CONRAD
Executive summary

1) Context, objectives and research questions

From the state of the art on “radicalisation”, the only thing we can say with a relative degree of certainty is that the life-paths of known terrorists and the life-worlds of people at risk of “radicalising” differ to such an extent that no single explanatory model suffices. The fight against contemporary terrorism and jihadism has become a “wicked problem” for which no other solution exists than a radical re-framing of the phenomenon itself (De Graaff, 2017:23). This ambitious objective is what the CONRAD project aims to achieve: to develop alternative discourses and approaches for *thinking* of or *talking* about “radicalisation.”

To this end, a set of research questions have been formulated: 1) What does the study of the existing literature teach us about “radicalisation” as a concept? 2) How is “radicalisation” framed in the public debate and approached in (European) policy? 3) How is the phenomenon understood and experienced by vulnerable groups in Brussels and Verviers? 4) What are the characteristics of the so-called “jihadogenic” spaces of Brussels and Verviers? 5) Which alternative discourses can be developed to talk about “radicalisation” and how can these be useful for civil society and public bodies?

2) Methodology

The CONRAD project deploys four methodologies: (1) a thorough study of the existing literature which has mapped the gaps in our understanding of the phenomenon (KU Leuven—Leuven Institute of Criminology), (2) an inductive framing analysis (KU Leuven—Institute for Media Studies) which shows the most dominant problematising and non-problematising frames used in the public debate, (3) a sociological and discursive analysis of policy approaches to “radicalisation” on a European level (KU Leuven—Leuven Institute of Criminology and ULg—Centre of Ethnicity and Migration Studies) and (4) participatory action research in deprived and stigmatised areas in Brussels (D’Broej and Odisee—Department of Social work) and Verviers (Terrain d’Aventures, CRVI, ULg—Centre of Ethnicity and Migration Studies).

3) Results and recommendations

“Radicalisation” is problematic as a concept and as a scientific tool for multiple reasons: (1) it assumes a linear process from religiosity, to orthodoxy, to non-violent radicalism, to extremist violence. This “conveyor belt model” is, however, a myth. From the study of the lives of known violent extremists we know that there is no single extremist profile, nor is there a single trajectory to this type of violence. (2) The concept refers almost only to the individual level, whereas it becomes increasingly clear that “radicalisation” resonates with collective processes. (3) It is a term that stigmatises particularly because it has almost entirely been reserved for Islamic “radicalisation”. (4) The term discredits genuine political engagement or indignation—people with grievances about experiences of injustice are being told to “deradicalise” rather than that they are taken seriously and recognised. (5) The “radicalisation” concept justifies questionable security strategies which engage in

counterterrorism pre-emptively, that is, when nothing illegal has yet taken place. (6) The study of the root causes

of “radicalisation” in the last 10 to 15 years has mainly yielded dissensus. As a result, we argue that this may relate to the unsustainability of the term itself. Its gaze is simultaneously too narrow and too wide.

Unfortunately, the problematic nature of the concept and the doubts whether there is a homogeneous and unique phenomenon we can call “radicalisation” have not stopped local, national and supranational authorities to develop policy approaches. Our analysis of the EU-level shows that also EU-actors experience a definitional challenge and because of this difficulty develop myriad programmes with legion priorities—we call it a bazooka-like tactic, because the EU-approach penetrates nearly every aspect of life and it that sense seems to fire a canon at a mosquito.

In the public debate, as our inductive framing analysis shows, 12 frames are used to talk about “radicalisation”. These images either see “radicalisation” as a problem (4 out of 12 frames) or not (8 out of 12). Interestingly, when confronting these frames with the state of the art, we see that only half of the frames are scientifically supported. Two frames that resonate with the dominant policy approaches are also the ones most heavily criticised in the literature.

Looking at the terrain, the term “radicalisation” is sensitive. From focus groups and interviews in Brussels with vulnerable young people we can conclude that the term is understood by the latter as referring both to a positive commitment to religion and a negative, destructive commitment to violence. This is experienced as an injustice since terrorist attacks in the name of Islam have cast a dark shadow over their own quest for meaningfulness, spirituality and authentic values. Furthermore, the term also refers to the dominant, stigmatising discourse, to the traumatic experiences of Molenbeek inhabitants after the attacks in Paris and Brussels and to the effects this has had on their life-worlds. Lastly, young people believe that the term “radicalisation” is also a symptom of an underlying illness within broader society, an aspect they feel is underappreciated in the public debate.

From the field research in Verviers, and particularly from the study of the social ecology and the history of Verviers, we conclude that there is no single key to understanding the “radicalisation” of young people. The individual cases under study mobilise various personal factors such as family, relationships, religion, ideology etc. Therefore, we argue, “radicalisation” should be considered as a peculiar modality of a larger phenomenon, namely the biographical intentional break with the social and political order.

Targeted and vulnerable communities experience government policies with regard to “radicalisation” as a machine. In our metaphor, the “radicalisation machine” has parts (policy-makers, researchers, media, civil society, security actors) which move according to mechanical rules and which aren’t conscious of their interaction with the other parts or their effects on the outside world. As a whole, the machine is characterised by the fact that it is exclusively concerned with wielding its power and consolidating its further existence. In other words, the machine is blind, thoughtless and only focused on survival. Also youth work

organisations and researchers are a part of this machine—the challenge for them is to acknowledge its nature and to liberate themselves from it.

Both in the public debate and in some research, ecological assumptions are made which connect certain environments such as Hodimont in Verviers and Molenbeek in Brussels to the

phenomenon of “radicalisation”. These areas are then called “jihadogenic”—they produce or generate “radicalisation” and “jihad”. However, these assumptions are challenged by our findings. The description of these urban neighbourhoods as deprived, dense and diverse areas also fails to capture the dynamic and numerous ways in which young people respond to their own living conditions, and the ways in which they manage to survive and even thrive despite difficult living circumstances.

We recommend opposing any strategy conflating – even indirectly – youth work with anti-radicalisation. Working with vulnerable young people should not be done under the guise of a security agenda but simply because young people are inherently worth it.

We recommend improving dialogue, partnership and collaboration within the youth sector so that youth workers share more convergent visions and procedures. All too often, the very basic idea of what constitutes radical behaviour and what needs to be done professionally to assist youngsters at risk, differs between institutions located within the same urban territory.

We recommend increasing the institutional completeness of youth work organisations (i.e. recognised youth centres or more hybrid organisations) with due consideration for the existing needs at neighbourhood level.

We recommend an investment in social and psychological support for youth workers. Youth workers are often caught in a web of multi-level vulnerabilities. As vulnerable workers, they often struggle within vulnerable environments for the sake of vulnerable youngsters. In addition to the insufficient level of funding of youth institutions, the very demanding nature of their job weakens the stability and resilience of their workforce which often results in broken professional careers and professional struggles due to an overload of work.

We recommend offering youngsters more opportunities for internal exchange with legitimate and knowledgeable facilitators (e.g. to discuss the place of religion in public and personal life) and external contacts with other social environments (nationally, internationally but also within the city).

We recommend a critical parliamentary discussion about (1) the blurred boundaries of the legal framework of security actors who engage in anti-terrorism pre-emptively, (2) the importance of professional secrecy for frontline practitioners and the risks of shared professional secrecy in the local integrated security cells (LIVC-Rs), (3) the ways in which suspected “radicalised” people are added to black lists nationally and internationally and how this harms their civil rights and their privacy, (4) the myth of collaboration and the multi-agency approach due to the inherent power imbalance between vulnerable groups, frontline organisations on the one hand and state and security actors on the other, and (5) the possible counterproductive effects of counter-radicalisation policy.

Finally, we recommend to stop using the term “radicalisation”. Instead we propose to use the term “political violence” or to only talk about “the preparation and execution of terrorist attacks.”

Key words: “radicalisation”, framing analysis, policy analysis, field research, youth