EYE 2016
THE EUROPEAN YOUTH EVENT

We are not afraid!

The year 2015 confirmed once again that terrorism is a serious threat to international security. The EU plays an active role in supporting Member States' measures to ensure security, be it through strengthening the control of firearms, securing borders or using new technologies. Security, however, needs to be balanced with the respect for fundamental rights. Communities also have an important part to play in preventing terrorism.

Imminent threat

The recent terrorist attacks in western Europe, and especially those in Paris, have demonstrated that Europe is now faced with a new kind of threat – the phenomenon of 'home-grown terrorism' which means that young Europeans become radicalised by extremist ideologies, are recruited by terrorist organisations and join the ranks of ISIL/Da'esh, the so-called 'Islamic State', and other extremist groups as 'foreign fighters'. This is a very dangerous development, not least because many of them receive military training in conflict zones which gives them the skills as well as the means to organise large-scale terrorist attacks once back in Europe.

The European Parliament's November 2015 resolution on prevention of radicalisation states that more than 5 000 European citizens have joined terrorist organisations, and the phenomenon only shows signs of increase. Hotbeds of radicalisation are emerging in different locations in Europe.

The European Commission has noted that it only takes six to eight weeks for extremist groups to radicalise young people and bring them round to their cause. This is made faster and more widespread by the extensive use of social media (such as Twitter, Facebook, and chat-rooms) by terrorist groups, providing almost live coverage from battlefields and spreading powerful, targeted extremist propaganda.

Common challenge

In the EU, the fight against terrorism lies primarily with the Member States, with EU competence limited to coordination and, in some cases, reducing differences in national laws. Over the past decade, however, the role of the EU in counter-terrorism has evolved as the EU has come to the understanding that no Member State can deal with this transnational threat alone. Joint action has since been taken in many policy areas linked to counter-terrorism, such as border control, police and judicial cooperation and aviation security. The more active role of the EU in counter-terrorism has also been driven by closer cooperation in security matters with the United States since the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

EU response

The cornerstone of EU action in this area is the 2005 EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which forms the basis of a number of legislative and non-legislative acts. Recent initiatives have been presented under the 2015 European Agenda on Security setting out measures to support Member States in ensuring security.

One way of preventing terrorism is to strengthen the control of firearms and making their acquisition more difficult everywhere in Europe. The Commission has acknowledged the need for such a measure and adopted a firearms package in November 2015.

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Another essential element, especially taking into account the cross-border activity of terrorists, is to ensure EU border security. This is complicated by the fact that people can move freely without border checks in the Schengen area. However, countries are allowed to reintroduce temporary border controls in exceptional circumstances. Member States must notify the Commission of the events that trigger such closures, for instance a state of emergency following a terrorist attack or a mass influx of irregular migrants at the border. But if temporary controls become the rule rather than the exception in a 'borderless area', it reduces the functionality and credibility of the system and a review of Schengen would be necessary.

To strengthen security even further, the EU has made use of numerous new technologies, such as electronic databases, biometrics and body scanners. National police and border guards have access to an EU-wide database called the Schengen Information System to detect suspicious travel movements, and the proposed EU Passenger Name Record (PNR) directive would provide for the collection of data on passengers taking international flights to and from the EU.

Fundamental rights and security: two sides of the same coin

Some counter-terrorism initiatives adopted in recent years have met with criticism, especially from a civil liberties angle. For example, data retention is considered an important counter-terrorism measure, but it is problematic because it involves retaining a large amount of personal data and as such, can interfere excessively with people's right to privacy. Raising the questions of necessity and proportionality, it might also lead to 'function creep', when the data collected are used for completely different purposes than those initially stated.

Striking the appropriate balance between security and privacy is a difficult task. Since some of the key counter-terrorism measures have been adopted as a matter of urgency in reaction to terrorist attacks, the result is that legislation is sometimes presented in very broad terms which could allow Member States to disproportionately limit civil liberties, such as respect for privacy or freedom of expression. Another side effect is that surveillance and suspicion are becoming more generalised, so that everyone could become a potential suspect under the watchful gaze of the state.

Furthermore, if surveillance is general, data surveillance tends to target certain 'risk groups', where people are identified solely on the basis of their nationality or ethnicity. What is at stake, then, is not only the protection of personal data, but also the principle of non-discrimination enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The European Parliament also reiterated in its resolution of 25 November 2015 that all measures taken by the Member States should respect EU fundamental rights and that the security of European citizens must preserve these rights, as these two principles are indeed two sides of the same coin.

Involving the community

The new European Agenda on Security also includes elements to prevent terrorism by countering extremist propaganda. This can be done through education that develops critical thinking and respect for other cultures and religions. By involving the community, people working, for example, in schools could be trained to detect early signs of radicalisation and step in before the situation escalates.

In 2011, the Commission created the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) that now brings together more than 2 000 practitioners and experts from Member States. They cooperate closely with local authorities and share information on approaches and lessons learned so that other people can find solutions to match their particular context. RAN also advocates the use of alternative narratives to weaken terrorist propaganda, both at community level and online. A 2014 report drafted in the UK concluded that using negative measures such as censorship is ineffective, costly and even counter-productive, whereas positive measures such as publishing counter-extremist content and promoting alternative narratives are more effective in challenging extremist views. RAN practitioners underline that this is not just about security, but also about addressing public opinion and challenging extremist ideologies in general, to 'win over the hearts and minds'.