

Exit from White Supremacism: the accountability gap within Europe's de-radicalisation programmes

BY LIZ FEKETE

The European Commission has called on all EU Member States to adopt a new set of measures to combat radicalisation and recruitment. In particular, the Commission recommends that all EU Member States set up Exit programmes for those at risk of radicalisation. Exit programmes were first set up in Scandinavia in the 1990s as a means of tackling the White Power movement and were subsequently exported to Germany. In this Briefing Paper we examine the history, evolution and methodology of Exit programmes for neo-nazis and white supremacists, and ask why past failures and bitter controversies surrounding these programmes have been airbrushed out of official evaluations. Lacking transparency and accountability, such opaque programmes, we argue, run against the grain of an open society.

At the beginning of May 2014, the Swedish ministry of justice co-sponsored, with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a meeting in London on countering right-wing extremism. A primary aim was to explore the possibility of bringing to the UK the counter-radicalisation programme, Exit, which encourages white supremacists to disengage from the neo-nazi scene. Such schemes were pioneered in Scandinavia in the 1990s, and then exported to Germany in 1998. The public disengagement of Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (who uses the pseudonym Tommy Robinson) and Kevin Carroll from the English Defence League (EDL) in October 2013 had given added impetus for those anxious to see the development of Exit programmes in the UK.

Exit is just one of a number of counter-radicalisation schemes currently promoted in Europe. Another is the private-sector-led international network Against Violent Extremism (AVE) launched by Google Ideas in 2011, and currently administered by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.¹ The policy approach taken by EU Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia

Malmström has provided a boost for the development of such counter-radicalisation projects. In 2011, Malmström launched the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) as part of the PREVENT strand of the EU Counter Terrorism strategy.² And in January 2014, the European Commission identified ten areas in which Member States and the EU can improve their response to radicalisation and extremism, which included the proposal that all EU Member States set up de-radicalisation or Exit programmes for extremists, citing the positive impact such projects have already had.³ The European Network of Deradicalisation (ENoD), an alliance of twenty-six organisations from fourteen member states, was officially inaugurated in November 2013 and includes representatives from Exit programmes in Germany, Italy (where EXIT specialises more in workplace bullying and religious cults) and Sweden.⁴

Roots of Exit

The roots of Exit in Sweden go back to the mid-1990s, when Sweden had earned itself an



Birgitta Ohlsson, Swedish Minister for EU Affairs, would like to see Scandinavian Exit schemes set up across the EU.

international reputation as one of the world's largest merchandisers of race-hate materials and the biggest exporter of White Power music to the rest of Europe.⁵ While fascists were arming themselves for 'race war', the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* warned of the dangers posed by ultra-liberal attitudes towards skinheads congregating at a youth club within the Fryshuset centre in Stockholm.⁶ The neo-nazi scene was becoming more violent, yet naive social workers at the centre were offering neo-nazi skinheads 'fun' activities such as military and supervisory guard training and coach trips to White Power music concerts across Sweden (racist concerts were also held on the premises), as well as courses in desktop publishing and newspaper production. The Fryshuset project was financed by Stockholm City Council and backed by Social Democrat politician Anders Carlberg, who believed that skinheads were definitely 'not racists', but 'fine lads' propagating a 'positive nationalism'.⁷

The skinhead youth club was the forerunner of the first Exit programme which was set up in the same Fryshuset centre in Stockholm in 1998 and continues to this day using many of its original frameworks. But there was a pre-existing model in the Norwegian 'Project Exit – Leaving Violent Youth Gangs', hosted by the NGO and parental network Adults for Children, established in 1996 by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Children and Family, and the Directorate of Immigration.⁸ And there the ideological underpinnings of Exit came from Dr Tore Bjørgo, a social anthropologist and lecturer at the Police Academy

in Oslo. Bjørgo took research into the formation of street gangs in the United States as a model for understanding immigrant (ethnic) and neo-nazi (white) youth street activity in Norway.⁹ By divorcing the actions of young neo-nazi recruits from consideration of wider societal norms and institutional structures, and practically evacuating white supremacist movements of racist or ideological content, Bjørgo implied that anti-racism was as much a problem as racism. Gangs tended to 'foster rival gangs and successor gangs ... in an ongoing process', he wrote, with the impetus for Scandinavian gang formation in the 1990s found within 'racism and anti-racism'. 'Militant anti-racism' was blamed for its 'negative social sanctions' and 'branding' of neo-nazis, which in turn pushed youngsters further into the stigmatised group, thereby 'diminishing their exit options and strengthening their loyalty to the group'.¹⁰

Controversies around Exit

Thus, from the outset, fascism across Scandinavian Exit programmes (including in Finland) was defined as a social rather than a political phenomenon. The neo-nazi structures that young white Scandinavians joined were not the concern of Exit practitioners; their task was to wean youngsters from troubled backgrounds away from the identity problems arising out of destructive subcultures and family breakdown which give rise in Bjørgo's words, to a constant search for 'substitute families and father-figures'.¹¹ From here, programmes take on almost familial characteristics. Neo-nazis were treated almost like lost sheep, or white 'Prodigal Sons' to be reintegrated into the Scandinavian national community through models of intervention which appealed to their sense of victimhood and grievance. That anti-racists branded their charges as racists and fascists made their task, they asserted, that much harder.

Although current national Exit programmes in Sweden, Norway and Germany are independent of each other, there is a common strand. Information about Exit's current activities is

tightly controlled, and past failures and controversies are simply passed over. According to Tor Bach, editor of the Norwegian anti-fascist magazine *Vespen*, the original Project Exit, hosted by Adults for Children, was a total failure from start to finish. 'This project was run in South Norway, in Kristiansand', he says. 'Ridiculous claims focusing on exaggerated successes were constantly made, but all the time, the nazi milieu was growing'.¹² Bach also observes how, over the years, Exit practitioners claimed success for prevention work which was in fact carried on outside Exit, principally by dedicated police and youth workers, many of whom prefer to stay quiet about any successes.

The first full-blown version of Swedish Exit, set up in Stockholm within the Fryshuset in 1998¹³ under the directorship of former neo-nazi Kent Lindahl, initially sparked a great deal of controversy. In 2001, there was a bitter dispute with a sister organisation in Motala, run by social worker Anita Bjargvide, who accused Stockholm Exit of lacking proper oversight. She suggested, amongst other things, fraud in accounting: the organisation, she claimed, was deliberately inflating the numbers of defectors it purportedly helped in order to secure more government funds. She also said that inappropriate language was being used on the premises, including racist jokes and that, on occasion, white power music was played.¹⁴

Today, similar criticisms are still being made about the values and methodology of Exit programmes across Europe. There is still confusion about Exit functions, as well as a lack of clarity about the way such organisations are formally constituted and managed. Describing themselves variously as foundations or NGOs, but firmly tied into state funding and counter-radicalisation programmes, they are staffed largely by former neo-nazis (the official term in Germany is *Aussteiger*, which roughly translates as drop-outs). Transparency seems to be lacking and there are none of the checks and balances that would exist if former neo-nazis were rehabilitated for past crimes, through the probation process, for instance.

'Drop-out' programmes in Germany

In the post-war Federal Republic of Germany, membership of fascist parties (as well as Communist ones) was deemed unconstitutional, and although Communist and fascist parties were not banned, those who joined were drawn to the attention of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, BfV) and prohibited from working in the civil service under the *Berufsverbot* decree. It is with this different hyper-securitised historical background that Exit-Deutschland¹⁵ was co-founded in 2000 by the prominent east German former neo-nazi Ingo Hasselbach and the criminologist and former police detective Bernd Wagner, with the support of two highly-respected independent foundations.¹⁶ In addition, in 2001, various other state-controlled Exit schemes were established under the *Aussteiger* programme. This federal programme also runs in prisons, where participating neo-nazis enter the witness protection scheme and can obtain certain legal advantages.¹⁷ The BfV also runs its own scheme for 'drop-outs', the methods of which are unclear, although the number of *Aussteiger* participating is published annually.

Many feel that participation in the various Exit schemes, whether governmental or non-governmental, is now too easy an option. Bianca Klose, head of the Mobile Counselling Team against Right-wing Extremism Berlin (*Mobile Beratung gegen Rechtsextremismus Berlin*, MBR) feels that while Exit schemes run by NGOs are necessary and can accomplish much, there is a danger that by placing too strong an emphasis on the perpetrator (both in terms of funding streams and public education) the wider debate about society's responsibility for the growth of the far Right can get lost and the victim's perspective muted. She also has misgivings about some high-profile stories about success cases.¹⁸ Exit statistics purporting to show the success of deradicalisation programmes (vital for securing more funding) cannot really be tested.

Klose has some thirteen years of professional experience working with the victims of far-right

violence. While recognising that the parents of young white supremacists might well need organisational support in order to challenge and 'win back' their children, her working life has also taught her how manipulative right-wing extremists can be in order to be taken up as an *Aussteiger*, particularly if it serves the purpose of reducing a sentence or securing probation. Too often 'they pretend to leave the scheme, only to return, once they have secured the desired outcome', concludes Klose. This sort of deception could be curtailed through a higher standard of evaluation, more thorough monitoring and supervision that included the requirement that clients make full acknowledgement of past crimes, provide information on neo-nazi structures or the criminal or even terror-related activities of their members.

For Klose, the key thing is how Exit schemes are implemented. She is adamant that NGOs have a role to play in helping neo-nazis turn their back on fascist ideology, but is concerned about the creation of an 'expert class' of former neo-nazis, some of whom go on to

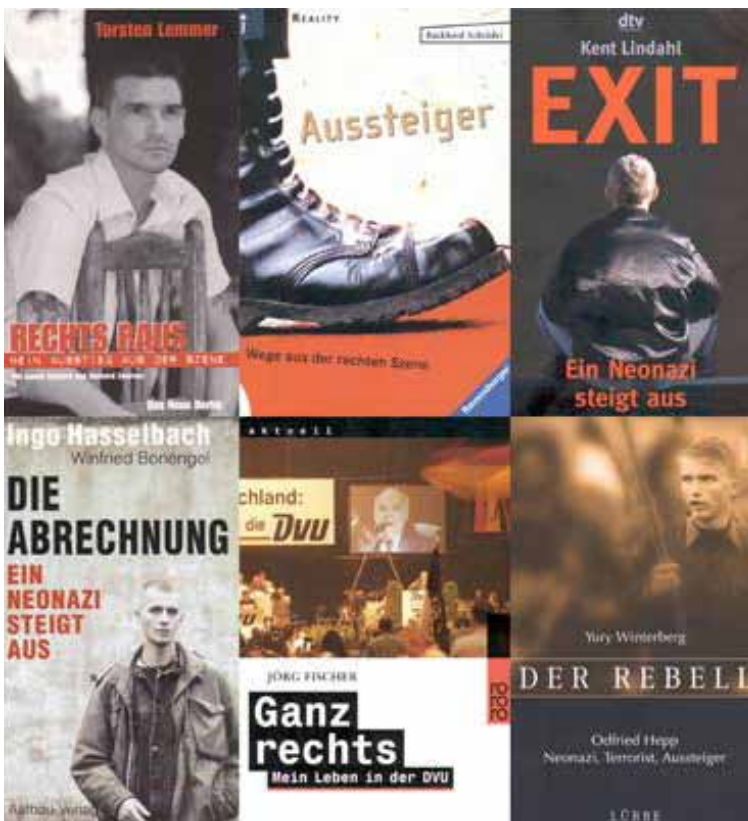


The head of Quilliam Foundation, Maajid Nawaz and Stephen Yaxley-Lennon.

develop professional careers as coaches for the *Aussteiger* or are employed as consultants or trainers in violence prevention. 'This is something that we see quite often', Bianca Klose says. 'Soon after leaving the scene, they are brought before the public and treated like experts, thus mixing the biographical with the professional ... blurring the distinction between two areas of life which are really quite distinct'. Leaving the scene is not in and of itself proof that a person has dealt with his ideology or come to terms with his actions; this needs to be examined in a far more sustained and sensitive manner. But 'way too quickly, they are invited into schools and workshops'. There is now the rise of a whole genre of political conversion confessional literature and some of the so-called 'drop outs' even go on to become celebrities.¹⁹

'Formers' as celebrities

Many of Klose's observations echo concerns expressed in the UK at the time of the much-publicised exit of Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka Tommy Robinson) and Kevin Carroll from the EDL. As Matthew Goodwin perceptively observed at the time, the resignations of two of the EDL's most senior leaders 'was remarkable' as much for what did *not* happen as for what *did* happen, namely 'a remarkable display of disingenuous nonsense, backed up by the counter-extremism think-tank the Quilliam Foundation'. 'There was no repudiation of the EDL's beliefs, or goals. There was no criticism of EDL foot soldiers', who were held up by Lennon as 'decent ... the best people in my life'.²⁰



Exit programmes have given rise to a whole genre of political conversion confessional literature. Photo: Antifa Infoblatt

Lennon in particular has emerged as a media celebrity, perhaps also with a confessional memoir up his sleeve. But the story of another 'former' may throw light on Lennon's alleged exit from the far-right scene. Nick Greger was a German neo-nazi with a long history of terrorist activity. He was an associate of Carsten Szczepanski, a neo-nazi paid informant who has given evidence at the Munich trial of Beate Zschäpe and four co-defendants (the case of the National Socialist Underground, NSU, see below) for charges relating to the murders of ten people, mostly of Turkish origin, between 2000 and 2010. Greger's trajectory is murky to say the least. In 2005, he was helped by the federal version of German Exit to write a confessional account of his disengagement from the neo-nazi scene. His 'conversion', however, was seemingly short-lived. Greger went on to become a leading light within the counterjihad movement in the UK, founding, alongside Paul Ray, Order 777.²¹ But was this really a story of a racist dropping out from the neo-nazi scene, only to drop back in as a fully-fledged counter-jihadi? Or is something else going on?



Could it be that Greger, who now lives comfortably in Gambia, was placed on the German secret services' payroll when he dropped out in 2005, and was even working with the British secret services when he founded Order 777? Of course we have no way of knowing, and can only speculate.

Exit programmes versus justice for the victims

It is on this murky terrain of state secrets, spy rings, and possibly faked conversions that those working to mitigate the impact of violent racist activity in Germany have to navigate on a day-to-day level. Their positions – against racism and fascism and for justice for the victims – are not necessarily those most favoured by the state. In fact, Exit programmes sideline anti-racist frameworks in favour of muted anti-extremism perspectives promoted by government-sponsored former neo-nazis who, unlike their victims, have never been at the receiving end of racist violence, and yet are now treated as experts on the roots of prejudice.

The role of the secret services' distorting practices is crucial. Just who exactly are these *Aussteiger*, and could their accounts of conversion be either self-serving, partial (designed to hide a larger truth) or just plain lies? As the scandal surrounding the German intelligence services, the police and the NSU deepens, is it possible that some *Aussteiger* know more about the NSU than they are prepared to reveal? Groups like NSU-watch, monitoring the trial of Beate Zschäpe and her four co-defendants, dispute the official narrative that the NSU was a cell consisting of three people aided by four unimportant accomplices. For there is abundant evidence that the NSU was not an isolated cell but a complex of interests, involving at the very least 200 neo-nazis, who provided safe houses, weapons and other indirect support for Zschäpe and her dead comrades Böhnhardt and Mundlos, when they went on the run in 1998.²²

The BfV and the police, by running neo-nazi criminals as paid informants, and by failing

to pass on 'deadly intelligence'²³ supplied by these informants to the Federal Office of Criminal Investigation (BKA), are deeply implicated in the NSU complex. In this context, lawyers for the NSU's victims are entitled to speculate further about BfV Exit programmes, particularly in prisons. We now know that at least one of the BfV's paid informants, Carsten Szczepanski, a former KKK Grand Dragon in Brandenburg and associate of Nick Greger, was recruited just prior to receiving an eight-year prison sentence for a brutal gang attack on an African man who nearly died of his injuries. In 1994, while Szczepanski was still on remand awaiting sentencing, he offered to inform for the secret services and was subsequently released early (on grounds of good behaviour), after which he was involved in many racist and terrorist crimes, including weapons procurement and assembling bombs – all while he was on the BfV payroll.²⁴

NSU-watch is currently building up a detailed picture of the Scandinavian connections to the NSU complex, particularly through Blood & Honour, which similarly acts as a network and possibly supported the murderers while they were on the run. But there is no evidence that the Swedish intelligence services are remotely interested in the question of whether Scandinavian fascists assisted the NSU. The

German and the Swedish intelligence services appear to take different approaches. The former *did* want to penetrate and control the far-right scene, although their motivation for so doing would appear unrelated to crime-prevention and are, frankly, in the absence of transparency (and despite several parliamentary inquiries) incomprehensible. But the Swedish intelligence services appear to have little interest in infiltrating the neo-nazi scene, continuing the security services' 1990s approach of burying their head in the sand about the danger that right-wing extremists pose.

Where white victimhood frameworks lead²⁵

In Sweden today Exit practitioners build on the earlier 'lost sheep' approach to racist skinheads adopted by the first controversial patron, Anders Carlberg, who in turn was influenced by the American Jungian prophet poet Robert Bly's thesis on 'positive maleness and nationalism'.²⁶ Exit Sweden, run by the former white supremacist Robert Orell, is today located within the same Fryshuset youth centre of old, and continues to use the white victimhood frameworks. While Orell describes himself as a former 'white supremacist' who was active in the violent skinhead scene in the 1990s, there is nothing to indicate what (if any) violent acts Orell (who describes himself as a trained psychotherapist) committed during that period of his life,²⁷ or whether any suffering he may have caused to others through his actions has been acknowledged through acts of sympathy, commitment and action. In fact, scour the internet and there is nothing specific about Orell's past activities at all. While there may be a simple explanation for this, the lack of public information available on Orell's past activities leaves the wrong impression.

According to an evaluation of the work of Exit Fryshuset carried out by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the organisation is staffed largely by 'former white supremacists' and their work is 'based on long-term cognitive treatment that assists in the protracted disengagement process'.²⁸ Its methodology for



When a German parliamentary inquiry into the NSU asked to see key documents relating to the paid-informant scheme within the far Right, they were told that the documents had been accidentally shredded. Photo: NSU-watch.

working with 'formers' starts from the premise that individuals who join white supremacist movements do not join for ideological reasons, i.e. that it is seldom a positive choice based on political convictions. By which they mean, one surmises, that the 'formers' were never really nazis, and definitely not racists! Instead, they are attracted to white supremacist movements for emotional and psychological reasons as they feel excluded or unaccepted by mainstream society and are searching for 'identity, support and power.' Today, white supremacists who contact Exit are told that they will benefit from a 'non-judgmental' approach which focuses on their 'grievances' and not their 'ideology'. Hence, Exit does not deal with ideology, or tackle political views head-on, but focuses on grievances, encouraging 'clients' to change their lifestyles and develop higher self-esteem.

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The issues raised in this report should open out all those hitherto seduced by the Exit brand to consider a number of questions, primarily about the relationship between programmes that promote white victimhood, and governments and cultures that routinely fail to acknowledge racism. Questions about the hidden hand of 'invisible government'²⁹ and the nature of covert policing (the policing you do not see) are also raised in this report. In the final analysis, and paradoxically, the opaque nature of Exit programmes runs against the grain of an open society, the very thing that anti-extremism programmes are meant to preserve.

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