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Preventing the radicalisation of children by fighting the root causes

Committee Opinion

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

Rapporteur: Ms Gabriela HEINRICH, Germany, Socialist Group

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination congratulates the rapporteur of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development on her report and generally endorses the proposed draft resolution.
2. The committee nevertheless presents nine amendments to supplement and reinforce the draft resolution.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 3, first sentence, replace “reinforce religious radicalisation” by “promote exclusion and may further reinforce religious radicalisation of children and young people”.

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 4.1.2, after “by encouraging child and youth participation”, add “and give them the tools to take a critical approach to information and to reflect carefully about what they read and are told;”.

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 4.1.2, insert the following new paragraph:

“develop the teaching of history of the religious fact by insisting on the peace-oriented dimension of religions, and in parallel raising awareness of teachers and expanding the curriculum in this area”.

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 4.2.1, add “families of radicalised young people as well as” after “support”.

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

At the end of paragraph 4.2.1, add: “so as to take account of the growing number of radicalised girls and women;”



Amendment F (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 4.2.1, insert the following new paragraph:

“develop counter-narratives based on the accounts of persons who have left extremist or terrorist movements”.

Amendment G (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 4.2.2, insert the following new paragraph:

“encourage mosques to take a stronger preventive approach, emphasising Islam as a peaceful religion, and to develop further their activities in the field of prevention, particularly with young people and as regards the representation of Islam on the Internet;”

Amendment H (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 4.4.1, after “mutual understanding and respect between”, insert “and within”.

Amendment I (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 4.4.2, insert “awareness-raising and prevention” before “campaigns”.

C. Explanatory memorandum, by Ms Gabriela Heinrich, rapporteur for opinion

1. The terrorist attacks which afflicted several Council of Europe member States in 2014, 2015 and 2016 have highlighted the extent of radicalisation leading to terrorism. The reasons for this phenomenon are complex and require close and objective analysis to avoid falling into the trap of preconceived ideas and stereotypes which lead straight to stigmatisation, discrimination and hatred.

2. The type of radicalisation which is now receiving the closest attention is religious radicalisation. Indeed, those who carried out the recent terrorist attacks in Europe claimed that they were part of their jihad. However, it must be borne in mind that religious radicalisation is not the only form of radicalisation. It can also be political, as was the case in the 1970s when radicalisation was expressed in terms of extreme left-wing movements. Far-right movements in Europe can equally be seen as a form of radicalisation. Similarly, the Utoya attacks in Norway in 2011 were the expression of the political radicalisation of the perpetrator and there was no religious dimension whatsoever. There are also mixtures between religious and political radicalisation. Moreover, the different types of radicalisation are interdependent, so that religious radicalisation can lead to political radicalisation or vice versa.

Discrimination and Islamophobia

3. I would like to endorse the position taken by the rapporteur, who says that Islamophobia can be an aggravating factor in some of the vicious circles leading people into terrorism. At a hearing held in June 2015 by the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance and the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, Professor Tahir Abbas underlined the links between radicalisation and Islamophobia, both being the product of the current social context. He said that there were very few European-born Muslims involved in violent jihadism and that “extremism was often a result of marginalisation and disengagement, of voices unable to find expression in their social context. This applies to Muslims but also to other disadvantaged groups”.¹

4. In its opinion on the report “Combating international terrorism while protecting Council of Europe standards and values”, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination pointed out that “the political approach to preventing future terrorist acts is also crucial. Longer-term political responses must always be designed bearing in mind that sustainable cohesion, including a sense of shared nationhood, cannot be achieved in societies in which large parts of the population feel excluded or discriminated against. Much damage is already being done to the fabric of our European societies by polemical discourse stigmatising individuals or groups on the basis of their national or ethnic origins, religion, skin colour, nationality or

1. AS/Ega/Alliance (2015) PV 03, Minutes of the hearing held on 23 June 2015 on the theme “Preventing Islamophobia while combating radicalisation of young people”

perceived ‘race’”.² This phenomenon can be called neo-racism. It occurs in the member States of the Council of Europe in many different forms. One of them, “race-less racism” is, compared to traditional racism, “equally damaging because it tends to justify discrimination against certain groups and individuals”.³

5. I think that it is important to point out that the acts of individuals should not be attributed to and supported by an entire group. We should not accept the idea of collective responsibility for acts carried out by individuals. Nevertheless, generalisations continue. Although the recent terrorist attacks were not followed by outbreaks of violence against Muslims, a rise in anti-Muslim behaviour has been noted. In France, the figures provided by the Interministerial Delegation against racism and anti-Semitism (Dilcra) in January 2016 on the number of anti-Muslim offences revealed an increase of 223% between 2014 and 2015. It should also be pointed out that Muslim women who wear veils are among the first to be targeted by such behaviour.

6. This finding obliges us to be more vigilant and to make an effort to explain the situation to people so as not to fuel hatred against one particular population group and not be caught up in the vicious circle that leads to more hatred, more discrimination and more radicalisation as a response. That is the purpose of the amendment I would suggest to paragraph 3 of the draft resolution (Amendment A).

7. I should emphasise that parliamentarians have a specific responsibility in this context as they are given a great power for communication and speaking in public forums and in the media. As a member of the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance, I therefore strongly encourage all members of the Parliamentary Assembly to join the Alliance and to speak out against all forms of racism, intolerance and hate.

Figures and portraits of radicalised young people

8. The figures are constantly rising as regards the number of Europeans who have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join Daesh. In France, 500 citizens and residents have allegedly taken part in military action in these two countries; the number of British citizens is thought to be 750.⁴ Other Council of Europe member States have also been affected. For example, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where over 200 Bosnian citizens are said to have joined Daesh,⁵ or the Russian Federation – 4 000 Russian nationals are believed to be with Daesh in Syria and Iraq. The available portraits of these radicalised persons show that there is no standard profile. However, their common point is their young age: most of these Europeans are under 30. I therefore welcome the fact that the rapporteur of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development has included young adults in her report and has not limited it to minors as initially planned.

9. Especially regarding the young age of the most radicalised, teaching children and adolescents to take a critical approach to information they have to deal with is of particular importance in terms of prevention. So too is learning about sophisticated discussions (avoiding over-simplification) and learning to reflect carefully about what they read and are told (Amendment B).

10. When describing the current phenomenon, Olivier Roy, a French political scientist, referred to “an islamisation of radicality” as opposed to a so-called “radicalisation of Islam”. In this respect, Islam only appears as the available “product” through which to express such radicalisation. The portraits of most young people who commit terrorist acts show that they are not, as a rule, interested in theology, do not attend mosques and were only converted a short time before they became radicalised.⁶ I, for my part, firmly believe that religious identity is not the direct cause of radicalisation and that many young radicals have no religious beliefs whatsoever. To the contrary, a stable religious identity seems to prevent radicalisation. As well as religious education in schools and other religious institutions, mosques should be more encouraged to clarify the peace-oriented dimension of religions, combined with activity in the field of prevention (Amendment C).

11. Olivier Roy also observed that in Syria these jihadists “are engaged only in warfare: none of them are interested in or try to become members of civil society. The fact that they take women as their sex slaves or recruit young women on the Internet is proof of the fact that they are not true members of the Muslim communities they claim to defend”.⁷ In the account she published in January 2016, a young woman who left

2. Doc. 13966, committee opinion (rapporteur: Ms Gülsün Bilgehan, Turkey, SOC).

3. Assembly Resolution 2069 (2015) “Recognising and preventing neo-racism” (rapporteur: Ms Milena Santerini, Italy, SOC), paragraph 1.

4. Doc. 13937, report of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, “Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq” (rapporteur: M. Dirk Van der Maelen, Belgium, SOC), p. 9.

5. Rodolfo Toè, “Guerre en Syrie: 70 enfants bosniens au côté de Daech”, *Courrier des Balkans*, 10 February 2016.

6. In this connection, see the portraits in Marc Trévidic’s book, “Terroristes – les 7 piliers de la déraison”, 2013.

7. Olivier Roy, “Le djihadisme est une révolte générationnelle et nihiliste”, *Le Monde*, 24 November 2015.

for Syria describes how Daesh took control of the city of Rakka, referring to Daesh as “an occupation army”.⁸ Such accounts are valuable and definitely provide the best arguments to dissuade young people from joining Daesh.

12. In its opinion on the report “Combating international terrorism while protecting Council of Europe standards and values”, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination already observed that “Radicalisation in the sense of holding (somewhat) extreme views, contesting societal norms, bucking the system, is common among young people. Many young and less young persons hold fundamentalist religious views, or views that are perceived by others as such. But this does not mean that they pose a risk to society or that they will seek to express those views through violent means. The vast majority of people holding ultraorthodox or fanatical religious views are not, and never will be, terrorists. What distinguishes terrorists from others is that, one way or another, they have arrived at the conclusion that it is less grave for them to commit violent acts (including possibly taking human lives) with the aim of spreading terror than for others to transgress the principles for which the terrorists stand.”⁹

13. On 11 March 2016, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination heard the moving testimony of Ms Véronique Roy Burin, whose son left for the jihad in Syria in 2014 after converting to Islam a few years before. Following the death of her son in January 2016, Ms Roy Burin continues to participate in awareness-raising campaigns in order to contribute to preventing the radicalisation of young people. She explained to the committee that she did not notice or understand the signs of radicalisation until very late in the process and underlined the sense of abandonment felt by the families finding themselves alone facing the situation. That is why I would like to suggest adding an explicit reference to the need to support families in the draft resolution (Amendment D).

Women and radicalisation leading to terrorism

14. As a member of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, I wish to express my concern at the growing number of radicalised girls and women. According to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 550 women from the West are currently in the areas controlled by Daesh.¹⁰ They allegedly represent 10% to 20% of the foreign fighters in some countries.¹¹ These girls are often 18 or younger and some are hardly 15 years old.¹² These women travel to Syria alone or with their husband, if not their whole family, including very young children.¹³

15. At the hearing held by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination on 11 March 2016, Ms Melanie Smith, researcher at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) and at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, presented her work on female extremism. Her research shows that there is no standard profile for radicalised women.¹⁴ They may come from the middle classes and have no strong link to Islam. Some of them have recently converted to Islam; others come from moderate Muslim families.

16. These women are often recruited via social networks, usually by other women, to build “the Caliphate” of the “Islamic State” (Daesh), in other words to become the wives of jihadi fighters and the mothers of the next generation. Contributing to the creation of a new State appears to be a pull factor for young women, as well as the promise of sisterhood with other women sharing the same values. They sometimes also leave for humanitarian reasons to help their Syrian brothers and sisters in hospitals. However their motivations must not lead either to a simplification or an under-estimation of the danger they represent. It appears that they also play a role in inciting others to violence, raising serious concerns that terrorist acts may become more frequent.

17. The Parliamentary Assembly’s recent resolution on “Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq” also expressed the Assembly’s concern at the growing involvement of women and girls who leave their homeland to join Daesh. The Assembly called on member and observer States and States whose parliaments enjoy partner for democracy status with the Parliamentary Assembly to “take fully into account the increasing number of

8. Sophie Kasiki, «Dans la nuit de Daesh. Confession d’une repentie», 2016, pp. 102ss.

9. Doc. 13966, committee opinion (rapporteur: Ms Gülsün Bilgehan, Turkey, SOC), p. 5.

10. “Becoming Mulan? Female Western migrants to ISIS”, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, p. 8.

11. Sasha Havlicek and Farah Pandith, “Comment nos filles deviennent des ‘califettes’”, *Le Monde*, 28 January 2015.

12. Young girls represent the majority (51) of the 84 French minors in Syrie (*Le Monde*, 3 March 2016).

13. In her work entitled «Dans la nuit de Daesh», Sophie Kasiki explains how she went to Rakka, taking her four-year-old son with her. She escaped and returned to France after two months in Syria.

14. “Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon”, Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, p. 5.

women and young girls departing to join Daesh, develop a gender-specific approach in prevention and re-integration, and specific counter-narratives aimed at women and girls, and fully use the social and family role of women in countering violent extremism".¹⁵ I fully endorse this recommendation.

18. Better use must be made in prevention programmes of the accounts given by women and girls who have returned from Syria and Iraq. That is the purpose of Amendments E and F that I propose to the draft resolution. The descriptions of the living conditions, which are particularly difficult for women as they are often locked up, are a powerful counter-narrative for girls and women who want to leave for Syria and Iraq, and far from the utopian ideal put forward by Daesh to attract new female recruits. Ms Melanie Smith explained during the hearing organised on 11 March 2016 that testimonies by women returnees remind that Syria and Iraq are war zones which imply the lack of basic services with serious consequences on health, in particular for pregnant women. In addition, joining Daesh is usually a one-way ticket and returning is extremely difficult and dangerous.

19. Concerning religious radicalisation it is in my opinion crucial that a dialogue be initiated not only between religions, for example between Muslims and Christians, but also within the Islamic or Christian community. To prevent radicalisation due to religious fanaticism, religions and their theologians should start discussing questions such as: does any religious content of the mainstream religion promote religious fanaticism or radicalisation? That is why I propose Amendments G, H and I.

20. To conclude, I would like to quote the report issued on 14 March 2016 by the International Crisis Group which underlines that: "If roots are complex, the catalyst is clear enough. The descent of most of the 2011 Arab revolutions into chaos has opened enormous opportunity for extremists. Movements have gathered force as crises have festered and evolved, as money, weapons and fighters flow in, as violence escalates. Mounting enmity between States means regional powers worry less about extremists than about traditional rivals, leverage the fight against IS against other enemies or quietly indulge jihadists as proxies. Especially in the Middle East, jihadists' expansion is more a product of instability than its primary driver; is due more to radicalisation during crises than beforehand; and owes more to fighting between their enemies than to their own strengths. Rarely can such a movement gather force or seize territory outside a war zone or collapsed State."¹⁶ We have to draw our conclusions from this statement: to efficiently prevent violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism, we need to invest in conflict prevention without further delay.

15. [Resolution 2091 \(2016\)](#) on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, paragraph 21.12.

16. International Crisis Group, "Exploiting disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State", Crisis Group Special Report, 14 March 2016.