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EXITing the Far Right. An Interview with Bernd Wagner



Neo-Nazis wishing to leave the right-wing extremist scene can get in touch with Bernd Wagner, who runs EXIT Germany. The private programme he founded has already been used by over 440 men and women to opt out of right-wing extremism.

Wagner, a criminology graduate and former senior CID officer, founded EXIT in May 2000 together with former neo-Nazi leader Ingo Hasselbach. The initiative helps people wishing to opt out of the right-wing extremist scene all over Germany by teaching them how to help themselves. The aim is to put them in a position where they can develop new professional and personal perspectives. Since 2007, the programme has also offered advice to families whose children are right-wing extremists. Furthermore, educational events are staged at which former right-wing extremists give talks.

EXIT is funded primarily by donations from the Freudenberg Foundation and the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, as well as by the German federal government's XENOS project. To date, EXIT has helped a total of 442 people to opt out of the right-wing scene, a quarter of them women. The majority belonged to the leadership cadres of right-wing parties or comradeships. According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, there were 25,000 right-wing extremists in Germany in 2010, 9,500 of them prepared to use violence.



Working to build a new life

Mr Wagner, EXIT Germany is a private organization. Why do you not leave this work to the authorities, which after all offer similar help to people wishing to leave the neo-Nazi scene?

The authorities are only willing to a limited extent to adopt our work methods. We were the very first in Germany to provide support for former neo-Nazis. It was only then that a number of official bodies such as the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution began to follow suit.

What is the difference between EXIT and the government's programmes?

The key difference is that we provide broader help than the state-run organizations do. We accompany the entire life-cycle of former right-wing extremists, while the authorities often make do with getting people out of the immediate structures of the right-wing extremist scene and giving them merely initial assistance. For us, however, it is not enough that former neo-Nazis no longer go to demonstrations or concerts and take part in violent acts. We go a step further, working together with the individuals concerned so they can build a new and secure life for themselves.

Generally speaking, we spend one to three years working with each individual. We also have one person who we have already been supporting for eight years. What is more, we provide support for former neo-Nazis who are serving life sentences in prison.

"We take anyone – so long as they are honest"

What happens when someone wishing to leave the scene contacts you?



First of all, we have to know where exactly the person in question was active within the right-wing extremist scene. Is the individual involved in violent or other criminal activities, are court cases pending? Will they put themselves at risk by taking this step, and how can they be protected against revenge by other members of

the scene? These are the questions we ask.

At the same time, we must determine what the individual's goals and ideas are when it comes to re-establishing themselves professionally and socially. What needs to be done to achieve these goals – does the individual in question lack particular educational qualifications, do they have problems at work or in their personal lives? The four of us who currently work full-time at EXIT have to take all of these things into account when planning the help to be given in the individual stages.

Do you take anyone who gets in touch with you?

We take anyone, though it is important for people to be honest. They must also tell us about any criminal or shameful acts they have committed – that's an absolute prerequisite. Another condition is a willingness to cut all ties with members of the scene. Secretly keeping doors open to their right-wing past is not acceptable. Anyone who fails to keep to these rules will not receive our help. As a result, we have also suffered a number of losses – eight individuals to date have returned to the scene.

Friendships also have to be ended

What possibilities do you have to verify that people are telling you the truth?

First of all, we have years of experience: this allows us to communicate in a particular way, ask the right questions and listen attentively. We also have contacts who we can ask to verify certain things. We thus attempt in each case to put together a pool of information in order to be able to assess the degree of honesty.



At what point can a person claim to have successfully exited the scene?

There are two criteria. First, all contact to members of the scene must have been broken off completely. This includes not only political and ideological ties, but also supposed personal friendships. Some people keen to opt out of the neo-Nazi scene imagine that they will be able, above and beyond the political and ideological level, to maintain contact on an interpersonal footing with individual comrades who they thought were such great guys. Most of them, however, are fully aware that this is simply not possible for reasons of security – so as not to run the risk of their old comrades turning up on their doorsteps and "beating them up".

Second, they must have changed their view of the world, which must no longer be based on the "box of tricks" of right-wing extremism. Former members of the scene must acknowledge the basic concept of freedom and dignity for all people and live their lives accordingly. This is what we work towards – that they actually think and feel this.

*Dominik Reinle
is a sociology graduate who works as a freelance journalist in Cologne,
for the Internet editorial department of Westdeutscher Rundfunk,
among others.*

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