

F.A.R

Title of the project : Folks, Authorities and Radicalism: between polarization and social construction (FAR)

Period

September 2017- September 2020

Abstract

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

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

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

Finally, the third objective of this research project is to examine at the micro-level those individuals whom the Belgian state authorities have been suspecting, and sometimes convicted, or support of terrorism or radicalization.

Two main complementary methods will be used. First, existing criminal justice databases will be analyzed carefully to detect possible recurrent patterns (The NICC is a public scientific institution of the Federal Ministry of Justice and therefore can have access to the databases of this department). The objective is to compare the trajectories of those individuals that are identified by Belgian state authorities as 'radicals' with the trajectories (a) of individuals that are followed by the Belgian police and judiciary as suspects of terrorism and (b) of individuals that have eventually committed terrorist acts or have been condemned for their participation to the preparation of such acts. Secondly, qualitative interviews of a purposeful sample will be investigated. The second method is used in order to determine (a) on the one hand the relevance and usefulness of the concepts (e.g., radicalized, terrorists, violent, etc.) and responses (e.g., to jail someone, to label someone as radical) of the Belgian public authorities as they interact with these particular individuals, and (b) on the other hand, the impact that these concepts and responses have on these individuals (e.g., in terms of perceived discrimination, the experience with the criminal justice system, disengagement of the person from violence or radical ideas).

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

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Funding

Belgian Science Policy Office (Belspo)