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ARTICLE



## 'The EU counter-radicalisation strategy as "business as usual"? How European political routine resists radical religion'

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of an EU counter-radicalisation (CR) strategy has challenged the usual reluctance of European institutions to tackle value-loaded issues. This article examines whether this new policy alters EU policy-making and especially its approach to religion. It illuminates, first, the triggers of such a CR strategy (traumatic events, popular expectations and international influences). It then shows how the shift of CR from foreign to domestic EU affairs leads to the acknowledgement of religion as a multi-dimensional phenomenon and to the involvement of a greater number of political, bureaucratic and civil society actors. Still, usual patterns of EU public action apply to reduce the controversial potential of CR: circumscription to a legal and bureaucratic logic, institutional burden-sharing, delegation to member states and civil society, hollowing of the normative content of religion. In conclusion, CR has sparked a new EU policy field but has not radically shaken the routine of European politics.

### KEYWORDS

Counter-radicalisation; religion; European Union; secularism; counter-terrorism

## Introduction

The European Union (EU) has developed a long-standing practice of avoiding any direct treatment of religion. It has done so by promoting a European type of secularism that does not exclude religion, but that keeps it at a critical and neutral distance<sup>1</sup>. However, the rise of religiously-inspired terrorism with references to Islam set a major challenge to European institutions and led to the development of an EU counter-radicalisation strategy (EUCRS). The aim of this article is to analyse whether the development of this strategy has altered the existing patterns of risk-reduction and consensus-building at work in European institutions, and more specifically around the treatment of religion.

Counter-radicalisation (CR) emerged as a policy field in the context of the European strategy against terrorism, launched in 2005, as part of a global policy paradigm encompassing all threats against public order. Though religiously motivated terrorists represent the primary targets, religion itself remains an elusive topic in institutional documents and, to a lesser extent, in political discourse and policy practices. Officials from EU institutions, security experts and civil society representatives allude to religion as the 'elephant in the room' that everybody has in mind but nobody names. Religion is thus framed as a key

component of the security problem, but as a challenging object of public action that must be either avoided or minimised in the search for a solution.

The European dimension is not the most prominent in the multi-level governance of counter-terrorism (CT) (Mégie 2010). The EU is constantly in search of new modes of action (Bossong 2014), its role remains peripheral in comparative analyses of national CR practices (El Difraoui and Uhlmann 2015), and is described as short of means and subordinate to that of member states (Monar 2015). *Ad hoc* analyses of the EUCRS policies say little on the underlying conception and treatment of religion (Bakker 2015). While studies of national CR do elaborate on the ways in which authorities deal with the religious dimension, they also suggest that national approaches share a propensity to circumscribe religion as much as possible, beyond the instrumentalisation of religious go-betweens to monitor or de-radicalise suspects or actual terrorists (see Ragazzi 2017; Bonino 2012).

According to the Commission's DG Home Affairs, 'terrorist radicalisation' is the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism<sup>2</sup>. Counter-radicalisation, on which European institutions have tended to focus thus far, constitutes a key part in the eradication of terrorism, as it attacks the latter at its very source<sup>3</sup>. In contrast to de-radicalisation, which targets radicalised individuals with the aim of re-integrating them into society, counter-radicalisation seeks to *prevent* members from non-radicalised populations from being radicalised (Spalek 2016; Schmid 2013).

The EU's agency is limited by its legal competencies. European institutions acknowledge that counter-radicalisation policies are ultimately the responsibility of member states (CEU 2005). This has resulted in multiple and different national strategies with unevenly developed preventive sections (Transnational Terrorism, Security and the Rule of Law 2008). Against this background, does the EUCRS alter the usual European policy-making towards religion?

The analysis explores the incentives leading to the institutionalisation of this EUCRS; the positioning and role of actors in the process leading to the establishment of radical religion as a domestic policy issue on the EU agenda; and what it means for the treatment of religion as a political object. It draws on content and discourse analysis of the main institutional documents framing the EUCRS. The timeframe encompasses the entire period from the launch of the EUCRS in 2005, and its subsequent revisions, up to the eventual adoption, in May 2017, of the 'Guidelines for the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation'. It covers the communications, guidelines, recommendations and reports issued by the key EU institutions – European Council, Council of Ministers, Commission, Parliament – including the workings of other actors and groupings that have emerged specifically in the context of the EUCRS, such as the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, the High-Level Expert Group on Radicalisation, the Special Committee on Terrorism and the Radicalisation Awareness Network. The document analysis is coupled with insights gathered from semi-structured, anonymous interviews conducted in Brussels with key actors involved at different capacities in the EUCRS.

The article is organised as follows. The first part examines the triggers behind the gradual shaping of the EUCRS. This timeline highlights how several factors (traumatic events, international influences, public opinion expectations and political entrepreneurship) have imposed CR as a priority security question. The second part shows that the shift of CR from external to internal EU affairs has signified a reinforced salience of religion, and

an increase in the number of EU institutions and NGOs involved in the multiple facets of the CR strategy. Finally, the third part looks at the ways in which religion is hollowed out of its normative authority and is reduced to a symbolic resource or a cultural reference, serving identity politics. The conclusion highlights that the necessity to cope with radical forms of religion has sparked a new policy field at EU level, but that this has neither dramatically altered policy practices and logic nor has it challenged the routine of European politics including, more importantly, around religion.

### **Triggers of the EUCRS: shift from external to internal affairs**

The driving forces that have led to the establishment of a European CT and CR strategy are threefold. In the first place, and despite the lack of the EU's direct legal competencies, the rise of religiously inspired terrorism and of the number of member states affected rendered transnational cooperation necessary. A second incentive were the growing concerns and fears expressed through public opinion, reflecting broader expectations for security responses to the issue. Finally, some political entrepreneurs have perceived the CT and CR issues as a window of opportunity to gain power and visibility.

### ***Global securitisation of religion and European perception of external threat***

The EUCRS is part and parcel of the 'securitisation' of religion (Waever 2008), namely, its treatment as a security matter, including a tendency of states to define a 'good' or 'moderate' religion as a resource to control violence, to legitimise public institutions and to assert collective identity. This approach has been criticised about its underlying assumption that peace and order go hand in hand with secularisation and the rise of the modern nation-state as internal and external peacemaker (Mavelli 2012). Focusing on the securitisation of Islam, critics moreover fervently emphasise the risk of human rights violations in national and international policies, which may even lead to the criminalisation of Muslims and to islamophobia (Motilla 2018).

Radicalisation has become the password to refer to political violence in general (Coolsaet 2011; Schmid 2013). There is no consensus, however, on its actual meaning, and especially on the links between the process of radicalisation and the state of radicality, as well as between a radical ideology and its effects (Khosrokhavar 2014). Opinions diverge even more regarding the *causes* of radicalisation: economic and social exclusion (Khosrokhavar 2004); the crisis of political representation and states' agency (Bertho 2016); the role of social networks and the internet (Sageman 2004); geopolitics (Scott 2016) and post-colonial legacies (Burgat 2016). One of the most controversial questions concerns the political (or not) dimension of radicalisation and, subsequently, on whether or not to also seek for political solutions. Roy (2016) describes a mix between Islamisation of radicality (generational rebellion, nihilism, social claims or delinquency with a thin religious symbolic repertoire) and radicalisation of Islam (re-invention of religious tradition). Kepel puts forward endogenous religious dynamics (1993) and especially Salafism (2016). A common underlying difficulty in these approaches concerns the definition of what is religious; and the extent to which public authorities hold the legitimacy to intervene directly in the range, content and organisation of religion.

EU member states have unequal familiarity with terrorism. Six member states – Spain, France, Greece, Germany, Italy and the UK – account for almost 90 per cent of all terrorist attacks perpetrated on EU territory between 1968 and 2011 (Bures 2011, 32). But the emergence of home-grown jihadism with a frequent cross-border dimension has affected a greater number of countries<sup>3</sup>. The need for enhanced cooperation in such a context, is highlighted by former Europol Executive Director, Rob Wainwright:

In contrast to ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorism, and most manifestations of both right-wing and left-wing violent extremism, jihadist terrorism has an international character and therefore needs an international answer from cross-border law enforcement<sup>4</sup>.

The most recent EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) indicates that, of the total of 2015 foiled, failed and completed terrorist attacks reported by nine member states, the number of jihadist acts represents a small proportion but has doubled in 2016–2017 and has caused nearly all reported fatalities and casualties in the EU in 2017<sup>5</sup>. It is thus a small but striking phenomenon with deadly effects; explaining its impact on public opinion.

Indeed, the hierarchy of concerns established by security institutions mirrors those expressed by EU citizens through the Standard Eurobarometer indicators. In the 2015 survey on Public Opinion in the EU conducted between 7 and 17 November 2015 – hence, during the deadly terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 – terrorism was considered by respondents as the second most important issue facing the EU, with a score of 25 per cent<sup>6</sup>. The Standard Eurobarometer of spring 2018 still depicts terrorism, together with immigration, as the most important issues facing the EU<sup>7</sup>. As reflected, lastly, in the Special Eurobarometer on Europeans' attitudes towards security (December 2017), 95 per cent of respondents regarded terrorism as a key challenge to EU security<sup>8</sup>. This public attention to the issue provided a window of opportunity for political entrepreneurs.

### ***EUCRS: entrepreneurs and progressive internalisation***

International pressures, traumatic effects of terrorist attacks and popular expectations led different types of actors to mobilise for the reinforcement of a European strategy against terrorism and radicalisation. Prior to 9/11, only five member states – France, Germany, UK, Spain and Italy – had specific legislation on terrorism, while no political will existed to back proposals by the European Commission to reinforce a common arsenal (Bakker 2015, 288). 9/11 acted as a catalyst, both because it created a common EU threat perception and because the subsequent US policy offered a precedent and a model. Still, unlike the American 'war on terror', the EU response to terrorism was to consider the latter as an essentially 'criminal phenomenon', which demands a law enforcement response rather than a war-like means of defence (Monar 2018, 337).

In 2001 an *ad hoc* program of measures was thus drawn-up by the General Secretariat of the Council, and the Commission speeded up a 'Proposal for a Council Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism'<sup>9</sup>. The EU eventually drew up a common definition of terrorism, together with standard penalties, in 2002<sup>10</sup>. The momentum was relaunched by the attacks in Madrid (March 2004) and London (July 2005), when, under the British presidency of the Council, the EU eventually launched its CT strategy.

This strategy targeted in particular ‘the terrorism perpetrated by Al-Qa’ida and extremists inspired by Al-Qa’ida, (as) the main terrorist threat to the Union’ (para. 3). It was based on four main pillars: prevention, protection, tracking and response. The ‘prevention’ pillar focused on tackling ‘extremist ideologies’ and ‘radical ideas’ as the root causes which can lead to radicalisation and recruitment. The purpose was to confront radicalisation by addressing the key social conditions, including poor or autocratic governance, rapid but unmanaged modernisation, lack of political or economic prospects and of educational opportunities, that may trigger such a process, primarily *outside* the Union. At that initial stage, such conditions were not considered as prevalent within the Union, except in some segments of the population. The strategy thus stated that the EU must promote good governance, human rights, democracy as well as education and economic prosperity beyond its borders.

Religion was briefly mentioned in some parts of the 2005 Strategy’s ‘prevent’ approach, which further focused on the need to address incitement and recruitment in key environments, such as prisons and places of religious training or worship. Inter-cultural dialogue – both within and outside the Union – was also encouraged as a key aspect of countering radicalisation (para. 13). Finally, the position of a Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (CTC) was established. The creation of this new actor may be seen as both the omen and the trigger of the progressive shift of CR from external to internal affairs.

CT and CR gradually became parts of the political debate in Europe. Between 2011 and 2013, the EU adopted approximately 239 counter-terrorism measures, focusing on the external dimension, in which religion was circumscribed to inter-faith and inter-religious dialogue within the framework of European cultural diplomacy. However, the gradual evolution of the EU strategy, and its formal reform in 2014, acknowledged the rise of internal threats and the necessity to address religion more directly, as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. This shift led to a proliferation of the institutional actors involved, as well as to the empowerment of civil society in the counter-radicalisation effort.

This renewed salience of religion became particularly clear in the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism revised in May 2014. (para. 20)<sup>11</sup>. The response to the challenge set by *religiously motivated terrorism* required dialogue between public authorities and the various social, cultural and religious groups concerned. This Strategy referred to the need to support civil society to make it more resilient to radical propaganda, as well as to the training of teachers and religious leaders as the first-line workers who may be able to identify signs of radicalisation at an early stage.

### ***Jihadism as internalisation of the threat and proof of its religious dimension***

The focus on CR was triggered by the jihadist terrorist impetus conducted in 2015 and 2016. The EU Heads of State held an informal meeting after the terrorist attacks in Paris in January 2015, under the heading ‘Preventing radicalisation and safeguarding values’.<sup>12</sup> The European Parliament (EP) supported this move, emphasising the need to fight a different kind of threat – the phenomenon of ‘homegrown’ radicalisation, i.e. radical Islam rooted in Western Europe, by way of extremists seeking to recruit young Muslims to help further their cause and the increasing number of European terrorist ‘foreign fighters’<sup>13</sup>. It echoed critics by researchers<sup>14</sup> that the Commission and the CTC’s focus

on the impact of *external* factors on *internal* security had failed to address the individual causes that make people more receptive to radical ideologies.

Against this background, the Council revised the 2014 'Guidelines for the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation' in May 2017. The emphasis was put on addressing radicalisation in Europe and on the overlapping between internal and external affairs: 'The terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015 and 2016 have demonstrated the importance of addressing radicalisation leading to terrorism and violent extremism also at European level'<sup>15</sup>.

### **The 'domestication' of counter-radicalisation in EU policies: new issue, old clothes?**

The 'domestication' of CR in EU policies refers to two correlated trends. First, it describes the shifting focus from external to internal affairs due to the multiplication of terrorist attacks on European soil, and the challenges of home-grown terrorism and of the 'foreign fighters' who return from war zones in third countries. Second, 'domestication' describes the propensity of the EU policy-making machine to frame counter-radicalisation according to its usual rules, including, among others: a search for the minimal common denominator, compliance with expert and bureaucratic rationality, inter-institutional burden-sharing and subsidiarity.

The increasing relevance of such a value-loaded issue as religion in the EU's domestic agenda, with the involvement of a greater number of institutional and non-institutional actors, was likely to challenge past practices and to render CR a bone of contention. However, no political conflictualisation of the debate took place at the European level to an extent comparable to the debates raging in some member states (Hegemann and Kahl 2018). Rather, specific features of usual EU policy-making used to contain the risk of dissensus seem to be at work: 'Brusselisation'; subsidiarity; delegation to experts and reliance on law as mechanisms of rationalisation; and burden-sharing through inter-institutional arenas that dilute accountability. An examination of the role of each EU institution reinforces the impression of continuity rather than rupture.

### **Growing transversally and in the blur: general evolution of European CT**

The gradual emergence of counter-terrorism as a policy domain has produced a significant and disordered expansion of bureaucratic actors with competing competencies at the European level. As early as 2006, in order to map who was doing what, a primary aim of the EUCRS was to establish a high-level political dialogue bringing together the Commission, the rotating Presidency, the CTC and EP representatives to 'consider progress together and promote transparency and balance in the EU's approach'<sup>16</sup>. In its 2013 summary report, the SECILE project was already talking about a 'terrorism fatigue', whereby a big counter-terrorism agenda had become so bloated that both citizens and even specialists found it hard to understand which specific policies fit in where and why, what these policies actually did, whether they have been properly implemented and whether they are effective (12).

CT is an illustration of a phenomenon described as 'Brusselisation', namely the challenge of coordinating the work by a large number of institutional actors involved in a policy umbrella that runs across a number of very different areas: from social integration



and community policing to the financing of crime and the exchange of intelligence (Argomaniz 2012, 93). CR pushes the difficulty of 'Brusselisation' even further considering the number of policy fields involved: from education to social policy, including communication, new technologies and many others.

Another key principle of the EUCRS is subsidiarity. The EU devises measures and institutions to *complement* member states' initiatives (Coolsaet 2010, 871–872), which remain largely accountable for security enforcement and take the blame in case of failure. Subsidiarity is also the key notion structuring the general approach of EU institutions towards religion. It is understood in its double meaning of *delegation* to national authorities and *empowerment* of NGOs when dealing with religion (Barroche 2012, 550), and particularly with religious freedoms-related issues and inter-faith dialogue<sup>17</sup>. It is thus no wonder to see European actors defer to national ones for the design and implementation of CR measures.

The role of each institution in CR and their handling of religion can be analysed through the usual features of EU policy-making. The increasing recognition of the salience of religion and the internalisation of counter-radicalisation have not altered Brussels processes and practices. Fragmentation, inter-institutional arenas as burden-sharing, delegation to experts, restriction to deliberative arenas, and reliance on subsidiarity to leave accountability and political risks to member states and civil society are the key features at play, and differ little from day-to-day reality of European affairs.

### ***The Council of Ministers: fragmentation of CT and empowerment of an outsider***

The Council of Ministers of the EU (henceforth Council) is both the institution implementing the orientations decided at the European Council and a legislative body deciding a large part of European norms. As a sphere of expression, coordination and reconciliation of national interests with less media exposure than the European Council, it limits the risks of polarisation by postures that aim at pleasing public opinion (Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 2006). The Council is moreover in charge of concluding agreements with external EU partners and of adopting the EU budget jointly with the EP. As in all other policy domains, it exercises these functions regarding CT and CR.

In its counter-radicalisation approach since 2005, the Council has been focusing on immediate security concerns. The occasional references to religion are primarily framed in the discourse of 'religiously-motivated' terrorist propaganda around Islam that distorts conflicts along the lines of a clash between the West and Islam. The elusiveness of religion as such in the Council's documents can be explained by two factors. First, religion emerges at the most practical level of policies, in the detailed discussion on the measures to implement. This task is delegated to *ad hoc* networks and experts and/or is left to the discretion of national administrations. Second, the Council's work in this area illustrates the fragmentation of issues by the European policy machine that prevents the creation of a unique frontline and that divides controversial questions into pieces, which are more easily absorbed by a technocratic approach. For instance, terrorism financing (including the role of religious organisations and some Muslim states) has been discussed by finance ministers in isolation from foreign ministers and the Justice and Home Affairs Council: the former deal separately with anti-terrorism financing clauses in third countries' agreements and the latter agrees on the exchange of police information in this area (Argomaniz 2012,

76). This fragmentation is further reflected at the Committee level, where responsibility is divided into two separate working parties: the external Commission for Territorial Cohesion, comprising senior officials from the justice and interior ministries, and the internal Working Group on Terrorism, comprising diplomats from foreign ministries. Due to their differentiated composition and political loyalties, it is not uncommon for these two groups to present divergent angles on the same problem (*ibid*).

The post of Counter-terrorism Coordinator was set up in 2005 to meet this challenge of coordination. The broader role of this 'counter-terrorism Czar' (Bakker 2015, 289) is to maintain an overview of all the instruments at the Union's disposal, to closely monitor the implementation of the EU Counter-terrorism Strategy, and ensure that the Union plays an active role in the fight against terrorism. From the very beginning, however, the CTC was not welcome in the political game in Brussels. Reflective of the EU inter-institutional tensions, the Commission officials perceived the CTC's appointment as an attempt by national governments to curb their own role in this area (Argomaniz 2012, 88; Bures 2011).

The role of the CTC represents a recurrent feature in European affairs: her/his position as a non-formal supranational entrepreneur (Moravcsik 1999) signifies that the CTC relies mostly on her/his strategic position at the crossroads of processes and channels of information of the EU multi-level governance and on her/his status of relative outsider to build coalitions across policy sectors. The CTC is by necessity a mediator and a facilitator, as s/he has no direct hierarchical authority and no funding, cannot propose legislation or force national governments to act, nor could s/he chair meetings of national justice, interior and/or foreign ministers to set the EU CT agenda (Bures 2011, 139).

Current CTC, Gilles De Kerchove, has a strong track record in this regard. He pushed to develop the exchange of best practices on the policing of religion between member states, as well as to include references to ideology (a proxy for religion more acceptable by all parts) in the conclusions of the European Council and in those of the Foreign Affairs Council. He championed the establishment of a high-level reflection group on radicalisation. He encouraged the Commission to support the operation 'Molenbeek la neuve' to reactivate the part of Brussels that has been shaken and stigmatised by the terrorist attacks. As an ambassador without the constraint of diplomatic caution, he also kept promoting the European approach worldwide and trading information with partners in the fight against terrorism and radicalisation. Finally, in his dialogue with experts, De Kerchove does not hide his sharing of Kepel's interpretation on the centrality of Salafism as the matrix of radicalisation and the inspiration of terrorism<sup>18</sup>.

### ***The Commission: handing CR to experts and civil society***

The Commission is the cornerstone of European policy-making as the holder of the largest part of legislative initiative; the controller of European policies and of the mutual duties of member states; and the watchdog of EU treaties and of the 'acquis communautaire'. It is the builder of coalitions between member states, interest groups and civil society. It implements and advocates European public action, and speaks on behalf of the EU in some configurations, such as accession processes and international negotiations. The Commission's evolution from the charismatic vanguard of an ever-closer union to the bureaucratic manager of integration as 'business as usual' in charge of multiple policies has been widely documented (Wille 2013). The above features are reflected in its role in

the EUCRS, where it casts itself mainly as an assistant to member states. When necessary, the Commission approximates the legal frameworks, in full respect of the subsidiarity and proportionality principles (i.e. in providing a common definition of terrorist and terrorist-linked offences). The religious dimension is considered as such in the Commission's proposals to contain the spread of radicalisation, through the promotion of engagement with civil society, of inter-faith dialogue, and of cooperation with mainstream voices and religious leaders.

An infamous weakness of the Commission is the compartmentalisation that complicates relationships among its separate DGs (Jordan and Schout 2006 99). This structure encourages 'possessive territorialism' (Argomaniz 2012, 74) over particular policy dossiers. The EUCRS is no exception since, due to its multidimensional character, it requires the involvement of several DGs: Migration and Home Affairs, Health, Research and Education. This does not come without costs, delays and inter-institutional struggles. These obstacles have been an incentive, among others, to rely on a frequent trick in European bureaucracy, namely the creation of *ad hoc* bodies to escape from the bulk of existing hierarchies and services. Beyond the freedom offered by innovation in the margins of the system, these new bodies also enjoy the advantage of externalising the risky business of CR. They do so by delegating it to civil society and to experts, and by sharing with them the political responsibility through an inter-institutional mechanism.

These bodies specific to the EUCRS are the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) and the High-Level Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R). The RAN was established in 2011 as an EU-wide umbrella network of practitioners engaged to prevent and counter radicalisation. Its Centre of Excellence acts as a hub in connecting, developing and disseminating expertise, fostering dialogue between practitioners and policymakers. The RAN is the Commission's tool to mobilise both experts and civil society in a flexible framework and to encourage the circulation of best practices regarding CR without exposing itself as a prescriber or dealing directly with the practicalities in the management of religious matters. Being commissioned by the Commission, and not by national governments, the RAN may reach out for practitioners in all countries (Fitzgerald 2016, 132). It is, then, a costless and safe way to expand the political and social constituency of the EUCRS across national borders and policy sectors without having to take a normative position on the treatment of religion as such.

The second novel body, the HLCEG-R, was set up following an initiative of the DG Migration and Home Affairs on 27 July 2017. Having completed its mandate in May 2018, the group brought together representatives from member states, the Commission and relevant EU services, institutions and agencies<sup>19</sup>. Its tasks were to offer advice on how to improve cooperation and collaboration among the different stakeholders and to develop targeted and effective measures to prevent and counter radicalisation at both EU and national levels. More than simply helping overcome problems of coordination, the purpose of the HLCEG-R was to share accountability of the value-loaded issue of CR.

In its final report, the HLCEG-R identified priority areas for further actions at EU level (such as prison, rehabilitation, online propaganda, education and social inclusion and the external dimension of radicalisation). Religion was considered around the need to encourage member states' relations with religious leaders and communities, and a national overview of religious pluralism, faith related dialogues and of the monitoring of religious institutions that spread Islamist extremist ideology. To ensure cooperation between the

EU and national levels, the Report proposed the setting up of a Steering Board, composed primarily by members states and chaired by the Commission (in which the CTC and the European External Action Service would be granted observer status), that would advise the Commission on strategic priorities for the 'EU's prevent work' (3.3)<sup>20</sup>.

### ***The European parliament: balancing human rights, security and popular demand***

The European Parliament (EP) has developed from a consultative body to a co-legislator in an increasing number of domains (especially budgetary and institutional ones) and, though it can rarely impose its views, it has become progressively more critical towards the Council. Even in areas where it does not have direct competencies, as the unique European body deriving directly from universal suffrage, it exercises a tribunician function by taking symbolic positions on key issues such as fundamental rights or the EU's democratic legitimacy (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2014).

The EP's role in the EUCRS mirrors this general background. Until recently, it had been marginalised in the decision-making process. According to the SECILE project, of the 88 legally binding counter-terrorism measures adopted between 2001 and 2013, only 23 have been taken under the 'co-decision' procedure, where the Parliament enjoys full joint legislative powers (SECILE 2013, 6). However, the post-Lisbon EP is much more involved in the passing of internal security legislation. As a result, the CTC and Commission officials are forced to engage earlier and to a greater extent with the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee (LIBE) in the legislative process, even if the former still have the final say (Argomaniz 2012, 78).

Regarding the EUCRS, the EP tries to balance its usual vigilance on democratic basics with the need to address popular expectations about security. It has focused on values and human rights, including on advocacy for an anti-discrimination directive (also on grounds of religion)<sup>21</sup>. In its February 2017 Resolution on 'Improving the functioning of the European Union building on the potential of the Lisbon Treaty', the EP advocated the need both for democratic and judicial oversight over counter-terrorism policies and for a systematic and mandatory exchange of information between national law enforcement authorities and intelligence services, and with Europol, Frontex and Eurojust to fight radicalisation<sup>22</sup>.

Upon an initiative of the European People's Party (EPP), European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Groups, an important innovation in the EP was the setting up of the Special Committee on Terrorism (TERR) on 6 July 2017. TERR's main task was to examine and evaluate the impartiality of facts provided by law enforcement authorities of member states, competent EU agencies and recognised experts, and the extent of terrorist threat on European soil. It also proposed appropriate measures to enable the EU and its member states to help prevent, investigate, and prosecute terrorism-related crimes (including on the prevention of radicalisation). In its early work – with the exception of inter-faith dialogue and anti-discrimination legislation – religion seemed to figure more as a root *cause* of radicalisation rather than as an element of *counter* radicalisation. This is also true in other components of the EP, where religion is discussed in the frame of radicalisation and religious fundamentalism, but not as a possible part of the solution. In its draft report of 21 June 2018<sup>23</sup>, however, TERR went the furthest in integrating religion within a solution strategy. It, specifically, asked that member states encourage and tolerate only such 'practices of

Islam' that are in full accordance with EU values (para. 15). An EU response to radicalisation must, moreover, entail the promotion of higher education opportunities for chaplains, with accrediting theological education programmes that integrate human values (para. 17). It is for this reason that the TERR report invited the Commission and the member states to develop and to fund a network of European religious scholars that can spread practices of Islam that are compliant with EU values (*ibid*).

Overall, the study of each EU institution confirms the stability of their positioning and practices according to their role and resources in European governance. CT and CR strategies have not significantly moved the lines and balances in Brussels power games. This suggests that radical religion as a policy issue and its inherent risks had to be customised to conform to the EU institutional machinery.

### **The hollowing of religion in the European CR strategy**

This final part looks at the ways in which religion is conceived in EU policies and narratives. It shows how religion remains an elusive object, minored as an autonomous variable and deprived of its normative and prescriptive dimensions.

This circumscription of religion is congruent with the functionalist logic of European action to deal with controversial, value-loaded issues through the safe repertoire of human rights, and to leave the management of normative choices to civil society and member states. Religion is mobilised only by references to a 'moderate Islam' to produce 'counter-narratives' in response to the radical religious discourses of terrorist organisations. It also reemerges as a bow to (or the underlying assumption of) the 'Christian heritage' of Europe to celebrate European identity under attack, European values challenged by barbarian violence or a specific European worldview in the global 'dialogue between cultures' or 'clash of civilisations'. This last part of the article shows how both occurrences of 'moderate Islam' and 'Christian heritage/values' illustrate the hollowing of religion, which is deprived of its moral and prescriptive dimension, is turned into a symbolic resource to define identity and otherness, and is reduced to a cultural reference or to a mere empty signifier<sup>24</sup>.

The most common rhetorical device to deal with the 'hot potato' of religiously-inspired terrorism is to focus on extreme religion (de facto 'radical Islam') and to state that extreme religion is not, in fact, a religion or at least not a religion that is compatible with Western and European values (Motilla 2018, 9). This leads to the empowerment of 'moderate Islam', at the risk – according to the formula coined by Roy – of turning the search for 'moderate Muslims' into an injunction to be 'moderately Muslim' (Roy 2016, 17–18). This reproach of considering only subdued versions of faith as legitimate is commonly addressed by CR policies at every level of governance; the EU being thus no exception.

The 2005 CT Strategy refers to religion indirectly and only regarding particular uses and interpretations of Islam that nurture a perception of the conflicts around the world as a supposed proof of a clash between the West and Islam (para. 10). The EU's response in addressing such propaganda includes: the need to empower moderate voices by engaging with Muslim organisations and faith groups that oppose Al-Qa'ida and others; to encourage the emergence of European imams and train foreign imams to European cultures; to change the perceptions of the West among Muslim communities; and to correct inaccurate perceptions of Islam and Muslims (para.11). Political institutions are

incited to mobilise religious actors as intermediaries and to support tailor-made religious narratives congruent with the standards of European democracy and living together. To do all this, the EU must moreover develop a 'non-emotive lexicon' that would avoid linking religion to terrorism and exacerbating divisions<sup>25</sup>. This is particularly illustrative of the attempt to frame religion in a rational way that may clash with the experience of the believers.

Minor variations can be observed among EU institutions. The Council is arguably the most elusive, with limited references to 'religiously-motivated' terrorism and propaganda around Islam<sup>26</sup>. The EP has little direct say on the implementation of the CR strategy that remains in the hands of executive bodies. It discusses the role of religion in its extreme forms in its studies on youth radicalisation<sup>27</sup> or on the gender dimension of radicalisation<sup>28</sup>. The EP has been addressing religion more as a problematic component of the radicalisation process rather than as part of the solution in the counter-radicalisation strategy. The exception here is the most recent draft report of the TERR Committee, which explicitly mentions the need to educate and support religious leaders, and to create a network of European religious scholars who will spread practices of Islam that are compliant with EU values. This echoes to an important degree the Commission's focus on the role that religion could play through inter-faith dialogue, education, training of religious leaders and counter-narratives. Specifically, the Commission is a leading force in denouncing the abuse of religious narratives conducive to violence by Islamist extremists and the vital role that religion at large can play in preventing or countering radicalisation: it binds communities, strengthens the sense of belonging and guides people in a positive direction<sup>29</sup>.

Willy-nilly, the necessity to tackle directly the religious dimension has imposed itself to balance the extremist discourses calling to violence. In his 2015 report to the European Council, the CTC expressed these lingering questions:

What more can we do on tolerance, anti-Muslim hatred, inter-religious dialogue, communication of our values? How can we prevent incitement and encouragement of terrorism, including ideologies that condone aspects of the Daesh ideology? And, finally, how do we ensure that all faiths respect and promote European values and human rights as enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights?<sup>30</sup>

The urgency of efficient counter-narratives is stated here both to immunise existing Muslim communities in Europe and to integrate immigrants and refugees, by providing them with adequate religious services<sup>31</sup>.

This is nevertheless more easily said than done. As interviews with European practitioners indicate, their general fear of dealing explicitly with religion concerns the possible backlash of their actions on such a normative matter. A high-level civil servant in charge of security matters in the EU observed:

I risk being perceived as the old White Christian man in charge of security issues. And as such, to be enclosed in a posture of Islamophobia. I am neither anti-Islam, nor do I want to impose a 'moderate' Islam. I advocate simply a plurality of interpretations of Islam, making place for radical ones as well as others<sup>32</sup>.

To interpret the discourse and strategies of EU agents requires thus not only acknowledging their institutional constraints and personal beliefs but also considering the reactions that they might expect from their counterparts and from the wider public.

## Conclusion

Romano Prodi, former President of the European Commission, joked that Osama Bin Laden had done more for justice and home affairs cooperation – and by extension for European integration at large – than Jean Monnet (SECILE 2013, 12). Should this comment be taken seriously, suggesting that Daesh has been instrumental in reinforcing and legitimising the EU through the development of the EUCRS? Our conclusion is on the sceptical side considering, first, the limited public awareness of European action and, second, the resilience of established narratives, practices and structures to accommodate the management of counter-radicalisation as ‘business as usual’.

EU initiatives in this field are more reactive than proactive. They answer to stimuli by external examples, traumatic events, and citizens’ pressures, following the global trend of the securitisation of religion. Member states remain untouched in their prerogatives and specificities. At the same time, each EU institution retains its usual positioning and functioning. Limited innovation comes mostly from relative outsiders (the CTC and *ad hoc* committees and networks) and civil society. The controversial potential of a common EU strategy is circumscribed by routinised European mechanisms to deal with such value-loaded issues: fragmentation of issues along the lines of bureaucratic distribution of competencies; delegation of normative choices to member states and civil society; reliance on the legal repertoire and on human rights as a method of rationalisation and consensus-maker; and inter-institutional burden-sharing.

Ultimately, the treatment of religion by European institutions does not differ much from past policies that had to deal with faith matters. Religion is only minimally acknowledged as an object in itself and is hollowed out of its normative content to be, instead, mobilised as an instrumental resource, as a mere cultural component or even as an empty signifier to reassert ‘European values’ and public order. The EU may not have found the key to counter radicalisation, but counter-radicalisation has not cracked the hard nut of EU political routines.

## Notes

1. See Foret (2015).
2. European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, ‘Radicalisation’, *No date*.
3. See LIBE. 2017. ‘EU Member State’s Policies and Laws on Persons Suspected of Terrorism-Related Crimes’.
4. Europol, ‘2017 EU Terrorism Report’, 15 June 2017.
5. 62 people died and 819 were injured in jihadist attacks in 2017 (TE-SAT 2018, p. 23).
6. Standard Eurobarometer 2015, 84, p. 51.
7. *Ibid*, 2018a, 89, p. 25.
8. Special Eurobarometer 464b, Report on ‘Europeans’ Attitudes Towards Security, December 2017, p. 4.
9. Proposal for a Council Framework Decision on combating terrorism, (521), 19 September 2001.
10. Council Framework Decision, 13 June 2002 on Combating Terrorism, para.2.
11. Council of the European Union, Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism, 19 May 2014.
12. Council of the EU, Informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government. Brussels, 12 February 2015.
13. See EPRS Briefing 2015, ‘Religious Fundamentalism and Radicalisation’.



14. *Ibid*, p. 7.
15. Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Counter-terrorism, 19 June 2017 (para. 3).
16. Council of the European Union, Conclusions of the first High Level Political Dialogue on Counter-Terrorism, 18 May 2006, p. 2.
17. See European Commission, 'Dialogue with churches, religious associations or communities and philosophical and non-confessional organisations': [https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/item-detail.cfm?item\\_id=50189](https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/item-detail.cfm?item_id=50189); and European Parliamentary Research Service, 'Religion and the EU's external policies' (December 2017): <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/divers/EPRS-IDA-614612-Religion-EU-external-policies-FINAL.PDF>.
18. Interview with two appointed European officials working on counter-terrorism, Brussels, 2 March 2018.
19. Amongst others, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation; the RAN Centre of Excellence; the European External Action Service; and the CTC.
20. European Commission, HLCEG-R Final Report, 2018b, 18 May 2018.
21. For an analysis of the EP's treatment of religion and radicalisation see Foret and 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.
22. EP Resolution, February 2017a.
23. Draft Report, Findings and Recommendations of the Special Committee on Terrorism, 21 June 2018.
24. See also Roy (2010).
25. Revised EU Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Recruitment (11), 14 November, para. 11.
26. Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism, 19 May 2014, para. 20.
27. 'Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU', LIBE Committee, 2014.
28. 'Radicalisation and counter-radicalisation: A gender perspective', EPRS Briefing, April 2016; 'Radicalisation and violent extremism: How women become radicalized and how to empower them to prevent radicalisation', FEMM Committee, December 2017b.
29. Commission Communication, 'Supporting the Prevention of Radicalisation leading to Violent Extremism', 14 June 2016.
30. EU CTC, Report 'State of play on implementation of the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12 February 2015a on counter-terrorism', p. 3.
31. *Ibid*, 'Follow-up to the state of the Members of the European Council of 12 February on counter-terrorism: State of play on implementation of measures', 5 October 2015b, 5c.
32. Interview with a European official, Brussels, 2 March 2018.

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