
The Message –

Formers in prevention/countering violent extremism (P/CVE)

Standards by EXIT-Germany

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Summary

EXIT-Germany is an organization that helps individuals exit from right-wing extremist (rwe/vrwe) groups. It includes formers in its work on an equal basis, with their involvement in political education, background research, and territorial situation analyses. Maintaining a public profile using formers is a central element of the organization's work. Personal testimonies and appearances by formers who openly question the ideology and critique internal mechanisms are significant in counter-extremism work. In some cases, making the exit public is unavoidable and serves to announce the exit to the rwe/vrwe scene and solidify the exit. Biographical self-reflection is another element of the exit process, and the contributions are published to generate an effect beyond the former's own reflection and perception.

The following text describes standards of EXIT-Germany and is part of a series of publications on standards by EXIT-Germany.

Classification

EXIT-Germany's work involves an overall concept that includes formers in its work on an equal basis. Alongside casework and family support, background research and territorial situation analyses, members of the working group of former extremists are also involved in political education. Formers assume various tasks - either behind the scenes or openly.

Maintaining a public profile using formers is a central element of the work of EXIT-Germany. Its significance goes far beyond simple public relations aiming to publicize the support available to those willing to exit. The right-wing extremist (rwe / vrwe) scene also receives signals with the aim of creating doubt and establishing a destabilizing effect. In addition to starting campaigns and establishing discourses on certain topics, the main counter-extremism work is carried out through personal testimonies (publication of biographies, reports on experiences, talks) and appearances by formers who openly question the ideology as well as critiquing internal and group-stabilizing mechanisms. These public statements also make the work of EXIT-Germany transparent - both to society and to the right-wing extremist (rwe / vrwe) scene. The positive effect that formers can have on doubters in the scene should not be underestimated.

In some cases, depending on the role and function the former played in the previous group, it is unavoidable that the exit is made public. This is done as part of the exit process, taking into consideration the appropriate time, the selection of the relevant media platform and security precautions. This step serves to announce the exit to the right-wing extremist (rwe / vrwe) scene and to solidify the exit. Whether and in what form the person in question subsequently becomes active in political education work depends on the individual course of the exit process and the former's personal development.

A further element of the exit process is structured biographical self-reflection to help formers to come to terms with their past and their ideology and to develop new insights. Discussions are held and texts are produced in a writing workshop. These are published in the EXIT-Germany journal or on the website of the working group of former extremists. The contributions, some of which are anonymous, range from scientific articles providing background information to very personal diary entries. Publication is an important element here, as this type of biographical discourse also concerns an experience of empowerment for formers as they know that their contributions will be made accessible to a wider readership and thus generate an effect above and beyond their own reflection and perception.

Deradicalisation & Exit: Panel Talk –
Formers in political education work

German version on [YouTube](#)



The results of biographical work are also part of EXIT-Germany's contribution to political education. A broad range of media and events is used to create public awareness including website of the working group of former extremists, YouTube contributions, print articles/interviews and online newspapers, radio and television, public events, participation in cultural, film, theatre and exhibition projects, support of citizens' initiatives and expert reports for politics and courts, science and research.

The events also provide political education about the role of ideology and violence as part of right-wing extremism and address the issue of right-wing extremism. Background discussions, talks and events are aimed at various target groups. There are national and international requests for events. These come primarily from politics (members of parliament, parties, committees, government representatives), from authorities and agencies, police forces, probation services, schools, youth (recreational) facilities, educational specialists, further education institutions amongst others.

The requestor's requirements, the target group and the character of the event are decisive in determining which former is best suited to be a speaker/discussion partner and the exact content and the format of the talk. The purpose and aim of the event vary accordingly. For example, an event for police staff is fundamentally different from one for young people in a school, which in turn is different from one for members of parliament.

In addition to the transfer of knowledge, insight and experience - which is also oriented to the target group and the content of the event - there is one main focus: conveying a message.

The message that it is possible to recognize that involvement in VRWE is fundamental wrong and a change needed. That the decision to do so lies with each individual; that you can acknowledge your mistakes, learn from them and build a new life. And at least that integration into society is possible if society allows it. The message is that people can change.

The message is always individual and at the same time extends beyond the individual person. It arises from a reflected personal, cultural and political experience, from contemplation on the nature of society and the constitution of a state that can guarantee humanity and freedom. The solution to all problems and tensions cannot be found in an unjust state that is hostile to freedom.

This message is particularly important for teenagers and young people who need to find their own path into adult life. Since these events require a large degree of preparation and follow-up work, here are tips for planning successful events with former extremists.



Formers and exit facilitator in an public event in Berlin

Third party political education events

In addition to events with young people organized by various partners in P/CVE and educational work who invite formers, EXIT-Germany receives inquiries from schools or individual teachers who would like to invite a former to give a biographical talk as part of a lesson or project day.

The local conditions and expectations can vary considerably and should be discussed well in advance as the selection of a possible speaker and the design of the talk are decided in accordance with these factors.

Principles

People who are in the process of exiting deal intensively with their past, explore the motives for their entry and exit in conversations with exit facilitators and reflect on questions of guilt and address ideological narratives.

Many formers want to make their story known in order to give insight and caution others not to make the same mistakes they did. For some, it is also a way of 'making amends.' EXIT-Germany supports them in developing skills to express themselves in writing or in public in front of an audience. Exit helps to open up possibilities, accompanies formers in their first steps and makes its own media platforms available. EXIT-Germany also warns against hasty steps and constantly urges a cautious, considered and well-prepared approach to the media.

Not every person wants to talk publicly about their story, and often this is not even possible for security reasons.

The top priority at EXIT-Germany is always the safety of the formers. Some choose to speak anonymously in the form of interviews, texts and podcasts.

The following applies for persons who have exited with the support of EXIT-Germany and who deliver talks:

- Complete exit according to the definition of EXIT-Germany

Exit is the process of finalizing the decision to no longer belong to the previous radical/extremist group/movement and to reject radicalism as a guiding principle of personality, thought and action and to shape a perceptible and sustainable new life in accordance with democratic values. An exit requires critical reflection, reappraisal and the successful questioning of the previous ideology. Exit is, therefore, more than leaving a party or group, more than a change of aesthetic expression or renouncing the use of violence. An exit has occurred when the ideology underlying and guiding the previous actions has been overcome.

- The desire, willingness and ability to speak in public;
- The ability to abstract from own history; ability to convey a message and provide food for thought;
 - » It is the person with their story in front of the group, but the person is secondary to the message; it is about the message communicated through the person's story; the message is more than the individual experience.
- A stable personality regarding the own history and in dealing with the public;

- Assurance of feedback and reflection with the exit facilitator;
- First talks are accompanied; procedure, methodology and content are discussed and feedback is given as needed.

Expectation management

The following points enable a better understanding of events with formers.

- Biographical talks given by formers are neither seminars for political education in which didactically prepared theoretical knowledge about extremism is taught, nor do they replace them. They are a useful addition and can be incorporated as an element if they have been prepared in accordance with the topic.
 - » The formers are therefore not engaged in "educational work" in the pedagogical sense. They are to be understood as contemporary witnesses who pass on their experiences through their stories and convey a human and political message.
 - » Some formers complete training or study in the social sciences / social pedagogy / educational field or continue their education in corresponding fields. In this case, the focus is on the profession. The time in the right-wing extremist scene and the exit will always remain part of the personal history that has shaped the person, and these experiences instruct future work.
- The "former" - in the sense of a prototype - from the right-wing extremist scene does not exist (avoid stereotyping).
 - » The person reports on their experiences from the specific environment from which they left. Thus, it makes a difference whether someone was e.g. a party member of the NPD, was involved in a Nazi Biker club or grew up in a nationalistic family. The person does not talk about right-wing extremism *as such* and is not an expert on general developments or crime.
- Talk style
 - » Sometimes speakers resort to vocabulary used in the scene when describing experiences of the time or depictions from the corresponding perspective. This does not mean that a deliberately "lurid" narrative style is chosen for dramatization or that it is a matter of a supposed lack of distance. These descriptions are about the unembellished portrayal of the past life as a neo-Nazi, which was characterized by ideology, hatred and violence, but which are embedded in the processing of personal guilt and remorse.
 - » It makes sense to discuss and explain the background and meaning of right-wing extremist language before, during and after an event. This can be done by formers themselves, and it is advisable to embed these explanations into the pedagogical context of the event.
 - » The formers not only come from various backgrounds, but also have differing educational backgrounds that shape the language and the character of the presentation.
 - » Similarly, previous experience of public appearances is also a factor.

- Answering questions
 - » It is precisely the aim of such an event to enter into dialogue with the participants and to discuss all questions openly and, as part of the preparation for the event, the young people should be encouraged to do this. They should also have the assurance that there are no "wrong" questions.
 - » The speaker does not need to answer every question. This applies especially to questions concerning personal and family backgrounds that may jeopardize safety.
- As a rule, an expense allowance is payable for the talk in addition to the payment of travel expenses.

Location, target group, topics and aims of the event

The more thorough the preparation, the more accurately a speaker can be selected who can then prepare themselves accordingly. This is especially the case for events in schools or with young people.

- What type of school is it?
 - » Secondary school, high school, college, others
- For what age group / grade is the event planned?
 - » possible from grade 7 depending on the situation, best from grade 9
- How is the class or group made up?
 - » Are there young people who have been the victim of (far-right) extremism, migrants or the children of migrants, or young people with far-right tendencies?
- Have there been incidents in the class / in the school / in the school environment / in the area?
 - » Often enquiries arise as a result of far-right remarks or incidents in a class or in a school.
- Ensuring the safety of the speaker
 - » The safety of the speaker has to be ensured during the event and on arrival and departure. This is especially important if there are (possible) extremists among the participants or around the event.
- Why did the teacher invite a former right-wing extremist? What did the teacher want to achieve?
 - » Problems in the class / school / area
 - » General prevention
 - » Project day
 - » Supplement to history, politics, social studies, ethics lessons.
- How long should the event be?

- » It is recommended to plan enough time for a subsequent discussion.
- Preparation and follow-up are essential for a successful event.
 - » What is already known about (right-wing) extremism?
 - » Will the talk be thematically integrated into a lesson or project unit? The biographical talk by a former can help to explain what makes a person become an active supporter of right-wing extremist ideology and why they subsequently left this path.
 - » Preparation of the young people and information about the purpose of the event by the teacher are highly recommended. It is also a good idea to conduct a follow-up session to give the young people the opportunity to talk about what they have heard, to discuss individual aspects again, to reflect on them and to classify and process them for themselves.
- Participation in the event should be voluntary for the young people; parental consent is advisable for minors.
- What exactly is expected of the event?

What does the event hope to achieve? Expectations and results

When thinking about the purpose of the event, you should also consider what is expected as a result. It is advisable to have realistic expectations.

Realistic expectations

It is often said that the aim is to counteract or even prevent political extremism. However, radicalization depends on various push and pull factors and their interaction. Furthermore, it is a process that neither begins nor ends spontaneously. Especially when young people with radical or racial and nationalistic convictions are part of the group, it cannot be assumed that their thinking, attitudes and behaviour will change only as a result of one event. What experience and findings from discussions and evaluations do show, however, is that something always 'sticks'.

There is a realistic expectation that an event makes an impression on young people and can prevent or stop the radicalization of individuals, because formers themselves held radical ideas in the past and began to have doubts about them. By talking about these doubts, others are confronted with them and forced to deal with them. The person provides food for thought and provokes discussion.

Further use of elements of the event

Furthermore, the personal experience and motivation of the former at these events provide all young people with the opportunity to work out for themselves how to stand up to radical beliefs in a way that is not exaggerated or confrontational.

A biographical talk offers the opportunity to make an emotional connection with previous cognition. Abstract knowledge about extremism, right-wing extremism or the process of radicalization becomes tangible in the context of a personal story, especially for young people. However, when preparing and following up with the group, it should be borne in mind that this

does not mean developing empathy for formers and an understanding of their actions. Rather, it is about using the former's personal story to reveal motives for joining and leaving the scene as well as about the time spent in the scene which can provide the basis for future discussion and debate and an examination of individual issues.

Authenticity

Discussions following events and evaluations show that, when it comes to the topic of radicalism and extremism, formers generally have better access to young people than teachers or those involved in political education. This is not only due to the fact that the teacher-student relationship is suspended. (This relationship is also not entirely suspended in the case of external educationalists, since the pedagogical educational mission plays a role here as well). When authenticity is spoken of in relation to formers, we are not talking about the embodiment of a 'credible attitude' or that content is presented in a 'credible' way. Nor does it concern the 'credibility' of the personal story.

Authenticity means a person talking to a group of young people who reveals something from their life, who talks about a section of their past that they cannot undo and of which they are not proud. What they can do, however, is warn others about falling into a similar path and speak about their perspective of the scene in which they were active, in order to raise awareness. In addition, formers usually radicalized themselves during their school years. When they talk about this time, they are at the age level of their audience. In retrospect, many say that it was precisely during this time in school that they needed input, impulses and confrontations instead of pedagogical overload, rejection or ignorance.

Self-evaluation

Reflective discussions are held with formers, feedback is gathered from the organizers, and feedback questions are used for the group to improve the process and design of events to meet the needs of the target group.



Formers and exit facilitator in an event with young people in Prague

Further reading

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