EU Versus Extremism: Europe must respond to the threat of radicalisation, before it turns even more violent

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The list of terrorist attacks carried out by individuals, acting on their own or with limited contacts with terrorist groups is getting longer and longer. And while we were trying to understand the reasons behind Anders Behring Breivik’s horrific attack in Utöya, we witnessed another man, Mohamed Merah, killing innocent people in France. We also discovered the so called “National Socialist Underground (NSU)” in Germany – a small cell suspected of killing 10 people over a time period of 14 years. And only a few months ago, we saw the brutal killing of a British soldier in the streets in London. These are unfortunately only some examples of attacks having taken place recently. Sadly, I believe it’s only a matter of time before we read about the next attack on European soil.

The terrorist threat has somewhat shifted away from organised groups to individuals or loose and small cells, who are harder to detect and whose actions are harder to predict. To prevent further tragedies, we must adapt our counterterrorism capabilities to these new challenges. Our response must begin with a deeper understanding of the processes that lead to radicalisation.

So far, both the European Commission and many European Union member states have not done enough. Violent extremism is not and never has been limited to one set of political views or ideologies. Some have been known to say that “violent extremism is not a problem in our country – we see no threat from al-Qaida.” They could not be more wrong.

The potential for violent extremism exists in all countries. It may manifest itself in different forms, be it right-wing or left-wing extremism, separatism or religiously motivated extremism, but it is always characterised by bloodshed and the scars it leaves on society. From now on, addressing violent extremism must be at the heart of the EU’s counterterrorism policy.

But the nature of the challenge requires a different response than the role traditionally provided by police. Instead, we need a wider response involving non-governmental
organisations, civil society groups, community leaders and others. The problems of terrorism and radicalisation are international, but the solutions are often local.

Some countries have a large amount of experience in tackling these threats; others have been less exposed. But the shadow of terrorism looms large over all of us, and we must help each other to prevent the worst from happening.

In 2011, the European Commission launched an EU Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). Its aim is to support member states in finding better ways to counter violent extremism.

The EU Radicalisation Awareness Network is an EU-wide network with more than 500 practitioners involved in countering violent extremism – NGO's, teachers, social workers, police officers, religious leaders, researchers and others. The network is piecing together a jigsaw of local knowledge into a European-wide picture. It will use this knowledge to help us answer some of the big questions about radicalisation – why do people decide to attack the society that raised them? How can we prevent people from straying onto the path of extremism?

The network met in January for a high-level conference in Brussels, where experts from the local level met with Justice and Home Affairs Ministers from several EU countries. Leading up to the meeting, several RAN working groups presented concrete recommendations for member states.

Among the policy proposals, is the setting up of exit strategies or de-radicalisation programmes in all EU countries, to help individuals leave violent extremist groups. It is crucial for us to provide the necessary support and assistance to those who seek to leave extremist environments. In order to do so, we must raise awareness about successful operations so far. Exit Deutschland is one of the best examples. They have provided counseling and assistance for individuals seeking to leave right-wing movements and have set an excellent example on how to counter extremism propaganda. Their innovative approach with for instance the 250 'white power' t-shirts distributed at a Neo-Nazi music festival has been recognised all over the world. I hope Exit Deutschland will continue to contribute to RAN's work in this, and other fields.
Another important area for the EU to work with is the role of victims. It is important to spread their testimonies to highlight the tragic consequences of terrorist acts. The increasingly sophisticated use of the Internet and social media as a propaganda tool for terrorists adds one more layer to our challenge.

The Radicalisation Awareness Network will work to support those who speak out against terrorism and make their voices heard. But this message must be credible. Terrorists will shut themselves off if the message comes from the “enemy state” they have been primed to despise.

We will use personal stories of extremism to debunk the myth that terrorism is exciting, glamorous or glorious. These messages are powerful and may influence that lonely, disenfranchised young man sitting in a basement, building his view of the world through online message boards.

Our discussions at the conference in January also revolved around how violent extremism is fuelled by a growing wave of xenophobia in many EU countries. Today, extremism is crawling into the mainstream. The growing right-wing extremist and xenophobic movements in Europe are a springboard for violence, but around the EU there are countries who do not take this development as seriously as they should. Now, we bring together policymakers with those who work in the field – because we want to effect real change.

The Radicalisation Awareness Network has come a long way in its work, thanks to the excellent people we have on board, but as the British say, “the proof is in the pudding.” Ultimately the network will be judged on the results we hope and expect it will deliver. The goal is to jointly develop a better toolbox for the EU by the end of this year.

We cannot afford to be complacent if we are to stem the diverse and growing threat from violent extremism. We have to stay ahead of the curve.