

The Belgian approach to tackling violent radicalisation: a practitioners' perspective

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Political context

For the past three years, Belgium has been drawn into the spotlight of European debate on terrorism and radicalisation. The terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016 perpetrated by the same home-grown terrorist cell in Brussels, the dismantling of another terrorist cell in Verviers, the exceptionally high number of citizens joining Daesh in Syria and Iraq, and a series of terrorism-related incidents has led to an intense public scrutiny of Belgium's seemingly inadequate counter-terrorism and related counter-radicalisation measures.

Following the terrorist attacks of 2015 – 2016, the Belgian government introduced some policy changes reflecting the major EU strategies on security and terrorism labelled by scholars as mostly reactive and "event-driven" in nature (Coolsaet 2010, 858). Overall, the EU's contribution is not meant to replace the work of the Member States (ibid.) and therefore, even though the Belgian system is developing in line with the common EU security agenda, the national policy-making is, to a great extent, shaped by practise, experience and context that are designed to provide a unique response to Belgium's particular challenges. The focus on national (or even local) trends and necessities is not surprising, given that there is yet very little consensus among practitioners and scholars themselves regarding theoretical models on the radicalisation process (Sageman 2004; Huq 2010; Patel 2011; Neumann 2008; Roy 2008). Yet, there is also a severe lack of empirically sound evaluations of counter-radicalisation policies and

The prevention of violent radicalisation as part of counter-terrorism measures is a top priority of the European Union and national security agendas. In 2015 Belgium introduced promising reforms in countering radicalisation and terrorism that aimed at connecting not only intelligence, security and police services across different policy levels but also the multitude of other stakeholders representing the government and civil society. However, the implementation and further development of the Belgian approach to prevention of radicalisation remain contested in political and public debate. This stands to reason because there is a lack of empirical data and a certain disregard of the voices of first-line practitioners who develop and operate preventive measures on the ground. Taking this into account, this IES policy brief provides a critical overview of the current state of Belgium's counter-radicalisation policy through the prism of analysis of stakeholders' vision of the present challenges: the conceptualisation of radicalisation in theory and practise, inter-agency and multi-stakeholder collaboration, and the evidence-based evaluation of interventions.

practices (Christmann, 2012; Feddes & Gallucci 2015, Schmid 2013) because of the multitude of drivers for radicalisation and extended number of contexts they touch upon. Even more, there is a general frustration both among scholars and practitioners who are not only dealing with complexities of inter-related concepts, such as: radicalisation, radicalism,

de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation, or counter-violent extremism (Schmid 2013) but also with the interlinkages of these concepts with terrorism or counter-terrorism. This is, among others, due to the very demand-driven nature of counter-terrorism and radicalisation research, meaning that many research projects are designed as service providers for security agencies in order to find patterns for surveillance measures (Kundnani 2012). In addition, it is obvious that gathering empirical data on radicalised or radicalising individuals is limited by data protection principles, restrictions imposed by police and intelligence services, and a habitual lack of cooperation of the individuals concerned.

This IES policy brief is aimed at sketching a critical overview of the current Belgian counter-violent extremism policy (CVE), including radicalisation, and which involves different state levels and various processes, structures and actors. More specifically, considering the inconclusive academic debates and cross-cutting context-driven practical approaches, it will focus on addressing policy gaps and stakeholders' needs as identified by practitioners involved both in the conceptualisation and realisation of CVE initiatives. This overview is based largely on the results of the two-day meeting with CVE stakeholders organised in cooperation with the European Foundation for Democracy in the framework of the H2020 Mindb4Act project's study visit on 21-22 June 2018 in Brussels. The project overall targets at building a community of practice for providing innovative, ethical and effective solutions for tackling violent extremism in the EU Member States. During the meetings, representatives from governmental agencies, academia, grass-roots organisations, schools, and international organisations exchanged views on practical implementation of CVE methods and tools in Belgium and in the EU, and the most evident gaps impeding the work of the multiple actors involved. The analysis of the insights gathered will contribute to a better understanding of the Belgian national approach and the formulation of key points in addressing the gaps in CVE, informing policy-makers and first-line practitioners alike¹.

Belgian CVE structure

The CVE policies in the federal state of Belgium are organised in a relatively horizontal and non-hierarchical structure in accordance with the respective competences of different bodies at various policy levels. Belgian state structure comprises a wide array of actors including: the local and federal police, the two intelligence services, representatives of relevant ministries (Interior, Justice, Foreign Affairs, Finance), representatives of the communities and regions, local administrations, public research institutes, social services and education system(s). Non-state actors such as grass-roots organisations or community projects are also involved but mostly on the local municipal level.

As stipulated in constitutional arrangements, the federal level is essentially in charge of hard-core security policies with its coercive measures, whereas regions are almost exclusively in charge of prevention. The Belgian CVE design is thus not based on a top-down chain of command, but on the principle of subsidiarity, depending on the task and the most relevant level of agency that is taking on this task.

At the federal level, within the National Security Council and two Security and Intelligence Committees (Coordination and Strategic) there are various ministries, LEAs and intelligence services involved in policy design and supervision. However, the main implementing agency at the federal level is the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA). CUTA was established in 2006, replacing its predecessor the Mixed Anti-Terrorism Group (*Anti-terroristische Gemengde Groep*, AGG), a coordination and cooperation platform for all security and intelligence services with a notoriously poor record of performance (Lasoen 2017). CUTA primarily aimed at: (1) centralising and coordinating information flows between different security and law enforcement agencies, (2) assessing the threat environment, (3) supervising the implementation of Plan-R (2005) – an action plan against radicalism. In 2015, it was tasked with revising the Plan-R. Compared to the original design of the Plan (limited

to the identification of hotspots of radicalisation, assigning responsibility to specific agencies to control specific hotspots, and organising the information flow along a National Task Force and a number of Local Task Forces), the revised 2015 plan-R also addressed prevention issues. The very latest version of the plan describes the drivers of radicalisation and the mechanisms of interaction between various stakeholders, such as law enforcement and preventive services at various state levels.

The plan provides some key working definitions. *Radicalisation* is explained as “striving to and/or supporting drastic changes in society, which may pose a threat to the democratic system of law (the goal), potentially by using undemocratic methods (the means), which may harm the functioning of the democratic system of laws (the effect)”. More generally, “*radicalism* is the willingness to accept the ultimate consequences of a certain way of thinking and putting it into practice.” Primarily the plan focuses on mapping various actors involved in CVE and describes the modes of collaboration and coordination among them. More precisely, aiming to improve the interaction among various Belgian actors, such as law enforcement and intelligence services, social and youth workers, municipal administrations, sports clubs and religious communities, the plan describes a mechanism consisting of three pillars: 1) national task force; 2) local task force and 3) local integrated security cells – all built up on efficient data sharing between law enforcement, practitioners and the public sector.

The *National Task Force* (NTF) is the central strategic policy body and is composed of intelligence services, law enforcement agents and representatives of relevant ministries such as justice and interior. The NTF maintains thematic working groups on radicalisation whose objective is to develop the relevant, in-depth knowledge of the various drivers of radicalisation and to advise on measures to address them. Currently there are four permanent working groups (prisons, Radio/Television, Prevention and Communication), five thematic working groups (Salafism, Extreme Right, Extreme Left, Asia Minor

and North Caucasus) and four ad hoc working groups (Hate Preachers, Mosques and Asylum/Migration, Foreign Fighters).

The *Local Task Forces* (LTFs) were established by the initial 2005 Plan R (Renard and Coolsaet 2018). They link the provincial and/or municipal and federal levels as ‘operational consulting bodies’ for intelligence and security services within specific geographic areas. The LTF’s purpose is to serve as a platform for the exchange of information, intelligence and analyses, to develop and coordinate information gathering activities, to propose new entries into the *Joint Information Box* on radicalised individuals and groups, to support front line police officers with the necessary knowledge, to liaise with local authorities and to propose, where applicable, preventive and disruptive measures (ibid.). Thus, “[g]iven its composition, the nature of the discussions within the LTF is security-oriented” (ibid., 36) with rather traditional security language involved.

On the municipal level, so-called ‘*Local Integrated Security Cells*’ (LISCs) were established in 2015. The exact composition of LISCs lies in the discretion of the municipal authorities themselves and may include all actors with a potential role in countering radicalisation such as the municipal police, local politicians, business associations, youth movements, local NGOs, or neighbourhood associations. The LISCs are established to ensure the information exchange between the social and preventive services, the LTF and the administrative authorities (mainly the mayor).

During the workshop, it became apparent that CVE stakeholders, a number of which are playing a role in Plan R themselves, have various criticisms of the implementation of this mechanism. The participants stressed that although collaborative structures nominally exist, they feel that there is a lack of communication between different policy levels and their respective authorities. As a consequence, at higher policy levels there is limited knowledge of thriving communities and their accompanying ideologies. The participants also mentioned that the effectiveness of collaboration and coordination between different policy levels or

different regions/municipalities too often depends on the inter-personal relationships of officials instead of formalised and institutionalised exchange. Furthermore, even if such exchange exists, it focuses on sharing of (subjectively) good practices, which hampers a solid, evidence-based evaluation of policies. In that regard, practitioners also mentioned that mutual need for financial resources fosters a reciprocal good-natured assessment of policies that emphasises intention over actual impact. However, it is not only implementation that is a source of concern among practitioners. Several first-line practitioners assessed policy design in Belgium as slow, event-driven and not adequately reflecting the dynamic development of specific trends within communities and neighbourhoods. For example, when Daesh peaked in territory, power and influence that saw young Europeans leaving for Syria to fight in the civil war, the issue of foreign terrorist fighters was guiding the creation of policies. Thus, presently (as the practitioners noted) since almost no one is now leaving for the Levant anymore, the policies being implemented do not fully address current challenges such as: the integration of returnees (in particular children), the prosecution of women, or radicalisation in prisons.

The role of regional bodies: Brussels Prevention and Security

Between the federal and municipal levels, there lies a regional level, where a lot of work on developing specific counter-radicalisation, prevention and intervention programmes is done. Brussels Capital region activity is predominantly operated by the Brussels Prevention and Security (BPS), coordinating the security and prevention policy at the regional level together with the police, municipalities and civil society. The Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) is the Flemish counterpart for BPS, it includes Flemish municipalities and their police zones, public service initiatives (“intercommunales”) and the Alarm Group Belgium. During the June 2018

study visit, the Mindb4Act delegation visited the BPS to receive the most recent information on the spectrum of activities organised in the region.

The BPS’ role in the framework of ‘Plan R’, as an integral part of the National Taskforce, is to coordinate LISCs in the Brussels-Capital region. In this respect the BPS is an essential actor, managing the chains of local municipal stakeholders and organising an extended variety of activities supporting local actors.

What first came into the spotlight was that, in practice, the BPS avoids dealing with the vague concept of radicalisation, preferring (by and large) to put the concept of ‘polarisation’ at the core of their business. The Global Security and Prevention Plan² (2017-2020) produced by the BPS, defined polarisation as “the strengthening of opposition between [persons or] groups in society that results or can result in (the exacerbation of) tensions between these [persons or] groups and create risks for the security of society” (p. 17). The choice of terminology by the BPS relies on the theory of a Dutch philosopher, Bart Brandsma, who identifies polarisation as a thought construct, often irrational, that states that humans, in order to think, need categorisations and polarities to which they attach a specific value (Brandsma 2017). In essence, humans tend to define the world into “us” and “the other”. Brandsma bases polarisation theory on ‘fundamental insights’ into the dynamic of polarization, different roles taken up by actors within a polarization dynamic and defined game-changers that allow the breakup of that dynamic. The model is highly popular all over Europe and there are specialised training sessions organised not only for Belgian LEAs but also for European ones too. The BPS themselves are training first-line practitioners in polarisation in order to formulate possible impacts of practitioners’ actions. The training underlines the importance of early prevention (working on ‘the silent’, as they put it), explains the interconnectivity between radicalisation and polarisation and opens up the concept of violent radicalisation to other tensions that may challenge security and order,

such as vandalism using Gulenist symbols after the attempted coup in Turkey during the summer 2017, or demonstrations/counterdemonstrations of far right/left-wing extremists in the region.

Unlike CUTA, the BPS largely focuses on soft preventive measures, thus deconstructing the traditional conceptualisation of *security and power* defined at the federal level, which by and large corresponds to the level of the BPS' activity. It is worth highlighting that these two entities are not competitors, but complementary organisations with different tasks, in line with the division of their competences.

For instance, the BPS is working on the dynamics of group relations in Brussels, such as demographic and economic inequality and other sources of tension between communities that may lead to polarisation. Overall, the BPS supports various types of local actors by sharing expertise and providing: 1) Analysis; 2) Support in establishing risk criteria; 3) Collection and analysis of statistical data, and 4) Financial support for projects carried out by police zones, municipalities and NGOs. In terms of financial support for grass-roots projects, the BPS launches calls for proposals, announced in the official journal and published for use by local partners. The evaluation of such project proposals is not easy, as one needs to evaluate true risk versus work effort spent on the realisation of such projects (Mueller and Stewart 2014). The BPS also runs its own projects on transversal topics attempting to safeguard social cohesion and security issues. For example, it took a major role in the development of the *Brussels Prevention and Proximity Plan* which includes surveillance of public spaces, youth work and neighbourhood outreach.

The polarisation and security team within the BPS hosts a monthly platform in which all the prevention services from the 19 Brussels municipalities are present and have the chance to exchange ideas with experts from research think-tanks, penitentiary staff, youth workers and policy-makers.

In general, evaluation and assessment are the bottlenecks in any policy and especially in CVE, since the policy in this field reflects a dynamic

reality implying a rapid search for deradicalising methods and tools. Based on the grid-system of indicators, developed in close cooperation with the municipalities, the evaluation of plans and policies takes place in thematic workshops in which internal evaluators from the municipalities assess the policies of the respective last two years. However, there are many questions that still remain unanswered. In this respect, considering the national context, which comprise a multitude of structures, actors, processes and dynamics, is a true challenge. According to BPS practitioners, taken overall, the development of indicators needed for the polarisation assessment scale is already underway.

Regional bodies, such as the BPS, are crucial in linking state structures and civil society involvement at both the federal and local levels. Federal authorities have, in accordance with their competences, a clear focus on security-related issues, while on the local and municipal levels, in particular when NGOs and grass-roots organisations are involved, the focus is on socio-preventive measures. This state of affairs leads to a certain degree of uncertainty among local authorities regarding what is actually expected of them by the higher policy levels, and it also causes distrust between the various actors as it often remains unclear which objectives and strategies other agencies and authorities are pursuing. In addition, the respective expertise regarding different aspects of CVE and counter-radicalisation initiatives on the federal level (security measures) and local level (socio-preventive measures) are not harmonised, which further complicates cooperation. This gap is most likely best addressed at the regional level as the natural contact point between state structures and community level involvement, particularly if it concerns a complex metropolitan area such as Brussels.

Conclusions

Following the overview of Belgium's counter-radicalisation policies and the insights gained during the meetings in the framework of Mindb4Act, several observations can be articulated as the main conclusions.

To begin with, Belgium's federal structure, that comprises a variety of different levels of governance along linguistic communities, regions, municipalities and cities is already complex, and that impacts on the implementation of initiatives scattered throughout all the levels. In this regard, one of the challenges of implementing Plan R, i.e. effective coordination between all the state levels, is the overall adherence to hard-core security. It is a fact that the plan itself was initially highly promoted by the federal security authorities. Thus, it not only focuses on the input from LEAs but also defines their leading role in the hierarchy of counter-radicalisation actors by assigning permanent membership of LEAs in the National Task Force. This, to a certain extent, conflicts with the approach favoured at regional level, that rather focuses on softer preventive measures, while constructing and deconstructing the traditional understanding of security when interpreting mass demonstrations, discrimination or inequality. The concepts of *polarisation and prevention* at the regional level highlight inconsistencies in terminology at regional and federal levels- this could be considered both a weakness and a strength of the Belgian approach to CVE. Since concepts determine approaches, on the one hand, Belgian authorities might be confused if they actually address the same or different phenomena, which embrace different concepts. On the other hand, use of diversified

terminologies might contribute to the expansion of the toolbox available in countering violent extremism by addressing psycho-sociological phenomena, like demography, discrimination, ethnical tensions and conflicts, feeling of belonging, integration etc.

Another point is that in Belgium, there is a network of around 30 municipalities which is accustomed to exchanging good practice and common guidelines for local authorities. As the contexts vary, local authorities have a hard time bringing a set of measures close to their own context. Thus, better exchange of information in diversified forms through mutual face-to-face or online training, reporting, evaluation and assessment, between all the state levels is needed. The results of such exchange would certainly depend on the quality of activities organised.

So far, a big emphasis in CVE multi-stakeholder collaboration in Belgium and beyond is put on exchanging good practises, where open discussion of probable failures and lessons learnt is often avoided in order not to undermine or question financial expenditure. However, such a fearless frank exchange of views and objective reflection on the work done is precisely what is needed to boost the performance of the various CVE actors, who, amongst other things, would learn from less successful operations.

Endnotes

¹ This Policy Brief does not in any way represent the official views of the participants of the meetings. It is based on analytical interpretation of the information received from the first-line practitioners through the meetings.

² <http://www.veiligheid-securite.brussels/sites/default/files/Plan%20GVPP%20Nederlands.pdf>

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