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The (R)Age Blind Spot

Radicalisation in Later Life as a Challenge
for Disengagement and Exit Work

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dist[eX]

Development of a Network for
Disengagement and Exit Work



The (R)Age Blind Spot



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» Abstract

Until recently, there has been little public awareness of radicalisation among older people, and it has rarely been a topic of research or exit work. Attention is mostly focused on teenagers and young adults. But older people also get involved in anti-democratic milieus, become radicalised online or form extremist worldviews in later stages of life. A lack of awareness of this target group's specific needs and vulnerability factors, combined with issues around how to reach older people, poses new challenges for practitioners and policymakers.

This policy paper calls for more attention to be paid to the older demographic. It points out gaps in awareness, identifies areas where action is needed and makes recommendations for policymakers. As well as better empirical data, there is a need for reliable funding structures, target group-appropriate approaches and greater societal engagement with these issues. The work of **dist[ex] – Development of a Network for Disengagement and Exit Work** is an important first step towards achieving these goals. However, further action is needed at the professional, structural and political levels to permanently embed the topic in professional practice.



» Radicalisation – a ‘young people’s problem’?

The fatal assault on a petrol station worker in Idar-Oberstein in 2021. The large scale-raid in 2022 where a total of 25 members of a terror group planning a violent overthrow of the German state (believed to be part of the ‘Reichsbürger’ movement) were arrested. The attack at Magdeburg Christmas market in December 2024.

These events differ greatly in terms of ideological motivation and how they unfolded. But one striking commonality between them is that the perpetrators or people arrested ranged in age from around 50 to over 70. That is to say, they were all in their ‘later years’, a category encompassing those in their mid-40s or older. Until now, this demographic has rarely been mentioned in the same breath as radicalisation or extremism.

Even if there is no standard, universally accepted scholarly definition of radicalisation,¹ there does appear to be something of a consensus among experts that it is primarily teenagers and young adults who are affected by processes that radicalise people into extremist views. In Germany, the association of radicalisation with adolescence or youth is a common thread running through public discussions, numerous publications, assorted areas of focus, civil society projects and both state and federal programmes. People in their ‘later years’ have been virtually ignored in research and practical resources and services.²

Adolescence is often regarded as a sensitive period during which people’s identities and political attitudes are shaped. On this view, the tensions that arise from forming one’s identity while simultaneously learning how to participate in society can make young people especially vulnerable to extremist ways of thinking, which can even extend into their committing acts of violence (cf. Lamberty 2013: 140). There are also practical factors that further explain this focus on younger people. Firstly, routine structures (such as compulsory schooling) and youth work services make it easier to reach and maintain constant contact with the young demographic. Moreover, it may be considered more effective to focus efforts on younger people, as their impact on society and its structures will be longer-lasting. Major federal programmes, such as the Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth’s ‘Live Democracy!’, therefore focus primarily on children, teenagers and young adults (cf. BMFSFJ 2024: 1167).

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But even if it is correct that young people do, for assorted reasons, frequently become radicalised and attach themselves to extremist actors, and so must certainly not

¹ By radicalisation, we here mean non-linear, multifactorial processes that do not necessarily culminate in violence. These are highly individual processes whose complexity must always be taken into account (cf. Abay Gaspar et al. 2018).

² One of the few research projects to specifically consider this topic is ‘RAGE - Rechtsextremismus im Alter als Gefahr für Zusammenhalt und Engagement’ (engl.: Right-Wing Extremism among Older People as a Threat to Engagement and Cohesion) in Baden-Württemberg (RAGE BW) (cf. Hebbelmann/Müller 2024).



be overlooked in educational and preventive measures, this paper calls for a broadening of perspective in the prevention landscape.

» Radicalisation in later life

It is not just the examples mentioned at the start of this paper that highlight the need for a better approach to this target group. While there is a dearth of research on people who become radicalised in their later years (cf. Pohl/Wiedemann 2025: 21), there are some indications that give good reason to think this is a larger social phenomenon and not just a matter of exceptional individual cases. Radicalisation processes and motivations for adopting extremist views can be observed in later life too. These processes often involve a combination of *push factors*, which make individuals more susceptible to radical ideas and propaganda from extremist actors, and *pull factors*, which refers to the strategies and recruitment methods used to attract susceptible individuals into extremist networks.

Adolescence is often mentioned in the context of push factors; during this phase of life, people are highly vulnerable and more susceptible to extremist views. However, periods of upheaval and transition can also be observed in older people. In their later years, many people are faced with changes in their day-to-day lives or biographical challenges. Their children have grown up and left home, they are about to retire after many years of working, deaths of family members and friends are becoming an ever more frequent occurrence. On top of that, there are physical changes (such as the hormonal changes that come with the menopause) or age-related health issues. These changes can sometimes lead to subjective crises or feelings of powerlessness: for example, financial problems due to only receiving a small

pension, feelings of loneliness or isolation due to a lack of social participation or a fear of meaninglessness, physical suffering and death. As well as physical changes, feelings of being overwhelmed by the increasing presence of technology in their everyday lives can cause a diminished sense of self-worth.

It should be clear that needs for things such as community, belonging, purpose, direction, appreciation, participation and self-efficacy are not the sole preserve of the young, but remain relevant into old age. Indeed, they may even gain fresh significance in people's later years. Pull factors (e.g. extremist rhetoric, offerings and worldviews that attempt to satisfy those needs) are consequently just as important for older people.

These trends are evident in movements such as the 'Reichsbürger' and 'Selbstverwalter' (literally, 'citizens of the Reich' and 'self-administrators', who reject the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany). Reports from the Bavarian and Baden-Württemberg intelligence services both note that most members of these movements are aged 50+ (cf. LfV BW 2021; BayLfV n.d.). The latter report suggests that the combination of 'strong historical references' and 'quasi-legal arguments' is especially appealing to an older demographic, and that the movements' worldviews sometimes offer solutions for financial crises and questions of identity and belonging (cf. LfV BW 2021).

In their later years, many people are faced with changes in their day-to-day lives or biographical challenges.



A similar age structure is observable in the 'Querdenken' movement, an ideologically highly diverse group with overlaps with far-right, spiritual and conspiracist communities that mobilised against protective measures implemented by the government during the Covid pandemic (cf. Koos 2021: 3; Frei/Nachtwey 2021: 7). During that time, the Querdenken movement's (online) messaging effectively latched on to everyday experiences such as overwhelming existential anxiety, feelings of loneliness or anger at political leaders. It catered to a desire for community, purpose and direction, as well as supporting (sometimes violent) attempts to rebel against the state apparatus (cf. Friedrich 2023: 158–159). Elements of the Querdenken movement remain active to this day and are using conspiracy theories to mobilise around other issues such as the war in Ukraine and the mistrust of politics and public broadcast media (cf. Behme 2022; Lösch 2025).

Though no age group should be placed under blanket suspicion and the vulnerability factors described above never apply to everyone the same way, there are some initial research findings that reveal certain susceptibilities of this demographic above and beyond those push and pull factors. For example, older people appear to be more strongly inclined to believe conspiracy theories and less wary of digital manipulation, which in turn makes them less capable of dealing with online misinformation than younger people (cf. Pohl/Wiedemann 2025: 24ff.).

In summary: there is a clear need to pay more attention to this demographic and to create services and structures tailored to the needs and experiences of older people. To do so effectively and with lasting impact, there are certain challengers that policymakers and practitioners of disengagement and exit work need to address.

» Older target groups as a new challenge for disengagement and exit work

What is needed above all is a better basic understanding of older people and their needs across the various areas of disengagement and exit work. That involves recognising how reductive it is to see radicalisation processes and motivations for adopting extremist attitudes as problems or phenomena specific to younger people. The idea that misanthropic attitudes are more pronounced in younger generations than older ones is not supported by the evidence (cf. Zick/Berghan/Mokros 2020). Nor is the idea that significant processes of change only occur during adolescence and not in people's later years (cf. Specht/Luhmann/Geiser 2014).

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It is necessary to recognise this demographic's full diversity of concerns, needs and lived realities, without stigmatising them or making generalisations or derogatory assumptions. Following the arrests of members of the alleged 'Reichsbürger' group in late 2022, public commentators sardonically referred to a 'rollator putsch', 'pensioner gang' or 'senile old coots' (cf. Stöcker/Stegers/Ziock 2024: 15–16). Such expressions disparage older people while simultaneously downplaying the potential for violence and the ideologically hardened, misanthropic views observable in the Reichsbürger movement.



Another challenge that must be addressed in this context is working out how to reach older target groups and what services or resources will appeal to different people. Extremist worldviews often cast scientists, politicians and the media as 'the enemy', which can make it especially challenging to motivate those influenced by such views to voluntarily participate in programmes funded by the government or foundations linked to a particular political party.

Careful approaches and creative, unconventional outreach ideas are needed to connect with these people, both online and offline, and present them with attractive alternatives to extremist views that are rooted in their own lived realities. It would be helpful in such cases to have networks and partnerships with existing institutions, some of which are deeply embedded in older people's lives, such as adult education colleges, businesses, old people's homes, 'multi-generational' community centres, clubhouses and providers of pastoral services. Options to reach the target group indirectly via relatives and people close to them should also be considered. For instance, existing bonds of trust can be utilised, or relationships strengthened by dedicated counselling and support services in radicalised individuals' social environment. Another promising approach is to involve older people in preventive measures not just as passive recipients but as active shapers and influencers (cf. Hebbelmann/Müller 2024: 36).

Careful approaches and creative, unconventional outreach ideas are needed to connect with these people, both online and offline.

Projects and organisations in the field of disengagement and exit work face a consistently challenging funding situation. The fact that there have only been very limited measures and services in this context specifically targeting older demographics is certainly due in part to the financial dependence on project tenders. Most of the projects funded by government ministries, foundations and so on are explicitly focused on adolescents and young adults, and this is reflected in the current project landscape.

For innovative disengagement and exit work with older people to succeed, politicians need to put a basic framework in place to facilitate that work on a long-term basis.

» What needs to be done now – tasks for policymakers

• Raise awareness:

In future, there needs to be greater focus in political discussions and strategy papers on radicalisation among older people so as to reduce blind spots and give a more complete picture of the situation.

• A more diversified funding landscape:

Future funding calls should explicitly also include older target groups. The Democracy Promotion Act (Demokratieförderungsgesetz) that has been mooted in the past would encompass this kind of cross-generational support.

• Long-term support for institutional infrastructure:

Developing messaging and services tailored to specific age groups requires sustained funding. Reliable long-term funding allows organisations to plan for the future and to build up professional structures and age-specific approaches in this previously neglected field.



- Strengthen research:

There is a need for targeted funding of interdisciplinary research on the processes by which older people are radicalised and on age-specific messaging by extremist actors. Robust empirical findings can provide a basis for precisely tailored prevention and intervention services.

- Build networks rooted in people's lives:

Cooperation with institutions present in older people's everyday lives (e.g. adult education colleges, churches, businesses, service centres for older people) needs to be strategically expanded and strengthened, thus providing a straightforward way to reach the target groups.

- Facilitate social environment-based approaches:

Relatives play a key role in getting through to affected individuals. Counselling services for people in their social environment should be further expanded and better advertised.

- Promote digital resilience:

Many older people need more support in the use of digital media. Programmes to improve their media and information literacy could greatly strengthen their ability to recognise disinformation.

» Conclusion

In light of demographic changes, radicalisation among older people is not a marginal phenomenon but a growing challenge, which merits more attention both in prevention work and from society at large. In future, **dist[ex] – Development of a Network for Disengagement and Exit Work** will seek to address this issue and embed it more strongly across various areas of professional practice. However, maintaining sustained contact with an older demographic will require additional measures, long-term funding structures and an expanded political awareness of the problem.

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With a term of **eight years**, **dist[ex]** focuses on sustainability, structural anchoring and nationwide effectiveness.

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