Trial and Terror. Countering violent extremism and promoting disengagement in Belgium

Sigrid Raets[a][1]

[a]PhD researcher, Institute for International Research on Criminal Policy (IRCP), Faculty of Law & Criminology, Ghent University

Abstract

Efforts to promote disengagement from violent extremism have become a key ingredient in many counter-terrorism policies around the world. Deradicalisation and disengagement initiatives can also vary considerably from country to country. The following article contributes to the growing literature on countering violent extremism (CVE) by delineating the Belgian CVE landscape. Drawing on 50 semi-structured interviews with frontline practitioners and policy makers, this article offers an overview of the major players, guiding principles, and main challenges that define current efforts in Belgium. In addition, these efforts to support disengagement are examined through the prism of the assisted desistance framework. The fundamental premise behind this analysis is that, while violent extremism is a rather specific type of crime, it is a type of crime nonetheless. As such, this article seeks to juxtapose the current approach vis-à-vis violent extremist offenders with the usual response towards non-extremist offenders. In highlighting the implications for theory and practice, the findings of his article illustrate how lessons from other fields can help inform CVE efforts.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the counterterrorist toolkit of many countries has expanded well beyond security-led approaches. Policies and practices that focus on prevention and rehabilitation have been adopted across the globe (Clubb, Koehler, Schewe, & O'Connor, 2021). Such efforts, often referred to as countering violent extremism (CVE), can come in many different shapes and forms. As such, CVE has entered into academic parlance as a "catch-all term" (Hardy, 2020, p. 4) for a wide range of non-coercive initiatives and actions that seek to reduce violent extremist involvement (Harris-Hogan, Barelle, & Zammit, 2016; Koehler & Fiebig, 2019).

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[1] Corresponding Author Contact: Sigrid Raets, Email: Sigrid.Raets@UGent.be, Institute for International Research on Criminal Policy (IRCP), Faculty of Law & Criminology, Ghent University, Universiteitstraat 4, 9000, Ghent, Belgium

One framework that has been routinely employed to categorise CVE initiatives is the public health model (Hardy, 2020). Using the language of the public health field, CVE efforts can take place at three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary interventions focus on the prevention of radicalisation in a certain population, secondary interventions target individuals that are deemed at risk of radicalising or show early signs of radicalisation, and tertiary interventions, as a sort of *ex post facto* prevention, target those individuals who have already radicalised (Birdwell, 2020; Clubb, Koehler, Schewe, & O'Connor, 2021; Harris-Hogan, Barelle, & Zammit, 2016). CVE initiatives, in other words, run the gamut from upstream prevention to downstream rehabilitation and re-integration.

At the tertiary level, individual interventions can be roughly divided into two types. Deradicalisation programmes address cognitive change. Disengagement programmes, on the other hand, focus on behavioural change (Clubb, Koehler, Schewe, & O'Connor, 2021; LaFree & Freilich, 2019). In practice, this distinction is not as clear-cut, since both are rather ill-defined concepts that tend to be used interchangeably (Horgan, Meredith, & Papatheodorou, 2020; Koehler, 2020). The guiding principle of interventions at this level is largely the same: facilitating reintegration so as to "avoid a continuation or repeat of such violent activities" (Bjørgo, 2016, p. 41).

But what is it that CVE approaches are trying to counter? As a concept, violent extremism remains murkily defined both within and outside the literature. To give an example that is relevant to the case covered in this article, the Belgian Intelligence Services Act of 1998 (article 8) offers the following wide-ranging definition of extremism, which has been adopted by institutions such as the nation's intelligence and security services and the Flemish government (Renard, 2021):

"racist, xenophobic, anarchist, nationalist, authoritarian or totalitarian views or intentions, whether political, ideological, religious, or philosophical in nature, which are theoretically or practically contrary to principles of democracy or human rights, the proper functioning of democratic institutions or other foundations of the rule of law. This includes the process of radicalisation."

Even without a universally accepted definition, violent extremism seems to be most readily associated not only with "deeply held but extreme political or religious *views*" (Schweppe & Perry, 2021, p. 21; emphasis added) but also with "condoning, endorsing, or taking extralegal or violent *actions*" (Aumer, 2021, p. 6; emphasis added). Violent extremism, in other words, tends to involve harmful and lawbreaking behaviour. One could therefore argue that it is best understood as a particular type of crime (Horgan, Meredith, & Papatheodorou, 2020; Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016). Indeed, as other commentators have previously noted (Hardy, 2020; LaFree & Freilich, 2019), criminology has much to contribute to our understanding of violent extremism, including how to counter it. Following the pioneering work of LaFree & Miller (2008), McCauley (2008), Mullins (2010), and Marsden (2016), a small, but growing body of research has been applying criminal desistance theories to the issue of how and why people come to leave violent extremism behind. Surprisingly, assisted desistance – a concept which seems particularly relevant to the study of CVE – has so far received very little attention (but see Glowacz, 2020). Given that there are still considerable knowledge gaps with regard to the content, implementation, and evaluation of CVE efforts (Cherney & Belton, 2021; Lewis & Marsden, 2021), drawing on a stronger and wider evidence base like the one criminology provides appears not just opportune, but also much needed.

The aim of this article is thus to contribute to the emerging field of CVE by zooming in on the case of Belgium. Informed by interviews with relevant practitioners and policy makers, this article first presents an overview of the Belgian CVE landscape before detailing what is currently being done to counter violent extremism and support individual disengagement. Next, these findings will be interpreted by drawing on the framework of assisted desistance. This article concludes with several reflections on the Belgian approach to CVE and considers the implications of the findings from this study for theory as well as for policy and practice.

Method

This article draws on semi-structured interviews with fifty front-line practitioners and policy makers. Table 1 presents an overview of the number of research participants per sector. A

detailed list of the research participants can be found in Annex I. The fifty interviewees included in this study represent a range of secondary- and tertiary-level CVE initiatives implemented in custodial or community settings. These initiatives were identified through the EU's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), through an unpublished list of CVE programmes compiled by the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) that was helpfully provided to the researcher, and through chain referral. All interviewees had to have practical experience in and/or in-depth knowledge about the field of CVE. Respondents were purposively recruited in all Belgian regions (*i.e.* Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels) as well as from all governmental levels (*i.e.* federal, regional, and local). 37 interviews were conducted in Dutch, twelve in French, and one in German. The interviews were conducted between April 2019 and October 2021 and varied in length between 41 and 106 minutes.

The research received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law and Criminology at Ghent University before data collection. Informed and voluntary consent was obtained prior to each interview. All potential respondents were informed by e-mail about the goals and the methods of this research project. This was also explained in person. In addition, interviewees were reminded that participation in the study was voluntary, that they were in no way obliged to answer all questions, and that they could ask to revise the content of their interview transcripts. All interviews were sound-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were anonymised in order to ensure the participants' confidentiality.

Data collection, transcription, and analysis proceeded in an iterative and non-sequential way. By doing so, themes that emerged in earlier interviews could be further explored in the later phases of data collection. Using an inductive approach, the interview data was analysed following Braun & Clarke's (2012) six-phase model for thematic analysis.

Before moving on to the research results, it is necessary to draw attention to the limitations of this study. The sample of fifty professionals that was included in this study is far from fully comprehensive and therefore only partly representative of the Belgian CVE field. Moreover, as this research draws on the perspective of practitioners and policy makers, rather than the actual service-users, it is not possible to make statements about the effectiveness of certain interventions or approaches based on this study. Lastly, given the regional focus of this study, there are clear limits to the generalisability of these research

results. Still, some of the findings may be transferable to other contexts, as Belgium is certainly not the only country grappling with the challenge of CVE work.
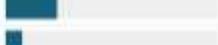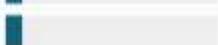
Sector	n	%	
Local and municipal actors	9	18%	
Prison, probation, and rehabilitation services	9	18%	
Policy	8	16%	
Disengagement and deradicalisation programmes	7	14%	
Social work	7	14%	
Youth work	6	12%	
Research	2	4%	
Security services	2	4%	
Total	50	100%	

Table 1: overview of respondents

The Belgian CVE landscape

A panoramic view of the CVE arena

According to Renard (2021, p. 162), the year 2015 marks a "fundamental paradigm shift" in Belgium's counter-terrorist efforts. It was only in the wake of a growing number of its citizens leaving for Syria and a string of terrorist attacks that Belgium started to adopt a broader CVE approach (Gielen, 2020; Renard, 2021). Since then, a whole slew of CVE initiatives, measures, instruments, laws, and actors have been deployed at the federal, regional, and local levels (Gielen, 2020).

Some of the first initiatives to emerge in this space can be situated at the local level, with a handful of "pilot cities" (Colaert, 2017, p. 16) blazing the trail and setting up their own CVE programmes (BE-19; BE-40). These same municipalities were the first to appoint so-called deradicalisation officials[2]. One of the most important developments at this level of governance are the Local Integral Security Cells (LISC)[3], which are multi-agency platforms

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[2] In Dutch/French: d*eradicaliseringsambtenaar/référent radicalisme.* It should, however, be noted that many of these practitioners do not call themselves deradicalisation officials because they take issue with the term 'deradicalisation'.
[3] In Dutch/French: *Lokale integrale veiligheidscel (LIVC)/ Cellule de Sécurité Intégrée Locale (CSIL)*

that bring together "the relevant actors dealing with the prevention of radicalisation at the local level" (Renard, 2021, p. 66). Key partners include the mayor, the local police, and social services (Hardyns, Thys, Dorme, Klima, & Pauwels, 2021; Renard, 2021). Many, if not most LCIS will combine elements of all three forms of prevention (BE-37; see also Hardy, 2020). On that account, CVE efforts are very much a local affair in Belgium (Fadil, Ragazzi, & de Koning, 2019; Jaminé & Fadil, 2019).

Beyond municipal initiatives, prison can be regarded as a second centre of gravity in the Belgian CVE landscape. It is should be noted that, in the rather complex institutional context of Belgium, the federal government has authority over the matters of security and "hard" prevention, and the regional authorities are in charge of "soft" prevention (Renard, 2021). The implementation of disengagement programmes in correctional settings is therefore a regional responsibility. In Flemish prisons, four deradicalisation counsellors[4] work with terrorist convicts and radicalised prisoners. The Federation Wallonia-Brussels, on the other hand, created a new service called CAPREV[5] to support radicalised individuals, including those who are detained (Gielen, 2020; Renard, 2021).

Between the hodgepodge of measures and the rapid pace with which they were adopted, the CVE arena in Belgium is perhaps best described as a confusing patchwork of partially overlapping initiatives (Fadil, Ragazzi, & de Koning, 2019; Renard, 2021). Moreover, as one might expect in a relatively new field of activity (Berger, 2018; Lindekilde, 2014), policy often proceeded on the basis of "trial and error" (BE-6), "pioneering" (BE-5), and "learning by doing" (BE-14). At the very outset, CVE programmes had to be built from the ground up, in a condensed timeframe, and with little to no scientific guidance (Renard, 2021). As one practitioner puts it: "we had to work it out from scratch. Nobody knew anything and everybody was scared" (BE-36).

Against the background of a multitude of actors and institutions getting involved in this area, coordination and cross-sector collaboration appear all the more important (Renard, 2021). Crucially, while Belgium - unlike some European countries (see for example Andersson Malmros, 2021) - does not have a strong multi-agency tradition, the multi-agency approach has fast become a cornerstone of the Belgian response (Hardyns, Thys, Dorme,

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[4] In Dutch: *deradicaliseringsconsulenten*
[5] In French: *Centre d'Aide et de Prise en Charge des personnes concernées par les Extrémismes et les Radicalismes Violents* (Centre for the Assistance of Persons concerned by Extremism and Violent Radicalism)

Klima, & Pauwels, 2021; Renard, 2021). In theory, multi-agency work is the most appropriate approach against violent extremism, seeing that this issue presents "a complex social problem requiring a multi-faceted response" (Stephens & Sieckelink, 2019, p. 273; see also Dalgaard-Nielsen & Haugstvedt, 2020; Ellis, Miller, Schouten, Agalab, & Abdi, 2020). In practice, however, such collaborative arrangements come with quite a few challenges and, particularly in the case of Belgium, a number of teething problems (Hardyns, Thys, Dorme, Klima, & Pauwels, 2021; Jaminé & Fadil, 2019; Mine, Jonckheere, Jeuniaux, & Detry, 2022).

Across Belgium, a wide spectrum of multi-agency efforts have started to surface. The most prominent platforms with regard to CVE and promoting disengagement are the aforementioned LCIS, which have taken on various shapes and sizes in order to meet local needs, and the local case discussions[6] and partner tables that are organised in those Flemish and Brussels prisons that house terrorist convicts (Hardyns, Thys, Dorme, Klima, & Pauwels, 2021; Renard, 2021). These platforms serve a dual purpose of sharing information and setting up case-managed interventions (BE-5; BE-34; BE-49).

Echoing the finding of Stephens & Siekelinck (2019, p. 281, italics in original) that "collaboration tends *not* to be easy", there are several cross-cutting issues mentioned by the respondents that complicate working across sectoral boundaries. In the specific arena of CVE, the worlds of social workers and intelligence and security services are prone to collide with each other (BE-20; BE-44; see also Haugstvedt, 2019; Stephens & Sieckelink, 2019). Professional secrecy and information sharing have proven to be some of the trickiest points of contention (BE-29). Even with legal provisions in place that allow for the sharing of information in this context (Hardyns, Thys, Dorme, Klima, & Pauwels, 2021; Jaminé & Fadil, 2019), this does not change the fact that "what is nice to know and what need to know really depends on your function" (BE-36). Social and youth workers express concerns not only about the pressure put on professional secrecy and the implications that this might have for the relationship with their clients, but also about their perceived independence and the risk of stigmatisation for their client groups (BE-6; BE-20; BE-33; see also Cops, Pauwels, & van Alstein, 2020; Mine, Jonckheere, Jeuniaux, & Detry, 2022).

Overcoming these ontological differences in a way that enables practitioners to "find complementarities and effectively reinforce each other's input without compromising each

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[6] In Dutch: *lokaal casusoverleg*

other's goals" (BE-29) can be difficult. Still, most professionals acknowledge the "added value" (BE-49) of a multi-agency approach and assert that, once these platforms are up and running, "in many cases, it works well" (BE-34). But how exactly does it work? In the context of CVE, multi-agency platforms largely operate in the same way, involving a case-by-case process of case referral or identification, appraisal of the nature of the concerns, bringing together all requisite information in order to make a psychosocial assessment of the individual, which covers "what things are needed for that person, what does his network look like" (BE-10), development of a customised intervention plan and determining "who are the appropriate, the right partners for [dealing with] this" (BE-5), delivery of the intervention plan and ongoing monitoring, which means "regularly mak[ing] that assessment again, how are they doing, are they taking steps forward, are they taking steps backwards" (BE-14), and, ultimately, case exit and closure (see also Cherney & Belton, 2021; Ellis, Miller, Schouten, Agalab, & Abdi, 2020).

The challenges of CVE work

Establishing partnerships and ensuring coordination across multiple agencies are only two of the many challenges associated with designing and implementing CVE programmes. Indeed, the respondents in this study highlight various other major questions and issues. One such issue relates to the lack of agreement about how key terms should be defined (see also Birdwell, 2020; Haugstvedt, 2019; Koehler & Fiebig, 2019). As respondent BE-3 observes, "the terminology is both very powerful and very vague" (BE-3). Without a common understanding of what "radical" or "extremist" means, what counts as (markers for) radicalisation and what is deemed the right threshold for intervention will, inexorably, vary (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Haugstvedt, 2020; Lindekilde, 2014; Lewis & Marsden, 2021). In most cases, the need to intervene is tied to "concerns about the use of violence" (BE-10). Risk of violence, however, is judged subjectively and many practitioners recognise that there is a "thin line" (BE-5) between what is problematic and what is not (see also Lewis & Marsden, 2021). This also means that there is a certain risk of false positives when it comes to second-level or pre-criminal interventions (see also Cherney, 2016).

Furthermore, if the phenomenon to be countered is essentially "a contested and elusive concept" (Koehler & Fiebig, 2019, p. 44), how can we clearly define what 'success' looks like

in this space (Berger, 2018; Birdwell, 2020)? Assessing change and measuring impact is therefore another fundamental challenge for CVE practitioners (Cherney & Belton, 2021; Davey, Tuck, & Amarasingam, 2019; Malet, 2021). In general, the goals of interventions, and thus the impact hoped for, can be very disparate. This is partly due to the fact that interventions are often highly personalised (Abbas, 2021; Birdwell, 2020). What indicates success for one individual might therefore not be the same for another. Where the ultimate aim of most interventions is re-integration or "re-inclusion in society" (BE-3; BE-14), goal setting almost never includes complete deradicalisation. As a matter of fact, "the policy objective is *not* deradicalisation" (BE-29, emphasis added) and some of the respondents object to the very notion of intervening into someone's personal beliefs, asserting that "deradicalisation, the whole idea, is a bit problematic. It's about something that is very private, it takes place in someone's head, it belongs to someone. It's more the behaviour that is a problem" (BE-35).

On a practical level, success is typically evaluated in terms of compliance, positive changes, and/or the absence of recidivism. With regard to compliance, some practitioners express the sentiment that "we are already happy if they say 'yes' to an offer, 'yes' to a conversation" (BE-3). However, while the willingness to engage in an intervention is certainly a *sine qua non* for progress (Davey, Tuck, & Amarasingam, 2019; Malet, 2021), one could argue that compliance alone is "not an accurate indicator of whether someone no longer poses a risk of radicalisation" (Cherney & Belton, 2021, p. 4). Several respondents also raise the issue of disguised compliance or client manipulation (see also Cherney & Belton, 2021; Lewis & Marsden, 2021; Haugstvedt, 2019). For example, one interviewee commented: "They can nod and say sorry, and [that] it will never happen again, and [that they] have repented, but how do you know someone is sincere? That's the million dollar question" (BE-7).

Another set of success indicators correspond to signs of prosocial behaviours or attitudes (see also Cherney & Belton, 2021; Davey, Tuck, & Amarasingam, 2019). This encompasses positive changes across a range of life domains, such as taking up a job or study, changing one's appearance, voicing doubts about the extremist ideology, or tolerating other views in society (BE-14; BE-22; BE-43). Such positive changes, however, make for rather subjective measures of success, seeing that they are based on the practitioners' perceptions of

how an individual is evolving (Costa, Liberado, Esgalhado, Cunha, & das Neves, 2021). It should also be noted that none of these changes can be assumed to be a universal marker of extremist disengagement, as "the importance and viability of attaining them is likely to differ for each individual" (Marsden, 2015, p. 159).

A third and final metric of success relates to a lack of re-offending. In terms of gauging the impact of a programme, recidivism rates are a common, but blunt measure (Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Mastroe & Szmania, 2016; von Hlatky, 2019). That is because a lack of recidivism does not necessarily imply that a particular intervention *worked* (Marsden, 2015). Or, as one respondent remarked: "To date, no one has committed another attack, so the success rate is 100%. But yeah, that is something that I myself find a little bit artificial" (BE-7). For others, recidivism does not mean a lack of success (BE-13; BE-38) . Instead, these practitioners point out that "relapses are part of the disengagement process" (BE-13). To compound matters further, recidivism rates among terrorist convicts are fairly low to begin with (Altier, 2021; Costa, Liberado, Esgalhado, Cunha, & das Neves, 2021; Renard, 2020). One practitioner summarised it as: "[t]hat is always going to be difficult. Is it because of your own interventions or is it simply that the figure is low? It's not that easy to evaluate" (BE-49).

The process of assessing individual progress is often unsystematic. For one thing, risk assessment tools tend to be used inconsistently across different sectors. The VERA-2R (Pressman, Duits, Rinne, & Flockton, 2016) is utilized predominantly in prison settings (BE-34) and by probation services (BE-49). Some municipalities have adopted the Radix tool, which is not a tool for structured professional judgement, but an instrument designed by a Belgian municipality in order to map an individual's strengths and weaknesses (BE-3; BE-5; BE-40). Many intervention providers, however, appear to rely on their "gut feeling" (BE-10; see also Birdwell, 2020; Davey, Tuck, & Amarasingam, 2019). The inherent challenge of evaluation is further exacerbated by the fact that not all programmes work with structured case notes or even keep case records. Several respondents stated that "[w]e don't have a database. (…) We don't keep any, any records, files, no" (BE-25) or that "[w]e actually write down as little as possible, yes, just to ensure confidentiality" (BE-35).

Trust represents a third challenge for CVE practitioners. Building trust constitutes "one of the most important basic elements" (BE-4) in terms of encouraging personal change. As Haugstvedt (2019, p. 160) finds, "this establishing of initial trust appears to act as a

structure on which the subsequent methods and approaches come to rely." However, establishing a trusting working relationship is not always easy. Generally speaking, the target group practitioners are working with either has little experience with professional help (BE-2) or has "a troubled history with official institutions of all kinds" (BE-29; also mentioned by BE-6). In such a context of mistrust and suspicion, having the right person delivering an intervention is crucial (Cherney, 2016; Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021). When we look at the CVE landscape in Belgium, however, we see a field that is dominated by government institutions. The state's "usual suspects" (Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021, p. 15) may not have the reach or the credibility required to connect with this particular audience (BE-5; BE-6). Even practitioners working for non-governmental organisations report being dismissed as "agents of the state" (BE-22) for appearing to be too closely affiliated with the government (see also Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021). In addition, quite a few respondents denounce the lack of diversity among frontline practitioners (BE-1; BE-6; BE-42), stating that "the professionals come from a completely different world than the people they come into contact with" (BE-38). A related argument was made by Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham (2021), who identify relatability, in terms of sharing a similar ethnic, socio-economic, or cultural background, as a factor that can help foster trust.

The fourth challenge has less to do with the intervention work itself, and more with the loaded discourse surrounding CVE. Indeed, a number of respondents indicate how the politically charged context of CVE can be difficult or, at times, "very uncomfortable" (BE-49) to work in (BE-15; BE-17). Security looms large over the field of CVE, and practitioners bear a great responsibility in this regard (Haugstvedt & Gunnarsdottir, 2021; Mine, Jonckheere, Jeuniaux, & Detry, 2022). The importance of CVE work, combined with the relative novelty of these efforts, can have a "paralysing effect" (BE-6; also mentioned by BE-19). In the early stages of Belgium's shift towards CVE, it was not unusual for practitioners to experience "professional uncertainty" (BE-19; BE-26) about how to handle this type of casework (see also Haugstvedt, 2019). One respondent recounts: "People were a bit hesitant to act in those cases, because they were afraid of doing something wrong. That has ebbed away a bit now" (BE-49).

Along these lines, quite a few respondents call attention to the stigmatising effect this securitising rhetoric may have (see also Altier, 2021; Ellis, Miller, Schouten, Agalab, & Abdi,

2020; Haugstvedt, 2019). One practitioner, for example, repeatedly stressed that "it's a heavy label to wear" (BE-13; also mentioned by BE-32), while another respondent highlights how the public debate leaves little room for nuance, as all their clients are simply "tarred with same brush" (BE-8). Not only does the stigma associated with CVE initiatives appear to make it harder to engage these individuals in the first place (BE-10; BE-13), some practitioners also feel that "their chances at re-integrating into society are lower, especially if their names are well known" (BE-36). This is consistent with Altier's (2021, p. 13) recent observation that "the public considers terrorists less likely to change or be 'redeemable'" and that such popular attitudes may limit the success of disengagement programmes (see also Bosley, 2020; Lewis & Marsden, 2021; Weeks, 2018).

A fifth and final challenge for CVE programming lies in the disjuncture between theory and practice (see also Baaken, Korn, Ruf, & Walkenhorst, 2020; Koehler & Fiebig, 2019; Malet, 2021). It appears that the academic literature on this topic does not answer the questions that are causing uncertainty for intervention providers (BE-4; BE-10; BE-38). Or, as one respondent summarises it: "The thing is, how do you translate [these theories] into interventions?" (BE-2). Several scholars have pointed out that there is a "veritable marketplace for new deradicalisation and disengagement efforts" (Hansen & Lid, 2020, p. xviii; see also Dijkman, 2021), prompting various new actors and self-proclaimed experts to rush into this void. While most practitioners believe training to be important, some of them are critical of the "mushrooming" (BE-10; also mentioned by BE-19) of courses and workshops related to CVE (see also Jaminé & Fadil, 2019). Moreover, in the absence of evidence-based practices, a few practitioners sought inspiration for the design and delivery of their interventions in the experiences of one or two formers (BE-7: BE-10). The extent to which such experiences can be translated into programmatic efforts, however, is debatable, for disengagement processes are known to be highly individualised (Koehler & Fiebig, 2019; Lewis & Marsden, 2021). The theoretical underpinnings of CVE work in Belgium, as well as the content of these interventions, will be further explored in the following section.

Promoting disengagement in practice

The content of CVE interventions

At this point, it is almost a truism to state that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for CVE (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016; Baaken, Korn, Ruf, & Walkenhorst, 2020; Hansen & Lid, 2020). Virtually all respondents agree that tailored interventions, designed to address the specific needs of the individual in a holistic and integral way, provide the best fit (see also Davey, Tuck, & Amarasingam, 2019; Lewis & Marsden, 2021; Stern & Pascarelli, 2020). What an individual exactly needs, moreover, can vary considerably. This individual variation is mirrored in the large repertoire of services offered and methods applied by CVE programmes. In practice, interventions tend to cluster around the following six areas (see also Baaken, Korn, Ruf, & Walkenhorst, 2020; Cherney & Belton, 2021; Hansen & Lid, 2020):

> (1) Education and employment
> (2) Lifestyle and leisure activities (including sports, hobbies, creative and cultural activities)
> (3) Psychological support
> (4) Family/social support
> (5) Informal support
> (6) Religion and ideology

There is a common thread running through these diverse efforts, and that is the basic principle of "building up pro-social pillars" (BE-43; also mentioned by BE-11; BE-14; BE-35). Interestingly, this goes for both secondary and tertiary CVE interventions. With individuals, especially youngsters, who are still in the early stages of the radicalisation process, the approach is mainly one of diversion (see also Cherney & Belton, 2021; Weeks, 2018). One practitioner used the metaphor of a roundabout: "If you have a roundabout, and there is only one exit, that young people often only see, then I think it is important to create extra roads" (BE-25).

Constructing off-ramps in order to deflect people from the pathway of violent extremism also characterises the work done in terms of tertiary prevention. The notion of

implicit deradicalisation is particularly relevant here. Implicit deradicalisation refers to intervention efforts that "attempt to reintroduce alternative means to significance and alternative goals compatible with those means" (Bélanger, 2017, p. 164). The strategy, then, is "providing an alternative" (BE-37) to extremist involvement for finding meaning and purpose, as opposed to directly challenging or delegitimising the use of violence, which corresponds to explicit deradicalisation (Bélanger, 2017; Cherney & Belton, 2021). As one respondent explains: "what we are trying to do is to see how a young person can be strengthened in different areas of his life, in such a way that the terrorist, radicalised thought processes no longer exist or are no longer that prominent" (BE-26). Consistent with the notion that "identity is (…) a key able to unlock the door to the demise of extremism" (Ferguson & McAuley, 2020, p. 11), several practitioners indicate that promoting a broader, more balanced sense of identity forms a crucial part of their work with extremist offenders (BE-8; BE-13; BE-35).

Of the six focal areas of intervention mentioned above, belief-based counselling represents the only tool unique to the context of CVE. Even so, it is by no means the most frequently offered form of assistance. As several respondents highlight (BE-3; BE-5; BE-49), only a minority of case-managed individuals receive religious or ideological counselling. Most often, ideological change is "not the goal in itself" (BE-13; also mentioned by BE-8; BE-35), but a means of facilitating disengagement and reducing re-engagement (see also Costa, Liberado, Esgalhado, Cunha, & das Neves, 2021; Renard, 2021). More than just an object of intervention, ideology can also figure as an "initial entry point" (Baaken, Korn, Ruf, & Walkenhorst, 2020, p. 6) or responsivity accommodation (BE-3; BE-4; BE-7; see also Fadil, Ragazzi, & de Koning, 2019). One practitioner, for instance, remarks: "Even if you only address the religious part, you are still communicating with them" (BE-6).

When it comes to tackling the issue of ideology, topical expertise is essential (BE-7; BE-22). As one respondent put it: "Without that [theological] baggage, it is not possible for us, ideologically at least, to engage them in conversation" (BE-38). For the most part, mainstream service providers are not particularly well-versed in the nuances between and within different ideological positions and therefore tend to feel uneasy about intervening in this area (BE-26; BE-49). As a result, ideological counselling corresponds to a niche market

relatively saturated by commercial actors and specialist services (see also Dijkman, 2021; Renard, 2021).

Rather than trying to dismantle a person's whole belief system or attacking extremist ideas head on, ideological interventions focus on providing individuals with the tools they need to start questioning and unpacking their beliefs themselves (BE-8; BE-22; BE-38; see also Davey, Tuck, & Amarasingam, 2019). According to one interviewee: "They must learn to think for themselves. We just help them in that process" (BE-38). This approach generally involves expanding and broadening their knowledge, referring them to the right sources, creating an open dialogue using Socratic questions and, where possible, improving critical thinking (BE-8; BE-22; BE-35; BE-38; see also Davey, Tuck, & Amarasingam, 2019; Lewis & Marsden, 2021). Improving religious knowledge may be relevant for some, since, as it turns out, most of the individuals they work with barely have a rudimentary understanding of these subjects: "they are not theologically strong. They hardly know Arabic. So you can't, you can't counter their arguments with theological arguments because they don't know anything" (BE-22; also mentioned by BE-38). When it comes to dealing with beliefs of the right-wing extremist variety, the approach is actually not all that different, seeing that many ideological interventions are mostly about injecting a sense of complexity into narrow, absolutist ways of thinking. As one practitioners explains: "With the extreme right, it is often a matter of nuance. Introducing nuances and deconstructing conspiracy theories" (BE-38).

"Sowing the seeds of doubt" (BE-7; BE-38; BE-43) emerges as a recurrent objective in this area of intervention. As specified by one respondent: "Sometimes you do manage to make them doubt. But you don't convince them. There is a big difference." (BE-22). Most practitioners strongly emphasise that changing one's beliefs "is not something that can be done under pressure" (BE-38; also mentioned by BE-7; BE-8; BE-35). One interviewee gives the example of what he calls ideological hardliners, who might appear doubtful at the end of a session, "[but] then the next session, they come back recharged. They did their 'research'" (BE-22).

We should, however, be cautious about drawing firm conclusions regarding the effectiveness of belief-based interventions. Whether programmes can or should address extremist beliefs in order to reduce extremist involvement remains unclear (Clubb & McDaid, 2019; Ellis, Miller, Schouten, Agalab, & Abdi, 2020; Ellis, Miller, Schouten, Agalab, & Abdi,

2020). Ideological interventions inherently raise serious ethical questions (Clubb, Koehler, Schewe, & O'Connor, 2021), and it can be argued that authorities should be more concerned with (unlawful) extremist behaviour than with (lawful) extremist views (Hansen & Lid, 2020; LaFree & Freilich, 2019). In addition, ideological counselling is by no means a panacea and other needs must be considered when working with these individuals (Cherney & Belton, 2021; Clubb & McDaid, 2019; Hansen & Lid, 2020). In some cases, ideological intervention can even be counterproductive, as attempts to discuss the delicate topic of ideology may be met with resistance, defensiveness, and mistrust on the part of the individual (Costa, Liberado, Esgalhado, Cunha, & das Neves, 2021; Hansen & Lid, 2020; LaFree & Freilich, 2019). Another reason why extremist beliefs require careful addressing has to do with the fact that extremist views are "best understood as a matter of identity, rather than merely of attitude" (Aarten, Mulder, & Pemberton, 2018, p. 568; see also Ferguson & McAuley, 2020). As Weeks (2021, p. 37) suggests, "the danger is that as the ideology the individual follows is undermined, so too is his/her personal identity". It is therefore critical that individuals undergoing ideological counselling are provided ongoing and long-term support, lest they revert to their old, extremist ways of being in a bid to reclaim a strong sense of identity.

In contrast with belief-based interventions, informal support represents one of the most common forms of assistance. Informal support generally involves listening to an individual's needs, concerns, hopes and aspirations (BE-4; BE-22; BE-35) as well as helping them with very practical issues (BE-11; BE-32). As one respondent explains: "[b]y tackling these practical matters, you gain the trust of people who are a little suspicious of these services" (BE-29). Moreover, investing time in getting to know "the human in front of you" (BE-6) is essential not just for establishing a solid working relationship, but also for ensuring a client-focused approach (BE-8; BE-33; see also Haugstvedt, 2019). Some practitioners utilise well-established methods such as motivational interviewing to explore an individual's story, prompting them to consider "who do you want to be, and what did you to get there" (BE-35; also mentioned by BE-8; BE-13). There are indications that informal support can make a difference in the context of CVE. A recent study by Cherney & Belton (2021) finds that the intensity of support and the duration of the programme do matter in promoting and sustaining positive change. Given that disengaging most often implies a gradual, incremental process of change that is "seldom straightforward or linear" (Mattsson & Johansson, 2018, p. 34), it is

not surprising to see that facilitating disengagement "requires lengthy and intense work" (Cherney & Belton, 2021, p. 16).

Concerning the other focal areas, it appears that these are implemented on a case-by-case basis, with programmes variously knitting together some of these components into a personal intervention plan. Some individuals are offered vocational training or receive help with securing a job or earning a degree (BE-5; BE-19; BE-25). With others, the approach might be to rekindle old interests or to introduce them to new hobbies and new experiences, for instance by encouraging them to join a boxing club, prepare a theatre play, or learn to play a musical instrument (BE-8; BE-11; BE-14). Other needs mentioned by intervention providers include housing, substance misuse, debt mediation, and, not infrequently, mental illness, including trauma experienced before or during the period of extremist involvement (BE-1; BE-3; BE-10). Several practitioners also refer to the importance of reinforcing ties with family members and friends outside of the extremist movement (BE-13; BE-33; BE-35). Some programmes working with young people will even go as far as offering their parents parallel counselling sessions (BE-2; BE-6; BE-26). Though most practitioners would agree that fostering alternative social relationships can be helpful, it is interesting to note that, overall, the group-related aspect of these change processes receives far less attention (see also Weggemans & De Graaf, 2017).

Crucially, the above paints a picture of CVE work as bordering on "business as usual" for local practitioners (Haugstvedt, 2019, p. 165; see also Feddes, Nickolson, Mann, & Doosje, 2020). As one respondent specifies: "most of the work done with these individuals is actually classic rehabilitative work" (BE-49). Rather than trying to "reinvent the wheel" (BE-7; BE-17; BE-43), most intervention providers draw heavily on their prior professional experience of working with other types of clients (see also Baaken, Korn, Ruf, & Walkenhorst, 2020; Dijkman, 2021; Haugstvedt, 2019). Several respondents also point to the high degree of continuity between CVE cases and the cases they usually encounter (BE6; BE-14; BE-32). Similar findings were reported by Haugstvedt (2019, p. 174), who indicates that framing these cases "as a social problem" may enable some CVE practitioners to overcome the initial hurdle of professional uncertainty. One respondent explains it as: "[d]on't focus on the radicalisation part, but focus on what you would do with all your other [clients], namely: look for strengths, look for what works, look for connection" (BE-26).

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Another aspect is the fact that, as a matter of principle, frontline practitioners focus "on the problems that the clients face and not on those that they create" (Baaken, Korn, Ruf, & Walkenhorst, 2020, p. 7). Indeed, a client-centred approach is not the same as an offense-centred approach, and treating violent extremist offenders as a separate category makes little sense if your first concern is with the support these individuals need right now, rather than with the offenses they committed in the past (BE-12; BE-15; BE-32). There are some intervention providers who resist the very notion of thinking in categories, emphasising that "we just see them as ordinary detainees" (BE-33) and how "there is no different treatment here. That would be stigmatising" (BE-11).

If there is one thing that clearly sets CVE cases apart, it is the priority attached to them, rather than the content of these interventions (cf. Mine, Jonckheere, Jeuniaux, & Detry, 2022). Various respondents note that "there is definitely a more intense approach (…) compared to other cases" (BE-34; also mentioned by BE-8; BE-35). In practice, this priority attention means that support is "offered proactively" (BE-8), that these individuals receive "priority counselling" (BE-29) instead of being put on a waiting list, and that certain specialised intervention providers have the opportunity to maintain "fairly intensive contacts with [their] clients" (BE-35) to build trust and develop a strong working relationship. At the same time, and often in the same breath, several respondents indicate that the individualised, multi-disciplinary approach established for CVE cases would also benefit many other types of clients: "in fact, it is a way of working that is necessary for all prisoners, but which is unfortunately not feasible in terms of staffing. So we have actually determined that this way of working is also a kind of living lab, of how you can accompany detainees in an even better way during their detention and also in their preparation for probation" (BE-36; also mentioned by BE-29; BE-34; BE-44).

Further to this, one practitioner remarks how: "[i]t is almost cynical to say that a target group that is viewed so negatively by society is actually given a kind of preferential treatment" (BE-36; also mentioned by BE-17). Or, more bluntly put by one of Renard's (2021, p. 169) respondents: "are we not doing too much with these inmates? Do we really need to offer them more support than to other inmates?" What these quotes aptly illustrate, is that making policy choices and setting priorities means dealing with dilemmas. Clearly, the exercise of determining what should be done with CVE cases is a delicate one, as tensions,

conflicts, and criticism continue to crop up. Most of all, working in the space of CVE involves a constant balancing act between broad, generic solutions and extremism-specific responses and between control and care. These dilemmas are further discussed below.

Balancing a broad approach with professional specialisation

Do we need specific programmes to deal with CVE cases? In Belgium, specialist services are very much the exception rather than the norm (BE-3; BE-36; BE-40). One respondent elaborates the point:

"From the beginning, we chose not to develop a specific new centre or institution or whatever. We opted, as we almost always do, to build on the strengths of the existing regular services. Because, in our view, that aspect of violent radicalisation is only a small part of the whole person, who may also have other problems." (BE-26)

As indicated above, there is considerable overlap between the factors that are important for CVE efforts and the factors that are already addressed in existing policies which target other issues, such as ordinary crime prevention efforts and offender rehabilitation (see also Feddes, Nickolson, Mann, & Doosje, 2020; Stern & Pascarelli, 2020). Moreover, the boundaries of the field of CVE are becoming increasingly blurred, as CVE cases often are complex, "multi-problem" cases (BE-3; BE-10; see also Fadil, Ragazzi, & de Koning, 2019), rather than cases that are exclusively about radicalisation or violent extremist involvement. CVE work, in other words, inevitably touches a wide range of regular professions and services (Dijkman, 2021; Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021; Lindekilde, 2014).

From this perspective, it makes sense that Belgian's CVE efforts are structurally embedded within the "normal system" (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 235). There are several advantages to this approach. By anchoring these 'new' efforts in already established referral and intervention procedures, CVE cases can be addressed in a more cost-effective, readily available, and sustainable way (Andersson Malmros, 2021; Cherney, 2016; Lindekilde, 2014). In addition, both Andersson Malmros (2021) and Lindekilde (2014) suggest that this anchoring may help legitimise CVE work and lower resistance and scepticism among frontline practitioners. Addressing CVE cases within the bounds of the regular system also

has the advantage of lowering the risk of stigmatisation, seeing that it has the effect of "de-exceptionalising" individuals with a history of, or ties to, violent extremism (Marsden, 2016, p. 36; Lindekilde, 2014).

However, this approach to CVE is hardly uncontroversial. Unlike any of the other social problems handled by the regular system, violent extremism is a "profoundly political issue" (Stephens, Sieckelinck, & Boutellier, 2021, p. 355). It could be argued that lumping violent extremism together with other types of offending not only de-exceptionalises it, but also severely depoliticises it. As Lindekilde (2014, p. 237) explains: "[p]reventing petty crime and drug abuse is not the same as intervening to challenge and transform political or religious convictions and practices; the latter is far more political and controversial in terms of individual freedoms."

Beyond concerns about the "psychologisation of the political" (Younis, 2021, p. 37), there are other reasons why bearing in mind the distinct nature of this problem is important. CVE programming is similar, but not identical to working with other intervention categories. There are a few unique factors and experiences associated with violent extremist involvement and disengagement, which means that CVE work may require know-how and skills that are not always synonymous with those of other interventions (Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021). Examples mentioned by respondents include religious interventions and trauma counselling (BE-26; BE-32). Practitioners also indicate that the current strategy of institutional anchoring creates an additional workload for regular service providers, often without additional resources (BE-33; BE-36; see also Cops, Pauwels, & van Alstein, 2020; Cherney, 2016; Mine, Jonckheere, Jeuniaux, & Detry, 2022).

In other words, finding the right balance between specialisation with institutionalisation is largely a matter of developing and implementing an approach that builds on the expertise and structures that are already out there, without losing sight of the distinct sensitivities of CVE cases. Having adequately trained personnel appears particularly critical in this regard (Cherney, 2016; Koehler & Fiebig, 2019). CVE programming, moreover, must not "[detract] from any independent efforts to achieve wider, entirely laudable non-P/CVE goals" (Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021, p. 7; also mentioned by BE-6; BE-20). To ensure a form of complementarity or symbiosis between CVE and non-CVE policy objectives, a 'zero-sum game' approach to investing in CVE initiatives that ends up

compromising other efforts should be avoided as much as possible (Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021).

Balancing eyes and ears with hearts and minds

While control and care are not necessarily mutually incompatible, they can at times contradict each other. Reconciling both perspectives is therefore not always easy (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Haugstvedt, 2020; Dijkman, 2021). At a basic level, all offender reintegration programmes operate in a difficult field of tension between supervising and monitoring individuals while also offering them assistance and guidance (Copeland & Marsden, 2020; Weggemans & De Graaf, 2017). These tensions become even more pronounced when individuals with an extremist background are involved. Due to the national security implications and "outsized fear" associated with violent extremism (Altier, 2021, p. 15; Weggemans & De Graaf, 2017), risk management and public protection tend to be prioritised over more rehabilitative aims. This reflex towards securitisation evidently has an impact on the practice of delivering CVE interventions.

Frontline practitioners have to navigate this dual agenda of control and care at the micro-level. One respondent, for example, puts it as follows: "vigilant care. That's a good term, I think, that summarises everything well. (…) So the welfare part on the one hand and on the other, yeah, also having to keep a close eye on things" (BE-6). Some professionals feel caught in the middle of conflicting expectations related to their role as intervention providers (see also Haugstvedt & Gunnarsdottir, 2021). As Lindekilde (2014, p. 238; italics in original) highlights, CVE practitioners may find themselves in a paradoxical position where they are "simultaneously working to actively confront and change views and practices *and* passively care and facilitate changes from within; build trust and companionship *and* challenge ideology; be personal *and* professional; push *and* not push".

Having an element of security enmeshed into support work not only implies a different way of looking at clients (Haugstvedt & Gunnarsdottir, 2021; Mine, Jonckheere, Jeuniaux, & Detry, 2022), it also raises concerns among the practitioner community about the instrumentalisation of supportive services (BE-5; BE-6; BE-20; see also Cops, Pauwels, & van Alstein, 2020; Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021). According to some respondents, the convergence of these two logics entails the risk that initiatives would no longer be able to

justify their existence purely on the basis of a supportive agenda, but that a security agenda will become a precondition to secure grants and subsidies (BE-20; BE-42; see also Jaminé & Fadil, 2019). Others note how some organisations or programmes simply rechristen their existing work as 'CVE' in order to better align with regional and federal policy priorities and access new funding streams (BE-9; BE-17; see also Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021). Imposing a securitised agenda on supportive services may, however, have counterproductive side-effects, such as alienating certain target audiences or individuals, particularly those who have already experienced marginalisation or stigmatisation (BE-6; BE-20; see also Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021).

Prison, it would seem, really brings the depths of this dilemma into bold relief (cf. Copeland & Marsden, 2020). Since 2015, Belgium has opted for a mixed placement policy, integrating violent extremist inmates as much as possible into the general prison population, but segregating individuals who attempt to proselytise others in dedicated prison wings or high-security facilities (Renard, 2021; Van Driessche & Franssens, 2018). It should be noted that while, in theory, extremist offenders who are dispersed among the mainstream prisoner population are subject to the same, 'ordinary' regime of non-extremist prisoners, in practice, many of them are placed under individual security regimes or measures. These measures may include more stringent searches of the detainee's cell, round-the-clock observation, exclusion from certain communal or individual activities, limitations on visits and communication, as well as confinement measures (Renard, 2021; Van Driessche & Franssens, 2018).

Several respondents note that strict measures such as placing individuals in isolation from other prisoners has taken a heavy toll on some, and might result in "psychological injuries" (BE-36; also mentioned by BE-29; BE-34). Other studies have likewise found that such "discriminatory measures" (Renard, 2021, p. 169) can endanger more rehabilitative goals (Baaken, Korn, Ruf, & Walkenhorst, 2020; Lewis & Marsden, 2021; Weggemans & De Graaf, 2017). As one practitioner remarks: "they already start from the point that they are angry with society and with how they are treated. And that actually only confirms their point" (BE-33). Respondents acknowledge, however, that while "there was quite a strong safety reflex in the beginning" (BE-34) with regard to detention regimes, this is no longer the case today (BE-29; BE-35; BE-36). One interviewee comments that: "[prison authorities had to learn that] you can also achieve security goals by having a non-restrictive policy. Those two

things, right, they are compatible objectives, they do not always contradict each other" (BE-29). Very strict regimes appear to be applied with more care and deliberation than before and extremist prisoners, as indicated above, are often given priority access to supportive services (BE-29; BE-34; BE-36). How violent extremist offenders are managed and monitored in Belgian prisons has, in sum, evolved significantly over a relatively short period of time.

According to some respondents, other counter-terrorism measures, such as nationality deprivation or the freezing of assets, may also affect the prospect of rehabilitation and reintegration (BE-35; BE-36; BE-49). Working with clients who were stripped of their nationality or who lost their right of residence – which might, but is not always directly linked to the commission of terrorist offenses – can be challenging for intervention providers. As one practitioner mentions, it is "very difficult to create a perspective for the future" for someone who is not going to be able to stay in this country (BE-35). Others argue that such measures are not only a serious obstacle to rehabilitative work, but that they may also produce undesired side-effects in terms of further radicalisation (BE-33; BE-49; see also Copeland & Marsden, 2020).

To summarise, although control and care can, and do, clash in the short term, they reinforce each other in the long run. Ensuring an appropriate balance between these two goals is especially important in the context of CVE, seeing how inadequate control or surveillance of those individuals who are assessed as needing it could pose a risk not only in terms of non-compliance but also for those persons to go on and cause serious harm, yet too great an emphasis on security over rehabilitation may ultimately jeopardise both (Weggemans & De Graaf, 2017). Balancing rehabilitation and risk-based considerations, moreover, is of perennial concern to professionals working in a criminal justice context and has been described as "one of the greatest challenges faced by practitioners" (Villeneuve, F.-Dufour, & Farrall, 2021, p. 77; see also Mine, Jonckheere, Jeuniaux, & Detry, 2022; Weaver, 2014). In addition, criminological research on rehabilitative interventions has highlighted how the logics of care and control are increasingly blended within contemporary criminal justice (Ainslie, 2021; Gough, 2013; Robinson, 2015). A number of extremism researchers point to a similar pattern in CVE spaces. Heath-Kelly & Strausz (2019, p. 91), for instance, describe the current CVE context in the UK as one where "care [is] positioned as an anti-terrorism measure – and counterterrorism as a care intervention" (see also Brown & Mohamed, 2021).

Several respondents made the same observation, noting how rehabilitation has been reframed as a risk-management strategy (BE-29; BE-34; see also Ainslie, 2021; Dijkman, 2021; Robinson, 2015). As one practitioner remarks: "the whole [system of] assistance and service provision to prisoners was not initiated from a desistance perspective. It was started from the idea that every citizen has the right to access and help in detention" (BE-34).

The theories underpinning CVE interventions

Lastly, the above describes the *how*, but not the *why*, of CVE work in Belgium. Very often, however, interventions are developed and implemented without a fully fleshed-out theory of change. For most CVE programmes, the mechanism through which the intervention is supposed to bring about the desired change is not clearly articulated, and neither is the rationale for choosing one specific approach or method over others (see also Abbas, 2021; Kurtenbach, Schumilas, Kareem, Waleciak, & Zaman, 2021). As previously stated, there is no straight, dotted line between theory and practice, with professionals indicating that our current knowledge on disengagement and deradicalisation processes does not chart a clear course for what to target in CVE interventions, or how to target it. As a result, most interventions are loosely based on notions found in the literature, but their activities do not always accurately reflect the mechanism of change implied by these notions.

Instead of relying on elaborate theories of change, many CVE programmes resort to a risk-factor approach (see also Cops, Pauwels, & van Alstein, 2020). Underpinning this approach are generic assumptions of risk, vulnerability, and "root causes" (BE-6) as well as the more implicit (yet equally unverified) utilitarian logic that improving a person's well-being and life satisfaction will make violent extremist engagement less likely (see also Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021; von Hlatky, 2019). Some intervention providers mention the push-pull model (BE-8; BE-35; see also La Palm, 2017) or the idea of "unexpected kindness" (see also Bosley, 2020; Brown, et al., 2021), which one respondent describes as "the fact that someone from the other group, who then suddenly stands in front of them and who does care about them and who does want to help and who they actually have a positive experience with, which is very unexpected" (BE-8), as sources of inspiration for their work. How these notions are translated into practice, however, is not made clear.

Others refer to broader theoretical frameworks, such as general desistance theories (BE-11; BE-13). One professional (BE-8) mentions drawing on the Good Lives Model - a criminological model which has become almost synonymous with a strengths-based approach to rehabilitation (Ward & Brown, 2004). Another practitioner specifies: "I base a lot of my work on the models that exist in health psychology. Like, how can the person progressively change their behaviour to have healthy behaviour, for example. Like quitting smoking or losing weight. And a lot of these things, they're actually applicable in other areas as well" (BE-43). Curiously, some intervention providers indicate that they purposefully look for guidance *outside* of extremism research. According to one of them, "I feel that it allows us to frame our clients once again as humans. Again from the idea of de-labelling" (BE-13). Even so, as Jones, Wallner, and Winterbotham (2021, p. 7) argue, the importance of a "theory of change that reflects the distinct sensitivities, purpose and constituencies of P/CVE programming" can hardly be overstated.

CVE and assisted desistance

Having outlined the background and content of CVE efforts *à la Belge*, let us now put these findings in a wider perspective. Unlike efforts to facilitate extremist disengagement, the role of formal interventions in the process of desisting from crime has been researched quite extensively. As such, the literature on assisted desistance - or "desistance-focused practice", as it is sometimes called (Ainslie, 2021, p. 148) - offers a valuable comparative framework (see also Glowacz, 2020). As a concept, assisted desistance generally refers to "the formal change processes that feed into an overarching desistance process" (Healy, 2020, p. 261).

What emerges when we compare these formal change processes, then, is that there are many parallels between assisted desistance and "assisted disengagement" (Koehler, 2021, p. 2). First of all, the scope of support offered by CVE programmes is practically the same as that of what one respondent called "classic rehabilitative work" (BE-49). The sole exception to this would be religious counselling, which is offered only to a small portion of Belgian's CVE programme participants. A recent review by Villeneuve et al. (2021, p. 90) highlights how "assisting desistance efforts lie in basic 'social work' which produces 'ripple effects'

through their personal and social contexts". The same basic principles are very much apparent in CVE efforts, too (see also Feddes, Nickolson, Mann, & Doosje, 2020; Haugstvedt, 2019).

Moreover, for both of these formal change processes, it is not just the content of the intervention that matters, but also the quality of the working relationship (Cherney & Belton, 2021; O'Sullivan, Hart, & Healy, 2020; Villeneuve, F.-Dufour, & Farrall, 2021). In a general sense, researchers tend to characterise desistance from crime as "co-constructed" (Weaver, 2014, p. 18) by the individual and the people around them. Moving away from violent extremism has similarly been described as a deeply social and relational process (Abbas, 2021; Bosley, 2020; Glowacz, 2020). Formal interventions are thus best thought of as playing an important, but nonetheless limited role within an overarching and long-term process of personal change that "ultimately belongs to the offender" (O'Sullivan, Hart, & Healy, 2020, p. 64). From this perspective, intervention providers will, at most, *assist* individuals in their journeys away from crime or extremism, and they appear to do so in broadly similar ways: that is, by helping individuals with particular problems in their life, by fostering the motivation to change, by helping them to develop particular skills and capacities, by challenging certain thought processes, and by supporting and validating identity shifts (Villeneuve, F.-Dufour, & Farrall, 2021).

In practice, CVE interventions are not all that different from other rehabilitative interventions. We can interpret this observation in two seemingly opposite ways. On the one hand, these similarities may point to a significant degree of overlap between the processes of quitting crime and giving up violent extremism. This, in turn, would raise serious questions concerning the necessity and justifiability of the current system of "differential justice" (Weaver, 2014, p. 16), where CVE cases are treated as a distinct and unique category of clients. If leaving violent extremism is more similar to, than dissimilar from, desisting from more common forms of deviance, as some commentators suggest (LaFree & Miller, 2008; Glowacz, 2020; Marsden, 2016; Weggemans & De Graaf, 2017), then this form of distinction arguably makes little sense.

On the other hand, the finding that CVE interventions come so very close to "business as usual" (Haugstvedt, 2019, p. 165) might reflect that we are simply "throwing known solutions at issues we don't understand" (Sommers, 2019, p. 31). It has indeed been argued that "different problems require different approaches" (Pearson, Winterbotham, & Brown,

2019, p. 321), suggesting that the efficacy of CVE programming could be limited by misapplying interventions designed for one distinct issue to another. From this perspective, the finding that many practitioners see little to no difference between CVE and non-CVE cases could perhaps be explained by their relative unfamiliarity with this type of client, or even by inadequate practitioner training.[7] At this point, more research is clearly needed to assess the impact of generic as well as more extremism-specific interventions on the disengagement process.

Comparing CVE work to assisted desistance also raises a few other questions. As Heath-Kelly & Strausz (2019, p. 107) argue, one could question "why (…) these outcomes [could not] be obtained through normal service provision, rather than a counterterrorism pathway". Another point, which was also brought up by several practitioners (BE-41; BE-45), is the question whether the present response to violent extremism is balanced in relation to other security threats. Quite a few professionals expressed that other problem areas, such as drug abuse, sexual offending, or organised crime, could benefit from the integral and integrated approach developed specifically for dealing with CVE cases (BE-10; BE-33; BE-40; BE-41). Similar findings were reported by Renard (2021, p. 169, emphasis added), who concludes that:

> "one could compare this investment in the (post-)penitentiary management of terrorist offenders with the *overwhelming lack of investment* for the rehabilitation and reinsertion of "ordinary" inmates. From such perspective, the measures developed for terrorist offenders would appear to be less a case of over-reaction than an adjustment compared to a general policy of under-reaction".

Discussion and conclusion

Zooming out, CVE programming in Belgium may be described using the metaphor of a snow globe, with policy and practice having being thoroughly shaken up by the Syria crisis. Now that the dust is starting to settle, it is possible to observe how CVE work has evolved in leaps and bounds over the last few years. Despite the undeniable progress that has been made, there

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[7] I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

is still plenty of room for improvement in this field (see also Cops, Pauwels, & van Alstein, 2020; Jaminé & Fadil, 2019; Renard, 2021). By and large, the professionals and policy makers included in this study paint a picture of a labyrinthine landscape, blotted by small-scale initiatives, disjointed policies, and uneven practices. In listing the many challenges of CVE work, this study has highlighted the complexity of CVE practice and the broad set of skills required by frontline practitioners. Many of them, however, spoke about a lack of clear guidance, both from the research literature and from supra-local authorities: "It's all very well saying, 'we'll give you money', give us some direction, give us some manuals to deal with the situation" (BE-19). As a result, CVE work encompasses a very wide range of activities, tools, and approaches. While this does make it possible to offer highly individualised, needs-driven interventions, it also means that there is no such thing as standard procedure or established practice in this field, rendering the evaluation of CVE efforts exceedingly difficult (see also Abbas, 2021; Cherney & Belton, 2021; Kurtenbach, Schumilas, Kareem, Waleciak, & Zaman, 2021).

Looking ahead, this article's findings allow for the formulation of three key recommendations:

Firstly, the results of this study point to a need to progress from pioneering and experimenting to professionalisation and standardisation. One crucial measure, in this regard, would be to improve training quality (see also Jaminé & Fadil, 2019; Koehler & Fiebig, 2019). Empirical evidence and evaluation are what make good policy, yet both of these are currently lacking. More efforts should be undertaken to examine programme effectiveness, and an essential step in that regard would be to systematically collect data on programme participants as well as the types of support that are offered. In terms of developing a set of outcomes against which client participation can be assessed, the focus should be on mapping change over a certain period of time and across a range of domains shown to be relevant for extremist disengagement (see Cherney & Belton, 2021 for an excellent example). In order to conduct more systematic assessments that, crucially, go beyond ill-defined behavioural measures, closer partnerships between practitioners, policy makers, and academics are needed. Additionally, there is an urgent need to better understand whether responsiveness to a certain intervention varies across individuals as a result of factors such as age (Barracosa & March, 2022), gender (Pearson, Winterbotham, & Brown, 2019), or the type of ideology

(Koehler, 2021). Only then can we begin to answer the question of *what* helps *when*, for *whom,* and *why*.

Secondly, CVE policy and practice should progress beyond the current focus on the individual. According to Abbas (2021, p. 141), "the essential problem with deradicalization interventions (…) is that they only address symptoms and not the sociological context that facilitates political violence". Even though disengaging is a social process, and reintegrating into society can be exceptionally challenging, most programmes are hyper-individual in focus while group- and community-based interventions remain underdeveloped (see also Brown & Mohamed, 2021). Reintegration is a two-way street, which means that working to support personal change without lowering community-level and stigma-related barriers is "like building a bridge to nowhere" (Bosley, 2020, p. 25). As such, it would be worth exploring the possibility of creating inter-group contact possibilities or establishing peer support groups for individuals with a history of violent extremism.

Thirdly, and finally, Belgium will need to sustain its CVE efforts. As one respondent notes, "the danger is funding, of course. If the money is suddenly taken away because there are no more attacks, then the whole thing collapses" (BE-45). In fact, many intervention providers voiced their frustration over the lack of consistent and ongoing funding. Sustaining CVE work not only requires long-term investment, most often it also means anchoring these efforts in existing structures (see also Cops, Pauwels, & van Alstein, 2020). However, beyond these "usual suspects" (Jones, Wallner, & Winterbotham, 2021, p. 15), which do not always resonate well with this particular target group, CVE programming should also be offered by non-governmental actors. Importantly, sustainable funding needs to go hand in hand with rigorous evaluation of these initiatives - which, thus far, has been limited (Gielen, 2020). Above all, CVE work is a long-haul undertaking. For this reason, it would be wise for policy makers and practitioners to not just invest in future efforts, but also to make sure that these efforts are grounded in robust evidence.

Acknowledgements

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Annex I: list of respondents

Respondent	Function/organisation
BE-1	Youth worker
BE-2	Youth worker
BE-3	Local deradicalisation official
BE-4	Youth worker
BE-5	Local deradicalisation official
BE-6	Youth worker
BE-7	Deradiant representative
BE-8	Deradicalisation counsellor
BE-9	Flemish government official
BE-10	Local deradicalisation official
BE-11	Social worker
BE-12	Social worker
BE-13	CAPREV representative
BE-14	Local deradicalisation official
BE-15	Representative of Services d'aide aux justiciables
BE-16	Representative of Services d'aide aux justiciables
BE-17	BeFUS representative
BE-18	Local deradicalisation official
BE-19	Local deradicalisation official
BE-20	Youth worker
BE-21	Local deradicalisation official
BE-22	Religious counsellor
BE-23	Socio-cultural worker
BE-24	Socio-cultural worker
BE-25	Local deradicalisation official
BE-26	Flemish government official
BE-27	Flemish government official
BE-28	Youth worker
BE-29	SAM representative
BE-30	Researcher
BE-31	Researcher
BE-32	Representative of Justitieel Welzijnswerk
BE-33	Representative of Justitieel Welzijnswerk
BE-34	CPSDEx representative
BE-35	Deradicalisation counsellor
BE-36	Policy coordinator Flemish prison
BE-37	Local deradicalisation official
BE-38	Ceapire representative
BE-39	Victim-offender mediator
BE-40	VVSG representative
BE-41	Brussels Prevention & Security representative
BE-42	Socio-cultural worker
BE-43	Kaleido representative
BE-44	CUTA official
BE-45	CUTA official
BE-46	Official from the Ministry of Interior
BE-47	Official from the Ministry of Interior
BE-48	Social worker
BE-49	Representative of the Flemish Houses of Justice
BE-50	Representative of the Flemish Houses of Justice

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