

## The political challenges of community-level PVE practices: The Danish case of Copenhagen vs. Aarhus on dialoguing with extremist milieus

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### Abstract

In 2015 and 2016 two interesting cases occurred in Denmark regarding practices related to Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE): a community-level dialogue was discontinued with an extremist milieu in Copenhagen due to the specific worldview but allowed to continue in a similar situation in Aarhus. What were the reasons for this divergence? When examining the community-level political argumentation, an exclusion paradigm played a crucial role, but other factors, such as confusion about the core concepts and goals of PVE, the political dynamics at play, and the prevailing decision-making structures also influenced the differential outcomes despite the similarity of the situations. Since community-level PVE practices constitute a rapidly growing field, there is a lesson to be learned from the Danish cases: building coherent and continuous PVE practices is not only a matter for professional practitioners, but also calls for a solid understanding of its goals at the political level.

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### Introduction

Community level Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) has become one of the most rapidly growing fields of counterterrorism in the past few years (Malkki, 2016: 342). For example, in 2015 the UN Secretary-General highlighted the role of local actors, including municipalities and civil society in the implementation of effective prevention programmes (United Nations, 2015). This means that local actors, including politicians, can exert greater control over the practices. However, PVE policies have already been criticized for involving too many actors, which confuses the overall goals (Briggs, 2010). Hence, the increasing plurality of

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practitioners and relevant decision makers is not necessarily a good development regarding the coherence and continuity of PVE. Two interesting cases from Denmark, a lead country in Europe for the prevention of radicalization and de-radicalization initiatives, demonstrate the possible political challenges that the community focus might entail in that a differential political-level understanding on PVE led to two different outcomes in communal-level practices in the cities of Aarhus and Copenhagen. As a result of preaching and supporting Sharia law, the dialogue with a radical milieu in Copenhagen was halted in November 2015. However, a similar dialogue continued in Aarhus despite scandals arising out of comments in favour of violence against women, or hailing Danish foreign fighters in Syria as heroes. This article analyzes the political background that led to the differential outcomes by addressing several pertinent questions. What type of political argumentation emerged, what kind of logic was it based on, and which other political factors played a role? Furthermore, what is the significance of the two cases in the wider framework of community-level PVE?

One of the reasons for the differential outcomes in Aarhus and Copenhagen was that the community-level political systems were different. Aarhus has one mayor with relatively broad power, whereas in Copenhagen the power is more de-centralized. This made Aarhus more resistant to political change, at least in the studied case, since the mayor stood behind the PVE practices despite the scandals. However, focusing on the political argumentation, it is apparent that there were similarities in both cities. The so-called exclusion paradigm was the most relevant of these, referring to the willingness to exclude unwanted factors from society instead of trying to remedy them (e.g. Koskela, 2009: 39-40). The paradigm itself is common in politics, so this begs the question of whether there was a relevant factor in the Danish PVE approach that rendered it vulnerable to politicking. Addressing this question calls for a focus on the community-level PVE itself. From the point of view of this article, there are two issues that PVE practices have been criticized for in other contexts. First, since the authorities are also communicating through their actions, targeted PVE may create “suspect communities”, thereby adding to the societal grievances instead of mitigating them (Spalek and Lambert, 2008; Lakhani, 2012). Second, the core concepts in strategy papers are often poorly defined,

complicated and even controversial (Coolsaet, 2012: 240). Both of these issues seemed to play some role in Denmark, but differently from the way they did in other contexts.

The present analysis is structured as follows: First the Danish approach to community-level PVE is briefly introduced, followed by an overview of the existing literature on PVE and the applied methodology. After that, the selected cases from Copenhagen and Aarhus are described focusing on the political argumentation. The findings are then discussed in the light of the wider PVE context. Although few conclusions can be drawn from the two cases, they are nevertheless relevant. First of all, the Danish cases underline the importance of solid political backing for PVE practices. Hence, when granting local ownership of PVE, it is essential to ensure that the overall goals are fully understood. Second, while the Danish state can naturally defend core democratic values and promote them, it is questionable whether this should be done in the framework of PVE. Ultimately, a value-based PVE approach securitizes differential values.

### **Community level PVE in Denmark**

Denmark has been in the vanguard of European community-level preventive policies and practices since EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove designated Denmark as the lead country in the prevention of radicalization and de-radicalization initiatives in 2008, only one year after the so-called Aarhus model was launched (Lindekilde, 2015). Danish PVE-practices were inspired in part by the British programme, and in part by a similar programme in the Netherlands (Crone and Nasser, 2018: 12). This allowed the Danes to take into account some of the criticism that the British policies had faced, primarily regarding the problem with creating suspect communities, which will be discussed below. After the Aarhus success story in 2014, whereby the flow of volunteers to the Civil War in Syria and Iraq was halted (Skjoldager and Sheikh, 2014), the Danes started to export the model to other countries as well, such as Lebanon (Crone and Nasser, 2018).

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The main innovation in Aarhus was establishing so-called info houses, which was the name given to the local cooperation network between the Security Intelligence Service PET (national agency), the police district (regional), and the municipalities. When necessary, the network also includes relevant local professionals, such as teachers, mentors, social workers, and networks for other purposes, such as crime prevention, psychiatric health care, and prison and probation services. All in all, the approach places very strong emphasis on the local level, PET being the only national agency involved (Hemmingsen, 2015). The rationale for the model was to build bridges across different administrative sectors both horizontally and vertically, and to share information among professionals who might each know relevant pieces of information. Collecting data from different sources helps PET to draw a complete picture. Due to the appraised successes in Aarhus, similar info-houses have since been established in all twelve Danish police districts.

The info-house system is primarily used for the so-called short-term approach, which generally refers to action targeted at extremist groups and individuals, their operations, motivations, ideologies, potential targets, strategies, and organization structures, in order to prevent violent action from taking place (Crelinstein, 2009: 45-46). However, the Danish PVE also includes a long-term approach, namely social, political and economic policies at the national, regional, and local levels aimed at diminishing societal breeding grounds for fragmentation, confrontation and marginalization. At the community level one of the core measures is to promote dialogue between different local actors, entities, and groups. However, dialoguing with all extremist milieus is not a widespread practice in Denmark, since the Danish approach does not regard religion as a root cause for radicalization (Crone and Nasser, 2018: 14). Consequently, many of the religious communities have deliberately been left out of the PVE networks, although some local authorities, like those in Copenhagen and Aarhus, have engaged in dialogue with religious figures and mosques.

The roots of the differential approaches are linked to the dual agendas of the Danish action plan: protection of the state and society against terrorist attacks, and the welfare state's responsibility for the individual's well-being (Hemmingsen, 2015: 15). This latter agenda

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requires some explaining. In the 2016 action plan it was specified that one of the goals is to prevent the rise of “parallel societies” and to protect the “freedom, democracy, security and self-determination of the people” (Regeringen, 2016: 3). The dual agenda strongly links Danish PVE to the European school of thought in countering terrorism, which sees a link between violent ideologies and action, underlining efforts to counter and prevent both (Neumann, 2016: 886-887). Even though the Danes have tried to downplay the role of religion in the process of radicalization, the 2016 action plan explicitly points out that the Danish government has taken several measures in order to control Islamic preaching and indoctrination (Regeringen, 2016: 25).

### **Previous research on community level PVE and its challenges**

The history of PVE as a special policy branch under the umbrella of counterterrorism can be traced to the aftermath of the 2005 London terrorist attacks, when the British government launched the Pathfinder projects, the aim of which was to encourage local authorities to engage with Muslim communities in order to build collective resilience and social cohesion (Lowndes and Thorp, 2012: 123-124). The rationale for the local focus stemmed from the fact that terrorists are well integrated into local networks, and communities may be able to act as an early warning system for the police and intelligence services (Briggs, 2010: 971-981). Since the UK was the first country in Europe with a special policy programme on PVE, it is natural, that most of the research on PVE is also related to the British practices. Despite the growing interest in the Danish model, there has been surprisingly little research on the PVE practices in Denmark. The most prominent research has been conducted by Danish researchers themselves, such as Lasse Lindekilde and Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, whose works have been used as sources for this article. The same scarcity of research applies to the politics or political argumentation related to PVE. This is also somewhat surprising since, as described below, PVE practices have been criticized precisely on account of their political impact on the targeted communities.

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In order to analyze the impact of the political argumentation in the wider framework of PVE, it is necessary to introduce the two most relevant challenges that PVE practices have encountered according to researchers. Perhaps the most significant criticism levelled at PVE practices is that they have turned Muslim communities into “suspects” (e.g. Spalek and Lambert, 2008; Kundnani, 2009; Lakhani, 2012; Heath-Kelly, 2012; Mythen and Walklate, 2017). Hence, if clumsily planned, the practices can actually reinforce the Islamist threat by privileging the Muslim faith identity and antagonizing Muslims instead of mitigating the root causes of radicalization (Thomas, 2011: 168-186). This has been the case in the UK, especially when PVE practices were first introduced. Hence, many countries, Denmark included, have tried to avoid this. Nonetheless, practices can *de facto* turn Muslim communities into suspects, as a study on Amsterdam, Berlin and London argues (Vermeulen, 2014). This criticism is linked to strategic communication. For example, as early as 1982 Schmid and de Graaf claimed that terrorism is a specific form of political violence due to its communicative character (Schmid and de Graaf, 1982). This leads to the conclusion that counterterrorism is also communicative. As Spalek and Lambert argue, hard policing tactics can have a negative impact on discourse (Spalek and Lambert, 2008). Furthermore, Beatrice de Graaf has suggested that the adapted counterterrorism measures are linked to the general perception of the state that executes those measures, and therefore one cannot separate communication from action (de Graaf, 2011: 8-9). Through PVE practices, the government is effectively securitizing its targets, irrespective of whether if they are individuals, milieus, communities, or values.

Another relevant issue that PVE has been criticized for is that the practices are developed without a clear understanding of how the actual process of radicalization – namely becoming a violent actor – occurs (Ranstorp, 2009). Furthermore, the core concepts in strategy papers are often poorly defined, complicated and even controversial (Coolsaet, 2012: 240). This applies to the Danish approach too. The 2016 Danish national action plan is focused on preventing and countering *radicalization* and *extremism*, to which end it also briefly defines the concepts. Extremism refers to “persons or groups that commit or seek to

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legitimise violence or other illegal acts, with reference to societal conditions that they disagree with”, and radicalization to the process whereby persons “subscribe to extremist views or legitimise their actions on the basis of extremist ideologies” (Regeringen, 2016: 7). These definitions reflect the common understanding of the terms quite well, but the Danish definition of extremism is interesting, because it also links extremism to legislation, not just the use of violence. By defining any breaches of the law in the framework of an ideology as a form of extremism, one could also regard non-violent civil disobedience and ideology-based tax evasion as forms of extremism. It is not clear whether this was the idea behind the Danish definition of extremism or not, but the conceptual fuzziness is not a matter of mere academic hair-splitting. It can have a direct bearing on the adopted measures and target of an action. If the goals of the action are unclear or incoherent, even controversial action is likely to ensue. Different actors involved in PVE often have different *raison d'être*. Police officers might see the action as protecting society, whereas a youth worker might try to prevent adolescents from making deleterious life choices. For example, in the UK, PVE has been criticized for funding projects whose aims are not clear, fostering the perception that the approach is a mere “spying tool” for the security authorities (Briggs, 2010).

### Research material and method

This analysis is based on open source information. The material is mostly sourced from Danish print media coverage on the political debates and public outcry related to radical preaching in Aarhus and Copenhagen, and the stances that were taken vis-à-vis the community-level dialogue with the radical milieus in question. Political statements, discourses, and stances were clearly represented from the national level down to the local levels in the two cities. *Politiken*, *Berlingske*, *Jyllands-Posten* and *Information* were among the most important Danish news sources accessed for the purposes of this study.

Regarding the state-level strategy on PVE, the most important primary sources are the national action plans (*Forebyggelse og bekæmpelse af ekstremisme og radikalisering*:

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*National handlingsplan*) from 2014 and 2016, which describe the official concepts and PVE policy at the time when the dialogue debacles were taking place, as well as the official goals of Danish CVE and PVE. Secondary material on the “Danish approach” has also been used in order to obtain a clear picture of the PVE processes in Denmark, such as the aforementioned research studies by Lindekilde and Hemmingsen.

Since the focus was on political argumentation, relevant questions pertain to the kind of arguments that were presented, the logic behind them, and the relationship with either the radicalization process, extremism, terrorism, dialogue, or values. This argumentation was then analyzed bearing in mind the policy goals in the official strategies and the PVE challenges that previous research has identified in other contexts. Only the qualitatively representative arguments are presented in this paper. It would have been interesting to focus on the politicking that took place behind the scenes as well, namely the way in which politicians and PVE officials interacted and the kind of powerplays that were conducted, if any. This was not possible within the framework of this research, however. Although the selected cases furnished a rather limited amount of data, it was nonetheless sufficient to raise some relevant questions on the role played by politics in successful PVE. Yet it must be recognized that much more profound research from other cases would also be necessary in order to draw more conclusive findings.

### **Dialoguing with extremist milieus: Copenhagen vs. Aarhus**

The question of dialoguing with extremist milieus has been politicized in Denmark every time it has been publicly acknowledged that they do indeed espouse an extreme worldview that includes justifying violent measures. This revelation has duly been greeted with a public outcry and political demands to end the dialogue forthwith. In this article the focus is on two religious milieus in particular: 1) Copenhagen and the Islamic religious community (*Det Islamiske Trossamfund*, DIT), and 2) Aarhus and the Grimhøj mosque. As mentioned in the

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introduction, in Copenhagen the dialogue was halted in November 2015, whereas in Aarhus the dialogue continued.

One of the practical reasons for the heated debate over dialogue is the impact of the Syrian civil war and the phenomenon of foreign fighters joining the so-called Islamic State terrorist organization, who might pose a terrorism-related security threat upon their return home (Lindekilde, 2015: 440). As explained below, this is especially true in the case of Grimhøj, which has been one of the most important hubs for Danish volunteers for Syria. In this context, the debate is linked purely to PVE and counterterrorism, since it mainly concerns radicalization and the role of radical milieus in the radicalization process. However, the debate is also associated with larger themes such as what the official stance should be on (religious) conservatism and whether society should tolerate subcultures and ideologies that are in stark contrast to the core values of Danish society, especially regarding the role of women. In addition to drawing ideological and value-based frameworks, the debate is also related to defining the physical space and boundaries for those subcultures in Denmark, which implies a debate on the role of Islam, and on whether new mosques and preaching sites can be built and, if so, where, when, and by whom. Hence, the debate on dialogue with radical milieus is profoundly connected to the core values and boundaries in Danish society, and thus the dialogue cases are in essence politically sensitive.

#### *The Copenhagen municipality and Det Islamiske Trossamfund (DIT)*

The dispute between the Copenhagen municipality (*Kommune*) and DIT goes back a number of years. The deepest grievance was related to the infamous Mohammed cartoon episode in 2005, when a delegation from DIT travelled to the Middle East and North Africa in order to disparage Danish society and freedom of speech, which was instrumental in facilitating the internationalization and escalation of a political crisis that had serious implications for Denmark as a whole (Holm, 2006). Other cases causing discord have been related to controversial imams whose preaching gives rise to scandalous headlines, or other related publicity. An example of the former was when the polemic imam Haitham Al-Haddad,

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notorious for his adulation of Osama bin Laden, acceptance of violence against women and alleged hate speech against Jews, was invited to Copenhagen in 2015. An example of the latter concerned a case from 2013 when DIT's youth organization, *Munida*, claimed in a YouTube video that watching the TV show *The X Factor* was *haram*, namely a forbidden deed.

The politicking against dialogue with DIT reached a peak in the autumn of 2015 when Copenhagen's local Social Democrats, Venstre, the Liberal Alliance and Conservative politicians reached a consensus on ending the dialogue within one month if DIT refused to distance itself from controversial manifestations (Bjørnager, 2015a). At the time of the ultimatum, Copenhagen municipality and DIT were involved in dialogue through three projects: 1) the *Viden Inklusion København* network against the radicalization of young people, where DIT's youth organization *Munida* was included but did not show up at meetings; 2) the Civil Society Group, which provides input for experts on radicalization prevention, where two representatives from DIT have been active; and 3) Copenhagen's Board for Integration and Citizenship (*Integration og Medborgerskab*) (Lauritzen, 2015).

The reason for issuing an ultimatum to DIT was not because of an isolated incident, but on account of the accumulation of various polemical cases in relation to the Islamic organization. The decision was not unanimous, however. For example, Anna Mee Allerslev (*Radical Venstre*), the Copenhagen Mayor for Employment and Integration Administration (*Beskæftigelses- og Integrationsforvaltningen*), said in an interview that one should not pit "hard against hard" and give up on dialogue, not least because it would be important to keep an eye on any "new Omar El-Hussein"<sup>2</sup> (Dahlgaard and Jensen, 2015).

In response to the political pressure, DIT's press representative claimed that "because of the threats and demands in the media, there is very little that dialogue can achieve", and that distancing oneself from the alleged radical stances would be akin to admitting that DIT adopted such stances (Bjørnager, 2015b). As DIT did not bend, on 12 November 2015 the Copenhagen Municipality Council (*Borgerrepræsentation*) decided that the cooperation with

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<sup>2</sup> The perpetrator of the Copenhagen shooting in 2015.

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DIT would not continue. Thirty voters among the Social Democrats, Venstre, the Liberal Alliance and the Conservative Folkeparti were in favour of ending the dialogue, as opposed to 23 council members who were against the decision (Melander, 2015).

### *Aarhus and the Grimhøj mosque*

Another “hotspot” embroiled in the debate on engaging in dialogue with extremist milieus is the second biggest city in Denmark – Aarhus. The municipality of Aarhus has had different types of PVE practices since 2007, including, for example, enhanced cooperation with local authorities and civil society actors, exit programmes, mentoring, and anti-discrimination campaigns (Lindekilde, 2015: 432-433). Despite the wide spectrum of different preventive measures, in 2014 it was revealed that 22 out of some 90 individuals that had travelled from Denmark to take part in the armed conflict in Syria and Iraq had set out from the networks of the Grimhøj mosque (Sheikh, 2014)<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the chairman of the Grimhøj mosque, Oussama El-Saadi, had allegedly hailed one of the Danish volunteers that had killed himself in a suicide terrorist attack as “a hero” (Rask Mikkelsen, 2014). As a consequence, a heated debate was ignited on preventive measures, especially on engaging in dialogue with the critical religious community in Grimhøj.

In a similar vein to the occurrences in Copenhagen, political Conservatives in Aarhus started politicking in favour of zero tolerance towards radical ideology and called for an end to the dialogue. A representative of the *Dansk Folkepartiet*, Pia Kjærsgaard, said that it was “absurd” that East Jutland’s police were claiming to be engaging in a good dialogue with the mosque at the same time as its leader was talking up the war (Rask Mikkelsen, 2014). A very similar statement was issued by Marc Perera Christensen (Conservative People’s Party), who said in a TV2 interview that it was “very problematic to cooperate with someone who thinks it is heroism to become a terrorist and a suicide bomber” (interview cited in Rask Mikkelsen, 2014). However, the politicking had little effect in this case. Only a couple of months later, the dialogue with the Grimhøj mosque was cast in a completely different light when the

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<sup>3</sup> In 2016 the number of Danish foreign fighters in Syria was estimated at 135 (Regeringen, 2016: 10).

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chairman of the mosque, Oussama El-Saadi, said in a press conference that due to cooperation with the police and good dialogue, the flow of foreign fighters from the mosque's networks had ceased (Skjoldager and Sheikh, 2014). Consequently, the Aarhus policies received a great deal of international attention as a PVE success story. Seven months later, in February 2015, the Mayor of Aarhus, Jacob Bundsgaard (Social Democratic Party), gave a presentation at a White House Summit, making the "Aarhus model" world famous in the process. Understandably, the debate on dialogue subsided for a while, although the *Dansk Folkeparti* strove to keep the topic on the agenda by demanding that the mosque should be closed down altogether (Jørgensen, 2015).

The debate on dialogue heated up again in spring 2016 when a TV2 series of documentaries entitled "Moskeerne bag sløret" (Mosques behind the veil) revealed radical preaching taking place in the Grimhøj mosque, namely comments in favour of Sharia law, violence against women, the death penalty for homosexuality, and so on. As a consequence, politicking against the mosque started up again. Some demanded strict control over municipality money allocated to cooperation with the mosque (Ritzau, 2016), whereas more Conservative voices again called for the mosque to be closed down completely (Mather, 2016). However, the outcome of the debate was that no major changes would be made, but rather that they would occur in the margins of the existing policies. The main argument against ending the dialogue and closing the mosque was summed up by Lene Horsbøl (Venstre): "In Aarhus, we have this thing called the Aarhus model, which means that we count on cooperation. That goes for the Grimhøj mosque as well. I believe more in dialogue and open cooperation, where we tell each other if there is something that we disagree upon" (Mather, 2016).

In response to the political grievances, on 8 March 2016 the Mayor of Aarhus published a 10-point plan for fighting radical Islamism (Haislund and Hvid, 2016). Ideas included certifying imams, providing help for women to extricate themselves from abusive relationships, better monitoring of ethnic minorities to ensure that girls would be given equal education opportunities, and reinforced dialogue with the minorities. The centre-right Venstre

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and the Conservative People's Party were dubious about the plan, particularly in respect of its timing after the documentary, even though they had tried to put the issue on the table many times before that. For example, Venstre's leader, Bünyamin Simsek, said that his party had reiterated warnings about the emerging "parallel society" long before the documentary, but that the mayor had not heeded the warning. This was echoed by Conservative leader Marc Perera Christensen, who said that the Social Democrats with their "socialist partners" had "not been able to handle the issue in the past 30 years" (Haislund and Hvid, 2016).

### **Discussion: Political challenges in a key role**

The cases of Copenhagen and Aarhus demonstrated three principal challenges at the political level that may cause differential outcomes for PVE practices at the community level. First, one must take into account different local political structures. Copenhagen has an elected government where several "mayors" – who are similar to ministers in a state-level system – have considerable autonomy to move around. In Aarhus there is one mayor, who heads the municipality. Consequently, Copenhagen is more exposed to party politics, and Aarhus more resistant to change, while the mayor stays the same. In Copenhagen, party politics bypassed the goals of PVE, whereas in Aarhus the PVE practice was renowned, and the mayor stood behind it. Hence, the practices had sufficient political backing in Aarhus at those times when the public outcry over radical preaching was most vehement. However, this difference does not wholly account for the outcomes because other political factors also played a role, as will be explained below. Nevertheless, the difference underlines an important lesson: successful PVE requires a good understanding of its role at all political levels. This lesson is even more relevant when bearing in mind that the current tendency is to increasingly emphasize local actors, including communities, in PVE.

Second, the core concepts and strategic focal points of PVE posed some challenges, yet not in the most obvious way. The Danish action plan defines the core concepts otherwise precisely, but regarding any types of illegal acts as a form of extremism is confusing.

Furthermore, the inbuilt dual agenda of the plan causes differential understanding of the goals of PVE. It is only natural that all political systems try to defend their core values. The same applies to Nordic welfare states that put a high value on civil liberties, equality, and social justice. Downplaying social grievances and polarization are normal activities of any welfare state. However, it is reasonable to question whether this should be done in the framework of PVE since it has great potential to securitize its targets. In other words, it runs a high risk of turning the targeted communities into suspect communities, or of perceiving certain values as a security threat even if the link to violence is not clear. Since the Danish approach is strongly value-based, it can be argued that in both Aarhus and Copenhagen the preventive practices had failed. Despite the fact that dialogue and cooperation had been ongoing for some years, radical milieus had formed, and they were still in evidence. Even the success in stemming the flow of volunteers travelling to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria can be criticized (Sheikh, 2015). Preventive measures have surely played a role in the decrease in volunteers, but it is likely that some external factors also diminished the interest in travelling, such as Islamic State losing ground, deaths of known foreign fighters, and infighting between the jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. These factors decreased the flow everywhere more or less at the same time, not only in Aarhus. However, existing extremist milieus should not pose a hindrance to the continuity of long-term measures, such as dialogue, at the community level. Those milieus are precisely the hotspots where constructive dialogue functions as a point of connection to society. Even if it does not succeed in preventing extremist thinking or bringing the milieu back to the mainstream, punishing the extremist milieu for this can serve as a critical marginalizing event, which can lead to further radicalization.

While criticism is legitimate and necessary in order to improve practices, it also provided politicians with some arguments. This brings us to the third political challenge that the Danish cases demonstrated. In the cases under study one can observe a grievance in the understanding of PVE between politicians and practitioners. The plan itself tries to avoid pointing the finger at communities as suspects, but those politicians arguing against dialogue did not regard this as necessary, since political dynamics has a logic of its own. Politicians

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might be interested in securing their own success in the next election rather than backing a policy that might make them appear weak. They need visibility within the relatively short electoral time period and they have to make choices that are supported among their electorate. This easily leads to shortsightedness regarding the goals. Politicians want quick results. Some of the argumentation was also based on the traditional carrot-and-stick logic, where “good” behaviour is rewarded and “bad” punished, but perhaps more important than that was the existence of the so-called *exclusion paradigm*. The paradigm refers to a tendency to completely exclude unwanted and unpleasant factors – in this case the extremist milieus – from society instead of trying to remedy them. The paradigm is visible in several political sectors, not only in security politics. For example, one can demand that rehabilitation centres for alcoholics are not located in urban centres, children with special needs are not grouped with normal children at schools, and so forth (Koskela, 2009: 39-40). In both cases the exclusion paradigm was in the interests of the conservative political forces. In many ways, the paradigm is a natural expedient; since their aim is to maintain the traditional values of society, they are generally less tolerant of different values, and they often demand harder measures and punishments for those who contravene those values.

The exclusion paradigm in Denmark was also linked to migration, not just extremism. In both cases it was a question of “foreign” extremism, which was relatively new in Denmark and prevalent among immigrants and people with migrant backgrounds. Since opposing migration is at the top of the agenda of present day neo-nationalist politics in Europe, Denmark included, questioning PVE was a populist move targeting migration rather than PVE as such. The goal of the politicking was to demonstrate to the conservative electorates that extremism – that is to say differential values – should not be allowed to flourish in Denmark. However, continuing dialogue with a counterpart that does not share your values does not imply that you accept, or even tolerate, those values. If political violence and terrorism are seen as a means of strategic communication (Crelinstein, 2009; de Graaf, 2011), then countering measures, including PVE, should bear in mind the communicative aspect of the chosen practices. Violent extremists have active and passive supporters, online and offline

followers and those audiences need to be taken into account. Every action or non-action is a message. Would the same politicians that argued against dialogue with DIT or the Grimhøj milieus have gone to the same lengths to condemn more “domestic” forms of extremism, such as neo-Nazism, or anti-fascism? One cannot answer that question based on this study, but it is an important point to consider. If the exclusion is more evident regarding some forms of extremism than others, the practice becomes a form of discrimination and part of the problem instead of a solution. In sum, certain types of political argumentation are instrumental in themselves in creating “suspect communities”, and thereby in increasing polarization and social grievances.

## Conclusions

One important conclusion that can be drawn from the cases in Aarhus and Copenhagen is that avoiding stigmatizing communities through PVE practices is a difficult, if not impossible task since PVE has great potential to securitize its targets. However, having a strongly value-based approach, as demonstrated in Denmark, may well amount to this. For example, guaranteeing that girls can go to schools, as the Mayor in Aarhus in his 10-point plan, should be a self-evident policy in any Nordic country for a myriad of reasons that do not have anything to do with violent extremism. While any welfare state naturally endeavours to mitigate polarization and promote certain values, such as freedom, democracy, security and self-determination for its citizens, it is questionable whether this should be carried out in the framework of PVE at all because other values, even non-violent ones, can then be seen as a form of extremism, or in other words, as a security threat.

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from the two cases is that PVE practices can be vulnerable to several types of political arguments and demands, such as the exclusion paradigm, the stick-and-carrot –approach, or quick results. This is understandable to some extent, since one of the challenges of PVE is to prove that it actually works, and politicians need clear-cut results before the next elections. Dialoguing with extremist milieus

is often frustrating and may give the impression that the target of the action is merely abusing the goodwill of society, if there are no perceptible changes in the thinking. However, the political system itself can have a surprising impact on PVE if there is insufficient understanding of its relevance, or if the local political interests bypass the interests of the national strategy. It was because of these factors that the dialogue with an extremist milieu was discontinued in Copenhagen, whereas in Aarhus it continued in a similar situation. If one wants to tackle this issue, one must put effort into clarifying the core concepts, and guaranteeing sufficient political backing in the system. It will not suffice for practitioners alone to understand why it is important to engage extremist milieus in dialogue – local politicians need to understand its importance as well. Failing this, politics can become more of a problem than a solution.

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