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Folks, Authorities and Radicalism : between polarization and social construction

DURATION
01/04/2017 – 31/03/2021

BUDGET
1 159 715 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The main objective of this project is to provide a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the process of terrorism and radicalization in Belgium. More precisely, we propose an interdisciplinary agenda that interconnects three approaches that deal with different families of factors (political, sociological and criminological).

The first approach aims at describing precisely the various public policies initiatives (federal, regional and local) that are justified by the prevention or the sanction of “radicalization processes”. This overview would allow for an evaluation of how the various initiatives are articulated (or not) and would provide a clearer view of how public authorities define, through their action, what they qualify as terrorism and radicalism. In addition to the mapping of Belgian state authorities initiatives towards terrorism and radicalism, we will investigate the reception of those policies by the field workers. By a qualitative research analysis combined with a multi-sited ethnography, we will focus on how those policies result in new forms of collaborations which accord a new sense of agency to the different governmental levels and how they are being understood by the professionals on the ground and by the Belgian population in general. Indeed, rather than assuming a top-down approach, the studies on public policy have shown that the reception by “street-level-bureaucrats” is far from straightforward and complex translations often occur on the ground.

The second approach aims at situating the contemporary processes of (de) radicalization in their social context. Through a large population survey (N=1500), we will try to map contemporary attitudes of citizens residing in Belgium towards the use of violence either by radical groups or by the public authorities. The assumption is that we are observing a growing polarization within society on what is perceived as a legitimate use of violence and on what are the causes that can justify this use of violence by either radical groups or state authorities. Five clusters of dimensions ([a] socio-economic position, [b] political behaviours, [c] identity dimensions, [d] religious values, [e] social distance and polarization between groups) will be taken into consideration in order to determine which combination of characteristics encourages the support of violent ideas, actions or groups.

Finally the third work package will examine at the micro-sociological level the individual characteristics as well as the journeys and/or the penal episodes of the individuals identified as 'radicalized' (in the broad sense of the term) by the Belgian public authorities (law-enforcement, entities of the administration of the criminal justice system, security services). On top of a literature review specific to this subject and an examination of the way the system of administration of criminal justice records the 'radicalization' phenomenon, this third work package mainly relies on two complementary methods.

First, on the basis of a sample of persons labelled as 'radicalized' and the linkage of the available data originating from different databases of the system of administration of criminal justice, we will examine the trajectories and the potential penal incidents that have marked their life. The sample will be established on the basis of a federal database (e.g., federal police or OCAM).



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Second, interviews of a qualitative nature will be conducted with a limited number of persons identified as 'radical'. The goal here is to offer a comprehensive analysis of the meaning that these people assign to their journey as well as their relationships to the public authorities, so as to apprehend the role and the effects of this experience on their future; in a broader sense, it also aims at initiating a reflection on the relevance and usefulness of the concepts and responses employed by the public authorities (terrorism, violent radicalization, etc.) with the issues that are encountered.

Ultimately, based on the results of the various analyses, the researchers will suggest public policies which could ameliorate the social climate in Belgium by preventing further polarization and, in this sense, avoid the emergence of extremism.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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LINKS

Website under construction