DISCUSSION PAPER

Thematic Panel 2

Prisons, Rehabilitation and Reintegration

First Meeting

"Ensuring the prison-exit continuum: Finding cross-sectoral challenges towards successful and durable solutions"
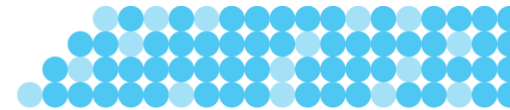
1-2 April 2025

Brussels, Belgium

EU Knowledge Hub on **Prevention of Radicalisation**

European Commission

Introduction

Effectively preventing and countering radicalisation and violent extremism is a cross-border priority requiring the involvement of a multitude of stakeholders from different fields with specific expertise and know-how. Such has been continuously recognised by the European Commission through their policy changes over time.

The *Strategic Orientations on a Coordinated EU Approach to Prevention of Radicalisation for 2024-2025* emphasise the importance of having a strategy that is as comprehensive in its reach as cross-sectoral in its approach to radicalisation prevention and rehabilitation. These initiatives recognise that overcoming the challenges of reintegration (particularly for persons sentenced to terror-related crimes, or assessed as radical, extremist or vulnerable to radicalisation) requires collaboration among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

To create and maintain successful rehabilitation and reintegration paths while guaranteeing continued support through probation and after release, each stakeholder must not only play their respective part but also understand how others can contribute to it.

It is within this context, especially by responding to a priority highlighted in the *Strategic Orientations 2024-2025*, that the EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation has set up a Thematic Panel on "Prisons, Rehabilitation and Reintegration". Such cross-sectoral, multi-themed, and transregional approach characterising our Thematic Panel topic and members allow us to critically discuss transversal (geographically and sectoral) topics, as it is truly materialised by our first meeting title of "Ensuring the prison-exit continuum: Finding cross-sectoral challenges towards successful and durable solutions".

Objectives

The meeting aims to provide an interdisciplinary platform to discuss key challenges and much-needed solutions faced by different EU Member States stakeholders in preventing and countering radicalisation in prisons (and in the post-sentencing period). With the purpose of contributing to the forthcoming EU CT/PCVE agenda, the meeting has three main objectives:

- Gather recommendations from members for the Thematic Panel yearly work plan;
- Take stock of the current challenges in the field by drawing forward-looking actions – i.e., at the practical level (for the next 5-year period);
- Take stock of the current challenges in the field by recommending forward-looking responses – i.e., at the policy level.

Context

Ensuring a cross-sectoral continuity of efforts for rehabilitation and reintegration

Numbers and policies: One size does not fit all

As radicalisation and violent extremism are transnational phenomena, so should the strategies that aim to prevent and counter them within (and beyond) the European Union. Looking at the broad European picture (i.e., Council of Europe Member States), estimates point to (approx.) 1.1 million individuals currently facing prison sentences (Aebi & Cocco, 2023), while 1.3 million are under supervision by probation services (Aebi & Molnar, 2023).

Zooming into the data related to terror-related offences, it is estimated that 28 507 persons are currently imprisoned. Yet, this figure is influenced by the 27 654 inmates in Turkey (Aebi & Cocco, 2023), highlighting the key need to consider the role that different policies and legislative practices (and their policymakers) play in each country or jurisdiction.

As mentioned, regardless of the numbers, radicalisation and violent extremism (and, as a potential consequence, terrorism) are characterised by their transnationality, being a cross-border topic encompassed by countries' strategical agendas. Hence, new threats, challenges, and opportunities are plausible to be transversally and cross-sectorally discussed to avoid any long-standing reactive practices and policies once "the bomb goes off' (Neumann, 2008, p. 4).

The dual role of prisons: Radicalisation incubators or facilitators of change?

The latest EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (Europol, 2024, p. 26) reaffirm a two-decade-long-known perspective (cf. Cuthbertson, 2004) that "[prisons] remain conducive environments for the propagation of jihadist narratives, for radicalisation and for the creation of new cells and networks, [with some inmates] been found to attempt to recruit other [vulnerable individuals]". In addition, as individuals who have committed terror-related offences are soon expected to be released, there are EU-wide concerns about the security risks they may pose to public safety (Europol, 2024).

The successful rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals in contact with the criminal justice system is a critical juncture within the justice process. This issue is especially pertinent in the case of those sentenced due to terror-related crimes, or who were assessed as radical or extremist – or vulnerable to radicalisation. However, one could argue that such

focus tends to be reactive since the much-needed and valuable rehabilitation work (either focused on cognitive distancing – i.e., deradicalisation; or behavioural halt – i.e., disengagement) falls within tertiary preventive efforts (i.e., radicalisation or a terror-related offence has already occurred).

Thus, one should not neglect that the *grass might be greener on the other side*, as research (e.g., Basra & Neumann, 2020; Vicente, 2025) has shown that prisons can be facilitators of change. Due to their organic nature, prisons can play a key role (e.g., European Commission, 2024) in identifying vulnerabilities (to radicalisation) and preventively anticipating potential cognitive changes (fostered by the prison environment – cf. Sinai, 2014) by providing individuals with the necessary support at various levels; thus, reducing the influence that some push, pull, and personal factors (cf. Vergani et al., 2020) can have on a given person.
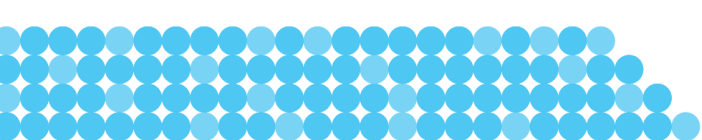
A cross-sectoral approach to rehabilitation, reintegration, and stabilisation: The key to a successful prison-exit continuum

Effective rehabilitation strategies and sustainable reintegration policies are increasingly urgent (European Commission, 2024), as recidivism rates – where available (cf. Costa et al., 2021) – may increase in the absence of sufficient individual and social support (European Crime Prevention Network [EUCPN], 2024).

The transition from prison to community living (often called the prison-exit continuum) is an undeniable challenge, with individuals facing obstacles such as unstable housing, limited employment, and a lack of community acceptance – all of which are especially profound in the case of those sentenced due to terror-related crimes (e.g., Walkenhorst et al., 2020).

The prison-exit continuum requires effective integration of efforts across multiple sectors: prisons, probation, community organisations, law enforcement agencies, judicial and local authorities, intelligence services, social services, the private sector, and civil society (European Commission, 2024; Walkenhorst et al., 2020). Hence, it is unlikely that a fragmented system, in which each sector functions independently (or, at least, not as collaboratively as envisaged), could successfully address the complex requirements of individuals seeking to seamlessly reintegrate into society (cf. Walkenhorst et al., 2020).

Upon release (and besides any potentially successful rehabilitation efforts), attention must also be given to meso and macro challenges that may impact such progress (e.g., Cherney, 2021; Liberado, 2023) and new vulnerabilities that individuals may face (e.g., Damas & Afonso, 2023; Damas & Liberado, 2024), often caused by factors such as housing instability and social isolation (Damas et al., 2023; Decker & Pyrooz, 2021).

Community engagement is vital during this phase, offering mentoring, access to social services, and opportunities for individuals to reconnect with prosocial networks (EUCPN, 2024). The need for a coordinated and cross-sectoral framework that combines prison-based rehabilitation with ongoing post-release care (EUCPN, 2024) should be the norm. By ensuring a thorough and long-lasting reintegration process aiming at personal and social stabilisation, one can argue that such an interinstitutional strategy will tend to reduce the likelihood of re-offending and re-engaging in radical or extremist viewpoints.

Different roles, same goal

Radicalisation in prisons presents itself through varied possibilities, namely the prevention of vulnerabilities of those serving sentences or preparing for reintegration, the rehabilitation of radicalised individuals or those in the process of radicalisation, and the management and rehabilitation of persons with extremist or terror-related sentences.

Therefore, the prevention of radicalisation and successful rehabilitation and reintegration calls for the combined effort of multiple stakeholders, each with their insight, knowledge, and experience. While the goal is the same, namely preventing radicalisation and ensuring successful rehabilitation and reintegration, each group plays a distinct role in achieving it.

Practitioners

Practitioners work directly with persons serving a prison sentence, offering the necessary assistance and treatments required for rehabilitation (Walkenhorst et al., 2020), such as (but not limited to) prison governors, prison guards, psychologists, probation officers, case managers, educators, community workers, social workers, and child protection workers.

As those who implement the approaches, programmes, and tools developed by research and determined by policymakers, practitioners are key in validating them in the frontline. Similarly, they have a key role in preventing radicalisation in prisons and ensuring the success of rehabilitation programmes (European Commission, 2020) by identifying early signs of radicalisation and addressing psychological, social, and vocational challenges.

Researchers

According to the *Strategic Orientations 2024-2025*, research is essential to identify effective rehabilitation practices and assess the long-term success of interventions, particularly in preventing radicalisation (European Commission, 2024). Studying recidivism patterns, evaluating existing rehabilitation programmes, and exploring the root causes of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism offers valuable data to shape future strategies.

Hence, researchers are essential to develop and advise policymakers on evidence-based approaches, programmes, and tools applied by practitioners, as well as evaluate their effectiveness, ultimately enhancing the efficiency of cross-sectoral interventions.

Policymakers

As outlined in the *Strategic Orientations 2024-2025*, policymakers are responsible for ensuring that policies promote cross-sectoral collaboration and provide the resources necessary for successful rehabilitation, with a specific focus on addressing radicalisation risks (European Commission, 2024) and reducing recidivism.
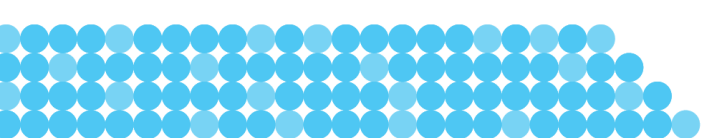
Thus, policymakers have the decision-making power to enact policies, norms, and protocols that determine strategic priorities, the required effort, and the needed resources to be enforced on the prevention of radicalisation, the rehabilitation and reintegration of those serving prison sentences, and the institutional cooperation and collaboration between governmental entities and community organisations.
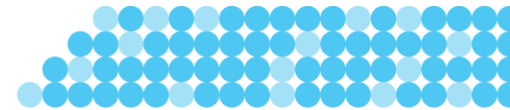
Conclusion

Considering the context laid out, it is essential to identify the main radicalisation needs and challenges in the prison context to plan solutions to effectively and cross-sectorally tackle them, accounting for the role of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

Such is the main objective of the 1st Meeting of the Thematic Panel "Prisons, Rehabilitation and Reintegration". In this spirit, the meeting will provide a unique opportunity to gather key stakeholders from various backgrounds, profiles, sectors, and EU Member States to co-jointly approach the current state of play of radicalisation in the EU (including the panorama in the prison context), the impact of the Western Balkans and MENA regions, and the current rehabilitation and reintegration approaches.

Departing from the insights shared and the *Strategic Orientations 2024-2025*, the meeting aims to define the main challenges faced and the needed solutions required to overcome them. The outcomes will be central towards determining the key topics and proposals for action that the Thematic Panel must address during 2025.

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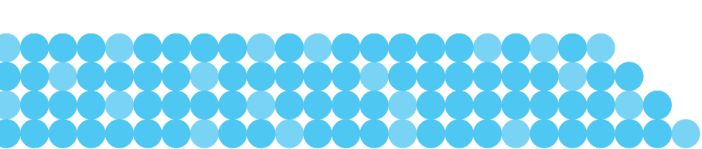
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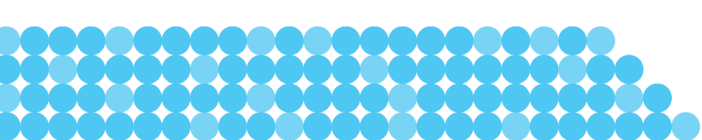
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