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Counter-narratives to terrorism

Committee Opinion[1]
Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
Rapporteur: Mr Jordi XUCLÀ, Spain, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy congratulates the rapporteur of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, Mr Liam Byrne, on his innovative and well-documented report on a crucial and challenging issue which lies at the very heart of any effective counter-terrorism strategy. The committee supports by and large the proposed draft resolution and draft recommendation.

2. The committee is aware that, although the title of the report contains no direct indication of the type of terrorism it is dealing with, the report focuses on Daesh and Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism, and does not address terrorism inspired by other ideologies. The committee appreciates that the report avoids "making stigmatising generalisations that portray whole groups of the population as responsible for the acts of individuals", in line with Assembly Resolution 2090 (2016) on combating international terrorism while protecting Council of Europe standards and values.

3. In this context, the committee believes that the concept of shared values and ethical traditions common to both the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5) and Islam put forward by the report is a promising avenue worth being further explored and actively promoted. The Assembly should be fully involved in this process.

4. The committee fully shares the conclusion of the report that the importance of the communication issue in the fight against terrorism should not be underestimated. It therefore welcomes the proposal contained in the draft recommendation that the Council of Europe should play, via its appropriate mechanisms, a greater role in gathering member States' experience and best practice in this field, thus confirming its indispensable role in the fight against terrorism.

5. The committee proposes some amendments to the draft resolution and draft recommendation aimed at strengthening the message of the report, making the language used more consistent with previous Assembly documents, and ensuring that the Assembly is fully involved in future work on the issue.

B. Proposed amendments

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 2, at the end of the second sentence, add the following words:

", including by terrorists acting alone"

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1. Reference to committee: Doc. 14032, Reference 4209 of 27 May 2016. Reporting committee: Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. See Doc. 14531. Opinion approved by the committee on 24 April 2018.

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 7, first sentence, replace the words “the Islamic State” with the word “Daesh”.

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 9, replace the first sentence with the following text:

> *“The Assembly reiterates that all measures taken to combat terrorism must comply with States’ obligations under national and international law and the fundamental principles of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and avoid undermining the values and standards of democracy which terrorists seek to destroy, and creating disproportionate restrictions to fundamental freedoms.”*

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 9, replace the words “heads of member States or government officials of member States” with the words “any State or government official or political figure”.

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 10.3, after the words “using credible messengers”, insert the following words:

> *“including women, victims of terrorism, repentant former terrorists and ex-prisoners,”*

Amendment F (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 10.9, insert the following paragraph:

> *“review the situation in education systems, promote inclusive education and ensure that schools fully play their role in preparing active citizens with a sense of responsibility and critical thinking skills, and who are prepared to live in a diverse society and defend the values of democracy;”*

Amendment G (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 10, add the following paragraph:

> *“The Assembly deems of utmost importance the articulation of the ‘overlapping consensus’ to unite diverse communities on the basis of common values, and is determined to contribute to it. It therefore asks its relevant committees to make concrete proposals for action in this direction.”*

Amendment H (to the draft recommendation)

At the end of paragraph 2.3, add the following words:

> *“, and to ensure that the Assembly is duly involved in this process;”*

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Jordi Xuclà, rapporteur for opinion

1. Introduction

1. The report prepared by our colleague Mr Liam Byrne, rapporteur of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, constitutes a welcome contribution to the Parliamentary Assembly’s long-standing work aimed at devising common approaches to the fight against terrorism on the basis of Council of Europe standards.

2. It is worth recalling that, in Resolution 2091 (2016) on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, the Assembly made a call to “make active use of all communication channels, including the Internet and social media, and draw on the expertise of the best available public relations specialists, to spread information about the heinous crimes committed by Daesh, and counter-narratives aimed at exposing extremist discourse and dissipating illusions about the real situation in the territories held by Daesh and the fate of its recruits, in particular by using testimonies of returnees who have witnessed first-hand the nature of Daesh” (paragraph 21.7).

3. Thus, Mr Byrne's report seeks to devise, on the basis of well-documented research, proposals aimed at putting into practice the need to develop counter-narratives to terrorism. As rapporteur for opinion, I intend to bring some additional elements and food for thought in order to better shape the phenomenon under consideration, and to propose some amendments to the draft resolution and draft recommendation aimed at strengthening the message of the report, making the language used more consistent with the previous Assembly documents, and ensuring that the Assembly is fully involved in future work on the issue.

4. I am aware that, although the title of Mr Byrne's report contains no direct indication of the type of terrorism it is dealing with, it focuses on Daesh and Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism, as directly stated in paragraph 3 of the explanatory memorandum, and does not address terrorism inspired by other ideologies.

5. While the reality on the ground is more complex and there are a number of terrorist groups in addition to those mentioned above, I agree that these two terrorist entities have developed sophisticated propaganda systems based on abusive exploitation of religious beliefs, and have been successful in enrolling thousands of individuals in their criminal activities, including from and in Europe.

2. What do we mean by counter-narratives?

6. According to a study published by the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) in 2015, counter-narratives are routinely suggested as responses to the vast amounts of propaganda from groups such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda. The idea of this concept is to use them in order to prevent terrorism from gaining momentum.

2.1. Definition

7. There is no universally accepted definition on what a counter-narrative is. It is a broad and ill-defined concept that is used in many different ways. There have been some efforts to identify its main categories, but actual counter-narratives differ substantially. Mr Tobias Gemmerli from DIIS[2] identifies three main categories of counter-narratives currently being promoted, namely:

– direct counter-narratives which confront the ideology and lifestyle of extremism;

– positive alternatives which, among other things, support moderate voices;

– improving digital competences and the ability of vulnerable people to reflect critically.

8. Also, Dr Kate Ferguson[3] supports the idea that these efforts take place within a political, policy or military context, and that they are in essence reactive. Using them could therefore be in practice a recognition of the terms laid down by the declared opponents. In doing so, they may in fact end up reinforcing the very narratives they are attempting to stifle.

2.2. What drives people to extremism?

9. There is a widespread idea that people who become extremists have two main characteristics:

– poverty: from which there appears to be no escape fosters resentment towards those who have more. If the choice is to die a martyr or to die a beggar, martyrdom is the clear winner;

– ignorance: the poor have no chance to have a decent education and thus are susceptible to easy manipulation. Clever people play on their prejudices and superstitions. Once extremists get those people in their grasp, indoctrination is easy.

10. However, the reality is quite different. Many people who are willing to become martyrs and die for a cause come from the middle class; they have received a proper education (even a university education) and were well raised ("well-fed and well-read").

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2. Gemmerli T., (2015), Extremism on the Internet. The fight against online radicalisation starts offline. Copenhagen, DIIS.

3. Ferguson K. (2016), Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies, p. 40, Norwich: Partnership for conflict, Crime and Security research, University of East Anglia.

11. According to many researchers, the real motives that drive people to extremism may be summed up as follows:

– a desire for meaning and for order, especially in countries that are submerged in chaos and corruption. Extremists promise clear-cut solutions to every problem ("here's how things will change if you follow these rules and ONLY these rules");

– desire for change: the old order must be overthrown and that can only happen through violent action. The extremists come to the front, promising to create a new form of government, by developing a strong sense of victimhood ("we are not responsible for the sorry state of our country, others have brought us down").

3. The role of victims, former terrorists and ex-prisoners

12. Victims of terrorism have a potential for effective counter-narratives because they are able to humanise the individuals' violent perception of the "enemy". Victims' narrative could reinforce dissatisfaction with the dangerous methods that violent extremists use to carry out their objectives. Moreover, it is often the case that communities vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment are also affected by violent extremism directly or indirectly, so victims can be a powerful emotional narrative.

13. On the other hand, former repentant terrorists and ex-prisoners carry a certain weight in terms of the respect that potential recruits might have towards them. As former terrorists, having experienced the reality of violent extremism first-hand, they can speak of their disillusionment and the consequences of joining a violent extremist organisation or committing an act of terrorism. Former terrorists also have a unique role to play in understanding the cycle of radicalisation and the narratives involved.

4. The role of specific groups of society

4.1. Women

14. According to a report[4] on "Women and Terrorist Radicalization" by an Expert Roundtable of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR), women can be an ideal counterpart in the battle against terrorism. They can counter violent extremism in numerous capacities, within a framework of initiatives tailored to the specificities of each context.

15. Within the family, as well as in society at large, women need to be able to answer their children's questions about their religious, cultural and political identity. This is essential since most processes of terrorist radicalisation take place between the ages of 12 and 20, when personalities and values are shaped. In this context, inability to openly discuss and address critical questions could leave a vacuum that risks being filled with violent extremist narratives.

4.2. Youth

16. Another OSCE/ODIHR report on "Youth Engagement to Counter Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism"[5] argued that young people should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to understand and reject violent extremism. They need to understand that extremism in all its forms and terrorism are not the solution to the injustices and conflicts they experience or identify with. Both formal and informal education can prove critical in countering those incidents among young people.

17. Today's terrorists and extremists are yesterday's young people looking for acceptance, identity and opportunities. If we build momentum through educational initiatives that can provide young people with safe spaces to share their concerns, we will create a positive chain reaction that will eventually reinforce young people.

4. https://www.osce.org/secretariat/99919?download=true.
5. https://www.osce.org/secretariat/103352?download=true.

4.3. Messengers

18. Protecting and safeguarding the security of those who present counter-narratives and alternative narratives is quite essential. Direct engagement in a battle of ideas can put individuals or groups in danger of being targeted, both physically and emotionally. Outspoken civil society figures, former extremists, victims or even religious leaders may become targets of future attacks.

5. Psychological rehabilitation for terrorism offenders

19. Psychological rehabilitation of terrorism offenders consists of efforts to re-establish their human capacity and their role in society, achieve self-efficiency, and be able to reintegrate into society. It focuses on character building and well-being of violent offenders in order to have a more peaceful state of mind and a more favourable attitude towards society. States should invest more in psychological rehabilitation, in order to achieve real integration and avoid a possible return of offenders to their prior state of mind.

6. Possible challenges and gaps

20. According to some experts, broad counter-narrative campaigns are not effective, as the propaganda of groups such as Daesh or Al-Qaeda only attracts a few individuals, and addressing the many in an attempt to reach the few is a scattergun approach that carries the risk of unwanted or even counter-productive side effects. Also, under this perspective, there is a risk of demonisation of a whole group of people or community because of the extremists, so one must always exercise caution in this respect.

21. In addition, the lack of knowledge about why and how the narratives and propaganda of groups such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda attract audiences makes it difficult to construct attractive counter-narratives, even if the relevant audiences could be identified. As a result, confrontational counter-narratives which engage directly with a narrative to expose, correct or ridicule it, run the risk of being automatically rejected.

22. Messages against violent extremism should always be carefully worded so as to avoid attacking a religion and ideology that many Muslims share, hence the need to have a full understanding of Islamic principles. Those involved in formulating counter-narratives should therefore take a nuanced approach, in consultation with scholars, when refuting extremist narratives, in order to avoid alienating large swathes of the Muslim population.

7. Integrated response

23. States and international organisations should recognise that no single response to terrorism, as there are many different pathways to acting violently with reference to ideology, and many different reasons why individuals or groups become attracted to extremist propaganda and its narratives.

24. A roundtable meeting organised by the Hedayah Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Research Centre and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)[6] concluded that there is too much focus on the internet as the medium of counter-narratives. While it was agreed that the internet, including social media, is an effective tool, the right entry points into the community must be found, so that the message is available in physical and virtual places that are easily accessible to the target audience, in order for it to have any effect. Some violent extremists also use cultural elements and symbols, including public rallies, bands and figurines to convey their message.

25. With regard to individuals or groups that are already attracted to extremist narratives or propaganda, the grievances that they seek to address through ideology must be identified on a case-by-case basis. They may be foreign or domestic political grievances, individual or personal, real or perceived.

26. Last but not least, in the broader population, the focus should be on bolstering general resources through capacity-building and inclusion, but also by embracing diversity, openness and freedoms to avoid feelings of marginalisation and the polarisation of society.

6. https://icct.nl/publication/developing-effective-counter-narrative-frameworks-for-countering-violent-extremism/.

8. Proposed amendments

27. As I mentioned above, I wish to propose some amendments to the draft resolution and draft recommendation prepared by the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights on the basis of the excellent report by Mr Byrne. The purpose of my amendments is to strengthen the message, make the language more consistent with previous Assembly documents, and ensure that the Assembly is fully involved in future work on the issue of developing counter-narratives to terrorism. In this part, I will refer only to some of them, which seem to me of special importance.

28. In particular, I suggest including a mention of terrorists acting alone, which is a new worrying phenomenon and a direct result of radicalisation. The Council of Europe is currently working on it and is preparing a recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on the issue; the draft recommendation refers to it in paragraph 1, and I believe that it should also be referred to in the draft resolution.

29. When it comes to defining credible messengers who could be involved in spreading counter-narratives, it is important to specifically mention women, victims of terrorism, repentant former terrorists and ex-prisoners, as is explained above.

30. In addition, I wish to stress the role of education in preparing active citizens with a sense of responsibility. Accordingly, I propose an amendment which repeats the wording used in Assembly Resolution 2091 (2016).

31. I also believe that the Assembly should continue its work on the issue of formulating the "overlapping consensus" that would unite diverse communities on the basis of common values. Moreover, it is important that the Assembly contributes to this work, which could be initiated at expert level, as it is suggested in the draft recommendation.

9. Conclusions

32. I fully agree with the rapporteur of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights on the importance of communication in the fight against terrorism and on the need to develop suitable counter-narratives to terrorist propaganda. The Council of Europe should play, via its appropriate mechanisms, a greater role in gathering member States' experience and best practice in this field, thus confirming its indispensable role in the fight against terrorism.