

Workshop for the Future Event Report, Conclusions and Recommendations

After the Paris and Brussels Attacks: What Future for Young Europeans?

The Paris terror attacks in November 2015 were clearly aimed at young Europeans and their way of life. But not only (most of) the victims were young Europeans – so were the perpetrators. The terrorist attacks in Brussels three months later shook up the world of many young people who work or hope to find a place in the ‘Brussels bubble’. They were a wake-up call for the young everywhere in Europe many of whom probably for the first time realised that a peaceful and untroubled future can no longer be taken for granted. Again, the perpetrators were young Europeans. How did Europe get to this point and what can young Europeans do to reclaim their future? How do young people in Europe see their own future and the role they can play to keep our societies open, pluralistic and democratic? How much freedom are they willing to give up for their security? How much security are they willing to give up for their freedom? What will and should European societies look like in ten years’ time? What can Europe learn from the way similar situations are/were handled in other parts of the world?

Introduction

On 21 June 2016, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union hosted another *Workshop for the Future* for young Europeans. This time the participants discussed how to deal with the after effects of the Paris and Brussels attacks and the fear and insecurity they have caused among the young. Together with five expert facilitators the participants worked in small groups to develop strategies on how to shape an open and tolerant society in light of the terrorism threat. With the experts offering insights and advice based on their professional and/or personal experience, the groups worked on questions concerning security, integration, identity and others. A recurring theme was also how to deal with xenophobia as a reaction to the recent migration and refugee flows into Europe. Here are the key findings of the workshop.

Conclusions and recommendations:

I. Fostering dialogue and mutual understanding

- The participants coined the notion of **‘human sharing’**. Human sharing refers to the encounter of people and the exchange of different cultures. Similar to the Erasmus programme, the EU should create even more opportunities for people not only from different countries but also from different cultural backgrounds within the same locality to meet and enter a dialogue. This could help to increase mutual understanding and tolerance.
- Many non-Muslims have a flawed **conceptual understanding** of Islam. They ignore the great cultural diversity of Islam and perceive the Muslim community as homogenous, even though there is no such thing as one single coherent Muslim community. The current debate on Islam is unfortunately focused on political Islam, while other strands are being marginalised.
- The political and societal discourse should be focused on **human identity** instead of religious identity. The identities of radical individuals must be differentiated. It then



becomes obvious that we cannot speak of a 'Muslim identity'. There are other common factors that prevail: for example, foreign fighters are usually uneducated and come from low income families, and all the terrorists of 9/11 were the second sons in their family, i.e. had no role to play in their cultural environment. Rather than as representatives of Islam, terrorists should be regarded as deviants.

- We need a more **open interreligious dialogue**, which emphasises the potential of all religions to be an inspiration for peace. This dialogue should also be open for the secular community. A peaceful and open discussion about the different beliefs can only be fostered if the image of Islam is separated from extremism and all religions and world views are treated as equally valid. In this regard, it is helpful to draw on scientific research which has shown that the more religiously educated a Muslim is, the more tolerant towards other cultures and stronger opposed s/he is to radicalisation.
- **Disenfranchised communities**, individuals and families do not get enough attention from society. Families who experience radicalisation in their surroundings need to get more support and empathy from society. The existing de-radicalisation programmes seem to have a discourse problem, since they tend to approach communities collectively. In this way a whole community such as Molenbeek feels being reduced to the status of 'criminal object'.

II. The role of education and social media:

- A reoccurring point in the discussion was the perception of increasing radicalisation as a result of the **state's failure to provide for the needs of all groups of the population**. A lack of resources for education, infrastructure, health care and job opportunities for every community creates a feeling of being 'left behind' in some groups. In a political atmosphere, in which the state withdraws as a provider of care and people are not properly cared for, radicalisation is able to thrive.
- One of the ways to combat extremism is to **encourage critical thinking**. Since education plays the most important role in developing critical thinking, society and government should invest more in education and make use of its possibilities to foster critical and open minds. Education needs to be more inclusive and open to every member of society.
- Neither **migrant waves** nor **xenophobic reactions** are new, but have regularly occurred in the past caused by wars, revolutions and political instability. Scientific data on migration in the US have shown that, against common belief, about half of the migrants return to their home country within 20 years. Of those who stay the overwhelming majority lives an unremarkable life and is well integrated in their host society. These patterns are similar in every migratory wave, while also the negative reactions in the receiving country repeat themselves. We can see that when comparing last year's newspaper headlines to those from the early 1990s when a wave of migration was caused by the Yugoslav wars. In order to counter xenophobia, responsible education plays a vital role.



- Young Muslims are often radicalised within just a few months through the internet. Therefore we need to be more aware of **social media** as a factor in radicalisation and use them more strategically in all counter-terrorism efforts. Governments and private companies could cooperate better, by systematically blocking the distribution of videos or posts that glorify violence. Not only young Muslims but all young people should receive better education in how to deal with social media.
- **Facilitating integration** should be actively improved. Authorities have to develop a comprehensive integration strategy with special attention to education and a more open access to labour markets.

III. Counter-terrorism measures:

- When dealing with terrorist groups like IS, one can use the **experience with the Mafia or drug gangs**. They all share substantial similarities in terms of their criminal culture and the glorification of violence. Also, they establish a closed membership base and put young people before a choice – either in or out.
- In the months to come we will have to focus closely on the issue of foreign **fighters returning** from Syria. Here, European cooperation is of key importance to early identify, observe and contact these individuals. It is crucial for the intelligence services to cooperate in dealing with returning fighters.
- The Israeli way to counter terrorism – through a very **sophisticated and intense profiling** – is not the way we should pursue in Europe. Profiling destroys fundamental rights and splits the society along ethnic lines. The price society has to pay is simply too high, especially considering that it is difficult to establish reliable data on its effectiveness to prevent terrorist attacks. Furthermore, profiling in Europe would be a very complicated task due to the already existing diversity within European societies. Any counter-terrorism effort going in the direction of profiling should be viewed with caution.

Epilogue

In light of the recent terror attacks which happened in France and Germany in the weeks after this workshop took place, the obvious conclusion is that the societal debate on how to deal with Jihadist and other forms of terrorism has only just started. (Young) Europeans as (young) people in many other parts of the world will not be able to walk away from a threat which has cruelly invaded their current lives and their future. The debate will have to be led with open minds and an awareness of the danger terrorism poses to people's lives and to the democratic values of our societies. Democracy in Europe and elsewhere will not be defeated by terrorist violence, but by our fear of it. As always, fear is a bad advisor: it kills our ability to think without bias and our will to build a future for all. Difficult times require courageous minds, not simplistic answers provided by extremists of all sorts.

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