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Folks, Authorities and Radicalism: between polarization and social construction

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SUMMARY

The concept of "Radicalisation" is currently considered as one of the key issues of the evolution of our societies. Largely used by the media and the public policies, the concept is, however, quite vague and in close relationship with other concepts such as engagement, political activism, extremism, terrorism. The present project offers to address the dearth of original and empirical data (especially in Belgium) regarding this issue by developing an interdisciplinary agenda which aims to interconnect different sets of aspects situated at three different levels of analysis: micro, meso, macro. To do so, the project is divided in three work packages.

The first work package focuses on the public policy of de-radicalisation and its implementation. To examine this policy, we target three specific objectives which have been outlined in three specific reports. The first report describes the various public policy initiatives justified by the prevention or the sanction of "radicalisation processes" and investigates those policies' effects on the stakeholders. It highlights two visions of radicalisation that co-exist; one based on a security approach that defines radicalisation as a violent form of militancy and action, the other based on a social approach that defines radicalisation as the social process of alienation and marginalisation. Then, the study shows how important and what role local authorities play in the policy implementation process. Finally, the connections between the LIVC R (*Lokale integrale veiligheidscel*; Local integral security cells) and the police reveal issues about confidentiality and information sharing. The second specific objective we pursue drawn from the last observation. We examine how prevention officers, social actors, and police at the local level deal with confidentiality and information sharing. The third specific objective aims to assess the impact of the policy on Belgian Muslims. We chose to operationalise this objective by focusing on the effects of early detection and reporting of violent radicalisation among Belgian Muslims.

The second work package aims to evaluate whether we observe among Belgian citizens signs of ideological polarisation, and whether this polarisation was associated to acceptance of illegal and violent actions by radical political groups and by state authorities in the way they deal with such radical political groups. We conduct two surveys. A first one draws from the Belgian population and a second one focuses specifically on Belgian people who identified themselves as Muslim. The first survey shows that there is no clear support in the Belgian population in general for illegal or violent action for political purposes. Tolerance regarding this kind of violence is very low regardless of ideological, philosophical, or religious beliefs. Besides this main conclusion, three observations can be made. First, looking at

individual variations, within the nativist and anti-immigration movements support for actions involving physical violence (against police or civilians) is somewhat higher. Second, the survey shows that rejection of political violence can be acquired through education and awareness of pluralism of opinion. Finally, the perception of violence in regard with the methods used by the police to investigative arises questions. As a matter of fact, a large number of citizens seem to be open to the police using violent methods such as prolonged police custody, wiretapping of suspects' relatives, and even interrogation methods that weaken the physical and psychological condition of suspects. The second survey examined the attitudes of Muslims residing in Belgium regarding illegal and violent political actions and confirmed the observations of the first survey.

The third work package examines at the micro-sociological level the individual characteristics as well as the journeys and/or the penal episodes of the individuals identified as 'radicalised' (in the broad sense of the term) by the Belgian public authorities (law-enforcement entities of the administration of the criminal justice administration system, security services).

The purpose of this work package is threefold. First, to analyse how the Belgian criminal justice administration system (CJAS) deals with the phenomenon of radicalisation by conducting an analysis of the legislative and grey literature containing information on the main databases that are used by this system. It results in two main observations: (1) the public authorities have developed a desire to detect and record suspicions of any form of radicalism at an increasingly early stage, starting with administrative police surveillance or the security and intelligence services; (2) the authorities have engaged in a trend of sharing information among a large number of services (police, justice, intelligence services, local and socio-preventive services, etc.) coordinating their actions according to a multi-agency model. Second, to describe individual trajectories and penal episodes of a sample of individuals (n = 19.641) who have been characterised as radical by the Belgian public authorities (federal police and CUTA) by the development and the exploitation of the first integrated database on 'radicalisation' constructed based on several extractions from main CJAS databases (e.g. relative to prosecution, conviction and imprisonment). The first results objectify the presence or not of the sampled individuals in different CJAS databases but do not, in any way, validate or refute at this stage the crime terror nexus hypothesis formulated by the literature. Further analysis to reconstruct firstly their proper trajectory is necessary. Another analysis conducted on the individuals who have been convicted of terrorism in Belgium (n = 489 persons, convicted between 2006 and 2020) gives substantial information about characteristics, antecedents, and recidivism of these persons. Third, to focus on the discourses of individuals to apprehend the concrete impact of the interaction between individuals characterised as radical and the Belgian CJAS. Interviews were conducted, on the one hand, with justice assistants and members of the management of local justice houses involved in the accompaniment of defendants characterised as being terrorist and/or radicalised. The results show that the justice assistants did not fully submit to the security imperatives underlying these cases, although these cases significantly influenced their work (e.g. complexification of the procedure verification, new professional relationship, ethical dilemma, workload). The analysis also highlights among other things that the management of information has become an essential part in their work. On the other hand, interviews were conducted with individuals who self-identify as radicals or were characterised as such

by the public authorities. Generally speaking, the findings, drawn from the results of the analysis of our respondents' discourse, correspond in many ways to what is found in the specialised scientific literature on the social movements. Moreover, it highlights various dimensions of their engagement, the motivations behind it, the practices that result from it, and the effects of their engagement and the social reaction.