European Politics and Society

ISSN: 2374-5118 (Print) 2374-5126 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpep21

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To cite this article: François Foret & Margarita Markoviti (2019): New challenge, old solutions? Religion and counter-radicalisation in the European Parliament and the radicalisation awareness network, European Politics and Society, DOI: 10.1080/23745118.2019.1672265

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1672265

Published online: 09 Oct 2019.

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EUROPEAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1672265

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New challenge, old solutions? Religion and counter-radicalisation in the European Parliament and the radicalisation awareness network

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the implementation of the European Union's (EU) counter-radicalisation strategy (EUCRS) and its treatment of religion. It focuses on two EU institutional frameworks that entail processes of politicisation and depoliticisation through rationalisation: the European Parliament, as the EU's political arena par excellence where value-loaded issues are debated, and the Radicalisation Awareness Network, as a technocratic body that gathers experts and circulates best practices. We examine both policy configurations to determine whether, to what extent and how the religious dimension of the EUCRS leads to the development of new patterns to organise or contain conflict; and whether new actors, divisions, loyalties, repertoires of action and policy practices emerge. We demonstrate that religion is institutionalised as an EU policy issue in usual ways that serve to promote transnational regulation while preserving party, cultural, denominational and national differences without altering the structural logic of European politics and their standard approach to religion.

KEYWORDS
Religion; EU and counter-radicalisation; Radicalisation Awareness Network; European; Parliament; politicisation; de-politicisation; expertise

Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the increase in terrorist attacks with references to Islam in several European countries has led to the gradual institutionalisation by the European Union (EU) of a counter-radicalisation (CR) strategy as part of a broader fight against terrorism. This strategy challenges the usual European policy-making, which has been based on an evasion of value-loaded issues that are likely to create conflicts irreducible to compromise. Religion, ingrained in historical patterns of church-state relations and national identities, remains a potential bone of contention between and within EU member states. Islam is an even more polarising subject. The purpose of this article is to analyse whether the development of the EU's CR strategy (EUCRS) has altered the existing patterns of politicisation/de-politicisation at work in European institutions, and more specifically around the treatment of religion.

From its launch in 2005 to its revisions in 2008 and 2015, the EUCRS has turned 'radicalisation' into a catch-all concept encompassing all threats against public order.

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According to the DG Home Affairs of the Commission, 'terrorist radicalisation' is the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism (European Commission: 'Countering Radicalisation and Recruitment'). Though religiously motivated terrorism has grown into the main threat, religion remains an elusive topic: it is framed as a key component of the security problem but a challenging issue involving conflictual values related to faith, secularism, fundamental rights and rule of law. As such, it serves as the touchstone of the politicisation of EU affairs, understood as the development of value-loaded controversies resisting negotiation and compromises. Conversely, it works as a benchmark for mechanisms of de-politicisation that characterise European policy-making: delegation to experts and civil society, deference to member states on behalf of subsidiarity, burden-sharing between multiple levels of governance and institutions to blur accountability, reliance on the legal logic, hollowing of the normative charge of policy issues.

The objective of this article is to investigate actual changes and continuities in the implementation of the EUCRS. The scholarship on CR at national level emphasises the gap between symbolic politics and public action on the ground. This gap is likely to be even more pronounced in supranational and transnational arenas, where national models are combined and competing. This justifies the need to pass from the macro- to the micro-institutional scale, from system- to actor-level. The focus is thus on two institutional frameworks of politicisation/de-politicisation within the European political system. On the one hand, the European Parliament (EP) is the arena where a limited politicisation occurs through the expression of conflictual national and ideological preferences. On the other, the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), set up by the European Commission in 2011, is a showcase of a technocratic body mobilising experts and organising the circulation of best practices across policy sectors and national boundaries. We examine both policy configurations to determine whether and to what extent the religious dimension of the EU's CR strategy provokes the emergence of new structures, practices and actors of political conflict; of new national and party gaps; and of novel ways to address religion and to reformulate European secularism; or whether, by contrast, the treatment of religion within the EUCRS is simply a new issue being managed through old routines of de-politicisation.

Regarding methods and sources, the discussion draws on content and discourse analysis of a selection of policy activities; of interviews with policy officers and politicians; of the debates in and publications by the EP (July 2014–November 2018) and the RAN (2011–2018); the oral and written question of members of the European Parliament (MEPs); and the relevant publications and Working Groups' ex-post papers of the RAN. The article is organised as follows. The first part offers a brief state of the art on politicisation in EU policy-making, with a focus on religious issues. In the second part we analyse the restricted politicisation of CR occurring within the EP, which largely confirms existing practices and cleavages. We then examine the functioning of the RAN and whether the rationalisation through expertise that it operates contains dynamics of a latent re-politicisation of religion, particularly through its interaction with national policies and civil society. The findings demonstrate that the emergence of counter-radicalisation on the EU's agenda has not significantly altered the EP's usual political patterns, nor has it generated novel approaches towards the management of religion in the RAN.

Counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation as 'business as usual' for the EU

The EUCRS is better understood in the wider context of counter-terrorism. The EU is more than a 'paper tiger' (Bures, 2011) in the fight against terrorism but does not have the lion's share in terms of competencies, political resources and leadership. The external dimension gives more relevance and assertiveness to European institutions to collaborate with third parties and to voice European interests and standards worldwide, including with the key partner, the US (Kaunert, 2010), but resistances are stronger in domestic affairs. The processes of supranationalisation at work in security and judiciary matters have not yet led to the emergence of a 'European FBI' (Occhipinti, 2003) understood as a transversal agency able to act across national borders and prerogatives. Recurrent doubts are expressed whether the EU is the right vehicle to fight terrorism with maximal efficiency or if national or other multilateral patterns should be privileged (Zimmermann, 2006). The activism of the EU in the field of counter-terrorism has produced tangible results to harmonise national legislations, to coordinate member states' policies and to support their operationalisation (Argomaniz, 2011). On some issues such as aviation security or terrorism financing and others, the EU has delivered due to strong competencies derived from the Common Market even before the turning point of 9/11. Still, specialised scholars highlight 'the light footprint of EU counter-terrorism' (Argomaniz, Bures, & Kaunert, 2015). European actions may be more visible than in the past but are circumscribed to a subsidiary role towards member states. The tension remains between the necessity to reinforce cooperation and the reluctance of national administrations to relinquish competencies. In a nutshell, the dilemma between security and sovereignty remains unsolved in counter-terrorism as well as in other EU Justice and Home Affairs. The high public profile of terrorist attacks puts simply this dilemma under a cruder light. Overall, counter-terrorism merely duplicates usual features of European public action. It appears as a hectic process of policy-entrepreneurship by the European Commission and other integration-minded actors without real strategic dimension, an incident-driven policy without real continuity (Bossong, 2008). The way to frame religiously-motivated terrorists as criminals does not differ from the treatment of other perpetuators of violent deeds and is largely driven by the concern to channel the problem along the existing pipes of EU legal decision-making (Kupatadze & Argomaniz, 2019).

In a precedent article,[1] we analysed the EUCRS at polity level: the incentives behind its institutionalisation; the positioning and role of actors (European institutions, NGOs, civil society) in the process establishing radical religion as an EU domestic policy issue; and what this means for the treatment of religion as a political object. We showed that CR was imposed as a priority security question by several convergent factors: traumatic events (terrorist attacks); mimetism of CR strategies of third countries (especially the US) and international organisations (UN); expectations from public opinion and political entrepreneurship by some EU actors. We described how the transfer of CR from external to internal EU affairs (from Daesh and the 'foreign fighter' to the 'home-grown terrorist') has reinforced the salience of religion and has led to a rise in the number of EU institutions and NGOs involved in the multiple facets of EUCRS. Finally, we demonstrated how, in this strategy, religion is hollowed out of its normative authority and is reduced to a symbolic resource serving identity politics. We concluded that the necessity to cope with radical

forms of religion has sparked a new EU policy field but has neither dramatically altered policy practices and logics nor challenged the routine of European politics including, more importantly, around religion.

Politicisation: range and limits of religiously-loaded issues at the EP

The likelihood and opportunity of a politicisation of the EU has formed the subject of academic controversy. For some, politicisation is defined as increased bipolarisation, which could clarify political choices, reinforce accountability and reduce Euroscepticism by allowing extreme positions to be voiced inside the political system and thus function as a form of catharsis (Hix & Hoyland, 2011). For others, politicisation could endanger the EU's governability by making compromise more difficult or impossible (Bartolini, 2005). At worst, a radicalisation of political positions would lead to deadlock. In any case, if any potential politicisation should occur, the European Parliament would provide the most likely arena for this; and religious or religiously-related problems would be prominent candidates.

As a representative body elected by direct universal suffrage since 1979, the EP is the most political institution of the EU and represents the ideal opportunity structure for the expression of normative views, including religious ones. Still, the assembly remains tied to the usual constraints of EU politics. The necessity to search for large coalitions and compromises leads to the avoidance of the most controversial issues. Besides, MEPs must cope with the ambiguity of having to speak for Europe, while being elected from national electorates. National cultures, majority denominations and the particular history of church-state relations in their countries directly determine the ways in which MEPs relate to religion. In short, twenty-eight distinct ways of combining politics with the sacred confront one another within this assembly. Political groups at the EP comply with this diversity to integrate parties with different ideological traditions regarding spiritual affairs (Foret, 2014).

Throughout the history of the EP, religious references have served to differentiate between competing political offers: Christian democracy advocates religiously-inspired values as a third way between market and collectivism; social democracy and the radical left promote secularism; conservatives and the nationalist right put forward a more or less strong Christian identity. Overall, disputes on ethical issues have been relatively scarce and episodic – as the EP seldom rules on such matters – and they have not altered existing political and legal frameworks significantly (Mondo, 2018). Religion was only occasionally mobilised and divergent worldviews were rarely expressed on polarising issues, such as the debates on stem cell research that became a bone of contention in 2005–2006 and 2013. The question concerned whether European Framework Programmes for Research should finance such scientific activities, with the status of the embryo at stake. The final document left the choice to member and skipped the value dimension by focusing on the means rather than on the ends.

Another example of politicisation of normative issues with a religious dimension is the battle around the Estrella report on sexual and reproductive health and rights in 2013. Once again, the impossibility of consensus led to non-decision and to defer the choice to member states in a non-binding resolution.[2] The debate further intensified through the aggressive lobbying of conservative Christian interest groups and the 'One of Us'

initiative.[3] Using the recently-established procedure of the European Citizens' Initiative, this endeavour gathered almost two million signatures online 'to protect the embryo in Europe'. The organisers tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to convert this mobilisation into electoral capital during the 2014 European elections, showing both the range and limits of such a politicisation.

A distinctive case of the EP's role as an echo chamber for the politicisation of religion is identity politics and, specifically, the debates that had unfolded since the late 1990s about references to God or to the Christian heritage in the failed European Constitution and in later treaties. Though the European People's Party (EPP) has been a vocal supporter of such references in the public space, within the EP it has taken a subdued position as a means to preserve trans-party consensus (Fontaine, 2009, p. 402). This illustrates the dual role of the European assembly: on the one hand, it allows ideological forces to express their preferences; on the other, it promotes moderation with the aim of building coalitions within the EP and of providing a *modus vivendi* in the interinstitutional game with the Council and the Commission.

De-politicisation by rationalisation? Delegation to experts to hollow out normative issues of their controversial potential

Rationalisation is fully congruent with the principles of European integration. The aim is to contain political passions, to balance electoral dynamics with bureaucratic continuity, and to search for the smallest common denominator amongst national interests and for the 'one best way'. To defer to experts on behalf of science, law, technocracy or public reason signifies reducing risk and circumscribing accountability for political rulers, as well as freeing up private initiatives (Littoz-Monnet, 2017). These three factors are consistent with the position of European institutions that have contested legitimacy and a market-friendly ethos. But rationalisation reaches its limits (Harcourt & Radaelli, 1999) when the authority of experts is not sufficient to solve dilemmas in situations of uncertainty (for example vis-à-vis the roots of radicalisation, and the best solution to fight it) and, above all, to legitimise decisions when no consensus exists (for instance, about the ways to deal with Islam and multiculturalism).

Uncertainty and dissensus are thus two venues that may open the way to a re-politicisation of the EU. An example are the limits of legal rationality in the implementation of the principle of human dignity to regulate fields such as the right of access to medicine or the use of biotechnologies (Plomer, 2018). Bioethical issues in general (ranging from therapeutic cloning, to the use of embryonic stem cells and to the possible genetic selection in the choice of embryos in assisted reproduction) have crystallised tensions between the claims of the market, policies which try to accommodate these claims, and moral, philosophical and religious references.

To cope with these political tensions on ethical matters, the European Commission has, since 2002, pushed towards slow convergence between member states through the development of networks of experts such as *Eurostemcell* or *Neuroget*. The Commission is also active through dialogue with civil society, with a view to avoiding any ideological polarisation (Pauwels, 2006, pp. 40–43; 66–68). This reliance on experts and on civil society is more complicated at the EP, where, due to the succession of parliamentary terms and the relatively high turnover of MEPs, there is less time available to routinise

the issue and to socialise actors. Overall, the transfer of normative issues from the sphere of political deliberation to a more rationalised one of expertise is a way to maintain the *status quo* that accommodates all actors. Some political entrepreneurs at the EP may be willing to initiate a conflictual debate, but the Commission and the Council are unlikely to follow them down the war path.

The EP and CR: usual limits of constrained politicisation

In the institutionalisation of EUCRS, the EP has sought to balance its role as democratic watchdog with the need to address rising popular expectations about security. It has advocated the respect of fundamental rights, even in a context of emergency, with an anti-discrimination directive (also based on the grounds of religion).[4] It has repeatedly called for the right policy-mix between democratic and judicial oversight over counterterrorism policies and efficiency.[5] If the overall positioning of the assembly is in line with its competences and its usual role in EU affairs, it is interesting to trace the internal dynamics that shape its contribution to the EUCRS. The question is whether, to what extent and in what ways politicisation occurs, especially in the treatment of the religious dimension. As MEPs do not vote on CR measures, their agency must be studied through less formal acts, such as the process of oral and written questions, that give more individual freedom of initiative and that allow cost-free ideological statements. A second indicator of the handling of CR within the EP is the establishment of an *ad hoc* body, the Special Committee on Terrorism (TERR) and the place dedicated to religion in this context.

Questioning the commission, questioning religion?

The research draws on content and discourse analysis of the MEPs' oral and written questions between July 2014 and October 2018, a period corresponding to a culmination of terrorist attacks and a reform of EUCRS during the 8th term of the EP. Questioning the Commission constitutes for MEPs the primary individual oversight mechanism of the European 'executive' (Proksch & Slapin, 2011, pp. 54–55). It is a resource to build a political profile by sending messages to social constituencies and interest groups and, in some cases, to attract media attention (Rozenberg & Martin, 2011, p. 394). Questions are also the opportunity to invest in topics that are not directly related to the competencies of the assembly and that may refer to symbolic politics, for example religion. The following sections explore whether references to religion indicate its politicisation, either through the ways in which it is framed or through the particular identity and strategy of the MEPs addressing the topic.

Religion as a secondary object

The main finding is that religion is almost never invoked as a policy issue in itself. It rather emerges in three secondary capacities: first, as an instrumental resource to deal with other issues; second, as a component of human rights issues; and, third, as a matter of identity, history and culture.

The search in the EP database of the oral and written questions asked by MEPs between the revision of the EUCRS in July 2014 and November 2018 relied on relevant keywords.

The results are: 237 occurrences of 'religion'; 636 of 'Islam'; 193 of 'radicalisation'; 821 of 'counter-radicalisation' (as a general category including 'anti-radicalisation', 'de-radicalisation' and 'preventing radicalisation'); and 884 of 'terrorism' (including 'counter-terrorism'). These findings show that the question of radicalisation and CR becomes prominent and that it serves as a shortcut for the entire security issue. It also confirms that Islam is specifically targeted.

The timeframe of the questions is significant. Taking as a sample the 821 references to 'counter-radicalisation', 34.5 per cent took place between the attacks in Paris in January and November 2015; 27 per cent in 2016 around the time of attacks in Brussels (March) and in Manchester (May). The pace gradually decreases, with 17.5 per cent of questions in 2017 and 11.5 per cent in 2018. The agenda of parliamentary questions is thus driven by terrorist acts, where MEPs pose as spokespersons on behalf of the citizens to request action from EU institutions and member states.

MEPs' questions highlight the shift from external to internal politics, the progressive intertwinement of the two spheres and the increasing salience of religion and especially of Islam. In 2014, questions revolved around right-wing extremism and radicalisation outside the EU. A turning point is visible in 2015, with the acknowledgement of 'home-grown terrorism'. Between 2016 and 2018 the concern for internal threats predominates. Still, the overlapping of domestic and foreign affairs is emphasised by several questions dealing with the return of 'foreign fighters' to Europe.

When explicit references to religion are made, these frequently originate from extreme right MEPs belonging to the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) *political group*. They emphasise the incompatibility of Islam with civilisation and the risk of an 'Islamisation' of Europe. They 'culturalise' human rights as a Western output currently endangered by religious extremism. Direct references to religion are much less frequent in other groups. MEPs from the European United Left, the EPP and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) tend to speak on their behalf rather than that of their ideological tradition and focus on the practical means to prevent radicalisation. The scarcity and dispersion of such voices illustrate that recourse to religion as part of the solution to radicalisation is neither obvious nor consensual in the EP.

Who is asking questions about CR and religion, and why?

The degree of activity and participation, as well as the nationality and party membership of those MEPs asking questions about CR and religion, illuminate their overall objectives. These issues do not seem to alter the usual practices and boundaries within the EP, nor do they create fresh patterns of politicisation.

A first finding is that CR and religion are not causes that favour the emergence of new political entrepreneurs. MEPs who ask questions on such matters are already the ones particularly active on other issues discussed. According to a rating based on diverse performance parameters of MEPs, (attendance, vote, questions, etc.),[6] the most prolific MEPs in our sample all rank in the 15 per cent of those MEPs most engaged during their mandate. Indicative examples are French ENF *Rassemblement National*, Dominique Martin (ranked 46th of all MEPs), Italian ENF-*Liga Veneta*-Lega Nord Mara Bizzotto (second), or French-LR Rachida Dati of the EPP (77th).

A second finding is that nationality is the best predictor of MEP engagement in religion- and CR-related topics. An overwhelming majority of such questions were raised by French representatives, followed at distance by Italian ones. France has been the most exposed country to terrorist attacks in the period under study. In addition, a sizeable number of French MEPs belongs to the National Front/National Rally and sit in the ENF *political group*, which is the most vocal on such problems. Nationality and party membership, thus, cumulate to explain the overrepresentation of France. The presence of Italians as the second largest contingent of MEPs active on CR is also explained on the basis of their large representation within the ENF group. Their interventions express their national concerns, for example the links between Italian organised crime and Islamic terrorism.

Thirdly, party membership figures as yet another strong predictor. The two largest groups at the EP – the EPP and the S&D – provide the highest number of questions on CR and religion. Still, smaller groups are proportionally more active. MEPs belonging to Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) ask twice and a half more questions than their number would imply, in congruence with their specialisation in identity and security politics. The Liberals and Democrats European United Left-Nordic Green Left are also over-represented, due to their commitment to advocate fundamental rights against the emergency state to fight terrorism. Non-attached MEP members of extreme right national parties (such as Golden Dawn in Greece and the Northern League in Italy) are also very vocal.

Overall, the data shows that a massive political investment of CR and religion characterises minority and/or radical forces who seek less to impact policies than to make symbolic statements and to send ideological messages to their electorate. Old ideological patterns associating the right with security and the left with human rights issues are also discernible.

Political group	Percentage of questions on CR, religion and Islam	Percentage of seats at the EP (2014–2019)
EPP	24.5	29
S&D	22.5	25
Liberals and Democrats	13.5	9
ENF	11.3	4.5
European United Left-Nordic Green Left	11	6.8
Conservatives	8	9.7
Non-attached members	7	3
Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	5	5.7
Green group	4.6	6.9

The EP further relies on *ad hoc bodies* building up expertise to deal with CR. A Special Committee on Terrorism (TERR) was set up on 6 July 2017.[7] Compared to the permanent Standing Committees, Special Committees usually have a 12-month mandate and they do not have the right to deliver opinions to other committees. TERR's mission was to evaluate the impartiality of facts provided by authorities at all levels of governance on the extent of terrorist threat on European soil, and to propose appropriate measures. In its early work, religion seemed to figure more as a root cause of radicalisation rather than as an element of *counter* radicalisation. Later on, in its draft report on 'Findings and Recommendations' of July 2018, TERR went further in integrating religion within a solution strategy by asking member states to encourage practices of Islam that are in full accordance with EU values[8] (para. 15). TERR also prescribed the funding by the European Commission of a

network of European religious scholars teaching practices of Islam compliant with EU values. Networking and *ad hoc* experts are thus seen as the best answer to the normative challenge set by religiously-inspired terrorism. Lastly, TERR seems to have simply confirmed the existing political logic within the EP, as the MEPs constituting the committee are, to a significant extent, the same ones already active on CR and religion.

Rationalisation or hidden politicisation?: The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)

The RAN was set up by the European Commission in 2011 (renewed in 2015, and applying for renewal in 2019) to prevent and counter radicalisation and violent extremism. Its primary goal is to support EU member states in 'a participative and cooperative strategy for developing solutions for one of Europe's most significant social challenges' (Korn, 2016, p. 185). The RAN contributes towards the production of a new European discourse on security, in which terrorism is to be governed 'through society' (Davila Gordillo & Ragazzi, 2017, p. 55). Its main concern is to stop people from getting involved in violent acts *in the first place*. For this reason, the RAN forms a network of frontline or grassroots practitioners, ranging from police and prison authorities, to teachers, youth workers, civil society representatives, local authorities' representatives as well as healthcare professionals.[9] At the heart of this transnational network, the RAN Centre of Excellence (CoE)[10] was created in 2015 to offer a platform for the exchange of experiences and the identification of best practices in tackling radicalisation.

The RAN enjoys an advantage of neutrality, as it is commissioned by the European Commission and not by national governments (Fitzgerald, 2016, p. 132). It is mandated for four years and can therefore have a more sustainable, long-term impact than other bodies set up only on an annual basis (such as the Commission's High-Level Expert Group on Counter-Radicalisation[11]). Its focus is wide, as the RAN is in charge of all kinds of radicalisation: from extreme right and left to nationalists and gender extremisms. Still, it is the EU body *par excellence* that addresses the question of radical religion.

The RAN as a showcase of the EU's rationalised governance

To fulfil its objectives, the RAN develops certain usual EU tactics: technocratisation (through reliance on experts); subsidiarity (through delegation to member states and civil society); and emptying religion of its normative content. Its organisation is also symptomatic of well-established trends in EU bureaucracy: innovation by *ad hoc* bodies situated outside existing structures and hierarchies; a network connecting existing resources without accountable centres; and the accumulation of entities whose eventual outcome may reproduce the very rigidities and struggles that they were supposed to overcome.

In the first place, the RAN is managed by the Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME). It does, however, enjoy a margin of autonomy, seen through the advice it offers to the Commission and the ways in which it mobilises academics or civil society, including representatives of national administrations, NGOs and individuals in various capacities. All these features also characterise other structures within DG HOME, such as the European Migration Network (EMN),[12] established in

2008, or the Civil Society Forum on Drugs (CSF),[13] created in 2006. This suggests that the RAN is neither an exception nor a radical innovation.

Another familiar feature of the EU at play here is governance by instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2010), rather than by direct rule. This is reflected in the Commission's control of the RAN's finances, since any decision leading to expenses is endorsed by DG HOME, either through the Annual Activity plan or by *ad hoc* authorisations. Similarly, all results and deliverables of the RAN are owned by the Commission, which decides on their use and dissemination. In short, the latter institution does not appear as clearly accountable from the outputs of the network, but it does keep mastery over it, primarily as a means to minimise risks in case of controversy.

Two further features of the RAN are indicative of the EU style of governance: its fragmentation and its connection to multiple social constituencies through actors recruited at the discretion of the Commission. The network is animated by nine thematic working groups (WGs).[14] Coordination of these WGs, as well as management of the RAN CoE, have been delegated to a private company based in the Netherlands, RadarEurope,[15] which functions as a think tank offering consultancy, policy advice and training. The WGs are chaired by leaders who also seat in a steering Committee in charge of the general coordination. The Commission is in charge of the appointment of these leaders, according to criteria that balance expertise, nationality and gender (Article 10 of the RAN CoE Rules of Procedures). A closer look at the leaders' profiles reveals their backgrounds in areas such as social pedagogy, psychotherapy or education. They are police officers, policy consultants and counter-violence and human rights experts. The one WG leader that distinguishes for her specialisation in religion is academic Jessika Soors (Belgium), who co-chairs the RAN WG LOCAL, and who has a research track record on Islamic through, Arabic studies, human rights in the Arab World and on Islamist-inspired extremism.[16]

The same distancing from religion applies to the ways in which the RAN WGs and the CoE defer such matters to a selection of experts from the private sphere. An illustration of this is the reliance on a communication consultant,[17] with no specialisation on the religious dimension, to provide tips on 'How to cooperate with religious organisations and communities within the local approach to radicalisation?'.[18] However, and according to the Head of the RAN CoE at RadarEurope, WG leaders 'select their invitees from individuals who have registered interest in participating, aiming to attract participants covering all fields of expertise'. As he claims, 'some invitees have expertise on religious radicalisation without this being evident from their title'.[19]

Beyond leaders, each WG is meant to strive to involve members of at least ten different member states[20] and to share best practices which can be transferred to other member states.[21] A policy officer at DG Home confirms that functional criteria prevail:

> The RAN selects experts to try to cover a wide geographical scope and range of expertise. Imams, civil society and community leaders are represented in the Working Group Youth Families and Communities. Other working groups also have experts from different backgrounds, but the emphasis is on their expertise in a field, such as education, prisons, youth work, communications etc., and not on their religious affiliation.[22]

The outreach of the network is supposed to extend beyond those actually participating in the deliberations, by mapping relevant interlocutors all across Europe, along the lines of

the EU requirement to overcome sectoral and national boundaries. Subsequently, radical religion is addressed as a common problem that can be fixed through the adoption of measures that are transferable from one society to another.

The RAN's outcomes: a re-politicisation of CR or the virtue of invisibility?

The RAN's impact on national CR policies is difficult to assess, not least because, according to Maarten van de Donk, senior consultant at the RAN Secretariat, 'it's not very often that you read a new prevention strategy of a member state and see "we took this from RAN!"' (Fitzgerald, 2016, p. 134). Some examples of such impact are the first de-radicalisation programmes in French prisons elaborated with RAN experts; or the evaluation of national prevention strategies requested from the RAN by the Slovakian government.

Interinstitutional check-and-balance offers extra resources to assess the outcomes of RAN. The 2018 European Court of Auditors Special Report argues that the network is not used to its full potential and could enhance its added value by producing more practical outputs drawing on successful practices in member states; by reinforcing transnational dissemination; and by empowering smaller NGOs on the ground without links to government (i.e. networks of local groups of foreign fighters' mothers) in order to ensure a genuine bottom-up approach.[23]

The scrutiny of the RAN by MEPs as expressed in their oral and written questions between 2014 and 2018 follows roughly the same lines. It confirms that the network receives limited attention. MEPs stress the failure of the network's dissemination, as its existence and work are largely ignored by many member states. The religious dimension is explicitly salient in MEPs' discourse when the RAN is turned into a tool to advocate a civilisationist view of Europe and the necessity to contain Islamic extremism and religious intolerance.

Media coverage is a last indicator of the potential re-politicisation of the RAN. A non-exhaustive analysis of the national printed and online press[24] suggests that, in the period 2011–2018, coverage of the RAN's activities is overall very scarce and varies between EU member states, as well as amongst third countries. Media attention is driven by the respective country's level of exposure to terrorist threat and the subsequent development of national CR strategies. It is the strongest in France and in the Netherlands, followed by the UK, Sweden, Italy and Belgium.[25] Third states, and primarily the US, pay occasional attention to the European model of RAN regarding their own experience with religiously-inspired terrorism. When it occurs, media coverage of the RAN is predominantly descriptive and neutral[26] and to a lesser extent positive,[27] with few negative depictions.[28] Still, the network appears to have little visibility in the public sphere.

Another channel for re-politicisation: competition of national models to frame the RAN?

According to the Repository created by the Commission's DG HOME,[29] some countries are non-participants in the struggle to shape EUCRS, as only 22 member states are listed as having established national CR policies. The RAN's publications, which include the 'Issue Papers' and the 'Collection of Approaches and Practices',[30] give an indication of the recognition the RAN grants to each national practice. This could potentially create a competition

between member states to advocate their models. However, these RAN publications are cautious not to refer to national but rather to local cases, and to put forward best practices *in abstracto*. For instance, the list of 'promising practices' highlights an initiative developed in Germany ('Advice Centre Hesse – Religious Tolerance instead of Extremism') and another one in the Netherlands ('To Prevent is Better than to Cure'). Such a concern is based on the underlying assumption that 'one size fits all' and that what is valid in a given context can be transposed elsewhere. Besides, the empowerment of the local level and the concealment of cultural boundaries are two traditional ways for European institutions to assert the relevance of a supranational governance.

Religion in the RAN: breaking away from standard EU practices?

As the EU specialised body dedicated to tackling radicalisation, the RAN offers an opportunity structure to go further than usual in the treatment of the religious dimension. Its technocratic nature is potentially both an asset and a liability: it offers less resources for the politicisation of the sacred and, at the same time, it relies on bureaucratic actors and experts that may have a rationalist and risk-averse ethos, making them less likely to address the normative dimension. In short, the RAN does acknowledge the role of religion in the prevention of the radicalisation process in more explicit terms than other EU institutions. Still, it does not depart from standard EU tactics in dealing with religion. This is seen particularly through: a propensity to offer general and vague recommendations about the significance of religion and religious diversity in the fight against radicalisation, seeking to avoid the singularisation of Islam; a focus on religion as part of *de-radicalisation* (dealing with the religious issue once it is already there and, thus, impossible to ignore) rather than *counter-radicalisation* (which has an anticipatory focus) (Schmid, 2013, p. 50); and a tendency to reduce religion into a variable manageable through standard policy instruments and transferable to different contexts for the sake of promoting common solutions at the European scale.

The 2018 RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices states that religious communities play a crucial role in countering and preventing radicalisation, although they are under increased scrutiny and portrayed as hotbeds of radicalisation (159). Universal solutions advocated through the collection include additional training for religious leaders and within religious institutions, and open dialogue *within* and *between* religious communities. An originality of the RAN compared to other EU institutions active in CR is to treat religion as a carrier of human rights and not only as an object of implementation of these rights. The purpose is to empower those religious actors who promote through their religious discourse fundamental principles such as democracy, non-violence, human rights and tolerance (RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices, 2018, p. 147).

Another specificity of the RAN lies in its support of the use of a neutral or positive language (reminiscent of the 'non-emotive lexicon' put forward by the EUCRS[31]) to speak of religion. It stresses the need to 'move away from the idea of the State promoting "moderate" versions of religious and ideological beliefs; and a need to enhance understanding of what works'.[32] Herein may lie a sign of the pragmatism of experts, who are less concerned by the political necessity to bow to the superiority of politics over religion and who favour, instead, the most efficient option, be it the reliance on vigorous religious rhetoric. This pragmatism may also be understood as an echo of the criticism to the

search for 'moderate Muslims' as a restriction to be 'moderately Muslim' (Roy, 2016, pp. 17–18).

A survey of the outputs of the RAN WGs confirms, on the one hand, that religion is almost entirely absent from the majority of discussions on counter-radicalisation and, on the other, that it figures extensively in the activities of those discussions holding primarily a *de-radicalisation* objective. Religion is thus considered as part of the solution primarily in cases were radicalisation has already occurred, rather than it being used to avoid radicalisation *in the first place*. In other words, it is mobilised as a counter-poison only once it is already present, but not solicited beforehand. For instance, religion figures to a significant degree in the activities of the EXIT and Prison and Probation (P&P) WGs. Here the objectives are to move individuals from a radicalised and violent mindset and/or environment towards mainstream society, a full 're-socialisation'[33]; and, in practical terms, to support practitioners from the prison and probation sector (such as prison staff, governors, psychiatrists, chaplains, etc.). These WGs highlight the fact that dealing with religion is a controversial matter due to a number of reasons: first, because of the limits set by the respective separation of church and state in each country and the extent to which religious input is integrated into state-run or financed projects; second, because of the difficulty in addressing and interfering in individuals' religious convictions; and, finally, because of the lack of acknowledgement of religion as a cause for and/or answer to radicalisation.[34] Such are the reasons behind the RAN's – but also that of other EU bodies' – reluctance, in intervening in matters of religion. When intervention *does* occur, this is done by considering religion as an element of individual trajectories, of which frustration and resentment against society are the main psychological traits. According to the RAN, policy programmes must therefore care for individual religious needs and support personal re-structuring.[35] This customised micro-approach aims at efficiency and it also serves as a way to avoid raising the religious question at collective and societal level.

In the instances when the RAN adopts a counter-radicalisation perspective, religion is mentioned exclusively along the lines of 'identity', with the underlying assumption that the radicalised individual resorts to faith only as a superficial ersatz for a missing identity.[36] Similarities are emphasised between religious and extreme-right or –left extremists, who can claim that '(…) only homogeneous societies with high walls can ensure survival. (…)'.[37] In both cases, the solution is advocacy for open societies with no specific mention of the religious dimension. This comparison between right-wing and religious extremism is a leitmotiv: '(…) in both ideologies, the nation or the *ummah*, the global community of believers are perceived as homogeneous collectives, sharing timeless ideals, fate and visions'. Subsequently, both these kinds of extremism 'reject the idea of democracy, pluralism and representation of minority groups'.[38] This assimilation of different kinds of radicalisation does not come as a surprise, as it is congruent with the original 'catch-all' mandate of the RAN. To some extent, the 'banalisation' of religion is inscribed in the very 'institutional DNA' of the network.

Conclusion

In the light of the increasing numbers of religiously-inspired terrorist attacks on European soil, this article examined the extent to which the religious dimension of the EUCRS strategy has provoked the emergence of new patterns of politicisation in European politics:

new actors; new cleavages and loyalties; new repertoires of action; in a nutshell, new dynamics of conflict or containment of conflict.. We have demonstrated that the gradual development of counter-radicalisation as a policy issue in the EU's agenda has neither shaken the patterns of constrained politicisation nor has it challenged the processes of de-politicisation through rationalisation that have traditionally shaped EU affairs. Indeed, the treatment of religion in this EUCRS is simply a new challenge being managed through old solutions.

Regarding the EP as an opportunity structure for constrained politicisation, CR confirms the usual divisions in terms of party belonging and nationality. Mainstream political families advocate pragmatic solutions to counter radicalisation, while extremist groups play the game of identity politics to catch media attention and electoral recognition. The left, at the same time, tends to prioritise fundamental rights and the right to security. Counter-radicalisation is not a new cause allowing the emergence of *ad hoc* political entrepreneurs, as the most active MEPs on the issue are already the ones that are well engaged in the EP's functioning. Finally, European representatives are heavily influenced by their national culture in their framing of CR and religion.

As a showcase of a technocratic structure rationalising normative matters, the RAN does not have the institutional leverage to dramatically influence national CR policies. Its approach to religion reflects the prisms through which the EU tackles the matter (namely, human rights and identity issues). It goes a step further by addressing religion as part of the solution to radicalisation. But the RAN only does so according to well-established practices. Experts and civil society are mobilised as policy partners to enlarge the social constituency of CR. Deference is paid to national and local actors who are still encouraged to circulate best practices transposable from one country to another, contributing to the invisibilisation of cultural boundaries through the 'one size fits all' approach. The multi-level governance and the organisation of networks blurs schemes of accountability and reinforce the burden-sharing of value-loaded issues. Religion is thus hollowed out of its normative and controversial content and reduced to a policy variable among others, acknowledged when it is evidently there in de-radicalisation policy, but still largely ignored *ex ante* in counter-radicalisation strategies.

Overall, the focus on patterns of politicisation/de-politicisation shaping EUCRS confirms that radical religion is a malleable object. The ways in which it is institutionalised as an EU policy issue has thus far served to emphasise the ideological, cultural and national differences without altering the structural logic of European politics and their standard approach to religion.

Funding

This work was supported by the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique (FRS-FNRS) under [grant number PDR/OL T.0252.18].

Notes

1. 'The EU Counter-Radicalisation Strategy as "Business as Usual"? How European Political Routine Resists Radical Religion' (under review).
2. European Parliament, 2013, Press Release, 'MEPs say sexual and reproductive health and rights are matter for member states', 10 December 2013.

3. European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development, 2013. http://www.undenous.fr/
4. See European Parliament, 2018. Anti-discrimination Directive.
5. European Parliament, 2017. Resolution on 'Improving the functioning of the European Union building on the potential of the Lisbon Treaty', February 2017.
6. http://www.mepranking.eu/8/mep.php?id=124751#mep
7. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20170629IPR78658/special-committee-to-tackle-deficiencies-in-the-fight-against-terrorism
8. European Parliament, 2018. Draft Report on Findings and Recommendation of the Special Committee on Terrorism, 21 June 2018.
9. See Radicalisation Awareness Network – What We Do: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en
10. European Commission, 2014, Commission Communication on 'Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU"s Response', 15 January 2014.
11. http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=3552
12. European Migration Network: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network
13. Civil Society Forum on Drugs: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/civil-society-forum-drugs
14. The nine WGs are: Communication and Narratives (RAN C&N), Education (RAN EDU), EXIT (RAN EXIT), Youth, Families and Communities (RAN YF&C), Local Authorities (RAN LOCAL), Prison and Probation (RAN P&P), Police and law enforcement (RAN POL), Remembrance of Victims of Terrorism (RAN RVT), Health and Social Care (RAN H&SC).
15. https://www.radareurope.nl
16. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran_practitioners_db/jessika-soors_en
17. See https://nicholasboothman.com
18. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-local/docs/ran_local_how_to_cooperate_with_religious_organisations_08122016_en.pdf
19. E-mail interview with an officer of the RAN-CoE, January 2019.
20. Radicalisation Awareness Network. Article 8, RAN CoE Rules of Procedure Governing the Activities of the RAN CoE.
21. See Radicalisation Awareness Network. Charter of Principles Governing the Activities of the RAN Centre of Excellence.
22. E-mail interview with a policy officer, DG Migration and Home Affairs, 1 February 2019.
23. European Court of Auditors, 2018, Special Report, 'Tackling radicalisation that leads to terrorism', 2018, No. 13 (footnote 1): pp. 22–24.
24. The search was conducted using Google News Search and the keyword 'Radicalisation Awareness Network', for the period January 2011 to December 2018.
25. Indicatively: 13 references to the RAN appeared in the French press; 11 in the Dutch; 9 in the British press; 7 in Swedish and Italian; and 5 in the Flemish-speaking Belgian press.
26. See, for instance, the article by Italian *Le Science* of *La Repubblica*, titled 'Nella mente del terrorista: strategie di prevenzione' ('In the mind of the terrorist: prevention strategy'), 23 April 2016.
27. For instance, the article on the Dutch *Consultancy* titled 'Hoe het Radicalisation Awareness Network bijdraagt aan deradicalisering in Europa' ('How the Radicalisation Awareness Network contributes to deradicalisation in Europe'), 21 March 2018.
28. See 'Newsbrief' (UK), 'Counter-radicalisation at the Coalface: Lessons from Europe and Beyond', 17 February 2017.
29. See European Commission, Prevent Strategies of Member States.
30. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018. 'Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Approaches and Practices'.

31. See Revised EU Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Recruitment (11), 14 November 2008, para. 11.
32. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018, p. 156.
33. See RAN EXIT Group: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-exit
34. Radicalisation Awareness Network, RAN Joint Meeting P&P – Exit, Ex Post Paper, 'The role of religion in exit programmes and religious counselling in prison and probation settings', 10–11 October 2017, p. 2.
35. Radicalisation Awareness Network, RAN Joint Meeting P&P – Exit, Ex Post Paper, 'The role of religion in exit programmes and religious counselling in prison and probation settings', 10–11 October 2017, p. 3.
36. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2016. RAN C&N Ex Post Paper, 'Workshop on Jihadist Propaganda and How to Respond', 3–4 October 2016.
37. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018. Ex Post Paper, RAN Policy & Practice Event, 25 April 2018, Madrid, p. 2.
38. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018. Policy Paper, 'Transforming Schools into labs for Democracy', October, p. 12.

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