Radicalisation and Resilience Case Study

Belgium

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September 2020

This case study is part of a series of in-depth reports on religiously motivated violent radicalisation - and resilience to it - in 12 countries. The series examines periods in which religious radicalisation and violence has escalated and analyses relevant policy and political discourses surrounding them. While seeking to identify factors that drove radicalisation and violence in each country, the case studies also critically assess programmes of prevention and resilience-building, identifying good practices.
This series was produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

Countries covered in this series:
Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, France, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Tunisia and the United Kingdom.

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The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Racius from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

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Introduction

Belgium is by far the smallest country of those considered in these reports on Western European cases, yet its importance in terms of the challenges faced by violent religious radicalisation belies this. It has been a country of a couple of 'firsts': the first to raise the issue of the phenomenon of young foreign fighters at the EU level, and the first to face an attack from a returning foreign fighter, as well of a 'most', Belgium has seen more of its citizens per capita leave to fight in recent wars in Algeria, Iraq and Syria than any other European country.

Moreover, as well as facing its own domestic violent terrorist attacks in recent years, networks in Belgium have long been found linked to terrorist activity in other European countries. Belgium, thus, is in fact a particularly important case in Europe in relation to violent religious radicalisation and has found itself at the centre of recent European concern over the issue, of both terrorist attacks on its territory as well as its nationals travelling abroad to fight for groups and causes with religiously-attributed motivations. Some of the challenges appear similar to other Western European states, discrimination and poor socio-economic indicators all play a role. In addition, governance challenges also uniquely emerge from Belgium's federal structure. Officially it adopts "a holistic and integrated approach at national level", yet the complexity of the regional and institutional structure has also provided considerable challenges when it comes to addressing violent religious radicalisation.

Methodology

This report is based on extensive desk-based research, analysing existing literature and official government policy documents. It also draws on semi-structured qualitative interviews with professionals working in the area. These include civil servants, public sector workers and non-governmental actors (see appendix). These were conducted in Belgium, in Brussels and Flanders, in February 2020. Only one interviewee was from Wallonia, although this reflects the focus on Brussels and Flanders in terms of many of the issues to be discussed in this report.

Conceptualisations of radicalisation

There is no broad consensus on what constitutes radicalisation and its links to (violent) extremism. One thing that appears to be clear about government understandings is that (non-violent) radicalisation (related to different ideologies) is a process which can lead to violent radicalisation (terrorism) (Colaert, 2017b), an understanding reflected by some interviewees but rejected by others.

Although terrorism had earlier been defined[1], the first time the government used the word 'radicalisation' was 2008, although very vaguely as a threat to the rule of law, and there is still no government definition (BNG2). As a result, very diverse understandings can be seen from different actors, which has led to a 'confusion' of projects, policies and

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[1] Article 137 of the Criminal Code defined a terrorist offence as an offence which may cause serious harm to a country or an international organization with the aim of seriously intimidating a population or unduly forcing public authorities or an international organization to take or refrain from taking certain action, a definition that was criticised for being too vague.

programmes (De Backer et al., 2019). From the 2010s, the term 'radicalisation' has been closely linked to the issue of foreign fighters, predominantly those going to fight in Syria; when the government used the term for a second time in 2014, it appeared in direct reference to foreign fighters (BNG2). Yet, with the lower numbers of foreign fighters and returnees in the last few years, home-grown terrorist attacks came to be considered a greater threat (Europol, 2018: 27) and it is clear that 'radicalisation' is now understood in wider terms; as one interviewee wryly noted, if radicalisation is understood in relation to foreign fighters, and no-one has left since 2017, we might have to conclude that radicalisation is no longer an issue (BNG2). This is clearly not the situation reflected in government policy or discourse.

A 2015 government strategy document (Plan R, see below) defines radicalisation 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" (van der Vet and Coolsaet, 2018). In a recent study it has been argued that government approaches in Belgium tend to reflect the ideas of radicalisation as a 'virus', a linear process, and emphasizes individual resilience or vulnerability (De Backer et al., 2019).

One leading expert in the field commented that they do not see how consensus can be reached and prefers that the term 'radicalisation' be dropped altogether as it is a problematic political construct rather than referring to something concrete that can be pointed to (BNG2; BNG1; see also De Backer et al., 2019); This sentiment was also shared by some practitioners, with one rhetorically wondering whether the concept 'radicalisation' had filled a void or created it (BCS3; also BCS1). On this reading, 'radicalisation' should be seen and responded to as a form of deviance shed of its particularity in relation to other forms (BNG2).

Broad distinctions also exist between authority spheres and levels, where local authorities and the intelligence services have a more nuanced and complex understanding, whereas regional and national level political discourse is more focussed on Islam as a problem and is more polarised (BNG2, BNG4).

What becomes apparent is that 'radicalisation' can mean different things for and have different effects on different people, in different places, and at different times. It can have negative, positive or neutral connotations, be related to different spheres (religious, political etc.), be a reference to a phenomenon, a group, or an individual, stigmatise a group or individual, and be a tool of securitization, amongst others.

Country Background

For Belgium Christianity remains overwhelmingly the dominant religion in the country in terms of identification, around 60%. Those who are unaffiliated to any religious tradition form the second largest group (around a third), with Islam being Belgium's 'second religion' (around 7-8%)[2]. Belgium officially recognises a number of religions as well as non-religious world views, providing they demonstrate they can meet several conditions, which has notably proved a challenge in relation to Muslims in Belgium. It is

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[2] See GREASE country report.

Islam and Muslims in Belgium that have been the main focus of radicalisation and terrorism in recent decades.

Belgium had experienced forms of far-left and far-right terrorism going back to (at least) the 1930s. Concerns about violent religiously attributed radicalisation can be traced back to the 1980s, when a special unit within the existing anti-terrorism division in the Belgian police was created to focus on radical Islamism (Coolsaet and Struye de Swielande, 2007). Owing to its proximity to France and sharing a language, Belgium initially served as a 'staging area' or 'transit country' for attacks on France related to the conflict over independence in Algeria (Lefebvre, 2017; Jaminé and Fadil, 2019) and to the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA) as well as the *Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain* (GICM – Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group).

Further links between Belgium and groups in other European countries were also uncovered in the 2000s; such as with the Madrid bombers, the perpetrator of the Christmas market attack in Germany, and the Netherlands and Hofstad. Cells associated with the war in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden were also uncovered in Belgium. A political focus on Islamist extremism intensified when issues of multiculturalism were firmly put centre stage and attracted a negative character to discourses of managing ethnic, cultural and religious diversity not as evident previously (Bousetta & Jacobs, 2006).

Foreign fighters have been an issue of particular concern for Belgium. Although foreign fighters began leaving for Syria in 2012, it was at first not given any special attention; foreign fighters had left previously for other conflicts. Numbers, however, went on to reach unprecedented levels and Belgium was the first country to raise the issue at European level[3]. Belgium has seen the most fighters per capita in Europe travel abroad to fight for terrorist groups (Starr and Pazos, 2018; Europol, 2016, 2018). Since 2011 over 500 Belgians, predominantly from Brussels and Flanders, male, and with an average age of 25-26, have left the country to fight for terrorist groups in Syria or Iraq (Lefebvre, 2017; Boutin et al., 2016; Renard & Coolsaet, 2018), although there have been no leavers since 2017 (BNG2). Many of these returned, something which became a source of concern itself; in 2014 four people were killed at a Jewish museum in the first attack committed by an EU returnee from the conflict in Syria (Ponsaers & Devroe, 2017; Lefebvre, 2017).

A number of recruitment networks for foreign fighters appeared in Belgium following 9/11 and the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Prominent among them were the Zerkani network in Brussels (see below) and the radical Salafist organization Sharia4Belgium in Antwerp, Flanders, the latter being disbanded in 2012 and declared a terrorist organization in 2015 by a Belgian judge.

Having long been a staging area, the first major incidents to occur in Belgium itself were the bombings on 22nd March 2016 at Maelbeek metro station in central Brussels and at Brussels airport. Since the Brussels bombings, Belgium has witnessed several terror-linked attacks, albeit on a more minor scale: two policewomen were wounded in a machete attack in Charleroi and three people were similarly attacked on a bus in Brussels in August 2016, with ISIS claiming responsibility; in October 2016 two policemen were stabbed; in March 2017 a man attempted to drive at high speed on a busy shopping street in Antwerp (Starr and Pazos, 2018) and in August that year a man

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[3] https://www.lawfareblog.com/reassessing-belgiums-failed-counterterrorism-policy

attacked a group of soldiers with a machete, wounding one. Converts to Islam have also attracted attention when it comes to violent forms of radicalisation, and a couple of interviewees expressed their sense that conversion theories are well-positioned to explain the phenomenon of radicalisation (BNGCS1; BNG1).

Within Belgium, the vast majority of foreign fighters leaving and domestic attacks have been related to Flanders and Brussels-Capital regions, with only around 10% being from Wallonia. In Wallonia, Verviers provides the best-known example and became associated with 'radicalisation' for several reasons, including foreign fighters leaving for Syria (although in much lower numbers than other cities), controversy over the preaching of an imam, and a high-profile police raid on the residences of returnees in 2015 foiling a terror plot[4] (see De Backer et al., 2019 for more detail on Verviers. There are also important differences between Flanders and Wallonia in terms of approach. The philosophical approach in the latter tends to be more all-encompassing rather than focusing on specific communities, although one interviewee (from Wallonia) stressed this difference should not be over-emphasised (BNGCS1). However, the issue of Islamist radicalisation is seen as an international issue and one that affects all of Belgium, in contrast to right-wing extremism which is seen as more of an issue for Flanders by Walloons (BNGCS1).

Drivers of religiously-inspired radicalisation and assessment

It is extremely difficult to identify the factors that drove any one individual to violent radicalisation, and a complex picture of personal, social and political factors arises. It should also be highlighted that the 'drivers' that one or another person emphasises are linked to the conception of radicalisation they hold and the two should be read together.

Different emphases in understanding can be seen along political lines, the left being more likely to (over-)emphasise social vulnerability and the right more likely to (over-)emphasise immigration and Islam as an ideological factor (BNG4; BNGCS1). One interviewee related, for instance, that Flemish nationalists said "society can never be responsible for radicalisation" (BNG2), a sentiment that was contradicted by a federal prosecutor: the Belgian federal prosecutor in charge of terrorism remarked of foreign fighters in 2016 that "our Western society is part of the problem", an assessment mirrored by Belgium's highest police official (quoted in Coolsaet, 2019: 46).

When it comes to many programmes and projects, one interviewee noted that the operating, even if not the stated, understanding seems to be underpinned by an individual and psychological focus to the neglect of historical and geo-political factors; "all these things are about what's happening between the ears", as they remarked (BNG3; see also Kustermans, 2015), and another interviewee noted how some francophone politicians have questioned what they call the 'sociological excuse' (BNGCS1).

Individuals who undertake terrorist activities have been heterogeneous (Bovenkerk, 2017; Kustermans, 2015) and Van Vlierden (2016) observes that several high-profile recruits came from Moroccan families who had done comparatively well in socio-economic terms. He suggests that more significant are feelings of rejection and alienation by and from Belgian society, fuelled by anti-immigrant sentiments and

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[4] Although the suspects arrested in the raid were not actually from Verviers but from Brussels.

Islamophobia[5]. A study carried out by the European Institute of Peace in Molenbeek (EIP, 2016), for instance, highlighted social isolation, a perceived lack of opportunities, notably in the labour market, resulting in low educational aspiration, the need for greater inclusive dialogues between residents, the need for more community leaders and authorities, and experiences of religious discrimination all as significant factors[6].

One interviewee made the distinction between two levels or layers of motivation for 'radicalisation'. At one level were the politically driven, more ideological 'veterans' of the wars of independence, such as Ahmed Zaoui and Najim Laachraoui; then there are those who are not politically trained (other than that which daily life provides), generally involved in criminality and who become drawn into terrorist activity by people at the other level (BNG3).

On the whole though, radicalisation is seen as a complex of push and pull factors, affecting vulnerable people or people made vulnerable; factors which while insufficient nevertheless comprise the following broad commonalities:

a) a 'conducive environment' (Coolsaet 2015) (push): a sense of alienation, victimisation, of not belonging, structural and institutional discrimination (BNG2), of local grievances (BNGCS1).

b) an 'offer' from an external agent (pull): a chance to 'go from zero to hero' and be bigger than they could be (BNG2, BNG3), the offer of 'a full identity' (BCS1). One issue highlighted was that too many young people are looking abroad for answers to identity issues as they are not getting any answers in Belgium (BCS3).

c) ideology (pull): a credible narrative that taps into the factors of a conducive environment, which helps frame it in a particular way. While a religious ideology was not seen as in any way the only form that this could take, it was generally acknowledged that a religiously-based ideological narrative can fulfil this function. The line here, however, becomes blurry between forms of religious intensification (with or without a negative connotation), social conservatism, living a more religious life (which may be viewed as a positive commitment), and radicalisation. On the whole, this was seen as an intensification of and 'reduction' of religion to simple binaries (BCS2; BNG1) or the use or abuse of religion (BCS1). A factor that was highlighted in regard to this was that of certain forms of foreign influence, most notably highly conservative forms of Islam promoted through institutions funded by Saudi Arabia and often labelled as a Salafist or Wahhabist (BCS1; BCS2; BNG1). 'Salafaism', despite the attention it attracts, and visibility certain forms can achieve (Sharia4Belgium, for instance), is in fact both more varied and marginal than this attention suggests in Belgium (VSSE, 2018).

d) networks (push or pull): often involving crime. Particularly for people who are vulnerable to c) and b) as a result of a), a positive network and positive encounters can be a decisive factor in the path they take; that is, being in a good social network and believing in a future is 'the best medicine' (BNG1). One interviewee said that at least

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[5] It is worth a side note that Islamophobia is not the only form of racism affecting an ethno-religious group. The latest European Islamophobia Report also notes rising anti-Semitism, with 94% of Belgians saying they would have a problem with a Jewish relative (Easat-Daas, 2019)

[6] See http://www.eip.org/en/news-events/what-does-molenbeek-think-%E2%80%93-new-eip-survey-reveals-drivers-violent-extremism. Last accessed 03/12/2019.

in Molenbeek it was not so much about mosques, as is commonly supposed, but encounters in the street and cafes were more important (BNG1). Bringing the four aspects together, one person said, "the more you have really good social inclusion, the less successful Islamist jihadi intervention to exploit vulnerabilities may be" (BNG1).

e) Individual psychology

Whereas a) is primarily socially oriented in conception, there is also the issue of encompassing features of individual biography. One interviewee noted, "we as sociologists are trained to look for collective drivers, but individual, psychological differences are important" (BNMGCS1; also Kustermans, 2015). A civil servant also raised the issue of trauma in individual lives whilst heavily emphasising social push factors (BCS3). While individual psychological profiles were identified as needing attention, in part because none of the previous factors even in combination can be said definitively to cause or explain why some radicalise and others do not, the general emphasis would see this as just one factor, and one that is intimately tied to others. How these factors of conception might be seen as drivers is explored below.

A conducive environment

Sketching the 'conducive environment' further, in which factors such as weak or negative networks and feelings of isolation, helps establish a broader picture of the Belgian context. In its cities Belgium has one of the highest risks of urban poverty and social exclusion of EU member states[7]. When it comes to its Muslim population, Belgium does not have a colonial history comparable to the UK and France, yet post-World War II migrant population has predominantly come from Muslim majority countries, notably Morocco and Turkey, and these populations have faced similar social issues. The National Register in Belgium does not provide data on migration background, and so reliable data is difficult to attain, particularly when it comes to second- and third-generations (Bovenkerk, 2017). Yet, strong indications are that minorities are over-represented in unemployment figures and in jobs at the lower end of the economic scale[8] (Coolsaet, 2016). In 2015 Belgium was among the worst performing states in the EU in terms of socio-economic status of citizens of migrant background, exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis (ibid). Further indications are that second-generations are proving more successful than their parents, but, notwithstanding differences between and within ethnic groups, still tend to concentrate in certain labour market sectors and do not perform as well in school as non-immigrant Belgians (Bovenkerk, 2017). It also seems to be the case that second-generations exhibit higher rates of crime than the first, especially among those who are socio-economically disadvantaged (ibid).

These socio-economic indicators are not unrelated to patterns of discrimination. Unia, an independent public institution that aims to combat discrimination and promote equality, has suggested in a report into discrimination in education that "it appears that Flemish education ranks among the top internationally with regard to quality and performance. However, the Flemish (and likewise, the French-speaking) education

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[7]   https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/9079352/KS-DZ-18-001-EN-N.pdf/884f6fec-2450-430a-b68d-f12c3012f4d0 p.32
[8]   https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/8787947/KS-05-17-100-EN-N.pdf/f6c45af2-6c4f-4ca0-b547-d25e6ef9c359 p.20

system ranks among the lowest in Europe in terms of social justice" (2018[9]). Unia have also reported a rise in discrimination in employment, with the highest proportion of these (27%) relating to 'racial' discrimination[10]. Islamophobia in general has risen, with an increase in the number of verbal and physical attacks reported, and instances of institutional Islamophobia and Islamophobic discourses having become increasingly normalised in the media (although with signs of greater nuance) (Easat-Daas, 2019), experiences that especially affect young people (Mazzocchetti, 2012). Feelings of 'discomfort' in working alongside or having a family member in a love relationship with a Muslim are also much higher than for other religious groups (SEB 437, 2015). Moreover, minorities are more likely to be stopped and arrested by police, detained in custody, given longer prison sentences, and relations with police can be 'dismal' (Bovenkerk, 2017: 62). Indeed, one interviewee who had worked in Flanders and Wallonia said that they had been shocked to discover the frequency with which young people faced police violence in their daily lives (BNGCS1). Thus, the police can be just as much part of the problem as part of the solution, or as one interviewee put it, "you need the police, but they are not the guys who will solve the problem [of violent radicalisation]" (BNG1).

Religious signs and symbols

As in a number of Western European countries, Belgium has been concerned with issues around religious signs and symbols stimulated by the presence and politicization of Islam and Muslims in the public sphere.

In Flanders, for instance, in order to be recognized, mosques must have written documents stating and proving their commitment to a) their use of Dutch as their *lingua operandi* (with the exception of the *Khutba*), b) their respect for the Constitution and basic rights and liberties, and c) their not being involved in terrorist activities (Adam and Torrekens, 2015). One interviewee, a civil servant, related how mosques are increasingly frustrated by the stringent conditions they are asked to meet and 'changing of the goal posts', along with delays in applications and that relations between mosques and government authorities can be strained as a result (BCS3).

Belgium has introduced a criminal ban on face-covering in the public sphere (in 2011 and upheld by the European Court of Human Rights following a legal challenge in 2017), provoked by the desire to outlaw the wearing of the *niqab*. Although a general ban on head coverings has not been brought in, such bans have appeared in rather ad hoc and inconsistent ways (BCS3). For Flemish private schools as for both public and private schools in Francophone Belgium, the decision is left to the discretion of the individual school authorities, resulting in *de facto* bans (Brems et al., 2017; Adam & Torrekens, 2015). Similarly, headscarf bans have also been introduced for employees of the French Community Parliament when in contact with the public, as have other local municipalities, although a general public sector ban has not been brought in, despite proposals for such a ban. In addition to these *hijab* bans, 'burkinis' have also been banned by a number of municipal swimming pools (Brems et al., 2018) and various

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[9] See https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Publicaties_docs/Diversity_Barometer_Education_in_the_Flemish_Community_-_executive_summary.pdf

[10] https://www.unia.be/en/articles/more-employment-discrimination-cases-reported-to-unia-in-2017. Last accessed 03/12/2019.

reports of women being denied service because of the headscarf have emerged (Easat-Daas, 2019).

The significance of the politicization of Islam can be seen in that, despite "the most high-profile Belgian headscarf ruling to date, in which the Council of State [having] found the headscarf ban in Flemish public schools to be discriminatory, [this] has not led to a change of policy in the umbrella organization of those schools. Such blatant defiance of a ruling of the highest administrative court is extremely rare in Belgium. It testifies to the strength of public opinion, which simply refuses to see headscarf discrimination as discrimination" (Brems et al., 2017: 897). As with other European countries, veiled Muslim women, and moreover the appearance of veiled women as candidates in elections, have divided feminists and provoked moral panic in the media over secularism (Göle & Billaud, 2012).

The growth of the right in politics

In Belgian politics right-wing political parties have also gained ground. The electoral success of the right-wing populist Vlaams Blok (VB) party in Flanders (changed to Vlaams Belang following a conviction for racist propaganda) began as far back as 1991, when it jumped from 3 to 17 seats in the federal parliament (known as 'Black Sunday' (Van Vlierden, 2016: 58)) and in 2004 it gained almost a quarter of the vote. This brought immigrant integration to the foreground (Adam, 2013: 553) and a focus on Muslims and Islam was a core part of this discourse, with slogans such as 'Fit in or leave', 'Our own people first' and 'Freedom or Islam: dare to choose' (Van Vlierden, 2016: 58). Although a *cordon sanitaire* was agreed between major political parties to keep VB out of government, this electoral success has left an indelible imprint on Belgian discourses around Muslims and Islam (Van Vlierden, 2016).

Although VB has since waned, Flanders has also seen the electoral rise of the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (New-Flemish Alliance, N-VA), the successor to the right-wing *Vlaams-Nationaal*. In the 2014 elections the party gained 31.9% of the Flemish vote. In the 2019 elections N-VA gained 25 of 150 seats, making it the largest overall party, while VB also resurged, winning 18 seats. Although primarily contrasting a positive form of Flemish civic nationalism against a negative discourse on Wallonia and a Francophone elite, the party also rejects multicultural*ism* as an appropriate model for managing diversity (Abts et al., 2019: 860). It should also be noted, nevertheless, that the Brussels-Capital region has since the mid-1990s had a diverse make-up of political representatives from minority backgrounds, including Muslims (Zibouh, 2011).

State and non-state led approaches

Partly a result of its position as a staging area, Belgium had been aware of violent radicalisation prior to the first domestic attacks in 2016, yet it was under-prepared to face these attacks on its own soil: as an anonymous official told the media, "We just don't have the people... and, frankly, we don't have the infrastructure to properly investigate or monitor hundreds of individuals suspected of terror links, as well as pursue the hundreds of open files and investigations we have"[11]. An interviewee, who was a local politician at the time of the attacks, also said that while there were signs that something

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[11] https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/belgium. Last accessed 03/12/1019. See also Lasoen, 2018.

was changing (amplified in retrospect), nobody appreciated or anticipated the size of the problem or what would occur (BCS2).

The legal and institutional infrastructure was greatly strengthened and expanded following the attacks but a particular challenge for Belgium has resulted from its complex governmental structure. Belgium has had consistent challenges in ensuring smooth operations between the federal and regional levels because of fragmentation and devolved competencies. Indeed, the report of a 2016 parliamentary commission noted a lack of capacity, fragmentation of communication and information, and an imbalance between prevention and repression[12]. As an example, Brussels region alone, which has been a focal point for issues of radicalisation, faces considerable difficulties co-ordinating operations owing to the delineation of forces along linguistic lines, with six different local police zones and nineteen mayors with different political affiliations, also divided between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking municipalities, all of which can lead to a lack of communication and fragmentation rather than integration in security matters (Devroe & Ponsaers, 2018). Following a series of failures in the 1980s, a reform in 1998 led to federal government taking control of policy for Federal Police while local authorities were responsible for Local Police policy. The integration of police forces in this way was founded on a local level community-oriented approach to policing (COP) coming under a federal framework (Ponsaers & Devroe, 2016). Prevention work for crime has long been a feature of social policies at local levels as part of the devolved competencies and, as such, exists separately from security measures. Indeed, people working in safeguarding and welfare work tend to emphasise radicalisation as a security issue rather than a prevention issue (BNG4).

This balance, leaning towards the local, was thought to be the best solution at the time, but has made a more integrated approach in the context of radicalisation and violent extremism difficult (BNG3). Belgium's complex institutional structure was a key reason for (albeit exaggerated) criticism it received internationally of its apparent inability to deal effectively with security matters related to terrorism, despite being among the first European countries to adopt related legislation (Lefebvre, 2017).

Prior to the 2010s Belgium had trod a less security-oriented and more cautious approach to how it addressed terrorism and attempted to steer away from stigmatising minority populations, an approach characterised by empathy and a bottom-up approach, addressing 'root causes', and safeguarding fundamental rights (Coolsaet & Struye de Swielande, 2007).

Yet, in a 'paradigm shift' a more expansive, integrated and security focussed approach and strategy was implemented following the Paris and Brussels attacks (Lasoen, 2018). This said, Belgium's structural organisation is relatively horizontal as a result of its federal structure and devolved competencies. The current approach aims to be more holistic, in line with developments in other European countries and a more coherent European approach at the level of the EU, but is also one built around criminal law enforcement (Verfaillie et al., 2019). Belgium has played an active role in international efforts and organisations, such as CoPPRa implemented by the EU Council, which was led by Belgian police. Belgium has also played a leading role in information sharing and contributing data to Europol and Eurojust (Renard, 2016).

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[12] See https://www.lawfareblog.com/reassessing-belgiums-failed-counterterrorism-policy

Legislative responses

In Belgium, terrorism had been a criminal offence long before the Paris and Brussels attacks, although its legal framework was considerably strengthened following them. In terms of legislation, several Acts and Articles have been introduced to respond to the threat and how it has developed[13]. The Terrorist Offences Act of 2003 criminalized terrorism, although did so in a way that did not stigmatise particular communities (Coolsaet, 2016). In 2013 Article 140bis was introduced into the Criminal Code, which criminalized any person who diffuses ideas or messages to incite terrorist acts, and Article 140ter, amended in 2013, criminalized recruitment for terrorist purposes.

Terrorism financing has also been addressed. Initially coming under earlier laws, such as those for money laundering, Belgium passed a law to implement EU Directive 2015/849, which aims to prevent money laundering and terrorist financing, and allows for sanctions to be imposed on institutions that assist in either. Royal Decree 84 of 28 December 2006 concerns specific restrictive measures against persons and entities in the context of the financing of terrorism and provides for freezing of funds and financial resources.

In 2013 articles targeting incitement to commit terrorist acts, recruitment for such acts, and giving training or travelling abroad for training relating to terrorism entered the Criminal Code. In addition, at a country-wide level, despite previously having had "one of the most open and liberal nationality laws in the world", legislation on attaining Belgian nationality became significantly stricter from 2009, in part because of increasing anti-immigration policy platforms following the Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks (Loobuyck & Sinardet, 2017: 402; Loobuyck & Jacobs, 2010). This legislation and the stricter conditions on citizenship, including evidence of integration (such as language competence), came under criticism for stigmatizing Muslims (Loobuyck & Sinardet, 2017: 403; Loobuyck & Jacobs, 2010).

In 2015, following the attacks in Paris and the emergence of links to Belgian nationals, the government decided on a package of 30 counter-terrorism measures released in two batches, including legislative and institutional measures (Ponsaers & Devroe, 2017; Boutin et al., 2016; Seron & André, 2016). These included amongst others, a new terrorist offence related to travelling abroad for terrorist purposes; the enlargement of cases in which Belgian nationality can be revoked; an increase in the security budget with a focus on terrorism measures; police raids and home searches were made easier, something which can be heavy-handed and do more harm than good (BNG1); surveillance techniques were expanded; border security was tightened; and dismantling unrecognized places of worship if there are concerns of radicalisation was made easier.

Institutional responses

In terms of institutional responses and measures, more coordinated government action had begun following 9/11, when in 2002 'Plan Mosques' (Plan M) was formed to focus on jihadist radicalisation. *Actieplan Radicalisme* (Action Plan against Radicalism) or 'Plan R', was established in 2005, replacing Plan M, and has since been variously revised (Jaminé and Fadil, 2019)[14]. It is described thus:

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[13] For a more detailed overview, see European Parliament (EP, 2017).
[14] See http://besafe.jdbi.eu/sites/besafe.localhost/files/u3051/planr_en.pdf. Last accessed 02/12/2019.

> The Action Plan against Radicalism is a plan of approach striving to restrict as much as possible the development of radicalism and extremism in our society. The method to achieve this goal is an integrated collaboration between various public services, by realising two goals: mapping out the individuals and groups with a radicalising effect on their environment, and reducing the impact of the drivers of radicalisation.[15]

Part of its more expansive focus is to "determine the right balance between a preventive approach, a disrupting approach and a repressive approach"[16] and has seen a series of 'harder' security and legislative developments as well as 'softer' measures. Both the civilian *Sûreté* (the State Security Service) as well as the military intelligence service (General Intelligence and Security Service of the Armed Forces, SGRS) were granted additional powers from the early 2000s. The *Sûreté* became increasingly concerned with radical discourse recruiting young second- and third- generation Belgians, including by organisations such as *Sharia4Belgium*.

The overall strategy is led from the federal level, Security and Home Affairs and Justice coming under federal government jurisdiction (Ponsaers & Devroe, 2017; Devroe & Ponsaers, 2018; Boutin et al., 2016), but with each region also having its own plan to be carried out in coordination. In 2006 the Coordination Unit for Threat Assessment (CUTA) was set up to coordinate analyses of threats and set the threat level. Four terrorism threat levels were introduced with the highest level being declared following the Paris and Brussels attacks – the threat level at the time of writing in July 2020 is set at 2.

Since the attacks in 2015 and 2016, the government has stepped up efforts to implement a more coherent and connected approach, replacing the more ad hoc and improvised approach in the years prior and introducing a series of new counter-terrorism measures (Renard and Coolsaet, 2018). Greater cooperation and collaboration were emphasized by the National Security Plan 2016-2019[17] (Elnakhala, no date).

The National Security Council, headed by the Prime Minister, was created following the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris to coordinate the overall intelligence approach. In fact, a core part of Plan R had already included setting up a National Task Force as well as Local Task Forces, overseen by CUTA, to integrate collaboration between various public services at different levels. Funding has also been significantly increased, including investment in technology (ibid; Lefebvre, 2017; Starr and Pazos, 2018). A further measure has been developing a single database into which information can be collated from the various municipalities and organisations engaged in different areas and in different ways (in Andre, 2017: 170). These developments have resulted in both a vertical dimension to better coordinate between the federal, regional, and community levels, alongside a horizontal dimension, which has seen the expansion of involved civil society actors.

To address particular areas that have been identified as important targets for counter-terrorism efforts, 'The Canal Plan' (so named after the canal in Brussels, to the west of which and a short walk from the historic centre of Brussels lies Molenbeek) was brought

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[15] http://besafe.jdbi.eu/sites/besafe.localhost/files/u3051/planr_en.pdf
[16] See fn 3, p.10
[17] https://justice.belgium.be/fr/nouvelles/autres_communiques_27. Accessed 02/09/2019

in to help coordinate focus in different areas between authorities by the federal government and strengthened police presence along the 'canal zone'.

Regions have also developed their own similar plans, with the two not necessarily coinciding (Ponsaers & Devroe, 2016). In 2015, the Flemish parliament established its own committee, the Committee for Combatting Violent Radicalisation (CCVR) (Kustermans, 2015). Two services were created by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation: a support and resources centre (CREA) with responsibility for support and training regional service providers; and the Center for Help and Support for anyone concerned by Extremism and Violent Radicalism (CAPREV), established to support young people and adults who had been radicalized, drawing on experts across several fields, and with a focus on disengagement and reintegration (in Andre, 2017: 146). CAPREV runs a confidential hotline for anyone concerned about radicalisation, for example family members, offering support and advice. In 2015, the Islam Expert Network was created to offer an alternative to radical Islam and address an ideological aspect related to it. It offers answers to teachers and students who have questions about Islam, a helpline within the Muslim Executive of Belgium, and as part of this schools would invite, for example, imams or teachers of Islam to speak to pupils, to guide conversations about Islam or to speak to individuals where there is a concern about radicalisation, and to teachers to help them identify but not overreact to concerns of radicalisation. This action plan was updated and extended in 2017 to include polarization (in Andre, 2017: 115-117). A result of the more bottom-up structure of Belgian deradicalisation policies has been variable adoptions and implementations of these policies and programmes to suit local conditions (Jaminé and Fadil, 2019). In Flanders, a manual was produced, training was provided to front-line practitioners on how to recognize radicalisation, and some cities have developed their own tools for this (Colaert, 2017b).

Concern was also raised about radicalisation occurring in the prison system and in 2015 the *Sûreté* set up a unit to focus on this led by criminal justice responses (Renard & Coolsaet, 2018). Returning foreign fighters are jailed automatically upon return and often kept in their own wing and in isolation (in Andre, 2017: 142; RAN, 2017), a policy which is having questionable success and still being debated (BNG3; BNGCS1). A problem also arises here in relation to prisons coming under federal competency but welfare in prisons and following release being a regional competency.

Although counter-terrorism policies are enacted by the federal government and preventive measures come under the regional and local authorities, following the attacks in Paris in 2015, measures requiring front line professionals such as teachers and social workers to report to the government any person they suspect of radicalisation were brought in. This continues to be a source of tension for many and is a tension at the heart of responses to radicalisation (BCS1). Yet, the federal government's ability to coerce in this regard is restricted by devolved powers. Social workers and educators can often resist sharing case file information with policing, intelligence and security bodies, in part based on the relative power mayors and local authorities have over their respective competencies (BNG3, BNG4). Following the Paris attacks, nevertheless, Belgium has brought in Local Integrated Security Cells – panels comprising representatives from social prevention services as well as repressive forces in order to collaborate (BNG3; BNG2; BNGCS1), and local prevention officials work in local authorities to coordinate and fund programmes and projects in the area.

In terms of the developing security apparatus, one interviewee commented, France has been Belgium's main international interlocutor when it comes to radicalisation but also that France does not offer a good example of social approaches (BNG3). Another interviewee remarked that some in the police feel somewhat triumphant with their increased power and say openly that the 'last hurdle' is to get welfare services to have to share case information with them. Indeed, because of the increased size, spread and scope of de- or counter- radicalisation across sectors and spheres, and because of the negative effects it produces, a recent study refers to it as a 'radicalisation machine' (De Backer et al., 2019)[18].

The Brussels attacks also prompted the government to 'take back' the Grand Mosque in Brussels. The mosque had been leased rent free to Saudi Arabia since 1967 but in a recent move the Belgian government has terminated the lease over concerns it was promoting radical forms of Salafism and as part of moves to end foreign influence over how Islam is taught and preached in Belgium. The mosque's administration was handed to the Muslim Executive, Belgium's umbrella institution for Muslims. In a statement the Justice Minister said it was doing so "in order to put an end to foreign interference in the way Islam is taught in Belgium… From now on, the mosque will have to establish a lasting relation with the Belgian authorities, while respecting the laws and the traditions of our country, which convey a tolerant vision of Islam"[19]. Anti-Salafi campaigns have in fact been a significant part of Belgium's response to Islamist extremism and also to the definition of and determination to establish a 'moderate', 'Belgian' Islam. Nevertheless, collaboration and partnering between local authorities and controversial Salafi groups have more recently emerged as a policy response to combatting violence (Roex and Vermeulen, 2019).

Prevention: welfare and safeguarding

The general lack of understanding or definition of 'radicalisation' has led to problems. One is that a lack of understanding at all levels has meant an at times over-determination in signs of 'radicalisation'. A recent report, for example, relays the following situations

> A youngster is removed from his classroom and interrogated because his beard is too long. A student in his final year at a trade school is denied an internship at the European Commission because of his origins and his religious beliefs. One month after the Paris attacks, two youngsters from the Royal Athenaeum in Jette are taken away for questioning, because one of the teachers interpreted their arguments as sympathy for the attackers. Two boys are stopped at the Monaco border because they appear on a black list, without knowing how they got on it (or how to get back off it).
> (De Backer et al., 2019: 71)

Understanding has improved over time and referrals of this kind along with it. Yet gaps remain, which has not been helped by a fractured approach. Described as 'trial and error' (as conveyed by a cabinet minister to an interviewee, BNG3), as a result, within as well as between the same regions and municipalities you can find a patchwork of

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[18] A further part of which might be seen in the role played by consultants in the private sector offering training (BNG2).

[19] see http://www.euro-islam.info/2018/03/29/muslims-politicians-react-belgiums-decision-take-back-grand-mosque/

programmes funded centrally, regionally or locally (BNG4). Prevention policy is a devolved competency over which regional authorities have jurisdiction.

The general emphasis in Flanders has been welfare and youth work focussed. Programmes can be vague and while they may be worthwhile social programmes in and of themselves, the link to radicalisation is not always apparent (BNG4). Such programmes tend to focus on working with young people and focus on workshops and dialogue around issues of identity. There can be an emphasis on 'having a good time', as one civil servant put it, rather than seriously engaged empowerment programmes and really involved practitioners (BCS1). One issue this gave rise to was that a number of projects were funded that were run by people without a record of working in the area (often enthusiastic people out of university) and not those with history of working in the area, which led to the absurd situation of these people then going to longer-standing organisations for help as they didn't have the expertise (BCS1). This also resulted in projects that added little value to work already being done (BNGCS1). There is also the question of whether such programmes are able to engage people most disengaged and isolated as programmes are voluntary (BNG2, BNG3).

A further issue is that of short-termism. With projects being only temporary, there is a lack of continuity in the work done as well as in the contact, engagement and relationships established (BNG3; BNGCS1). This can produce a lack of consistent, basic youth work and the problem of where young people go and what they do between the times that a youth house might be open and running a particular project (BCS1). The approach has also meant that in some areas NGOs operating have not been brought together by the local authorities to cooperate, collaborate or share knowledge and experiences, something conveyed in reference to Molenbeek (BNG1).

There can also be a negative impact when radicalisation is made central to such work (BNGCS1). A result of the Local Integrated Cells and radicalisation framework is that some things which should not be dealt with within that framework are pushed into it by different institutions (BCS3) without distinguishing between 'radicalisation' and other issues such as domestic abuse or mental health problems, which need to be dealt with separately and accordingly.

The framework of radicalisation under which much funding comes can result in a skew to focus on Muslims in some instances rather than more widely as the projects had done previously (BNG4). As a result, a diversity of responses emerged from civil society. Some organizations took the opportunity to take the money that was available, while others eschewed it as it was seen to undermine or distract from their work; many youth work organisations didn't want to collaborate with government radicalisation strategy and funding as they are wary of it having a detection function, for instance. They are also unhappy that in a context of severe cuts for their regular work they have to compete with each other for funding under the framework of radicalisation (BNG4, BCS1). This can damage trust if they are forced to do particular work with particular groups rather than their normal work. Their stance would be that youth needs space to criticise government without causing concerns and raising flags that this means radicalisation (BNG4). A further side-effect of a competitive funding model is that organisations become reluctant to share experience and best practice, as well as what may be learnt from failings.

A general lack highlighted by some interviewees (BNG3, BNG4) was that there were few former extremists discussing their stories as case studies for discussion and that "we need people who have been radicalised and deradicalized, who know how practices work, how people are instrumentalised into the logic of the organisation" (BNG3).

Narratives and Islam

Plan R makes stipulations for communication, including what can be considered counter-narrative strategies and policies. In 2015, the Islam Expert Network was created to offer an alternative to radical Islam and address an ideological aspect related to it. It offers answers to teachers and students who have questions about Islam, a helpline within the Muslim Executive of Belgium, and as part of this schools would invite, for example, imams or teachers of Islam to speak to pupils, to guide conversations about Islam or to speak to individuals where there is a concern about radicalisation, and to teachers to help them identify but not overreact to concerns of radicalisation. This action plan was updated and extended in 2017 to include social polarisation.

Within Muslim communities themselves responses and explanations have varied. Belgium's Muslims are not of course a monolith and represent different national backgrounds, languages and viewpoints. Groeninck (2019), for example, identified two main positions in internal debates. The first emphasises the problem of a lack on the part of young people of education and understanding of Islam and its history, especially a tradition of divergence in opinion. The second emphasises the need for reformed and scientific textual hermeneutics posing more of a challenge to traditional authority structures.

Even where some politicians and community groups are reluctant to discuss aspects of Islam that may be used in extremist narratives, others from within Muslim communities have sought to address Islam directly in relation to radicalisation. An example here is Khalid Benhaddou (BNG4[20]), an imam from Ghent who has started to work against radicalisation. He works closely with the government and, amongst other activities, talks in schools and prisons. He tries to keep in the middle, staying away from extreme pro- or anti- government stances, trying to influence both sides and to be an example for government, for the Flanders region as well as his local Muslim community. His focus is more explicitly religious than government agencies would emphasize, and he brings a nuanced picture of Islam and its internal diversity.

Other interviewees also talked about the importance of having such narratives (BNG1) and discussions about living a religious life in a more secular environment – something needed on both sides (BCS3). A former politician in Molenbeek said that the community themselves are often the first to come forward and say there is a problem, but they are often not listened to (BCS2).

Lots of mosques and mosque organisations are also not keen on working with the government (BCS2; BCS3). As mentioned above, they can resent the hoops they are made to jump through in order to gain recognition, the disjointed process between political levels involved, and shifting goal posts. Moreover, recognition procedure by the Flemish

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[20] In case this seems like a breach of anonymity, the interviewee was not Khalid Benhaddou but someone who talked about him as a good example of positive work being done.

government ground to a halt recently after a minister said she would reconsider how it worked (BNG4). This can have the effect of creating gaps for foreign funding (BCS2).

A final reason why open discussions are seen to be so significant and beneficial relates to the communities and more specifically the families who saw their children leave as foreign fighters. As one person remarked, the guilt and stigma that is felt and experienced (from within as well as without the community) has not yet been worked through (BNGCS1).

Crisis case studies

On March 22nd 2016 bombs were exploded at Zaventem airport in Brussels just before eight o'clock in the morning and just over an hour later on a train at Maelbeek metro station, located on a street home to official buildings of the European Parliament, European Union, European Commission and Belgian Government[21]. The bombs killed 32 and injured 340, making them the deadliest domestic terrorist attack the country had witnessed, and for which ISIS claimed responsibility (Ponsaers & Devroe, 2017).

Following the attacks, Belgium temporarily raised its national threat level to the highest level (four), closed the metro system and other transport hubs and networks, including the airport, and partially evacuated two nuclear power plants. The attackers were later identified as Ibrahim el-Bakraoui, a former ISIS fighter who had previously been arrested and of whom flags had been raised by the Turkish government, Ibrahim's brother Khalid el-Bakraoui, who had links to Salah Abdesalam (a perpetrator of the earlier Paris attacks) and Najim Laachraoui, who was born in Morocco and raised in Schaerbeek in Brussels, along with Mohamed Abrini and other co-conspirators. Laachraoui, who had been the bomb maker for previous attacks and associated with the Zerkani network, was referred to by one interviewee as 'the last veteran' of the wars of independence (BNG3). The attackers in these two incidents were known to authorities and connected to the network that organized the 2015 attacks in Paris. Police raids across the country followed.

The federal government announced three days of national mourning and flags on public buildings were flown at half-mast on public buildings. They also held a one-minute silence at noon on the 23rd of March, which ended with spontaneous applause and chants of "Vive la Belgique" in Place de la Bourse. Muslim organisations openly condemned the attack and religious leaders issued messages of unity.

The Belgian Federal Parliament established a parliamentary commission in 2016 to investigate the circumstances of the attacks, which published four reports on three aspects of the disaster: the emergency response, the security architecture, and countering radicalism. The Commission identified several dimensions to radicalisation, focussing on the role of a fundamentalist religious dimension as the precursor to violence but also reflecting on societal conditions, including discrimination (Coolsaet, 2019). The Commission also highlighted the fragmentation of Belgian security apparatus, and its lack of coordination.

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[21] Although it is interesting that in the literature and interviews, Brussels as the home of the EU is not mentioned as significant for radicalisation in Belgium.

One area of Belgium has come under particular scrutiny in the context of radicalisation and extremism in Belgium and responses to it, and this intensified following the Brussels attacks: Molenbeek in Brussels. Although not from or residing in Molenbeek, the attackers (along with those involved in the earlier Paris attacks), had links with the municipality and networks based in it. The mayor of Molenbeek district, Francoise Schepmans, responded to the attacks by closing some mosques for 'incendiary language.'. It was also determined that of 1,600 non-profit organisations registered in the district, 102 had links to criminal activities, 51 of which to religious radicalism or terrorism and Molenbeek gained a reputation as a 'safe haven' for terrorists. Molenbeek had already been under scrutiny from the authorities and the media as well as being the focus of policies addressing radicalisation and violent extremism; following the Paris attacks, Jan Jambon, the Belgian Interior Minister at the time, had pledged to "clean up" Molenbeek (the Canal Plan, although wider than Molenbeek, was launched following these attacks and involved screening NGOs for links to crime and terrorism). Molenbeek, then, had come to be seen by politicians as well as media as something of a crisis area, representative of the problem more generally. In the year following the Brussels attacks Police performed door-to-door checks on a quarter of all Molenbeek residents[22]. The following section expands this case study by considering the area of Molenbeek in detail, which serves to highlight the wider issues and challenges in relation to radicalisation that Belgium faces.

Focus on Molenbeek

Brussels-Capital region has a high concentration of Belgium's Muslims, more than 40%, the majority of whom are concentrated in half a dozen of the region's boroughs, and meaning that around 17% of the region's population are Muslim (Fadil et al., 2011)[23]. While people from around 100 different municipalities have left as foreign fighters (Colaert, 2017a), attention has focused on just a few, and one has come under particular scrutiny: Molenbeek in Brussels. Given this and Molenbeek's longer history, it has come under intensive scrutiny, and, even more specifically, the two (of 5) districts of Quartier Maritime and the Centre Historique within Molenbeek.

With a population approaching 100 000 (the two districts above making up just over a third of this total), Molenbeek has the highest concentration of fighters who travelled to Iraq and Syria in Europe (Starr & Pazos, 2018), and approximately 16 times the ratio of terror suspects compared to Belgium as whole[24]. The man who attacked people at the Jewish museum lived in Molenbeek and the borough was also linked to the November 2015 attacks in Paris and Brussels attacks in 2016. One of the Madrid bombers was from Molenbeek and Oussama Zariouh, who exploded a bomb at Brussels central station in June 2017 was also from the district. Molenbeek was also the home of the Zerkani network, which recruited foreign fighters. Zerkani was nicknamed Papa Noel [Santa Claus] because of his generosity with cash handouts, generated from criminal activity (Van Vlierden, 2016; Gatti 2019). Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who coordinated the November 13th attacks in Paris, grew up in Molenbeek and was among Zerkani's recruits, and had previously been in contact with Farid Melouk. Whereas Sharia4Belgium had a high public profile based on street protests, the Zerkani network operated more clandestinely

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[22]   https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/51-molenbeekse-vzw-s-verdacht-van-terreurbanden~bab91786/. Last accessed 12/05/2020

[23] There is no religion question in official Belgian demographic statistics, so accurate, reliable and up-to-date figures are difficult to come by

[24] See https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/belgium. Last accessed 03/12/2019.

and its members often had previous criminal convictions, which seems to be at least one reason for the idea of a 'crime-terror' nexus[25].

As such, Molenbeek "has for a quarter of a century been seen as the heart of Islamism in Belgium" (Lefebvre, 2017: 4), subsequently finding itself the focus of police and media attention and even gaining the moniker 'Molenbeekistan' (Pirsoul, 2016). The Prime Minister at the time of the Paris attacks (and at the time of writing President of the European Council), Charles Michel, commented that "Almost every time, there is a link to Molenbeek"[26]. As such, it has been argued that Molenbeek exhibited features of a 'safe haven' for terrorists (Gatti, 2019), offering a place in which cells could safely plan attacks and hide from authorities, had the ability to raise funds, and provided strong networks and opportunities for recruitment through a variety of social spaces.

A number of figures who would become key, such as Farid Melouk and Ahmed Zaoui fled Algeria to Molenbeek in Brussels from where they planned attacks on France, with Zaoui becoming 'the spider in the web' for these attacks (BNG3). Zaoui was a member of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front who had been elected a member of parliament but was denied taking this position by the government of Algeria and the French government who did not recognize the party as legitimate (ibid). As one interviewee commented – "as civil western society we don't have an answer to what we should do when an Islamic political party is elected democratically" (ibid).

Molenbeek has historically been an area in which immigrants have settled in high numbers and is internally diverse. In part following an agreement with the Moroccan government in 1964, it has welcomed among the largest number of migrants from North Africa in the capital region, the majority Moroccan, and as such has a high Muslim population (Andre, 2017: 72; also Torrekens, 2007). One interviewee said that this kind of concentration was itself a problem because "if you take people who have the same religion, social situation, language and you put these people together, it's really difficult for people to get integrated in the rest of society". They stressed, however, that "it's not the responsibility of the people, it's the result of political choice. It's the way we make the cities" that is the issue (BCS2).

Molenbeek is the third poorest municipality in the region[27] and suffers from above average population density for the region (notably for young males), above average school drop-out rates, and low educational attainment. It also has above average levels of unemployment; at around 30% overall and 40% for young people[28] it is some 3-4 times the national average (Gatti, 2019; EIP, 2017). Indeed, the two districts of Quartier Maritime and the Centre Historique, with an above average Muslim population (predominantly Moroccan), are densely populated and socio-economically poor even compared to the average for Molenbeek (EIP, 2017). Molenbeek also suffers from inadequate housing and schooling and high crime levels. The media attention it has received has reinforced and increased levels of discrimination and fear, particularly focused on young men of Moroccan descent, and it has been portrayed as a 'no go' area

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[25] It is perhaps noteworthy that in relation to Vilvoorde, the crime rate dropped following the first wave of foreign fighters leaving Belgium (BNG2).

[26] Quoted in https://www.france24.com/en/20151116-belgium-molenbeek-paris-attacks-islamist-investigation. Last accessed 03/12/2019.

[27] https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/overcoming-prejudice-poverty-molenbeekphobia-brussels-190731145739811.html. Last accessed 04/12/2019. Around the time of the attacks in 2016 it was the second poorest municipality on the country (EIP, 2017).

[28] See footnote 9.

(Renard & Coolsaet, 2018; Andre, 2017; Fadil et al., 2011). In fact, coming from Molenbeek can be perceived as its own form of discrimination such that this itself can make getting a job more difficult (EIP, 2017). It has also been the site of protests and riots against the authorities stemming from the Muslim population (Vandezandeas et al., 2011) as well as by radical right-wing groups. In comparison with the national average, Molenbeekois of North African heritage are less likely to be part of civic organisations and associations or to have links to the local political establishment and politicians (EIP, 2017).

Despite its unsavoury reputation and monikers as a terrorist hub, there is no evidence that there is community-level support for forms of extremism or for foreign fighters (BNG2; EIP, 2017). While groups isolated or withdrawn from wider society can be identified (including extremely Orthodox groups of different religious denominations), these are quite a different matter (BNG2). In fact, security and terrorism are relatively low among residents' concerns. Moreover, the term 'radicalisation' is on the whole not one welcomed by young people in the area, seen as a concept that causes harm to people in the neighbourhoods because it induces stigmatization, lacks nuance, and is too narrowly understood (BNGCS1; see also De Backer et al., 2019).

There is a high level of trust in the police (even though they are also seen as inefficient), although trust is low when it comes to politician and journalists (EIP, 2017). Where parents are concerned about security issues, these are mainly related to drug dealing and theft. The main fears and worries expressed by residents are for their children's future in the face of a lack of opportunities, particularly regarding education and employment, and bridging of diversity (EIP, 2017).

For many, Molenbeek is in fact a safer and more comfortable area than the wider capital, although there are notable differences. Those of Belgian heritage can frequently experience discrimination within Molenbeek, whereas the majority population, of North African heritage, mainly experience discrimination outside the area (EIP, 2017). For the Muslim population, for the majority of whom the practice of Islam is extremely important in civic and cultural as well as religious terms, Molenbeek provides an environment where they are 'at ease' practicing their religion – a frequent comment being that they can live 'just like in Morocco' (EIP, 2017). These high levels of religiosity can cause problems for openly 'atheist' Muslims, who can face discrimination and social ostracism. Relations with Christians in the area tend to be good, as they are also with proselytisers of different confessions, such as Jehovah's Witnesses (EIP, 2017). This suggests a greater ease with co-religionists than with those of no religion, although this should also not be over-emphasised as there is localised contextual variance within Molenbeek; Christians are on the whole less at ease than Muslims in practicing their religion in the more densely Muslim districts and anecdotal evidence suggests that this might be especially acute for Jews, for instance (EIP, 2017). Further fault lines run along gender lines, where women may, for instance, experience discrimination outside of Molenbeek if they wear *hijab* but inside Molenbeek if they do not; and along generational lines, between younger generations born and brought up in Belgium and their parents who migrated (EIP, 2017).

In terms of religiously attributed radicalisation, for many, the main drivers are perceived to be a lack of opportunities and discrimination, which can cause social isolation and vulnerability, along with religious ignorance, and facilitated by an ineffective and 'laissez-faire' attitude on behalf of authorities and their ineffective relationship with the

community (EIP, 2017). Religious education is seen as an important way to combat extremism, along with a need for greater dialogue across the diversity of groups in the capital, developing greater bridging ties, greater opportunities (particularly in the labour market), and the need for credible community leaders. Stricter policing is also identified but in ways where effective ties and relations are developed with the community (EIP, 2017).

Mechelen: by way of contrast

Another area in Flanders deserves a mention here for quite the opposite reason to Molenbeek and serves as a useful point of contrast: the city of Mechelen. Mechelen is located north of Brussels and Vilvoorde and south of Antwerp, putting it along a corridor that has seen a majority of foreign fighters leave from Belgium. In this geographical context Mechelen is remarkable for having seen none of its residents leave as foreign fighters. Its population of 86 000+ is diverse, with over 120 nationalities and a fifth with origins in North Africa[29], who are twice as likely to be unemployed as native Belgians[30]. It thus bears some similarity in some of the important markers associated with Molenbeek in this regard. What stands out in Mechelen, however, is its long running social inclusion programmes aimed at young people, alongside strong policing. As far back as the 1970s youth programmes were running that brought young people around the table (BCS1). Indeed, the former mayor, and now Vice minister-president of the Flemish Government and Flemish Minister for Living Together and Domestic Administration, Bart Somers, was awarded the 2016 World Mayor Prize in recognition of the city's approach to welcoming immigrants and enriching and diversifying society culturally, economically and socially. It was stated that Somers "has shown Europe that people from many different countries and cultures can come together and be proud citizens. Bart Somers believes that all people in Mechelen are unique and different. They have different dreams, do different jobs, lead different lives. But Mechelen is their home, their city"[31]. It is the combination of strong policing, long-running and engaged youth work, investment in infrastructure, and investment in an inclusive narrative and identity that mark Mechelen's distinctive approach (BCS1, BNG2). An issue here also is the idea of 'success' and how it is measured. The kind of long-term youth work undertaken in Mechelen does not work with "wanting results and wanting them quickly", "that's not how youth work works" (BCS1).

Best practices and conclusions

A wide variety of programmes and projects, both state-led and non-governmental led were highlighted in interviews. Notwithstanding reservations about whether they can be considered related to 'radicalisation', several 'best practice' features can be identified. In general the following features were highlighted in relation to programmes or projects considered to be good examples: that they are dialogic; that they bring people together, perhaps especially those who hold divergent views and that wouldn't ordinarily do so; that they do these two things in a constructive approach to discussing difficult issues; and that there is an emphasis on democratic engagement, that they create spaces for open and honest communication.

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[29] See footnote 12.
[30] https://euobserver.com/beyond-brussels/133185
[31] http://www.flanderstoday.eu/politics/mechelen-mayor-bart-somers-wins-world-mayor-prize

A few positive examples of programmes or projects that were highlighted in interviews include:

MolenGeek[32]: Based in Molenbeek, this is a social initiative that created a co-working space for young entrepreneurs to come together, as well as providing training in coding and events.

Mentorship for Mothers: a scheme to support mothers by putting them in networks and signposting for who to speak to for different types of advice, and offering legal assistance (BNGCS1). A further project aimed at parents set up talking groups for parents and used questionnaires before and after the programme on how parents felt about their education style in relation to their children.

A local municipality project in Vilvoorde, facilitated by the mayor, brought young people and police together to do improvisation theatre. The project chose those young people who had had clashes with police and those police who had been disciplined for racism, with the result that both came out with more empathy towards one another.

Meeting points – these were youth work sessions talking about controversial issues, seen as a way for young people to out grievances in a democratic way in a space where dialogues were not conditional and premised on adherence to certain pre-set norms. Advisory notes were drawn from the sessions with the aim on influencing policy.

One project focussed on individual trajectories and works very methodologically with the person involved, the programme being drawn up and goals set in collaboration with individuals. Evaluation in this instance is also done in collaboration. It was noted that these kinds of methodological and collaborative projects are very rare (BNG4).

Evaluation and 'success'

A further issue that can also be seen to stem from the trial and error approach relates to the evaluation and assessment of programmes and projects. As one interviewee conveyed, it simply wasn't on the minds of officials at the time when they were reacting urgently to large departure numbers.

One civil servant working in the area commented when asked about evaluation: 'on the evaluation part I can be brief, we don't!' and, moreover, that when writing reports on the success of a project 'you do some creative writing' (BCS1). Moreover, that it was also a political problem, as one person, who has undertaken extensive research with civil society and government actors, also went on to say that although you can predict the problem of returnees (and children), it's not a popular problem for politicians and so 'it was postponed, and postponed and postponed' (BNG4). A further aspect of how the issue is, in some ways at least, a distinctly political problem is that a lot of money went to general prevention and not to the serious cases (returnee prisoners released from prison, for example). In these cases there is a lack of coordination between departments and no clear methodology worked out. One, perhaps cynical, perhaps realistic, explanation conveyed in interviews for this is that there is little political capital to be gained: it's extremely difficult, especially given the different competencies in this domain, it requires a long term effort and is not seen so much in public opinion. By

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[32] See https://molengeek.com/

contrast, youth work money and counter-narrative projects are more press statement-friendly and visible to the electorate (BNG4). There are thus unresolved issues as a result of how ex-convicts who receive no follow up fall back into their old networks (BNG3). A further issue is that some prefer to serve their full term and be released without the conditions attached to early release, again evading follow up work (BNG3).

The Flemish government has since 2017 made moves to assess its action plan in this area but as there was not an assessment logic from the beginning, this task has proven close to impossible (BNG4). Gielen (2017) makes the point that evaluation needs to be tailored to local circumstances and needs to form part of the project or programme from the beginning if it is to be viable and useful. Yet, the confusion of underlying approaches and array of projects (even if they may in themselves be worthwhile) and lack of clear, methodological planning has resulted in 'an Ikea catalogue of different measures and goals' (BNG4), making it impossible to evaluate impact.

In this absence of rigorous evaluation 'success' is measured sometimes 'with stupid things like "nobody's left for Syria"' (BNG4), which is impossible to relate causally to any programmes and ignores an array of other factors, such as that it's become harder to go now, ISIS has been largely defeated etc. Success is most often conveyed through individual examples or how local authorities now have more knowledge and contact with local communities, or that people have a broader and more nuanced understanding of Islam, seen as evident in the decline in calls to experts in government by first line practitioners when dealing with a potential case of radicalisation because they now know how to respond better (in contrast to the early days when a lot of these phone calls were because someone had a beard or headscarf).

Skills, knowledge and experience

Personal and social skills were highlighted with the ability to effectively facilitate discussion, dialogue and debate seen as especially valuable. This extended into being engaged, involved and committed with a sound knowledge not just of the issues but of the communities.

Problems arise with a lack of field experience, if approaches are too theoretical, if practitioners treat the work as a '9-5' job (BCS1) and are not sufficiently involved. An overarching sentiment is that you can't work on radicalisation if you are not sensitive and skilled towards diversity and cultural awareness as these form the basics of being able work in this area.

Extending from this is more detailed knowledge: being able to see the difference between Orthodox practice and violence, and not conflating the two or failing to see violence not connected to Orthodox religious belief/practices, understanding that the shahada is not radical or being able to tell the ISIS flag from the Prophet (BCS2). A final important area of knowledge is knowing how to collaborate with top-down organised institutions (various levels of the state, police, and so on) on the one side, and likewise for top-down organisations, understanding how to work more effectively with bottom-up organisations and communities.

Concluding comments

Belgium represents one of the most important country cases in Europe when it comes to violent Islamist radicalisation and extremism. For a long time a staging post, it has seen violent attacks on its own soil as well as a high number of foreign fighters. Despite a longer history of forms of violent extremism from different quarters, it found itself underprepared for the attacks in the mid-2010s and difficult to coordinate a coherent and connected approach owing to its complex federal structure and devolved competencies. This, moreover, produces a patchwork of understandings and responses of what the issue is and how to address it. Officially it adopts a holistic and integrated approach led from the national level, yet its layered policy levels through the regions, municipalities and police zones create challenges that Belgium has struggled to coordinate, though has been increasing efforts to do so. It is probably fair to say, and this certainly not exclusive to Belgium, that it has found itself to a large extent playing catch up to a phenomenon that has continued to evolve. This is also borne out in the programmes and projects that have, in different ways, responded to radicalisation and extremism.

Appendix: Interviews

Code	Position descriptor
BCS1	Civil servant/researcher
BCS2	Former politician
BNG1	President NGO in social cohesion and youth work, former researcher and politician
BNG2	Researcher and policy advisor
BNG3	Researcher and policy advisor
BNGCS1	Researcher and politician
BCS3	Civil servant
BNG4	Researcher and policy advisor

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Project name: Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

Project Acronym: GREASE

Project Coordinator: Professor Anna Triandafyllidou

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September 2020

Document series reference: D4.1 Radicalisation and Resilience Case Studies

This document can be downloaded from the publications section of the GREASE website at http://grease.eui.eu/