



LOCAL APPROACHES TO PREVENT AND COUNTER RADICALISATION IN CITIES IN FRANCE, BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS

Radicalisation is on the rise in many European societies, because of the increasing diversity, insecurity and unemployment levels strengthened by the local impact of global developments, including the economic crisis and the continual influx of refugees. Radicalisation manifest itself in for example a growing electorate of radical and populist political parties, an increase in the support and sympathy for radical religious – especially Islamist – movements, a fierce public debate, arson at centres for asylum seekers, and increasing polarisation in society. Currently, the threat of radicalisation, violent extremism and polarisation is a common concern of national and local authorities in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. For example, national authorities in these three countries have developed anti-jihadist policies to prevent their residents from joining IS fighters in Syria and other jihadist conflicts, and to deal with returning foreign fighters. Many of these policies are focused on countering jihadist extremism with repressive and legal measures. Without questioning the need of such measures, additional preventive approaches are needed with a much broader scope, to counter and prevent radicalisation and polarisation in local society by strengthening social cohesion, resilience, dialogue, participation and equal opportunities. Such policies are pre-eminently the competence of local authorities, in collaboration with professionals and civil society organisations, facilitated by national policies.

Finding the balance between repressive and preventative measures

Many countries and cities in Europe are confronted with comparable challenges of preventing and countering radicalisation. In general, there is a need for a broad approach to radicalisation, which balances preventative and repressive measures. This article focuses on *preventive approaches at local level*. The responsible organisation in Belgium is the FPS, which is the Federal Public Service for Social Integration, Poverty Reduction, Social Economy and Federal Urban Policy. In France, this is the General Commission for Territorial Equality (CGET), which is in charge of designing, elaborating and applying the national urban policy in deprived areas. Both services are supporting ministers who are responsible for urban and social policies, without any competence in the field of security and counter-terrorism. The same applies for the Dutch Ministry of Interior and Kingdom relations, which is primarily responsible for urban policy. The urban policies will focus on cities and disadvantaged neighbourhoods and groups with a view to reduce the breeding ground and support for radical movements. The institutional settings are complex in France, Belgium and the Netherlands because of the various competences and issues involved.

Current approach in Belgium, France, The Netherlands and Europe at a glance

In Belgium, the federal Ministry of the Interior and its “Radicalism” unit, the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (OCAM), coordinate Belgium’s effort to develop a government-wide strategy to counter and prevent radicalisation and violent extremism. They operate along with other levels of governance: Regions, Communities and, finally, local authorities. The Federal Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis coordinates initiatives against radicalism, trains stakeholders in the matter, and is also responsible for the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the federal policy on security and prevention with regards to radicalism. The FPS (Federal Public Service) for Social Integration,



Poverty Reduction, Social Economy and Federal Urban Policy, is under the responsibility of the ministers for Social Integration and for Urban Policy and secretaries of state for the fight against Poverty. This FPS supports complementary policies to tackle the breeding ground for radicalisation and polarisation. Regions and communities, for their part, have drawn up action plans at their own governance levels. First and foremost, these plans cover the following issues: social cohesion, youth policy, education, fight against discrimination, etc. Amongst the regional and community measures we find training and awareness schemes for the local stakeholders (associations, communities, teachers, etc.), the introduction of an appointed official (SPOC) for matters relating to radicalisation, helpdesks (or free phone numbers) aimed at friends and relatives of those who might have become radicalised, media education for young people, support for cultural events (e.g. the theatre play “Djihad”, declared to be of public interest and seen by thousands of young people) or intercultural dialogue. These actions also affect counter-radicalisation policies from higher levels of government, including the fight against discrimination, citizenship education courses, and social work in prisons. Local stakeholders, whether public or from civil society organisations, have often been the first institutions to tackle the problem of radicalisation, as made clear by the examples of the improved services or platforms developed by the cities of Vilvoorde, Brussels and Verviers. Their actions are primarily aimed at promoting social cohesion in their neighbourhoods by supporting community centres, awareness campaigns for street educators and social workers, socio-professional integration paths adapted to this specific target group (youth at risk of radicalisation), individual contact with families or people directly affected, and sharing of experiences and good practices.

In France, counter-terrorism activity is coordinated by the Interministerial Liaison Committee against Terrorism (the Comité Interministériel de Lutte Anti-Terroriste), which consists of the prime minister and the ministers of the Interior, Defense, Justice, and Foreign Affairs. The Ministry of the Interior oversees the Anti-Terrorism Coordination Unit (Unité de Coordination de la Lutte Anti-Terroriste), which consists of agencies from the Interior and Defense ministries. Preventive measures are directly carried out by various ministries (Justice and Interior essentially). In the aftermath of the January 2015 terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo, France has quickly developed a national counter-terrorism program. On January 28, 2015, the government launched a new campaign, “Stop-Djihadisme”, to counter the threat of Islamic extremism at numerous levels of French society. It has begun to institute counter-jihadism measures to its education and prison systems, allocate additional resources to its counter-terrorism agencies etc.¹ In May, a wide-reaching surveillance law was passed intended to improve the ability of the country’s intelligence services to identify potential terrorists. A range of preventive measures are directly carried out by various ministries. In addition, the Interdepartmental Delinquency Prevention Centre (ICPD) launched a major training program for various stakeholders in prevention. The Ministries of the Interior, Justice, Education, Family, Health, the City and Youth are mobilised in this training and prevention strategy. The French Ministry of the City and the Ministry for Housing, Territorial Equality, and Rural Areas are relevant with regard to the urban and local policies to prevent polarisation and radicalisation by reducing their breeding ground. Under the authority of the Prime minister, based on an inter-ministerial approach, the General Commission for Territorial Equality (CGET) is responsible for designing, elaborating and applying the national urban policy (Politique de la ville) in deprived areas through a contractual approach (Contrat de ville). The CGET intervenes in the fight against Islamic radicalisation on topics related to education and social support in neighbourhoods where distrust against republican values and secularism is observed. It is also involved in the new policy measures on “Égalité et citoyenneté: la République en

¹ [France: Extremism and Counter-Extremism](#). Counter Extremism Project.



actes”, aiming at promoting the adherence at the republic (citizenship) and shared values, and promoting equal opportunities for all.² This policy includes measures to combat segregation, rehabilitation of the disadvantaged neighbourhoods, promoting safety, improving education and social mixing in education, fighting discrimination and promoting citizenship through sport, culture, language and the value of “laïcité”.

In both countries the counterterrorism measures and strategies have been further intensified after the November 2015 Paris attack and the effects of the attacks on March 23 will be in the same direction. Obviously, these involve mainly security measures. However, one cannot win the fight against radicalisation and terrorism with security measures only, for they should be supplemented by a preventive strategy.

In the Netherlands, the NCTV (National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism), which is imbedded in the Ministry of Security and Justice, coordinates the national policy to counter terrorism and radicalisation that is developed and implemented by all relevant Ministries. The Netherlands comprehensive action programme to combat jihadism³ of August 2014 aims to protect democracy and the rule of law, counter and weaken the jihadist movement in the Netherlands and to diminish the breeding ground for radicalisation. Implementing these new measures requires close cooperation between all partners at the local, national and international level, and between government and civil society partners. The main partners in the national Counterterrorism Strategy are the Ministry of Security and Justice (under which the NCTV, the Public Prosecution Service, and National Police fall), local governments (the mayor being responsible for public order) and the Ministries of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (responsible for the General Intelligence and Security Service), Foreign Affairs and Social Affairs and Employment. Preventive policies and measures are mainly the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment in cooperation with the NCTV. The policy to counteract radicalisation includes measures to detect radicalisation, prevent the increase of new adherents to the jihadist movement, enhancing resilience against radicalisation and countering social tensions that could be a breeding ground for radicalisation. The national government supports the local approach in the prioritised municipalities. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has established a team for the prevention of radicalisation and social tensions which supports municipalities, professionals and communities in countering radicalisation and social tensions: the Expertise Unit on Social Stability. Municipalities with increased problems of radicalisation are supported by learning circles on an integrated preventive approach to counter radicalisation. Many local governments – that are confronted with manifestations of radicalisation – have developed or intensified their policies to counter radicalisation and social tensions.

At the European level, the European Commission supports Member States in their efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism of all types. The European Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), launched by the Commission September 2011, supports first-line local practitioners involved in preventing radicalisation and violent extremism across the EU and facilitates the exchange of best practices. Currently, the Commission is in the process of setting up a RAN Centre of Excellence, an EU knowledge hub for consolidating and disseminating experiences and cooperation on anti-radicalisation. In 2014, the Commission set out ten areas of action for strengthening the cooperation between the Member States and the EU to prevent all types of extremism that leads to violence,

² See: Problems in urban neighbourhoods are associated with « un malaise social et une crise des valeurs », see gouvernement.fr, and : Synthèse du comité interministériel égalité et citoyenneté: République Française, Premier Ministre: [Egalité et Citoyenneté: la République en actes](#). Réunion interministérielle du 6 mars 2015.

³ [The Netherlands comprehensive action programme to combat jihadism](#), 29-08-2014



regardless of who inspires it ('Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU's Response' ([COM \(2013\) 941 final](#) of 15-1-2014). On 28 April 2015, the European Commission set out The European Agenda on Security ([COM \(2015\) 185 final](#)) for the period 2015-2020 to support the cooperation of EU Member States in tackling security threats. Tackling terrorism and preventing radicalisation is one of the three priorities of this European Agenda on Security, focussing on a response to terrorism and foreign terrorist fighters. "Education, youth participation, interfaith and inter-cultural dialogue, as well as employment and social inclusion have a key role to play in preventing radicalisation by promoting common European values, fostering social inclusion, enhancing mutual understanding and tolerance", according to the Commission.

Policy Challenges

Governments have developed a variety of approaches to counter violent radicalisation and polarisation and to foster social cohesion and inclusion. However, there are still many questions about the real essence of the problem to be tackled (what is radicalisation? What is polarisation?), the societal and individual causes and conditions that (may) promote radicalisation, persons and communities at risk (including the breeding ground), which measures are effective for early detection, prevention and combating radicalisation, with whom to collaborate and how to support professionals and communities at risk, and how to combine measures in an integrated local policy. National and local preventive approaches include a broad spectrum of measures (see the [RAN](#) best practice collection and data base of approaches, lessons learnt and practices to prevent radicalisation). Preventive approaches include: raising awareness of first line practitioners, strengthening resilience of youth at risk, engagement and empowerment of communities at risk, education of young people on citizenship and tolerance, support for families vulnerable to radicalisation, delivering counter-narratives to extremist propaganda, and creating appropriate institutional infrastructures for support for people at risk of radicalisation (RAN 2014). Currently the national policies focus on anti-jihadist policies. However, preventive policies should aim at countering more general 'causes' of radicalisation, including exclusion, inequality, discrimination, segregation and rejection of the dominant society.

The challenge would be to develop local policies to diminish the breeding ground for radicalisation and support and sympathy for radical movements. These policies are typically intended to intervene at the moment that members of the target groups are not radicalised (yet). Social conditions, including unfair treatment, discrimination, exclusion and segregation, in combination with individual factors increase the risk of radicalisation (See: [Fermin 2009](#)). In addition, the global context plays a role, as currently is the case with the war in Syria. Although the relationship between social conditions or breeding ground and actual processes of radicalisation is complex, a broad policy to counter radicalisation at local level has to tackle these social conditions in combination with an individual approach focused on specific individuals and communities at risk.

Prevention of radicalisation should also aim at a wider group of active supporters and passive sympathisers. Terrorists can only perform their operations if they receive active support (information, safe houses, financial support, transportation and false passports etc.) and a certain level of passive sympathy and understanding from a wider audience. According to Stefan Aust, the author of *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the R.A.F.*, the activities of the RAF only stopped when the supporters and sympathisers felt that it had been enough.⁴ Any terrorist activity is always part of a bigger radical movement, for example the Islamist movement in the case of IS terrorist fighters. Thus preventive

⁴ NRC Handelsblad 28-11-2015: "[verstop jij even die tas met geld](#)".



policies should also target the passive sympathisers of the IS. The group of active supporters is a much smaller one. Preventive policies should aim at reducing the size of the group of sympathisers and supporters, by for instance by improving the opportunities for young people. It is also important to counter the hostility to the Western society and values, not only by teaching fundamental democratic values, but also by accepting them as full citizens, improving deprived neighbourhoods where many migrants live, improving the opportunities for youngsters, and accepting Islam as a one of the religions in Europe.

To develop a broad preventive approach, answers are required to questions including: How to recognise and interpret radicalism and sympathy for radical movements in local society? What are the drivers and breeding ground of radicalisation and sympathy for radical movements? How to counter these developments? How to involve and train professionals working with young people (schools, social services, police etc.) to understand the phenomenon? How to reach the vulnerable youngsters and how to reduce their vulnerability and increase their resilience? How to enhance their opportunities? How to collaborate with civil society organisations and with local communities? How to promote dialogue? How to increase the support for democratic values? Experience of individual and collective deprivation, unjust treatment and second class citizenship can lead to frustration and anger, especially among adolescents and young adults with a threatened positive identity. The second and third generations of migrants with an Islamic background are particularly vulnerable. Preventive policies are aiming at diminishing the breeding ground for radicalisation and for sympathy for radical movements by improving social relations in neighbourhoods, promoting mutual understanding, fighting discrimination, and improving the educational and labour market opportunities of the groups at risk.

In Belgium, France and the Netherlands preventive policies build on and strengthen previous policies to promote social cohesion, shared values, dialogue, equal opportunities and inclusive policies. However, there is still a lack of clarity due to the complexity and diversity of the processes and interrelations with societal and individual conditions. Some municipalities are already well on their way in developing and implementing prevention policies, while other municipalities have to make a start or are uncertain about the right direction. Mutual learning and exchange of experiences will help policy-makers and practitioners at various levels to get a better understanding of preventive approaches and measures. The EUKN will be active to create platforms and events where this learning and exchange of experiences can take place.