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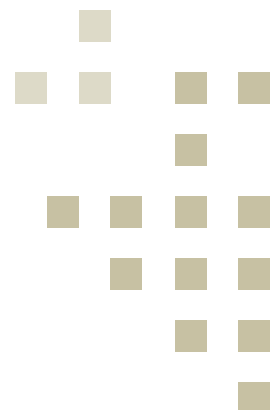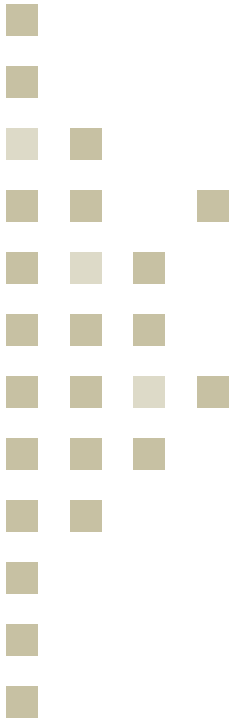
[627] Paper

Exit Neo-Nazism

Reducing Recruitment and Promoting
Disengagement from Racist Groups

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Exit Neo-Nazism: Reducing Recruitment and Promoting Disengagement from Racist Groups

By Dr Tore Bjørgo[1]
The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

This paper was originally written in August 2001 as a chapter for the volume *Right Wing Extremism: Aspects in Europe* which was to be published by the EU Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. Unfortunately, the book project was shelved. A shorter but updated version of this paper was subsequently published (in German translation) in *Journal für Konflikt- und Gewaltforschung* (Vol. 4, 1/2002). The present version includes a more thorough description (as of August 2001) of Exit projects in Sweden, Finland, and Germany, and a concluding comparative discussion.

Summary
Young persons belonging to various types of right-wing extremist groups commit a large proportion of xenophobic and racist attacks. Measures against racial violence should therefore include interventions that reduce and (preferably) dissolve such groups. To be effective, this requires knowledge about how such groups emerge and operate, and in particular, on processes of recruitment and disengagement. Through early intervention, it is possible to reduce recruitment of new members to racist youth groups, and also facilitate (early) disengagement for those who are already involved with the group. Although most members of racist groups leave sooner or later, it is important that they quit sooner rather than later – before they hurt others, and before they have internalised a racist world-view and a violent pattern of behaviour. The article describes reasons for why some young people join racist groups; factors and circumstances that cause most of them eventually to consider disengaging; and what prevents some of them from doing so. The Exit project was started to develop methods and strategies for reducing recruitment and facilitating disengagement from racist groups. Beginning in Norway in 1996–97, the Exit approach was subsequently adopted and developed further in Sweden, with strong results. From there, the Exit approach spread on to Germany, where there are now a number of private and state-run initiatives to promote disengagement from neo-Nazi groups. There are also Exit initiatives in several other European countries.

All over Europe, neo-Nazi groups, skinheads, and xenophobic gangs of youths commit acts of racial violence, and harass ethnic minorities and other people they consider their enemies. The public frequently responds with shock and disgust, and rightfully so. Strong and public reactions against racism may certainly be of great value in itself. Demonstrations and information campaigns may be good for the public morale by reinforcing positive attitudes towards minorities and against racism. However, such responses have little effect on the youths participating in racist groups. They seem to reinterpret such manifestations of antiracism in ways that merely reinforce their world-view, identity, and group cohesiveness. If we want to influence such groups, we should try to base interventions on knowledge about the group processes involved.

Unfortunately, there is no single 'magic bullet' that alone can solve the problem of racist violence and racist groups. Policies and measures are likely to be more effective if they are comprehensive and co-ordinated rather than isolated approaches working in opposite directions. This requires collaboration at the local level between the police, social agencies, schools, youth workers, and non-governmental organisations. On the general level, interventions against racial violence should include the following:

- suppressive measures (improving laws against racism, police action, more effective implementation)
- victim support (prevent victimisation, taking care of victims, assistance to report)
- improving public awareness on xenophobia and racist violence (political manifestations, dissemination of information, campaigns, demonstrations, public declarations, etc.)
- addressing structural causes (marginalisation, discrimination, unemployment, etc.)
- reducing the size and activities of racist groups (reducing recruitment, increasing disengagement, splitting groups).

This article will focus on the last dimension, but that does certainly not mean that this should exclude the other forms of interventions.

The group dimensions of violence

Most cases of racist violence are committed by several persons together. The nature of these groups varies considerably. Some groups are just loose cliques of friends who happen to get in conflict with some foreigners. Other groups have more the character of delinquent gangs, often with a xenophobic orientation, but without any ideology or links to extremist organisations. Some groups are bands of skinheads with a nationalist or Nazi orientation or style. And still other groups are parts of neo-Nazi organisations or networks.

Although many of the less organised xenophobic youth groups do not have direct ties to the neo-Nazi or right-wing extremist scene, these youth groups nevertheless represent an important pool of recruits to neo-Nazi groups and other far-right movements. And some of these xenophobic youth

gangs may transform into more ideological groups because of the responses they get to their acts of racist violence. Thus, it is important to address how to prevent an escalation in racism and violence, and how the various forms of racist youth groups can be reduced in numbers and strength.

In understanding racist violence and the behaviour of participants in racist youth groups, it is sometimes useful to make an analytic distinction between *racism as motivation*, and *racism as expression*. To some of these youths, it is clearly both. They commit racist acts that are motivated by racism, xenophobia, or Nazi ideology. However, to many of the other participants in racist youth groups, racism is their form of expression whereas there are quite other considerations than ideology that motivate their Nazi and racist behaviour. This could be to show off to friends, to live up to the expectations of the group, to prove their loyalty or manhood, or getting media attention. For the majority of racist perpetrators, it is probably a mixture of such non-political motives with a loose bundle of undigested xenophobic feelings and racist slogans that determines their behaviour. To the victims of their racist expressions, however, it does not matter much what motivated the fist that struck them – it hurts the same. Such knowledge may nevertheless be highly relevant to agencies involved in developing more targeted and effective methods of prevention and intervention against racism and violence. In relation to those characterised by racism as expression rather than motivation, it is likely to have a direct impact on their racist behaviour if their ties with the racist group can be broken.

In the following, I will focus on why it is important to reduce the size of the neo-Nazi and racist youth scene, and what are the critical processes we should try to influence in order to achieve that.

It makes a lot of difference if there are close to 3,000 neo-Nazis activists, as is the case in a country like Sweden, or merely 100–150, as in Norway. With a large number of participants, the Nazi scene in Sweden has reached a critical mass, and become a movement. They also have a large number of sympathisers – several thousands – who may serve as a pool of recruits. These sympathisers also constitute a big and profitable 'home market' for White Power music, magazines, and other 'nationalist' products. There is a large pool of talent among the participants of the scene – including musicians, artists, writers, computer specialists, academics, university students, and others with a wide range of skills. This provides opportunities for specialisation among a variety of interests and tasks within the movement. Through the last decade, an elaborate organisational, economical and media infrastructure has been built up by the Swedish neo-Nazis. To some young people, it is socially attractive to join the scene. Many stay on in the movement for many years, providing experience and stability. Although they mainly recruit among teenagers, the average age in the neo-Nazi scene is relatively high. It can no longer be described mainly as a youth scene. Many activists are in their twenties and thirties, and have been involved for ten years or more. Due to its size and numbers, the movement (or local group) is not very vulnerable if leaders are put in prison – there are plenty of alternative leaders to take over. The movement is also sufficiently strong and intimidating to provide some protection against outside enemies.

In Norway, the situation is different. There are merely 100–150 active participants concentrated in five to ten locations. Members are young and have relatively short careers in the movement – only a few continue to be active after they turn 20. Thus, the average age is lower than in Sweden. Few have more than basic education, and the pool of talent and skills is very limited. As a result, organisation is weak, magazines and music productions have a low quality, and the few local groups that exist are small. There is a very limited infrastructure in terms of music bands, magazines and other media enterprises. To outsiders, the Nazi scene looks like a group of losers, and it is hardly very attractive to join. The local groups are also vulnerable to arrests or defection of leaders and core members – there are few to take over. As a result, the Nazi scene in Norway lacks the critical mass it needs to flourish in the ways it does in countries like Sweden and Germany. However, even if the scene has a limited size at the national level, some of the local groups have a sufficient size and strength to have 'street credibility' – they are able to intimidate people and dominate the streets in their community. In addition, such local groups may reinforce their strength by being connected with other groups nationally or internationally.

So size matters at all these levels. And age matters as well. How can we then influence the size and career patterns of the neo-Nazi and racist youth scene?

One approach is to focus on the population balance of the group in a demographic sense. The relevant parameters here are the number of people joining the scene, the number of people leaving the scene, and the length of time they remain in the movement. <Figure: Population balance.ppt>

If there are more people that join the group than those who leave, the group is growing. And opposite, if there are more people who quit than the number of new recruits, the group is in decline and may disappear unless they are able to turn the trend. However, within a larger Nazi scene, it is possible to desert a sinking group and join a more successful one.

New extreme groups emerge constantly. However, most of them fall apart after a few months or years – only in rare cases are they able to survive for a decade or more. These few 'successful' groups are more likely to keep most of their members over an extended time, and replenish their ranks with new recruits. Other groups suffer from steady defection and turnover in membership without being able to recruit a sufficient number of newcomers to keep the group strong enough to survive.

Most of those who have joined the racist scene do disengage sooner or later. Our goal should be that they quit *sooner* rather than later – before they hurt others; before they have internalised a racist world-view and a violent pattern of behaviour; and before they have ruined their own future by getting a criminal record and a Nazi stigma. The longer they stay the more difficult it is to get out. And the more long-term and experienced activists, the stronger will the Nazi scene become. And obviously, it is easier to influence a young teen-ager to quit than to get an adult veteran of the movement to do so.

So how can we influence the processes of recruitments to and disengagement from extremist groups? At least, we need to have some answers to the following questions:

- Why do young people join racist groups? What are their motives and circumstances for joining?
- What happens to them once they have become part of the scene?
- Why do most of them eventually disengage? What are the circumstances and motivations?
- And what factors and obstacles prevent the rest of them from doing so?

I will not go into all these processes in detail now,[2] but rather focus on some main issues.

Entry

Extreme groups fulfil certain fundamental social and psychological needs to many young people. These groups appeal to different types of persons who may join for very different reasons, or combinations of reasons.

1. *Ideology and politics:* In most cases, young people do not join racist groups because they are racists, but they gradually adopt racist views because they have become part of a racist group. However, some *do* take contact with racist groups because they agree with the political views. They seem to be a minority among recruits, though.

2. *Provocation and anger:* New recruits are usually less concerned about politics or ideological content, but they frequently have vague feelings of hostility against foreigners. They respond more to what they experience as provocative and outrageous behaviour by immigrants, or feel that they get less access to social services and other scarce goods than those offered to immigrants and asylum-seekers. Some consider immigrants and asylum-seekers as competitors for scarce economic resources, such as jobs, housing and social services.

3. *Protection:* Young people may join militant racist groups to get protection against various enemies or perceived threats – whether that be school bullies or immigrant youth gangs. Racist youth groups sometimes actively seek out individuals who are in need of protection and offer them security in the group.

4. *Drifting:* Some young people may be described as 'tasters' or 'drifters' who join and leave a series of movements, organisations, and subcultures. They are often motivated by curiosity and a search for excitement more

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[2] The following pages are based on empirical research presented in more detail in Tore Bjørgo, *Racist and Right-Wing Violence in Scandinavia: Patterns, Perpetrators, and Responses* (Oslo: Tano Aschehoug, 1997), in particular Chapter 6. A shorter version was published as 'Entry, Bridge-burning and Exit Options: What happens to young people who join racist groups – and want to leave?', in Jeffrey Kaplan and Tore Bjørgo (eds), *Nation and Race: The Developing Euro-American Racist Subculture* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998). Full bibliographical references are provided in these publications but omitted here for reasons of space and readability.

than real commitment. However, it frequently turns out to be much more difficult to move on from a neo-Nazi or racist group than is the case with most other groups young people may drift into. The stigma of being branded as a neo-Nazi may be extremely difficult to get rid of.

5. *Thrill seeking:* Some of those who involve themselves with extreme political groups, represent a personality type with a particularly strong psychological need for excitement, for testing their own limits and for exposing themselves to potentially dangerous situations. Some of those with these dispositions go into more destructive activities, such as crime, drug use, or political extremism and violence.

6. *Violence, weapons, and uniforms:* Some of those joining militant racist and Nazi groups, are strongly – even primarily – attracted by the violent and militaristic aspects of these groups. Brotherhoods of arms, masculinity cults, and the mystique of weapons and uniforms appeal strongly to certain types of young men.[3] Militant nationalist and neo-Nazi groups provide a social context for cultivating such interests, e.g. by organising clandestine weapons training in the forests.

7. *Youth rebels go to the right:* Traditional leftist ideologies and role models of revolution and rebellion hold little appeal to many young rebels at the turn of the Millennium. As one young nationalist activist put it, 'if you really want to provoke society these days, you have to become either a National Socialist or a Satanist!'[4]

8. *The search for substitute families and father-figures:* Many of those joining extremist groups have a troubled relationship with their families, and with their fathers in particular. Some parents are obviously too busy with their own careers to show their children sufficient attention, concern, and appreciation. Provocative and rebellious behaviour is often the child's way of getting attention and at least some response – a negative one if a positive response is not forthcoming. Older activists in racist groups often serve as substitute father-figures or masculine role models for such young boys in particular.

9. *The search for friends and community:* Some of those joining the racist scene are individuals who have no friends and are primarily looking for friendship and acceptance. Having failed to be accepted into other groups, they enter the first door open to them. They often find that the racist group is quite forthcoming and accepting, and in some respects even more tolerant than many 'straight' youth groups are. However, to be accepted into the inner circles is much more difficult. Some individuals of this type may go to great lengths to win acceptance. Being highly susceptible to group pressure, they may even carry out acts of violence

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3   Heléne Lööw, 'The Cult of Violence: The Swedish Racist Counter-Culture' in Tore Björgo & Rob Witte, *Racist Violence in Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).
4   Interview with former activist in the Norwegian *Viking* group (1 September 1995).

and other crimes in order to be accepted as a full member or to enhance their status within the group.

10. *The search for status and identity* is a main factor when youths join racist groups and youth gangs in general. Individuals who have failed to establish a positive identity and status in relation to school, work, sports or other social activities and settings sometimes try to win respect by joining groups with a dangerous and intimidating image. By donning the 'uniform' of the local skinhead group or a neo-Nazi movement, other kids who in the past used to bully them now yield to them. Although often mistaking fear for respect, by joining a racist group they perceive a clear difference in the ways others relate to them. A similar process can be observed at group level. Local youth gangs who in the past were feared and despised for their arbitrary violence, vandalism, and criminality may find that if they turn their violence and aggression towards unpopular foreigners, some segments of the local community may applaud. The national news media frequently give their acts extensive coverage, and racist organisations may hail them as true patriots and nationalist fighters. In such cases, entire groups of delinquent youths may transform their character and join the racist scene collectively.

In more general terms, Wilhelm Heitmeyer[5] describes the process of individualisation in the modern social and economic system. Social status and identity are no longer 'givens' but have to be achieved through personal effort with a great risk of failure – particularly in times of social and economic crisis, and unemployment. The trend among many young people to define their identity in terms of such 'natural characteristics' as race and nationality – which are ascribed rather than achieved statuses – may be seen as an attempt to solve this dilemma.

The most common way youths get in direct contact with racist groups is probably by being introduced through friends or older siblings who are already members themselves. Girls frequently get involved as girlfriends. Many youths come in contact through media focus on specific racist groups.[6] Racist groups are also developing their own media in increasingly skilled ways. Magazines, local radio broadcasts, web pages on the Internet, White Power music on CD, videos and concerts are reaching an increasing number of young people who may thereby get in touch with the movement.

Community-building and bridge-burning

Once a young person has established contact with a radical nationalist, racist or neo-Nazi group, what happens to him or her? To some newcomers, very little happens. They hang around for a while, find that it was not quite what they expected, and leave to search for something more exciting elsewhere.

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[5]   Wilhelm Heitmeyer, *Rechtsextremistische Orientierungen bei Jugendlichen: Empirische Ergebnisse und Erklärungsmuster einer Untersuchung zur politischen Sozialisation* (Weinheim and Munich: Juventa Verlag, 1988, 1992); W. Heitmeyer, 'Hostility and Violence Towards Foreigners in Germany' in Bjørgo and Witte, (1993).

[6]   For a more thorough discussion, see T. Bjørgo, 'Role of the Media in Racist Violence' in Bjørgo and Witte (1993).

Few noticed that they came or that they left. The shorter the time they have been inside, and the less they have been involved, the easier it is to get out.

Others have very different experiences, and undergo two parallel and mutually reinforcing processes: inclusion and socialisation into a new reclusive and stigmatised community, and cutting ties to 'normal' community outside. As these dual processes progress, it becomes increasingly difficult – sometimes almost impossible – to leave the group.

Newcomers in the group have described how they have gone through a process of socialisation. They learn from the others how to behave in order to find their place in the 'family'. One important aspect of this is to install into new members a sense of security consciousness about things to keep their mouths shut about, to be careful about what they talk about on the phone or send by mail, and where they can go and not go safely in town. There is an element of realism behind these concerns. However, this security consciousness also creates a sense of paranoia among members, a pervasive feeling of belonging to a small group surrounded by enemies. This may serve to strengthen group cohesion and loyalty, and add to the mystique and excitement of belonging to a 'dangerous' and more or less clandestine group. At the same time, however, the suspicion that the enemies may have infiltrated the group reinforces this atmosphere of distrust and paranoia. New members are not trusted, and even long-term members may occasionally be suspected of being traitors. The fear of being considered untrustworthy or even accused of being an infiltrator is a powerful factor promoting conformity and submission to group values among newcomers.

Sooner or later, most new members will experience violent confrontations with enemies such as anti-racists, 'foreigners' or the police. Such confrontations are significant events to those who participate, whether the battle ends by victory, defeat or arrest. Regardless of the outcome, these events tend to give the participants an experience of common destiny. Victories are sources of shared pride, defeats give rise to hatred and bitterness against the common enemy. Even experiencing bitter defeat tends to strengthen group cohesion. Although violence and harassment from militant anti-racists may serve to raise the costs of joining a racist group, and may sometimes scare recruits into pulling out, the effect is often the opposite. They are pushed further into the scene and become more hateful and violent than they were before as a result of the violence they have been exposed to. One observer has described the experience of being beaten up by enemies as the main initiation rite of the group.[7] Another important consequence of taking part in these violent confrontations, is that these experiences tends to change profoundly how they relate to violence – both in terms of the legitimacy of using violence, and by getting familiar with the practice of it.

Becoming socialised into a new community, with a world-view and value system completely at odds with mainstream society, and building bonds of loyalty to the new 'family', represent one fundamental process individuals go through when they join a racist group. An equally important process takes place more or less simultaneously: the severing of ties to 'normal' society, as

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[7]   Cf. Katrine Fangen (1995), *Skinheads i rødt, hvitt og blått: En sosiologisk rapport fra 'innsiden'*. Oslo: UNGforsk Rapport No. 4, p. 102. She also describes these groups from an individual career perspective, including why members quit.

well as to family and friends. Society for its part stigmatises them as despicable Nazis and racists.

Reasons for considering leaving the group

At some stage, most activists consider leaving the group and starting to live a 'normal' life. What kinds of experiences and factors contribute to this decision? I will try to systematise some of the more common factors. Those who quit the group are usually affected by a combination of several factors. Obviously, the more reasons, the stronger is the urge to quit. It is useful to make a distinction between 'push' and 'pull' factors. 'Push' relates to negative social forces and circumstances which make it unattractive and unpleasant to remain in a particular social environment, whereas 'pull' refers to factors attracting the person to a more rewarding alternative.

Push factors:

1. *Negative social sanctions* may make some of those who join racist groups reconsider their affiliation. These may range from parental scolding and social isolation to criminal prosecution by the police, and harassment or violence by militant anti-racists. Such sanctions are normally more effective in relation to new recruits who have not yet established strong ties of loyalty and broken all ties to the 'normal' community. However, some of these negative sanctions, such as branding them 'racists' and 'Nazis', may have the unintended effect of pushing new recruits further into the stigmatised group, thereby diminishing their exit options and strengthening their loyalty to the group. This is especially the case when negative sanctions are not combined with positive incentives to establish alternative identities.

2. Some activists *lose faith in the ideology and politics of the group or movement.* They experience self-doubt where they feel that what they had believed in and fought for was wrong, both morally and politically. However, it is probably more common that beliefs change *after* leaving the group, and as a consequence, rather than before, as a cause of leaving the group.

3. A common feeling among some activists is that *'things are going too far'*, especially in terms of violence. They may feel that there are too many violence-prone and extremist people joining the group, doing wild things they themselves cannot accept or do not want to get associated with. Some also fear that the violent conflict with militant anti-racists is escalating and getting out of hand, and that people on both sides may get killed.

4. Some grow *disillusioned with the inner workings and activities of the group*. One common objection is that the group is too much involved in drinking beer and senseless fighting rather than focusing on serious political work. Another source of disillusionment is the lack of loyalty

between the members of the group. Although comradeship is a central value to the group, many find that even those they held to be close friends stab them in the back, betray or cheat them. Pressure from outside and the fear of infiltration produce a strong sense of paranoia within the group, and this may often cause people to accuse one another of being infiltrators or potential traitors. Some new members are also dismayed by the ways veteran activists try to manipulate and control the younger ones, being protective and helpful in order to place newcomers in a position of dependence; involving them in illegal activities; and trying to cut off their exit options.

5. Even long-term activists are vulnerable to the risks of *losing confidence, status and position in the group*. Although most youth groups do not have formal leadership hierarchies, they are nevertheless highly status-oriented. This makes members highly vulnerable to various accusations and rumours. The pervasive paranoia and fear of infiltrators also expose people to accusations of being traitors or informers. In such situations, when a person's standing and reputation in the group has declined, the option of quitting is more tempting than in a period when he or she is respected and well regarded by the mates. In extreme cases, members may even be formally (or even violently) expelled from the group.

6. A common feeling among many 'front-line' activists is that after a while they *become exhausted and can no longer take the pressure*. Life in a skinhead gang or a neo-Nazi group can be quite exciting at times. The struggle against various enemies, whether they be militant anti-racists, immigrant youth gangs or the police, may entail violent clashes, clandestine activities and an almost constant feeling of high tension and uncertainty. The attraction of these adrenaline highs makes 'normal' life outside seem almost unbearably dull. However, few people can continue to live this kind of life year after year without becoming emotionally and physically burnt-out. The negative aspects of being stigmatised, socially isolated, always exposed to violent attacks from opponents, and consumed by intense hatred to various enemies also tend to take their toll as time passes by. Living under legal pressure and police surveillance may also be exhausting in the long run. Many activists have committed crimes for which they face or fear legal prosecution. In countries where the authorities may ban extremist organisations, the fear of becoming stigmatised by being linked to an illegal association may add to the pressure.

Pull factors:

7. The negative aspects of life as an activist in a stigmatised, extremist group often create *a longing for the freedoms of a 'normal' life*. It becomes an increasingly attractive idea to be able to live a relaxed life, minding their own business without always having to be on guard against enemies and traitors, without fear of violence, without being stigmatised and isolated, and without all the restrictions of a more or less underground existence.

8. At some point, activists in militant nationalist or racist youth groups feel that they are *getting too old for what they are doing*. They no longer have the same need for excitement; they may have less energy, and want to calm things down. When they become more mature, chasing and being chased by anti-racist militants and immigrant youth gangs no longer appear meaningful. As Fangen (1995:107) aptly puts it, 'life in the nationalist group represents a kind of prolonged youth phase, a postponement of adult life'. Most skinheads begin to think about their future and possible professional careers about at the time when they turn 20 or before. However, breaking with the scene requires that they see some reasonably attractive alternative – a future. Unfortunately, some of them cannot envision that future holds anything to them.

9. Young activists are acutely aware that being publicly known as neo-Nazis, racists or radical nationalists may jeopardise their *career prospects and personal futures*. Few European countries practice *Berufsverbot* against political extremists in a formal or legal sense (Germany is a notable exception), but it is nevertheless a fact of life that certain types of political extremists do not get certain jobs, or may even be fired. Thus, for a youth who has ambitions of obtaining a higher education and an interesting and relevant job, it is not a good idea to continue as a racist or neo-Nazi activist.

10. One of the strongest motives for leaving a militant racist or nationalist youth group is *to establish a family with new responsibilities for spouse and children.* Getting a girlfriend (or boyfriend) outside the group is a frequent cause of quitting. Such situations obviously involve establishing new bonds of loyalty and setting different priorities. In relation to groups which have some kind of gang structure (such as some skinhead or rocker groups) or in other ways demand the full loyalty of the individual member, this may lead to a fundamental conflict of loyalty which can only be solved by either leaving the group or leaving the family or girl (/boy) friend. Loyalty to spouse and children will often take priority over loyalty to group and mates.

Factors inhibiting disengagement
Although activists may have several strong reasons for leaving the group, there may still be sufficiently strong factors to discourage them from taking such a step. This has to do with the processes of bridge-burning and community-building that they went through when they became part of the group.

1. There are several *positive characteristics of the group* that may be considered too valuable to leave behind. High investments have been made in terms of friendship and social support. The racist group provides community, a substitute 'family', identity, security against external threats and enemies, excitement and adventure. Even if a person has completely lost faith in the group's ideology and politics, ties of friendship and

loyalty may for some individuals constitute more than sufficient reasons for staying with the group.

2. Potential defectors may also fear *negative sanctions from the group* – sometimes with good reason. It varies from group to group how tough they are with defectors. Some groups let people go without making any negative sanctions against them. Other groups consider quitters as traitors that must be punished or threatened back into the fold. In general, new recruits, who have been only on the periphery of the scene and not initiated into any of the group's secrets, may normally leave without any consequences. It is quite different for long-time activists who have been part of the core group. Such persons know things about the group and fellow members that may cause serious problems if this information got out. Leading activists who defect will normally receive death threats, and some have been beaten up severely. However, although threats to kill defectors are common, only in exceptional cases have death threats actually been carried through. Less lethal sanctions, such as harassment, verbal threats and expression of contempt, represent more realistic threats to defectors than outright violence. However, there are numerous cases where defectors have been beaten up severely by their former comrades in the racist scene.

3. *Loss of protection against former enemies:* A person who quits a racist or neo-Nazi group that has been involved in an ongoing violent struggle with militant anti-racists or violent immigrant youth gangs, may experience that former enemies do not necessarily believe that the disengagement is genuine, or may not even care. Militant opponents sometimes continue to assault and harass a person even after he or she has quit the racist group. For such persons, the act of leaving the racist group may also mean losing the relative protection they could enjoy by being part of a violent gang or organisation. Fear of being left in such a precarious situation may serve to dissuade potential defectors from quitting, and the actual experience of it may prompt others to return to the fold.

4. *Nowhere to go:* One of the main reasons why (potential) leavetakers may end up in such precarious situations is that former social relations with friends and family were broken or impaired when s/he joined the racist group. If the person in question tries to withdraw from the group without making a sharp and (in the eyes of the racist group) provocative breach, the defector will often be met with suspicion. Without moral support and protection, that person risks ending up in a social vacuum. Breaking away from an intense social group, many ex-members of neo-Nazi groups describe their new life as being characterised by loneliness and social isolation.

5. *Fear that career prospects are ruined:* Persons who have been publicly known for neo-Nazi or racist activism, may – with some justification – feel that their prospects of getting a good and interesting job are seriously

impaired, even if they are no longer politically active. They fear that their past will always haunt them.

Exit options

Thus, members of racist groups who for various reasons consider quitting will often decide to stay because they find the alternatives even less attractive. The following overview will discuss various strategies former activists have used or may use to get out of racist groups, and outline and evaluate the pros and cons of the main options open to persons considering to leave.

1. The most obvious and spectacular strategy is to make a straight and public break with the racist movement, renouncing the attitudes and the ideologies it represents. This strategy may involve a full confrontation with the group from which the person disaffiliated, as well as with former friends, and a total upheaval of values and life-style. Such a dramatic breach will therefore in most cases entail psychological strains as well as serious security risks. This high-profile form of disengagement is the exit strategy normally associated with a few leading activists who before their defection were already well known. Such individuals have fewer alternative exit options available than the more anonymous activists, who can pull out with less fuss and less risk of being hampered by their extremist past. To well-known activists, a clean and public breach with their past offers them an opportunity to – almost literally – begin a new life.

2. A number of activists *break more or less publicly with the racist groups* they belonged to by referring to family obligations, fear of ruined career prospects, dissatisfaction with the direction the group is moving, etc. – *but without making a complete break with the ideology and politics of the movement as such*. However, the outcome of this exit strategy is often that the persons in question end up in a highly precarious situation: They may still be exposed to harassment and social ostracism both from their former group and from former enemies, but without gaining any support and protection from a new social network. Work mates, prospective employers, friends from the pre-racist period, anti-racists, and even family members tend to consider such 'half-hearted defectors' with suspicion, as a person who may still harbour racist views. Attempts to establish new social networks, e.g. by joining various clubs or associations, may be perceived as 'Nazi infiltration'. Their past also tends to haunt them, hampering both their social and professional prospects – especially if their racist activism was publicly known. Such defectors therefore run the risk of ending up in a social vacuum, with a strong feeling of social isolation and loneliness. After a while, many of them long for the old group, with its sense of community and comradeship. However, this 'half-way' form of dissociation is often only a stage in a process that might eventually end up with a full breach. Attitudes tend to change *after* a change of group affiliation rather than vice versa. It may take time to readjust to a new reality. One should therefore not expect defectors from

Nazi groups to hold politically correct views the day after their disengagement.

3. Group members who are *not* publicly known as racist activists have good prospects of a successful reintegration into mainstream society by taking a low-key approach, *withdrawing gradually without ever making an open or public break*. During a lengthy period they gradually make themselves marginal to the group, taking less and less part in political or social activities, lose interest in the group and make the group lose interest in them. By staying away from all kinds of media publicity and not involving themselves with anti-racist groups, this form of defection is unlikely either to provoke reprisals from the movement or to cause them any negative sanctions from mainstream society. Few will know that they were ever part of a racist movement, and hopefully, those who do know will keep it to themselves.

There is, however, a major problem associated with this form of defection strategy: the racist skeleton in the closet. Throughout the rest of their lives, there is always a risk that the past may return to haunt them. Paradoxically, for a person who has been involved with a stigmatised group, the better he or she is integrated into mainstream society and the greater the success her or she achieves professionally, the higher is the risk – and the greater is the fall – if the secret past is exposed. A person who lives a normal life as a blue-collar worker may not be much hurt professionally or even socially if someone discloses that ten years ago, he was a member of a neo-Nazi group. There is also little risk that anyone would have any interest in making such a public exposure. It is quite different if the person in question makes a career in public life, getting into high positions where image, trust, and confidence are essential qualities. With public visibility, there may well be someone who harbors a personal grudge or has vested political interest in revealing dark secrets about this character's past, particularly if the person becomes controversial – what might be called the 'Kurt Waldheim syndrome'. These stories tend to make excellent media headlines. An exit strategy based on withdrawal from the extremist group without ever making a clean and public break may be quite expedient in the short run, causing few or no negative sanctions. However, the long-term outcome may be less beneficial.

From knowledge to intervention

I have described some of the factors and processes that lead young people into racist groups, what motivates many of them to eventually disengage, and what prevents them from doing so. Most of these factors can be influenced through deliberate interventions.

I have focused on youths because most of the recruitment takes place among young people. They are easier to influence – for better and worse. We know that young people join these racist groups because the group fulfil certain basic social and psychological needs. By intervening early with youths that are flirting with the racist scene, and finding alternative means to solve their needs, it is possible to prevent them from becoming fully part of

the group and adopting its racist values and a violent mode of behaviour. Thereby we can reduce recruitment.

It is also possible to increase the individual's motivations to quit the group. The strongest motivations will obviously come as the result of a combination of push and pull factors. Only push, or only pull will not work. If interventions make it costly and unpleasant to remain in the racist group, and, at the same time, more attractive alternatives are made available, members of such groups are likely to seriously consider disengaging.

However, there are obstacles to disengagement. Many of those breaking with extremist groups do fear reprisals from former friends and former enemies. Some of these people have an obvious need for protection, or at least to find ways to handle their fear. And they also need new social networks and futures.

So what can be done? This leads us to the establishment of the Exit project and closely related initiatives in several European countries.

The Exit Project:
Promoting disengagement from violent and racist groups

Background
During the early and mid-1990s, several local communities in Norway had faced serious problems with xenophobic violence and racist youth groups. After a particularly nasty series of incidents in the town Brumunddal, central and local authorities eventually took the problem seriously and made heavy investments in research and development on how to handle this and similar situations. The three-year Action Plan Brumunddal, based on and followed up by substantial research,[8] had a very positive outcome. The action plan included broad mobilisation of public agencies as well as civil society. Some of the interventions focused on reintegrating a group of young marginalised men who had directed their frustrations and anger against immigrants. Xenophobic violence stopped, and the local racist youth scene dissolved. Although all xenophobic tendencies were hardly eradicated completely from the community, Brumunddal had clearly become a much better place to live – for the remaining immigrants as well. Local agencies had learnt some valuable lessons on how to collaborate closely to handle such problems.

The positive experiences and outcomes from Action Plan Brumunddal provided inspiration and promising methods to several other Norwegian communities with similar problems of violent and racist youth groups. In most cases, these communities managed to solve or at least reduce their problems. During the 1990s, local and central authorities in Norway were much more on the offensive compared to the typical response a few years earlier, when denial, belittling or moral panic were the usual responses to problems of xenophobic violence and racist youth groups. Experiences and knowledge

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[8] In particular Frøydis Eidheim, *Hva har skjedd i Brumunddal: Lokalsamfunnet i møte med de fremmede og seg selv.* Oslo: NIBR rapport 1993:20; and Yngve Carlsson, *Aksjonsplan Brumunddal – ga den resultater? Bekjempelse av fremmedfiendtlig vold i lokalsamfunnet.* Oslo: NIBR-rapport 1995:13. Parallell to the Brumunddal studies, there were also two ongoing doctoral projects focusing on other racist youth scenes by Katrine Fangen and Tore Bjørgo, respectively.

gained from various local projects were also documented and accumulated systematically for later use.[9]

One lasting lesson of the highly successful Action Plan Brumunddal was that problems of xenophobic violence should be considered a responsibility to the entire community. A second important lesson was that it was useful to involve external experts as advisors. As a consequence, the central government decided to establish a permanent pool of experts, '*The Interdisciplinary Advisory Service for Local Action against Racism and Xenophobia*', coordinated by the Directorate of Immigration (UDI). This advisory service consists of (at present) 17 researchers and practitioners, including police officers, social workers, pedagogues, conflict mediators, and others.[10] Together, they provide complementary forms of expertise to municipalities and local agencies that have to deal with problems they do not locally have experience with how to handle. Usually a team of two advisors will assist local agencies in developing an adequate analysis of the problem, and give advise on what kinds of action might be effective. One important task is to determine the magnitude and nature of the problem, in order to avoid both belittling and overreaction.

Another important useful function of the advisory service has been to accumulate experiences from many communities that have had to handle varieties of the same types of problems. Rather than having to 'reinvent the wheel' every time a new local community gets a problem with xenophobic violence or racist youth groups, the advisory group is accumulating and systematising knowledge, methods, and practical experiences that might be of relevance to other communities with similar problems.

The advisory service provided a framework within which several researchers and practitioners started to work closely together to develop more effective methods. One of the outcomes of this process was the Exit project. Exit was gradually developed during the period 1995 to 1997, when it was formally established as a project.

The emergence of the Exit project

During 1995 and 1996, the police made several mass arrests and other interventions in the racist youth scene in Oslo and Kristiansand. The participants turned out to be young, sometimes 13 years of age or younger. Many parents were shocked about what their children had become involved with, and were desperate to get their children out of the racist scene. In close co-operation with the preventive police unit in a part of Oslo (Manglerud), some parents established parental network groups in 1995 to help each other and to pool their efforts. These parental groups turned out to be useful. Within a few months, almost all the children of these parents had withdrawn from the racist scene.

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[9] Cf. Carlsson, Y. & Lippe, H.v.d. (1997), *Industribygda og rasismen: Utvikling og avvikling av et fremmedfientlig ungdomsmiljø i Vennesla 1991–1996*. Oslo: NIBR-rapport 1997: 17; Carlsson, Y. og von der Lippe, H. (1999): *Velstandsbydelen og rasismen*. Oslo: NIBR-rapport 1999:9; Tore Bjørgo & Yngve Carlsson, *Vold, rasisme og ungdomsgjenger: Forebygging og bekjempelse* (Oslo: Tano Aschehoug, 1999).

[10] These experts are involved with the advisory service on a freelance basis only, and get paid for each counselling job they do for a municipality. The central government sponsors the municipalities by covering the costs of one day of free counselling (for one or two advisors) per case.

As a researcher, I was at the time studying how young people join and leave racist groups. Parents with children in racist groups contacted me, asking for advice on what to do. Together with two officers at the Manglerud preventive police unit (both part of the Advisory Service), we started to develop a more general project for parental network groups and other methods to get young people out of racist groups. Our first activities started in spring 1996, but the project was formally established from mid-1997, funded as a three-year development project by the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Children and Family, and the Directorate of Immigration. The NGO 'Adults for Children' hosted the project that eventually was named 'Project Exit – Leaving Violent Youth Groups'. The Exit project had three main objectives:

- aiding and supporting young people who want to disengage from racist or other violent groups,
- supporting parents with children in racist or violent groups, establishing local networks for parents,
- developing and disseminating knowledge and methods to professsions working with youths associated with violent groups.

The Norwegian Exit project decided to work through the local agencies by providing them with relevant know-how and methods, rather than building a separate Exit agency to take care of youths. Thus, it is the local youth workers, child welfare officers, teachers, and police officers that work directly with the youths. The project has trained more than 700 practitioners from various agencies and professions in prevention and intervention in relation to racist and violent youth groups. An Exit handbook is now published (in Norwegian).[11] Below, two of the main methods will be described in more detail – both focusing on early intervention by involving parents.

The parental network group

Parents are in a central position to influence on their children's behaviour, although this influence will naturally decline as the child grows up. Parents with teenage children in racist or other violent groups may profit from collaborating with other parents in a similar situation.

- These parents have a strong need for knowledge and information on what is going on in these groups. By sharing information between them, parents can together build a better understanding about what is happening in the milieu in which their children are involved. This knowledge can be extended if the parental group brings in knowledgeable people from outside, such as police officers, researchers, or ex-members.

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[11] Tore Bjørgo, Odd Arild Halhjem, and Taran Knudstad, *EXIT – Ut av voldelige ungdoms-grupper: Kunnskap, erfaringer og metoder i lokalt tverrfaglig og tverretatlig arbeid* (Oslo: Voksne for Barn, juni 2001). The handbook is available on the web at http://www.vfb.no/nedlasting/Haandbok.pdf

- In such a forum, parents can discuss their dilemmas in connection with how strict restrictions they should put on their children and their behaviour, and how to avoid that their sanctions might result in pushing their children away from them. Parents may also reach agreements on common positions regarding what their children are allowed to take part in, or what will be accepted in terms of (Nazi-style) dress code. The network group can thereby strengthen the parents' monitoring, control, and ability to provide care for their children.

- Having children in neo-Nazi or criminal groups can be socially stigmatising for the entire family. Some parents and siblings have been excluded from former social networks. Most of these parents feel a strong need to talk with someone about their problems but do not dare to bring it up in their regular circles. A closed forum with others in a similar situation offers such an opportunity. Single parents in particular need the support such a parental network can provide. Some parents have succeeded in getting their children out of the racist scene. Their experiences may be of use and an inspiration to others.

- A parental network may also play an important role in disseminating information to parents regarding upcoming events. If the son or daughter tells the parents that they plan to go camping with friends in the weekend, it might be useful if the parents know from another source that the local racist group plans to attend a Nazi concert or a demonstration the same weekend. The parental network may also be informed by the police that a large confrontation between rival groups is coming up. This may enable parents to keep their children at home during the event, preventing them from becoming victims (or perpetrators) of violence, or arrested.

There are great differences between various parental groups. Some groups have consisted of parents with strong personal resources. They have in some cases been able to run the network group mainly on their own. Several of these groups have been highly successful – getting all their children out of the racist scene within a few months. Other parental groups have consisted of parents with weak resources, lots of personal and family problems, and often holding attitudes that do not differ much from those of their children in the racist group. However, even these parents have often realised that their children are involved with something that will hurt their future. Groups consisting of such parents will usually require that a professional or another resourceful person come in from outside to organise the network group and keep it up and running over time. These external helpers have often functioned as liaisons between parents and the police or social agencies.

Not all parents are motivated to take part in such a network group. Some do not see anything problematic in their children's involvement with a racist group – either because they are just happy that their child has finally got some friends, or because they hold views similar to those of their children.

Some parents are racist or criminals themselves. Others do not realise – or do not want to realise – what their children are involved with. They are afraid of being branded as bad parents who have transferred dubious values to their children. Some parents get paralysed, apathetic, or just indifferent. And to some it is a completely unthinkable idea to take part in a network group where they have to talk with strangers about their problems. Thus, parental network groups are not for everyone.

In spite of problems, results show that parental network groups have been successful. About 130 parents representing 100 youths/children have participated in such parental network groups in Norway between 1995 and mid-2000. By the end of that period, only about 10 of these youths were still involved with the racist scene. We do not claim that all those 90 quit the scene because of the parental groups – many left for other reasons – but we do know that this work made a decisive impact in many cases.

Parallel with the Norwegian experience but originating independently, parental network groups have also been tried out in the Swedish town Klippan, and found to be a highly useful method. Some parents have been involved since the beginning of the group in 1997, some have quit when their children disengaged from the scene, whereas others continue in the parental group to help and inspire others. When parents started to organise themselves, it did sometimes escalate the conflicts they had with their children. But on the whole, the parents involved considered the network group to be an indispensable source of strength.

One of the tasks of the parental group in Klippan is to operate a hot line that can be phoned by parents and others from all over Sweden, providing information about neo-Nazism, what to look for to detect if a child is involved with the scene, and offering practical advice on how to respond and discuss the issue with the child. This type of information and advice is also distributed in a small booklet (in Swedish only), 'On responding to racism and Nazism among youths'.[12]

The Klippan group is now also involved in preventive work, collaborating with schools, the police, and other agencies and NGOs. The parental group in Klippan has worked closely with Exit in Sweden and other disengagement projects, and also exchanged experiences and methods with Norwegian partners.[13]

The Structured Youth-Parent-Professional Conversation

A preventive police officer who was one of the co-founders of the Exit project, Bjørn Øvrum, has developed another powerful method of early intervention with children involved with racist groups or other delinquent behaviour. 'The Structured Youth-Parent-Professional Conversation' can be applied when e.g. a police officer, a teacher, or a youth worker detects that a child or youth is involved in activities that give reason to worry. The professional will then summon the young person together with the parents for a

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[12] *Om att möta racism och nazism bland ungdomar* ('On responding to racism and Nazism among youths'), co-published by the Parental group in Klippan, and Save the Children Sweden (2001).

[13] The Klippan experience is described and analysed in a book by Berit Wigerfelt and Anders Wigerfelt, *Rasismens yttringar: Exemplet Klippan* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2001). The parental network group is discussed on pp. 281-283 and 307.

voluntary conversation, and will present the symptom that gave rise to that worry. This could be theft, drug use, tagging, or participation in a racist group or another type of gang. Child and parents will also be informed about the likely consequences of this behaviour if it continues. The purpose of the conversation is not to punish but to create the basis for reorientation and change in behaviour of the child or youth, as well as mobilising the parents' own engagement and resources. The professional asks for the parents' consent to share information with other relevant agencies to help the child through coordinated efforts. This helps to get around obstacles to collaboration often caused by the strict rules of confidentiality practiced by social agencies. The conversation session should be seen as the starting point in a process of reorientation where other agencies (school, social workers, etc.) will also get involved in the next stages.

The conversation is based on a structured procedure where the professional, the parents and the child together discuss the behaviour that gave rise to the meeting, and what they believe is explaining that behaviour. If, for instance, the young person is participating in a violent or extremist group, the youth is asked what he or she believes is causing him/her to get involved with such a scene. The youth will be presented with a set of alternatives (cf. figure): is it for example a need for protection, thrill seeking, friendship, or status? For each type of cause there is a card suggesting possible corresponding options to be discussed with parents and child. If, for example, the probable cause of the problematic behaviour was thrill seeking, they can discuss what kinds of legal and socially acceptable alternatives could be available, and how the young person can realise his or her wishes for an exciting leisure time. Together with the youth and the parents, the professional try to look forward, focusing on solutions in order to stimulate a process of reorientation and alteration of behaviour. <FIGURE: PowerPoint file 'Structured Youth Parent Conversation.ppt'>

Although the Structured Youth-Parent-Professional Conversation model was originally developed during preventive police work with racist youth groups, it can be applied for many types of youth delinquency problems. The Norwegian police have recommended it for more general use. Youth workers, teachers, and other professionals are also being trained to apply it. Results so far are very promising. However, it probably makes a particularly strong impact when it is the police that call in parents and child for a conversation.

These two methods have been effective as early interventions with young teenagers who have got involved with racist youth groups. In several cases, recruitment to racist youth groups has been reduced to almost zero. Using these methods, local police, youth workers and other agencies are now equipped to act promptly once they notice that young people flirt with such groups.[14] We believe that such early intervention is one of the main reasons

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[14] In a local Exit project in the city Kristiansand, an inter-agency task force consisting of police officers, youth workers, social workers, teachers, and the Exit worker together used this approach in their work with 38 youths involved with the local racist scene during the period from 1996. By mid-2001, six of these individuals were still active in the Nazi scene, three were dead (by accidents or drug overdose), but the remaining 29 are living relatively normal lives. <UPDATED FIGURES: By the end of 2001, the project had worked with 60 youths, and 49 had left the racist scene.>

why the neo-Nazi scene in Norway remains relatively small, young, and characterised by short careers and few 'veterans'.

When it comes to providing disengagement assistance to older and more established neo-Nazis activists, the Norwegian Exit project has been less successful. In this area, however, the Swedish offshoot of the Exit project has achieved impressive results.

The proliferation of the Exit model

Exit in Sweden

Shortly after the Norwegian Exit programme started in autumn 1997, it got in contact with a former Swedish neo-Nazi, Kent Lindahl. He had broken with the Nazi scene in the early 1990s, and had more recently made a number of presentations at Swedish schools together with a Jewish Holocaust survivor, warning pupils against involvement with the Nazi scene. He was a highly credible person with a powerful personal story. The Norwegian Exit challenged him to start up Exit in Sweden. He did so, with great success.

Exit in Sweden was established in mid-1998. The goals of the Swedish project were similar to the Norwegian model, but it is implemented in a somewhat different way. The Swedish Exit projects works directly with the individuals who contact Exit. Staff members also make school visits to talk to students about neo-Nazism, and increasingly also train teachers, social workers, and police officers on the issue. Several members of the staff (which at present in mid-2001 counts a total of seven) have a background as former participants in the neo-Nazi movement (or the 'White Power world', as it is often termed in Sweden). This personal experience obviously provides a powerful credibility when they talk to young people. It also makes it easier to establish contact with individuals that consider disengaging from the Nazi movement.

Exit in Sweden has developed a five-stage programme that describes the process individuals typically will go through when leaving the movement and re-establishing themselves into mainstream society, and what Exit can contribute to help them through this process:[15]

The phase of motivation: The young person is still part of the White Power scene, but has started to have second thoughts about it, and questions his/her involvement. At this point the person contacts Exit and probes the possibilities for disengagement and assistance. Exit answers questions, provides information, and offer a contact person 'who has been where you are and knows how it is'.

The phase of disengagement: The person has made the decision to leave the White Power scene. Some have already quit when they contact Exit, others need practical help and advice to do so. Exposed to threats from former

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[15] The following description is based on the evaluation report on Exit in Sweden by the Swedish Council for Crime Prevention, titled *Exit för avhoppare: En uppföljning och utvärdering av verksamheten åren 1998–2001* (Stockholm: BRÅ-rapport 2001:8), pp. 20–23.

friends, and left without a social network, this is a chaotic period. They need someone to talk to, and help from Exit (and sometimes the police) to assess the threat situation in a realistic way. In some cases they have to move to a different community, and may be in need of financial assistance and social services. The contact person from Exit is available by phone around the clock, and may serve as a guide and liaison to social agencies, the police or other resources. The personal support from the contact person, providing an opportunity to talk out on doubts, fears, problems and thoughts about the future is of great importance at this stage.

The phase of establishment: The break is now completed. The young person has secured a place to live and subsistence (usually with parents or by assistance from social services). Some have a job, others study or get job training, and some have still not found anything to do. But they have cut their ties to the White Power scene, as well as to their former friends there. They are usually in a social vacuum, with a very limited social network. They often feel empty and alone. And they fear to go out in the evenings. At this stage the contact person try to provide new links to 'normal' life, and help to expand their social networks. Exit organises some joint activities for persons who have disengaged from the White Power scene, bringing them together with other youths from different and more mainstream backgrounds. Group discussions are useful at this stage.

The phase of reflection: At this stage the individuals start to realise what they have been involved with during their time in the Nazi movement, such as violence, crimes, extreme ideologies of hatred, and recruitment of others into similar activities. Some get problems with anxiety, depression, insomnia, or alcohol. Some also need professional help to deal with their violent impulses, traumas, or their lack of confidence. The Exit staff include a therapist who is available for consultations. Many ex-activists need to reflect on why they got involved with the scene, where the hatred came from, and how to go on with a normal life. Most of the racist thoughts and impulses have disappeared during this process. Some leave their racist views behind when they break with the group; others need more time to change their world view.

The phase of stabilisation: at this stage, the young persons have got a 'normal' life with job, studies, and sometimes a family of their own. They have turned away from hatred, racism, crime, and alcohol abuse. However, they still fear that their past will ruin their future, and they feel guilt and shame for what they have been involved with. Exit no longer works actively with persons in this phase but many of them still keep in touch with their contact person.

Exit's period of active involvement usually lasts between six and 12 months. By April 2001, Exit was working actively with around 40 persons.

The Swedish Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ) has carried out an evaluation[16] of the project on assignment from the Swedish government that funded Exit. The BRÅ evaluation was highly positive, concluding, 'the work of the Exit project has been both relatively extensive as well as successful'.

During the three years Exit in Sweden has operated, 133 persons turned to Exit for help, and 125 of these have left the White Power movement. The majority of the persons that contacted Exit were between 18 and 25 years of age, and most had been involved with the White Power movement between two and four years. Half of them had been convicted of criminal offences, and a further quarter reported to have committed such offences without having been convicted. After they broke with the movement, they claimed to have ceased to commit criminal offences.

BRÅ interviewed 17 ex-activists, eight parents, and 24 representatives of institutions that had cooperated with Exit. They generally expressed a very high level of satisfaction with Exit's work and contribution. Several ex-members and parents stated that they would not have been able to get through it alone, and that Exit's help was invaluable.

Although the evaluation report generally gave the project very high marks on its activities and results, it pointed on the negative side on organisational problems that had led to a high turnover of staff. This has to do with typical traits of organisations established by committed enthusiasts, with all the strengths and weaknesses of many such organisations. The evaluation showed that having persons with that particular background and personal credibility had been decisive for the success of Exit in Sweden. However, there were also problems in the organisation. For the future operation of Exit, this strength of personal experience should be combined with a more professional leadership and improved ties with other agencies.

Exit Deutschland and governmental Aussteigerprogramme in Germany

From mid-2000 onwards, the notion of reducing right-wing extremism through promoting disengagement made a strong and rapid impact in Germany. Directly inspired by Exit in Sweden, *Exit Deutschland* was established in August 2000. The criminologist and former police officer Bernd Wagner and the ex-Nazi Ingo Hasselbach initiated the project, which was hosted by the NGO *Zentrum Demokratische Kultur*. The magazine Stern and its '*Mut gegen rechte Gewalt*' campaign supported Exit Germany economically.[17]

Exit in Germany offers assistance to persons who want to quit the right-wing extremist scene. The initiative has to come from the person who wants to disengage. Exit provides help with assessing and handling threats to the

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[16] *Exit för avhoppare: En uppföljning och utvärdering av verksamheten åren 1998–2001* (Stockholm: BRÅ-rapport 2001:8). The evaluation report is available (in Swedish with a four-page English summary at the end) in Acrobat format from the BRÅ web page http://www.bra.se/web/material/

[17] The '*Mut gegen rechte Gewalt*' campaign and the Exit approach are presented at http://www.stern.de/politik/spezial/index_mut.html. The Exit homepage is http://www.exit-deutschland.de/. Most of the information in this section is based on a presentation made by an Exit representative, Christina Hausmann, at a seminar on 'Decreasing Racial Violence', organised by The EU Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in Vienna 2–3 July 2001. See also a full-page article in *Die Zeit* 10 Mai 2001 on Exit and the *Aussteigerprogramme*: http://www.zeit.de/2001/20/Politik/200120_rechteaussteiger.html

personal security of these individuals, although to move to another city is only required for a few clients. Exit assists them through the process of disengagement and resocialisation (cf. the Swedish five-stage model). It does not offer any economic support during reintegration. Exit Deutschland emphasises that these persons must take responsibility for their illegal actions and the consequences, but may help to arrange legal assistance. Focusing on reorientation, Exit also sends persons in crises to psychological counselling, but does not provide these services itself.

   After one year of activity, *Exit Deutschland* currently (Sept. 2001) works with 87 individuals who are at different stages in the disengagement process. Twenty-four of these cases are now finished in the sense that the persons have broken completely with their racist past and established themselves with a new life outside the movement.

   The clients are between the age of 15 and 55 but mostly between 17 and 27. They are almost exclusively males who have been heavily involved with neo-Nazism for at least two years. Some have been leading figures, and most have committed criminal acts. They often serve in prison, where it is difficult to shelter them from former comrades if they want to break with the group. In some cases, the solution is to apply for transfer to another prison. In the early stages of the project, the great majority of those who contacted Exit for assistance were from the western parts of Germany – very few were from the east. By mid-2001, this trend has reversed. The project now has an east–west ratio that roughly represents the population of East and West Germany. One possible explanation is that Exit needed more time to be known in the East. Another factor might be that the structures there are more closely knit and activists need more time and effort to get out. Most of the clients have jobs, study, or are in vocational training. Only a few are unemployed or social cases.

   Exit Deutschland is part of *Zentrum Demokratische Kultur* in Berlin that also hosts several related project against right-wing extremism and racist violence. This includes support to victims of xenophobic violence, and mobile counselling teams that work with communities where there are problems with racist violence and right-wing extremism. Exit is an important supplement to these other activities.

   Partly due to all the publicity in the news media surrounding the establishment of Exit in Germany during autumn 2000, German authorities decided to set up similar *Aussteigerprograme*. By mid-2001, such programmes had been established in 11 of the 16 states of the German federation. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*) runs a program targeting right-wing extremist activists all over Germany. At the state level, however, these programmes are run by different governmental agencies in the various German states. In Baden-Württemberg, for example, it is organised by the police (*Landeskriminalamt*); in Rheinland-Phalz and several other states the programme is under the State Office for Youth Affairs and Social Welfare; in Hamburg it is run by the Senate Administration for the Interior; and in other states by the State Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz*).

Due to their different institutional basis, these programmes will naturally also differ in focus and content, although they all generally seek to facilitate disengagement for persons involved with the right-wing extremist scene. Most of the programmes also operate hot-line telephones where persons willing to quit can make contact. The programme developed by the Ministry of Justice in Niedersachsen is mainly focusing on helping right-wing extremists in prison or on probation to break with the extremist group. Other programmes, e.g. one called *Ausstiegshilfen Rechtextremismus*[18] run by the Criminal Police in Baden-Würrtemberg, focus on putting an end to right-wing extremist 'careers' but also the prevention of further criminal offences as well as a sliding into the extremist mainstream by marginally involved persons and sympathisers. Another goal of this programme is to provide protection of threatened witnesses in order to ensure criminal prosecution. Offenders who are willing to cooperate with the public prosecutor may also be offered some legal advantages. Such persons should then be separated from the right-wing scene. Being operated by the Criminal Police, this programme has certain criminal justice flair to it. Nevertheless, there are also several elements in the programme that focus more on preventive work. These parts emphasise such means as education, discussion, care, intervention with youth welfare, and cooperation with teachers and parents to prevent a further sliding into right-wing extremism. This requires that the police collaborate closely with other public bodies and institutions, such as social services, youth workers, schools and employment services, and that these agencies coordinate their efforts in a common prevention and intervention strategy. Such cooperation has often been a problem between various agencies in Germany, in particular between youth workers and the police.

The *Aussteigerprogramm für Rechtsextremisten* run by the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* will be described in some more detail.[19] The programme has two main objectives consisting of an 'active' and a 'passive' part. The first is to 'separate out' leading figures and activists, in particular by contacting those who show signs of wanting to break away from the scene, e.g. if they appear to be burnt out, discouraged, or that they have realised the futility of their political struggle. The ultimate aim of this part of the programme is to weaken and disconcert the right-wing extremist scene by causing the defection of such influential figures, which in its turn might influence others to quit as well. Although the BfV claims to have modest expectations regarding how many leading activist they could turn through this approach, the reactions from the right-wing extremist scene could at least be interpreted as an indication that this part of the programme had disconcerted leading figures considerably.

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[18] The description of the programme *Ausstiegshilfen Rechtextremismus* is based on the paper 'Programme "Assistance to Exit Right-Wing Extremism"', presented by Karl-Heinz Ortenreiter of the Office for Criminal Affairs Baden-Wurttemberg during the EUMC seminar on 'Decreasing Racial Violence' in Vienna 2–3 July 2001, and personal conversations with Mr. Ortenreiter.

[19] The description is based on the paper 'Concept, response and perspectives of the BfV-Aussteigerprogramm to encourage right-wing extremists to leave the scene', presented by Bodo W. Becker at the EUMC seminar on 'Decreasing Racial Violence' in Vienna 2–3 July 2001, and by personal conversation with Mr Becker. It should be noted that the Office for the Protection of the Constitution is a security service, not a police force, and it does not have the obligation to initiate criminal prosecution if it gets knowledge of illegal offences.

The second part of the *Aussteigerprogramm* is to persuade sympathisers who are not yet that deeply involved in the right-wing scene to leave, thereby preventing them from drifting further into the violence-prone extremist circles. The main tool is the operation of a telephone hot line, open at all hours to persons considering to leave the scene. Here, they will receive advice and support from staff members who have been specially trained for this task. They may provide advice on such matters as whether it is necessary in that particular case to move to a different social environment, assistance when looking for employment, or help to find a new apartment – all with the aim of providing help to self-help.

When the programme was made public, news media in Germany and all over Europe published stories saying that the programme would make payments of allowances amounting to 100,000 DM for right-wing extremists willing to leave the scene. The BfV strongly denies that this is the case. Although financial aid may be granted in certain individual cases (e.g. if the situation requires urgent measures to be taken for the individual to move to a safer locality), the BfV claims to be very cautions in paying economic allowances. Right-wing extremists who are willing to leave the scene, will, for example, only be refunded part of their travel expenses when they go to have a meeting with a contact person in the programme. As could be expected, the flawed news stories on the programme regarding alleged payments led to a number of phone calls from individuals claiming to be right-wing extremists eager to start a new and better life! One of the first tasks of the hot line operators when someone calls therefore became to start the process of checking out whether the person in question was actually known to the *Verfassungsschutz* as a participant of the right-wing extremist scene. A number of callers turned out never to have been heard of in these circles. These persons were obviously motivated by the alleged payments.

For this and other reasons, the BfV expects persons calling the hot line and expressing willingness to leave the scene, to provide their real name and agree to a personal interview with the BfV in Cologne or Berlin. This is to test how seriously they intend to leave the scene.

The *BfV-Aussteiger hot line* has been operative from mid-April 2001. By the end of August, more than 680 calls had been received. However, this figure includes journalists, information requests, and non-genuine inquiries. The number of right-wing activists who were considered to be potentially willing to leave the scene amounted to about 140 individuals. As expected, the majority of the callers were from the various neo-Nazi comradeships and from the right-wing skinhead scene and similar violence-prone groups.[20] These are circles where group pressure is stronger and the difficulties involved with quitting are greater than in other parts of the right-wing extremist scenes. During the first four months of the programme period, 35 such persons have had their initial meetings with BfV staff, and some more meetings were fixed. Another ten persons who were in the process of leaving the scene on their own have also been provided with advice or assistance on the phone.

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[20] The neo-Nazi comradeship scene is considered by the BfV to consist of some 2200 persons in 2000, whereas the number of right-wing extremist skinheads and other violence-prone individuals number are counted to 9700.

The high number of serious responses to the hot line part of the Aussteiger programme clearly exceeded what the BfV had expected initially. On the other hand, the active part of the programme – approaching leading figures to encourage them to disengage – has turned out to be a difficult task, although it was expected to be so. However, if successful, the potential effects and repercussions of 'separating out' some of the leaders could be considerable.

Exit in Finland and Switzerland

A group of researchers (headed by Dr Vesa Puuronen) at the University of Joensuu started a local Exit project in Joensuu in 1998, inspired by the Norwegian Exit project.[21] This city had got a bad reputation in Finland for a large number of racist attacks and other xenophobic and criminal activities committed by a relatively large group of Nazi-oriented skinheads. This racist youth scene had emerged and grown during the 1990s on the background of economic recession in the city. A growing number of immigrants and refugees arriving during the same period became convenient scapegoats.[22] Xenophobic attitudes were widespread among young people as well as among some adults who condoned the activities of the skinheads.

The Exit project in Joensuu was based on cooperation between Exit project workers, youth workers, social workers, teachers, police officers and researchers. This multi-professional composition of the project group was a source of strength but also caused some difficulties due to different professional cultures, approaches, and interpretations of the problem at hand, and different ideas regarding how these problems should be solved. Nevertheless, the participants gradually managed to reach a more common understanding and coordinate their efforts better.

During its first two–three years, the Exit project in Joensuu focused its main effort on prevention and early intervention to reduce recruitment. Addressing xenophobic attitudes among youths had high priority. One method was to provide social arenas based on tolerance to provide areas where local and immigrant youths could mingle. A municipal youth house within the framework of the Exit project was an important part of this, providing exciting and meaningful activities. This seems to have contributed to a reduction of tension among different youth groups in the area.

A method of early intervention has been to get into dialogue with racist or skinhead pupils at school. When pupils in general violate school rules, a common reaction is hold back the pupil at school at the end of the day, where they have to sit quietly in the classroom for an hour or two as a form of detention. In cases where pupils known as participants of the racist or skinhead scene violate rules at schools, they are offered to speak with an Exit worker during their 'detention'. Most of these youths are eager to

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[21] The description of Exit in Finland is based on a paper presented by Vesa Puuronen and Jarkko Riikonen at the EUMC seminar on 'Decreasing Racial Violence' in Vienna 2–3 July 2001, and personal information from Puuronen and other researchers involved with the project since the onset.

[22] The combination of these two factors is a common background for the emergence of racist youth groups. The cases Joensuu and the Norwegian town Brumunddal were remarkably similar in this respect. Cf. Bjørgo (1997:87–93) for a comparative analysis on the co-occurrence of racist violence, youth unemployment, and increased numbers of asylum-seekers in the Scandinavian countries.

participate in such a conversation because they normally do not have the opportunity to discuss their life situation and problems with adults. This situation also provides the Exit worker with a good opportunity to get to know the children or youths in question, and to develop confidential relations with them. This may in its turn be a starting point for a process of change for the young person. These discussions are also excellent sources of information regarding what is going on in the racist youth scene.

During its first two–three years of operation, the Exit project in Joensuu has not succeeded in reaching the older and more established skinheads in order to start processes of rehabilitation with them. This is an effort that is planned to be intensified during 2001 and 2002.

One characteristic of this project is the strong link between youth work and research. As mentioned above, the local project was initiated by researchers, and researchers have also been directly involved in the activities of Exit as part of an action research project.

More recently, there has also some been some interest in Switzerland to adopt elements from the Exit approach as part of governmental action plans against neo-Nazism.[23] The public in Switzerland realised in 2000 that it had a growing neo-Nazi skinhead scene and that something had to be done about it. The Federal Commission against Racism is working actively to set up a network of low-level counselling centres throughout the country that eventually will be linked through a single telephone hot line. This hot line will also offer assistance to parents of Nazi skins as well as to active participants in the Nazi scene who seriously consider disengaging.

Some comparative comments and conclusions

It is important to emphasise that the Exit approach does *not* intend to offer a complete strategy against racism and xenophobia. It should be seen as one element within a broader framework. Such a comprehensive strategy should provide support to victims of racism; improve awareness towards tendencies of xenophobia and intolerance among 'ordinary people'; influence popular attitudes and public policies that legitimise xenophobia; reinforce and implement legal measures to suppress racism, discrimination and xenophobic violence and harassment; and address more structural causes of the emergence of racism, xenophobia, and violent youth groups. Reducing the size and activities of racist groups by stopping recruitment and promoting disengagement from racist groups should nevertheless play an important role within such a broader framework of fighting racism and xenophobia.

Since the first Exit project was initiated in Norway in 1996/97, similar projects have been implemented in Sweden, Germany, and Finland by mid-2001, with several other countries expressing interest in adopting the approach as well. Although building on past experiences and well-established methods as well as some more innovative means, Exit's main contri-

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[23] This paragraph is based on information provided by Michele Galizia of the Swiss Federal Commission against Racism during a presentation at the EUMC seminar on 'Decreasing Racial Violence' in Vienna 2–3 July 2001, and discussions on several other occasions. The Swiss action plan puts strong emphasis on victim support and holds a somewhat critical position towards the Exit approach due to its lack of focus on the victims of racism.

bution has been to put together these elements into more systematic strategies for reducing recruitment and reinforcing disengagement from racist youth groups. In addition, it has also been instrumental in getting the issue of disengagement from racist groups on the policy agendas in these countries.

Although closely related in approach and goals, there is some interesting diversity among the various Exit projects in these four European countries. The first difference is that dissimilar types of organisations implement the projects in rather different ways, depending on the primary purpose of the organisation. Exit in Norway, Sweden, and Germany (Berlin) are basically non-governmental organisations (or parts of larger NGOs), although largely funded by the government.[24] The local Exit projects in Joensuu (Finland) and Kristiansand (Norway), on the other hand, are integrated in inter-agency projects at the municipal level. In contrast, the various *Aussteigerprogramme* that were established in Germany during 2001 were run by different governmental agencies at the federal or state level. Obviously, the primary tasks as institutions vary considerably between e.g. the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the Criminal Police, and the Youth and Social Services. It is hardly surprising that this will also influence the character and emphasis of the projects these various agencies organise. Thus, when the Criminal Police of Baden-Württemberg as part of its *Ausstiegshilfen Rechtsextremismus* project is offering selected ex-Nazis a witness protection programme, such an element would hardly be included in the toolbox of Exit programmes run by NGOs.[25] The NGOs hosting Exit projects do also differ between themselves in ways that make their imprints on the character of the programmes. Thus, the Norwegian organisation Adults for Children is a social policy NGO, whereas Exit Deutschland is hosted by *Zentrum für Demokratische Kultur*, that runs several anti-racist and pro-democracy initiatives. As a consequence, the latter Exit project has a more explicit anti-racist orientation, emphasising ideological conversion somewhat stronger than is the case with the Norwegian Exit project (which is of course also anti-racist in its values and goals).

Of greater importance is the impact institutional affiliation will have on the willingness of potential quitters to contact the project in question. To some (former) activists who for years have considered the security service or the police as representing the Enemy,[26] it may be easier to contact an NGO. Many of those considering disengaging are very concerned not to be considered as someone betraying former friends. The *Verfassungsschutz* and the criminal police to some extent provide that role by offering witness protection programs in certain cases. The NGO programmes try to avoid placing their clients in such problematic 'traitor' roles.[27] Several Exit workers have

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[24] The exception is Exit Deutschland, which is mainly funded by Stern Magazine.

[25] However, (preventive) police units have also been heavily involved in the Exit projects in Norway and Finland, although as partners rather than as main organisers of the project.

[26] Paradoxically, some neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists also view the police and security service with a certain respect and even awe. However, this depends much on the ideological direction of the group in question – some are anti-state, others are in favour of a strong state.

[27] It is worth noting that the German word *Aussteiger* and the Norwegian/Swedish *avhopper* are morally neutral terms, meaning someone who leaves something or breaks out, whereas the English term *defector/defecting* has a negative connotation of someone who switches sides and starts to collaborate with the enemy. *Disengagement* is a more neutral term in English.

emphasised the advantage they have in being considered relatively neutral actors who are not part of the government. On the other hand, state agencies do of course have several advantages compared with NGOs. Secure funding and large resources make operations much easier and sometimes also more effective. NGO projects are frequently hampered with having to spend so much of their effort on fund-raising.

The other main difference between the various projects relates to what stage in the process of recruitment and disengagement they focus their efforts towards, which their main target groups are, and which methods these projects employ as their main tools. As stated earlier, it is possible to reduce the size of an extremist group (or change the 'population balance') both by reducing recruitment and by reinforcing disengagement – although a combination of the two will obviously give the strongest reduction.

Several projects (e.g. some of the German state-level projects and to some extent also the Swedish and German Exit projects) are primarily based on operating a telephone hot line and waiting for persons to call when they have more or less decided that they want to quit. Depending on the response (some publicity work is obviously needed), this 'passive approach' may get a rather high success rate, as almost all those calling are motivated to quit and succeed to do so.

The Finnish and Norwegian Exit projects, on the other hand, have focused their efforts more on prevention and early intervention with the aim of reducing recruitment or promoting early disengagement – before they young person has become too much entangled into the scene. Unlike Exit in Sweden, these two Exit projects have not succeeded in reaching long-term and hard-core activists. The Norwegian Exit project has had its main successes in early intervention with new recruits and teen-agers who are flirting with the Nazi scene, in particular through close collaboration between public agencies and parents. Working with youths who (at least initially) are often not motivated to quit is a hard task, and the success rate is not as high as working with those who take the initiative themselves of asking for help to disengage. In principle, prevention is always preferable to trying to cure the 'disease' at a later stage, and the sooner a new recruit quits the scene, the better. On the other hand, many prevention programmes tend to become rather general and unfocused, spending resources on youths who never get in trouble anyhow. Interventions targeted on those who have started to flirt with the scene may be more cost-effective.

However, several of the projects try to combine active and passive approaches. Exit in Sweden has visited schools where there are problems with racist groups, telling their personal stories about how they got involved with neo-Nazism and how they got out of it. These presentations have made great impact on many schools and pupils, and established contacts and dialogues with a number of young Nazis who later contacted Exit for assistance to quit. Another variety of the combined approach is that of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which has had great response on it 'passive' hot line, but is also actively approaching leading activists in order to persuade them to disengage. It is too early to assess whether the latter approach will succeed or fail, but the hot line seems to be a clear success.

In spite of differences in organisation and focus, these programmes do share a common goal – decreasing the racist and neo-Nazi scene by reducing recruitment and reinforcing disengagement. It is encouraging to observe that this approach is spreading to more and more European countries, and that results seem to be highly promising – in particular in countries like Sweden and Germany where problems with neo-Nazism are most severe. It is almost self-evident that reducing recruitment and facilitating disengagement are simple and sensible approaches that could and should be adopted by different agencies and organisations with a stake in the struggle against racism and violence. It resembles similar prevention and intervention efforts to such problems as drugs or alcohol abuse. Such programmes are also run by different public, private, or religious institutions that put their different imprint on the activities.

It is now time to establish closer international collaboration between the various national Exit and disengagement projects – governmental as well as NGOs – to exchange know-how, methods and experiences. Separately, such initiatives are likely to succeed in some areas and fail in others. They need to learn from each other – about failures as well as mistakes – to improve and be more effective in reducing recruitment and helping people to disengage from the far-right scene – thereby changing the population balance of these racist groups in ways that will reduce their numbers and undermine the ability of these groups to spread hatred, intolerance and fear among the population. There is also a need for more research on the causes and processes that facilitate the emergence of racism and xenophobia in society, as well as research and evaluation of successful and unsuccessful attempts to counter these negative processes.