

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT AND REHABILITATION OF CONVICTED FOREIGN FIGHTERS: CURRENT CONDITIONS, CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the current conditions and challenges concerning the country's penitentiary system from the perspective of the possible transference of violent extremist ideologies from some convicts, particularly returnees from foreign fronts, to other prisoners. It reveals to what extent psychologists and other professionals involved in the process of resocialization are equipped with skills and tools for assessing the risk of personal violent radicalization, or, for monitoring the progress of the convicted individuals in their rehabilitation. It also addresses the issue of implementation of proper rehabilitation programs designed to provide violent extremists with helpful skills and attitudes for breaking the circle of violence and re-directing from their previous course toward socially acceptable activities.

As an initial step towards the identification of how the penitentiary system responds to the need of de-radicalization of foreign fighters and prevention of radical ideas being spread among other inmates, this micro exploratory study was carried out by performing thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered from 11 professionals who work as educators in five different prison institutions in the country. The findings drawn from their answers are that there are no specialized psychological instruments which may be used for determining the psychological profiles of extremists, including convicted foreign fighters and thus, psychologists have to use tests designed for the general population. This is by definition not proper practice because such tests have questionable validity and objectivity when applied to forensic populations. Further, the analysis of their responses implies that neither specialized programs for resocialization nor specific protocols for monitoring the progress made in the rehabilitation interventions of violent extremists are applied. The educators engage their whole professional experience in overcoming the challenges of this situation and all of them emphasize the need of appropriate training in implementing specialized rehabilitation programs and specialized instruments tailored to identify risks of radicalization or threat of undertaking future violent activities.

It is concluded that the justice system should make best efforts to assist the prison personnel in dealing violent extremists. One of the first steps towards that is the provision of specialized assessment tools along with custom-designed programs for rehabilitation of this category of convicts.

**Key words:** psychological assessment, resocialization, foreign fighters, radicalization

## **Introduction**

Aiming to join the global fight against violent extremism and to strengthen the national security, in 2014, the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, made changes in the Criminal code (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 5 February 2014, no. 27), with which participation in foreign military, police or paramilitary formations is considered punishable by law with a sentence of minimum 4 years imprisonment. In accordance with these changes, several citizens have already been arrested and convicted for either financing and publicly stimulating terrorist activities, or recruiting, organizing and participating in terrorist groups which have been operating in foreign wars as allies of the radical terrorist groups and organizations. Currently, they are serving their sentence in the Macedonian penitentiary institutions.

The high possibility of transference of extremist ideologies from these convicts to other individuals who are serving sentence in the same prison is probably the most frequently mentioned concern in the context of penal policy towards foreign fighters (Brandon, 2009). With higher numbers of radicalized foreign fighters being incarcerated, addressing the issue of possible spreading of radical ideologies is with no doubt a growing challenge for the criminal justice sector, even though the hypothesized direct links between imprisonment and radicalization is not yet well-supported by empirical evidence (Jones, 2014).

From a psycho-social perspective, prison institutions, especially when they are overcrowded, in poor physical conditions and mismanaged, represent a fertile ground for the emergence and acceptance of such extremist ideologies. It is assumed that the acceptance of radical ideas mainly occurs due to the intense psychological need for developing an identity that provides feelings of belonging, uniqueness and maintaining control over the current situation and the future, which from a perspective of an imprisoned individual, is usually very uncertain. Considering the fact that some extremists have a clear motive to recruit new extremist supporters, it is understandable why this concern is quite justified, despite the fact that not each individual convict who returned from foreign front presents a real threat for recruitment of new extremist supporters.

The objectives of this paper are to scan to what extent the prison staff responsible for the process of resocialization, particularly psychologists, are equipped with skills and tools for assessing the risk of personal violent radicalization, or, for monitoring the progress of the convicted foreign fighters in their rehabilitation as well as to address the issue of implementation of proper rehabilitation programs designed to meet the needs of this forensic subpopulation.

## **The slow progress of psychology of terrorism**

Body of research from the sphere of terrorism psychology still reveals a disproportion between those based on empirical data and those which are review-based, or, focused mainly on the terminological distinctions. Among the few which are based on empirical data, the most dominant were those using anecdotal data or present case studies with very limited possibilities for generalization. The detailed analysis of available research studies (Silke, 2008) suggest that a decade ago, only 20% of studies contained new cognizance regarding the phenomenon, and

that they were carried out by using methodology which hardly delivers both internal and external validity of findings (Borum, 2011).

The reasons for this condition, which slowly but surely changes, is understandable when taken into account that finding respondents who are willing to provide data is very hard, especially in cases when violent extremists themselves are the research subjects. On the other hand, although plausible, the reluctance of prison officials to accept researchers to regularly examine and monitor the inmates and programs is also a serious practical obstacle. In addition to the limited and hard access to these individuals collecting empirical data is a serious challenge from the perspective of the notorious issues of culture sensitivity. This is especially valid concern in the last decade when the manifestations of terrorism are varying in their forms, as well as in socio-cultural contexts and underlying motives. An additional difficulty is the often mentioned heterogeneity in defining the terms terrorism and terrorist, as well as extremism and radicalization (Rae, 2012), similarly as it is not yet clear among different scholars what should and what should not be considered as radicalization (Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). Last, but not least, these concepts are inherently difficult to measure (Schmid, 2013).

Until recently, there has been a consensus among researchers in the area of psychology of terrorism that that violent extremism is neither associated with a distinct personality trait or profile, nor caused by a specific psychological disorder (Dean, 2007; Horgan, 2005). This understanding, derived from the absence of empirical evidence to support the hypotheses of underlying 'personality roots' of extremism has been recently challenged. The interpretation of the wide range of existing records has been questioned from the perspective of absence of a common methodological paradigm on one hand and lack of more serious efforts to get quantitative data on the other. The most recent review of the published studies in the field (Gill & Corner, 2017) suggests that after all, certain types of terrorists do have personal traits that are distinguishable from the general population. Additionally, it was found that those individuals that can be classified as violent extremists differ among themselves in relevant groups of personality traits, thus forming typical subgroups or profiles.

The knowledge on individual radicalization personality traits and processes has also been used to inform de-radicalization programs, which aim to disengage individuals who have already committed violent acts or are already radicalized (Holmer&Bauman, 2018). Consequently, using psychological assessment for the needs of identifying risks of radicalization on individual level, or for monitoring the progress in the efforts for resocialization of the persons convicted of terrorism, remains the most beneficial approach that help program designers and implementers in mapping or evaluating the social ties and relationships that influence individuals and/or groups toward or away from violent extremism.

### *Resocialization programs for foreign fighters in prisons*

Development and implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programs for convicted foreign fighters is of huge importance and calls to integrate such programs in the overall response to the phenomenon of foreign fighting are becoming more significant (Entenmann et

al, 2014). In the context of terrorism management, resocialization of convicted foreign fighters should be a systematic and well-thought-out intervention, whose aim is to change their attitudes, cognitive schemes, moral judgment, and other relevant characteristics related to criminal behavior. The final effect of such program should be reduction or complete elimination of the possibility for repeating the same crime or similar activities, and alleviation of the social integration for the individual after the prison sentence comes to its end. Thus, resocialization can be viewed as the first step of reintegration of these individuals in the society after serving the sentence, which is proven to be a difficult process.

Contemporary knowledge entirely supports the view that any process of resocialization brings about optimal results when it is implemented as an individualized program that acknowledges and meets the need for focusing on different goals and forms of intervention. For instance, the same approach is not advisable for both leaders and followers, simply because the root of their behavior is not driven by the same motives, nor they have the same value system, attitudes or beliefs that upkeep their activities. There are already some strong indications that an approach modeled to be efficient for every situation and each individual, does not exist (Mullins, 2010). Furthermore, radicalization does not occur neither in cultural nor in a socio-political vacuum and these variables should also be considered as important. It is worth mentioning that the attempts which rely on both theoretical models and empirical data to make more complex models of resocialization and imply the determinants of violent behavior of extremists on several levels, have been successfully implemented (Borum, 2011).

The selection of the most efficient methods for changing the cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of radicalization is possible only if a preliminary analysis concerning each of the factors for the behavior dynamics is well done. Among few successful models is the one offered by Taylor & Horgan (2006). It represents a dynamical synthesis of different social, political, and psychological factors coupled with experiences and relations between people of the community. Even though such programs are implemented with a satisfactory degree of success, there are authorities in the field who still highlight need of extending both theory-driven and empirical research from different relevant disciplines in the search for improved prediction of recidivism and factors affecting post-release outcomes and social adjustment (Kessels, 2013).

### *Psychological assessment of radicalization and de-radicalization*

Given the lack of homogeneous findings on the possibilities for predicting terrorism involvement on individual level, it is quite unrealistic to expect that valid risk assessment tools for early detection of potential involvement into terrorism might appear very soon (Sarma, 2017). Psychologist cannot yet provide an unambiguous list of predictors of endorsing radical attitudes or involvement into extremist behavior. That being said, they are at least able to provide some knowledge about the complex process of engaging and disengaging from violent extremism.

Situated in the context of dealing with the potential danger from transference of foreign fighters' radical viewpoint in prisons, the aim of psychological evaluation is to follow the changes which occurred (or did not occur) among individuals which are in direct contact with these

convicts, or identify the effects from the effort to rehabilitate convicted foreign fighters. The capability to collect, evaluate, analyze and share information related to violent extremist prisoners is critical not only to the safe operation of prison facilities but also to the overall prevention of radicalization to violent extremism. Consequently, the strain for developing efficient tools without which this assessment would not be possible is at the same time an integral part of the efforts for both radicalization prevention and resocialization i.e. rehabilitation.

The main sources of data for risk assessment and progress monitoring in prison environment do not differ from the ones used for the general prison population. The assessment commonly relies on simultaneous interpretation of data gathered by observation (particularly critical forms of behavior and/or symbolism), review of relevant documents (such as court and police reports), face-to-face interviews with the inmates and their family members or friends and last but not least, standardized psychological tests. The standardized tests are particularly important source of information because they are considered to be the most objective and the most effective assessment tools at the same time.

Although some experts believed that tests which were developed for and successfully used on other forensic populations could be successfully used to help assessments of imprisoned violent extremists (Roberts & Horgan, 2008), commonly, this view is seen as not being sufficiently supported by research data. Clinical and actuarial risk assessment measures are considered as reliable for offenders, but there is no sufficient evidence yet that they have been validated for prisoners who have been engaged in violent extremism. The main advantage of using this approach is merely the convenience of having these tests already available for use. Many comparisons have shown that weaknesses associated to administering these tests outweigh the benefits - consequently, not many authors consider their use as safe and efficient and recommend specialized tests which target only this category of offenders (Monahan, 2012).

There are two well-known instruments specifically designed for use with terrorist prisoners, with superior psychometric properties in comparison to other tests. Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ and VERA-2 have been evaluated as quite reliable for assessing the risk of involvement in extremism, even though it is recommended that they should undergo further empirical evaluations before being considered as safe predictors of this kind of behavior. In addition to identification the risk of radicalization, regular use of such standardized instruments supplies information which might guide prison authorities on deciding whether the detainee is ready to be released, what is the most suitable post-release plan, and finally, it allows meaningful comparisons between rehabilitation programs in different countries.

### **Assessment, monitoring and rehabilitation of foreign fighters in penitentiary institutions in the Republic of Macedonia**

Individuals convicted for joining foreign paramilitary organizations, or for supporting and recruiting for these organizations, are placed in different penitentiary institutions in the country, according to a special regime, which nevertheless, allows contact with the other inmates. In light of the risk that prisons are potential "incubators" for radicalization to violence of prisoners

sentenced for offences unrelated to violent extremism, the need for continuous monitoring of extremist radicalization condition is crucial. Available data on the capacities of the prisons in the country to respond to the need of managing the challenge of preventing convicted extremists to spread their radical propaganda and providing environment where they can de-radicalize, imply that not much has been achieved. Along with the notorious problems of over-crowdedness, inter-prisoner violence, corruption and mistreatment by personnel identified in the report by Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman and Degrading Treatment in 2016, the risk of radicalization spread is aggravated by a "dearth of rehabilitation and reintegration programs in Macedonian prison facilities" (Stojkovski & Kalajdziovski, 2018, p. 23). The second National strategy against terrorism from 2016, mentions radicalization prevention as important for several times, but, according to the assessment given in the report of Bureau of Counterterrorism for the same year, the complementary Action plan does not contain reference for application, financial support, control, monitoring and evaluation (Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2017).

This work is an attempt to inspire broader discussion and to engage professionals in raising their voices about the urgent need for development of special, contextual and culturally adapted assessment tools and custom tailored programs for resocialization of convicted foreign fighters which serve time in our country. The upcoming debate should take into account the perspective of both possibilities and limitations offered by psychological theory and practice.

## **Method**

The methodology applied for the drafting of this paper is qualitative and the data were gathered from only one source- professionals- educators<sup>10</sup> employed in penitentiary institutions who are responsible for both evaluation monitoring and implementation of rehabilitation programs.

### ***Participants and data gathering method***

The 11 study participants were selected purposely on the basis of their job position and engagement as correctional educators. All of are employed in one of the penitentiary institutions located in Shtip, Kriva Palanka, Prilep, Skopje or Idrizovo. The interviewees are directly involved in the process of resocialization and monitoring of all inmates, including the convicted foreign fighters. Their years of service in the particular institution vary in range between 4 and 30 years. In terms of their professional background, psychologists and social workers were dominant. Seven of them are females.

The recruitment was facilitated by an officer from the Directorate for execution of sanctions. After being given a guarantee for anonymity<sup>11</sup>, all of them voluntarily answered 6 open-ended

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<sup>10</sup> The educators are responsible for the process of rehabilitation of the inmates and their work involves not only scheduling *work* assignments, *educational* opportunities, but also monitoring and evaluation their progress and counseling.

<sup>11</sup> Having in mind the very limited number of respondents and for the purpose of a thorough protection from the pos-

questions of the structured interview designed for this particular purpose. The data were gathered in September 2018.

### **Findings**

The analysis of the interviewees' accounts indicates two general patterns – the answers are very reserved and there is a very high homogeneity in their experiences and perceptions. The responses were remarkably consistent in regards to both the existing methods through which foreign fighters and other extremists are psychologically evaluated and the mechanisms in which their resocialization is monitored. According to the collected answers, only a general set of few psychological tools is available for the time being. In other words, those psychological tests that are developed for use in general population are administered to the forensic one, even for profiling and assessing degree of radicalization of individuals convicted as foreign fighters. To improve the evaluation, it is complemented with data from combination of sources such as: insight in court documentation, diagnostic interviews and track of behavior through unstructured observation, social and forensic anamneses:

*"So far, the level of radicalization has been assessed on the basis of verdict, police knowledge, knowledge of the prison police, as well as personal characteristics - leadership, signs of radicalization - external -beard, clothing) etc".*

*"The criteria for classification that are applied in the institution are practically all the techniques for collecting data and information about the convicted person while in the admission unit - from autobiography, through the 'lobi' technique and the anamnestic interview, social history and psychological opinion, criminological history or the type of the crime..."*

Some answers indicate reliance on inmates' physical appearance as feature pointing to their radicalization. As an example, one respondent explains<sup>12</sup>:

*..." [We are identifying radicalization] according to their [convicts'] appearance, the appearance of their visitors, if they have a wife and how 'covered' she is and with what she is covered, with whom they communicate form the other inmates in the institution, their attitude toward employees and the degree of respect toward prison rules, their requests for religious practice breaks, and if they are committed to these practices."*

A set of specialized psychological assessment tools for profiling of convicts who are foreign fighters and/or violent extremists is not in use yet, and psychologists rely solely on personality tests which have not been subjected to the process of standardization. In other words, they administer tools that lack norms and whose validity and reliability are questionable, even when used in the general population. This does not inevitably mean that the evaluations facilitated by these tests are invalid or inaccurate, nevertheless, the risk of incongruities are high. The

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sibility of their identification, none of their demographic features is revealed in support to the quotations presented in the text. This procedure does not compromise the research validity because the answers have significantly high homogeneity.

<sup>12</sup> All quotations are translated as they are in the original statements of the respondents.

respondents seem to be aware of the disadvantages of using psychological tests for general population – however, it is more preferable for them to have any instrument than none at all.

Unfortunately, the conditions are the same in regards with the specialized (custom-designed) instruments for assessment of the risk of radicalization. The respondents in this micro study mention that they monitor the behavior of the other prisoners and get data from the other prison personnel in order to assess the potential spread of extremism to other inmates, however, they are not equipped with any set of standardized indicators according to which they could evaluate the degree of radicalization. Two of them describe the efforts made to perform evaluation in given circumstances:

*“All signs of radicalization are carefully processed, as well as information from the Security Sector or from other convicts – if they [convicts] suddenly change their clothing or appearance – grow a beard without moustache, wear cropped trousers, or some behaviors appear – certain convicts begin to practice Islam with a higher enthusiasm, and all of them were in contact with convicts which were convicted for terrorism related crimes and participation in foreign military, like fasting, daily prayers, refraining from listening to music...”*

*“We do not have any instruments for assessing the risk of radicalization of other prisoners, and what we do what we can within our limits and possibilities. We are monitoring all convicted persons, their behavior, whether there is a change in physical appearance - beard, whether there is a change in religious customs”*

Educators' answers lead to a conclusion that there are neither specialized resocialization programs, nor specialized protocols for monitoring the process, although, part of the answers indicate that some forms of special attention are given to inmates convicted to foreign fighting. Currently, evaluation and monitoring are administered in the same way to all inmates. The following answers are typical:

*‘Specialized program is not applied because we do not possess such, apart from the regular program nothing else is done with this prisoner category.’*

*‘Apart from the regular treatment activities based on cognitive-behavioral therapy nothing else is done.’*

The answers of the interviewed team of professionals suggest that they are aware of the seriousness and complexities of the problem. They are also aware of the lower success of resocialization efforts of the inmates with radical views in contrast to other inmates. This is illustrated by the following answer:

*‘Convicted extremists’ collaboration in the process of resocialization is at unsatisfactory level, most of them do not discuss their crimes, and the rest of them give deficient answers. They strictly follow their radical, religious practices.’*

Some respondents know that the Directorate for execution of sanctions has established a working group of professionals from five prisons in the country where convicted radicals reside, together with two foreign consultants who should develop a treatment program for radicalized

convicts along with a risk assessment tool. These forthcoming activities have been discussed only by those individuals who are already members of the working group.

All interviewed correctional educators unreservedly confirmed the necessity of additional training for appropriate use of psychological evaluation methods on convicts – foreign fighters and/or extremists. This finding may be viewed as a very favorable condition, considering that the awareness about the lack of specific competences might be a good motivating ground for their development.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

Developing tools with acceptable psychometrical characteristics and satisfactory predictive possibilities is a very complex process, albeit yet possible. VERA-2R (Violent Extremism Risk Assessment) protocol for radicalization risk assessment was already mentioned as a good practice, in literature described as efficient and subjectable to cultural adjustment (Pressman, and Flockton, 2012; Pressman, Duits, Rinne and Flockton, 2016). This tool contains indicators especially developed for those who have experience with terrorist violence, as opposed to those forms that are used for all individuals involved in criminal activities. Having only this subpopulation as a target group, makes VERA-2R more suitable for terrorist risk assessment than any pre-existing tests which were not explicitly designed for this group of prisoners. Another valuable feature of this tool is that the approach is proposed for different types of violent extremists motivated by religious, political and social ideologies.

Psychological instruments may be developed, and they may be a useful tool, but not when they are the only data source, and not when they are situated out of narrow local context. The above mentioned assessment tool belongs in the class of so-called micro-level instruments, because it applies an individualized approach. It comprises of indicators that in the same time may assist in following the improvement of the rehabilitation process which makes its cost-benefit ratio being even more reasonable. This further justifies the claim that approaches which help prison professionals to process and integrate information in a structured way are of an immense value and are in coordination with good practice in the broader area of radicalization risk spread in the institution (Sarma, 2017). That being said, there are limitations as well. This tool cannot be safely used for predicting/identifying potential violent extremists among the general population. For now, their use is proven to be efficient only for evaluation of the vulnerability of individuals to get radicalized and for assessing the progress (or regress) in rehabilitation.

Regarding tailored resocialization programs, in the absence of empirical data which would definitely point out how an efficient de-radicalization program should be designed (UNODOC, 2016), especially adjusted individualized approaches based on preliminary in-depth evaluation are suggested as the best replacement. What is advisable as universally important for each program however, is paying a strong attention to addressing the psychological needs. Of central importance among psychological needs is the creation of a sense of belonging alternative to belonging to the extremist group (Dean, 2014). This is achieved through intensive work on changing attitudes through confrontation with the inconsistencies and controversy of the accepted

extremist beliefs, deconstruction of bipolar positions (they versus we) and the idea of existence of an essential connection with the other followers from the radical group, by developing tolerance, emotional maturity and creating aspirations for belonging in the mainstream surroundings and a feeling of being part of it.

Lastly, providing the prison personnel is so important, that might be considered as a key element of prevention and combating radicalization. It should provide the personnel with appropriate competences like understanding violent extremism, assessment of violent extremist prisoners, implementing a positive regime for violent extremist prisoners and complying to ethical standards. At the same time it should help in making them immune of two opposed dangers – one of them is their potential recruitment to extremist views, and the other, much more probable in our context, is the risk of developing very derogatory attitude towards this group of prisoners which potentially leads toward their discrimination. Consequently, such training would be comprehensive only if they integrate work on developing interpersonal skills; stress management and even sensitization and awareness of issues like cultural and religious diversity.

### ***Limitations***

This initial study relies solely on the perceptions and experiences of a sample of professionals who work with prisoners convicted by violent extremism. Due to practical reasons (the protection of their identity being the first) the selection of participants could not have been done randomly. The sample is relatively small and comprised of those respondents who accepted to be interviewed. There is a possibility that despite the voluntary participation and the guarantee for anonymity and discretion, the participants were very restrictive in sharing information on this very sensitive topic, especially with someone who is an outside of their work community.

### **Conclusions**

Given the number of currently incarcerated persons convicted for foreign fighting, coupled with the existing poor and degrading conditions of Macedonian prisons (State Department, 2016) that might seriously exacerbate radicalization in this environment, there is no doubt that penitentiary institutions in the country have a very important role in tackling the spread of radicalization among the general prison population. This initial micro research has presented the limitations that correctional educators, particularly psychologists are facing in their efforts to administer tools for assessing the risk of personal violent radicalization, or, for monitoring the progress of the convicted extremists in their resocialization. It also addresses the issue of non-implementation of rehabilitation programs designed for violent extremists.

Findings show that professionals involved in performing the resocialization activities and the assessment of its progress lack specialized instruments which may be used for determining the psychological profile of extremists, including convicted foreign fighters, even though aware that the tests designed for general population are not suitable for use in forensic populations, rely their evaluations on this source together with several other indicators, mainly visible signs in prisoners' appearance and behavior. Further, findings imply that they did not receive any

in-service training in risk assessment or carrying out specialized programs for resocialization of violent extremists.

In view of the fact that specialized instruments for assessing the risk of radicalization exist and could be culturally adjusted, efforts should be made to equip professionals with such tools. Further, resocialization programs designed as one-size-fits-all approach that are currently implemented in the penitentiary institutions, could hardly be effective for the wide range of offenders at the same time. For rehabilitation programmes to be effective, interventions should be tailored accordingly to the previously assessed cognitive, emotional and social factors and be accompanied with periodic risk assessments to measure progress and the success of interventions.

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