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## **Considering strategies designed to counter radicalisation: Comparative reflections on approaches in the United Kingdom and Belgium**

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on the issue of counter radicalisation strategy, examining the efficacy and the weaknesses of policy initiatives designed to prevent violent extremism. In order to scrutinize various approaches toward combatting the problem of “radicalisation”, we compare and contrast policy and practices in the United Kingdom with counter measures adopted in Belgium. Drawing on a range of examples from these two countries, it is argued that context sensitive and situated multi-agency approaches to counter radicalization are more likely to engage individuals at risk of being drawn into violent extremism and are also less likely to (re)produce iatrogenic effects. Our analysis suggests that, in order to fully understanding what may ostensibly be perceived as individual proclivities toward violence, the role of structural, institutional and environmental factors is significant. We posit that these factors need to be given greater credence in both explanations for “extremism” and processes and practices implemented to reduce the risk of harm.

### **Key words**

Counter radicalisation strategy; extremism; terrorism; prevent

### **Resumen**

Este artículo se centra en la estrategia contra la radicalización, examinando la eficacia y los puntos débiles de las iniciativas políticas diseñadas para prevenir el extremismo violento. A fin de analizar varios abordajes para combatir el problema de la “radicalización”, comparamos y contrastamos políticas y prácticas del Reino Unido con

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contramedidas adoptadas en Bélgica. Utilizando ejemplos de ambos países, argumentamos que, para contrarrestar la radicalización, los abordajes de multiagencia adaptados al contexto tienen mayores probabilidades de atraer personas en riesgo de ser atraídas por el extremismo violento, y también tienen menores probabilidades de (re)producir efectos iatrogénicos. Nuestro análisis insinúa que, para comprender totalmente lo que puede ser percibido como proclividades individuales hacia la violencia, es significativo el papel de factores estructurales, institucionales y ambientales. Aducimos que se debería dar más peso a esos factores a la hora de explicar el “extremismo” y los procesos y prácticas aplicados para reducir el riesgo de daños.

### **Palabras clave**

Estrategia contra la radicalización; extremismo; terrorismo; prevención

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of religious and politically motivated violence is longstanding and has a broad and deep history (see Gearty 2000, Vertigans 2011, Walklate and Mythen 2015, Wight 2015). Over the last two decades, the primary focus of State security and intelligence efforts in Western nations have been oriented toward the threat of Islamist extremism. Since the 9/11 attacks, individuals and groups inspired by radical Islamism have committed attacks across the globe, notably in Bali, Belgium, France, Germany, Spain, Turkey and the UK. Several countries have also suffered serious attacks by individuals motivated by right wing and racist ideologies, as exemplified by critical incidents in New Zealand, Norway and the United States (see Allen *et al.* 2019, Spence 2020). In addition to deploying coercive means of combatting terrorism and introducing rafts of legislation formally designed to curb the threat of terrorism, many nation states impacted by terrorism have implemented policies designed to prevent the process of “radicalisation”, commonly associated with religious and politically motivated violence. In Europe, North America and Oceania, domestic strategies for countering radicalisation have largely been oriented toward tackling proclivities toward violent extremism through intensified modes of surveillance and preventive interventions. Such initiatives – typified by the *Prevent* Strategy in the UK – have specifically targeted young people at risk and sought to intervene at an individual level in order to encourage changes in patterns of thought, political values and religious beliefs (Qurashi 2018). From the outset, it should be noted that the foundational assumptions underpinning such approaches that seek to transform and/or correct individual ideas and values are partial, in that they largely elide the material conditions in which individuals are rooted and their lived experiences and interactions with(in) institutional contexts (see Heath-Kelly 2017, Mythen *et al.* 2017). Such critical observations notwithstanding, a range of concerns have been expressed about the iatrogenic effects of risk-based counter radicalisation measures such as *Prevent* on individuals, communities and the broader democratic ethos (see Qureshi 2017, Modood and Meer 2019, Pilkington and Acik 2020). In other countries – such as Belgium and Denmark – increasing attention in policy-making circles has been directed toward local contexts of action and the positive potential of building resilience, both amongst young people considered to be susceptible to radicalisation and communities that are impacted by terrorism (see Lindekilde 2013, Parker *et al.* 2017).

In this article we wish firstly to document some of the deleterious consequences arising out of the implementation of the *Prevent* strategy in the UK. Second, drawing comparisons with counter radicalisation practices being implemented in Belgium, we go on to explore alternatives to risk-focused counter-terrorism measures, questioning whether more locally grounded, materially focused approaches may have greater utility for those engaged by them and also whether context sensitive approaches could be more effective in addressing the broader problem of religious and politically motivated violence (see Hussain *et al.* 2020). We begin by providing a capsule account of the objectives of *Prevent*, before bringing to the surface several problems that have been associated with the UK Government’s longstanding counter radicalisation strategy. In particular, we intend to highlight some of the harmful impacts of *Prevent* interventions on young British Muslims, a “target” group that have been disproportionately subjected to them (see CAGE 2013, Ahmed 2017, Mythen 2020). In the final third of the paper, we share some preliminary observations from an empirical study in which modes of

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countering “violent radicalisation” were discussed in interviews with practitioners involved in multi-agency teams working in several Belgium municipalities (see Baillergeau 2018). In so doing, we wish to explore the potential of alternative, locally grounded, mediation-based approaches in disrupting journeys that may otherwise eventuate in violent extremism.

## 2. Counter-radicalisation in the United Kingdom: The *Prevent* Strategy

CONTEST constitutes the UK’s overarching approach to combatting terrorism. It operates under four branches which are designed to be complimentary and intended to provide a holistic response to the threat of terrorism (HM Government 2011). The four work-streams that comprise CONTEST are commonly referred to by security practitioners and policy analysts as the “four Ps”: Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare. These elements have distinct but complimentary objectives as follows:

- Pursue – to stop terrorist attacks;
- Prepare – where we cannot stop an attack, to mitigate its impact;
- Protect – to strengthen our overall protection against terrorist attacks;
- Prevent – to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremists (HM Government 2008).

While the various dimensions of CONTEST have been subjected to critical scrutiny, the *Prevent* strategy in particular has provoked notable criticism from a diverse range of actors and agencies (see Heath-Kelly 2017, Thomas 2017, Mythen *et al.* 2020, Dodd 2020).

As formulated in government policy, *Prevent* seeks to combat the threat of terrorism through early identification of individuals that may be prone to radicalisation (Home Office 2011). As such, the strategy is geared towards intervening to support people at risk of affiliating with extremist groups that may subsequently go on to be involved in politically or religiously motivated violence. At inception, the *Prevent* strategy comprised five overarching objectives and included ambitions to enhance community cohesion. The five original objectives were as follows:

- challenging the violent extremist ideology and supporting mainstream voices;
- disrupting those who promote violent extremism and supporting the institutions where they are active;
- supporting individuals who are being targeted and recruited to the cause of violent extremism;
- increasing the resilience of communities to violent extremism;
- addressing the grievances that ideologues are exploiting (HM Government 2008).

However, in 2011, following on from a phase of UK Government departmental restructuring, the original community cohesion priorities were formally migrated out of the strategy and a revised version – which remains current – was put in place. In its present iteration, the three central objectives of *Prevent* are as follows:

- To respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat posed by those who promote it.

- To prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.
- To work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation that need to be addressed (Home Office 2011, 7).

While the strategy is formally designed to combat all forms of violent extremism, post the 7/7 attacks in London, the implementation of *Prevent* concentrated primarily on the threat presented by radical Islamism (see Mythen *et al.* 2017, Massoumi *et al.* 2019a). To this end, various initiatives were rolled out with the expressed intention of challenging forms of religious belief that promote violence and encouraging “moderate” theological approaches (see Department for Communities and Local Government 2007, O’Toole 2015). To this end, and in line with the first objective above, the terrain of counter terrorism strategy has been predominantly focussed on ideational as opposed to material problems and issues. Whilst various internal disputes surfaced between government departments charged with delivering *Prevent* (see Ratcliffe 2012, Thomas 2017), more serious rifts became apparent as the strategy progressed in practice, including accusations of discrimination against Muslim minority groups, damage to community relations and the exacerbation of cleavages between the police and ethnic minority populations primarily targeted by the strategy (see Dodd 2009, Travis 2011, Mythen *et al.* 2013, Mythen 2020). Whilst ostensibly geared toward safeguarding “vulnerable” individuals, the *Prevent* strategy functions, in effect, as a programme of surveillance which invites reporting of “suspicious activity” (see Massoumi *et al.* 2019b). In practice, referrals to local *Prevent* bodies are made by either professionals in working contexts – e.g. in schools, universities and hospitals – or by concerned members of the public. Referrals to *Prevent* are subsequently passed on to designated police service leads who decide whether there is sufficient evidence that the individual identified as exhibiting problematic behaviour is vulnerable to radicalisation. If affirmed, cases are then referred to “Channel panels” that formally assess whether further intervention is required and, if so, which support services should be mobilised to provide that support. Channel panels are police led, chaired by a representative of the local authority and include professional experts such as youth workers, social workers, doctors and religious leaders (see Home Office 2015b). Promoted as a multi-agency initiative, the formal objective of Channel panels is to protect vulnerable people by identifying potential harm, assessing the nature and extent of risk and developing appropriate mentorship and support plans for individuals at risk (see Home Office 2015b). The content of the mentorship and support provided varies from case to case, but includes aspects such as assistance with education or career advice, managing mental or emotional health issues and theological or ideational coaching. The logic underpinning Channel is thus tightly aligned with the broader *Prevent* strategy and geared toward making pre-emptive intercessions prior to an offence occurring. The mode of evaluating risk by Channel panels within the *Prevent* strategy has proven to be highly controversial and, as we shall go on to argue, potentially problematizes and criminalizes what appear to be everyday practices and processes associated with adolescent socialization.

Risk assessment within Channel panels is performed with reference to a “Vulnerability Assessment Framework” (VAF). The VAF is a risk assessment tool designed to gauge three key factors: *engagement* with a group cause or ideology; *capability* to cause harm and *intent*. This framework itself is underpinned by UK Government approved *Extremism Risk Guidance*, known colloquially as ERG 22+ (see Webster *et al.* 2017).

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*Extremism Risk Guidance* outlines 22 factors that should be considered in assessing vulnerability to extremism. Thirteen of these factors are associated with *engagement*, including excitement; comradeship or adventure; transitional periods and a search for identity, meaning and belonging. Three factors are indexed to *capability*, which are individual knowledge, skills and competencies; access to networks and funding or equipment. Six factors are measured under *intent* to cause harm, including over-identification with a group, cause or ideology and “them” and “us” thinking. Clearly, the correlations between exhibiting such factors and expressing extremist views – never mind engaging in serious violence – are far from joined up. Whilst intended as a practical assessment tool, it is questionable whether many of the factors measured by the *Extremism Risk Guidance* are reliable indicators of risk, as such. A report by Rights Watch UK (Edmeades 2016) into the implementation of *Prevent* in schools is instructive in this regard: “a student studying engineering or chemistry, or wearing dress traditionally associated with a Muslim-majority community, or doing better/worse at school, discloses no link with any matter of extremism or terrorist ideology. Accordingly, were decision-makers to faithfully following the *Prevent* guidance on indicators of vulnerability, the potential exists for over-referral without justification” (Edmeades 2016, 14). Aside from the oblique rationale for identifying risk factors, what is most troubling here is the way in which frameworks that are not adequately supported by robust empirical evidence – nor tested before application – have been deployed to direct interventions which have serious repercussions for those impacted by them, in particular young people. To cite one pertinent example, the ERG 22+ risk factors were referred to as evidence in relation to the behaviour of a young person in a court case - *A Minor, Brighton and Hove Council v Mother X, Father Y* - which involved removing them from parental custody into care as a consequence of concerns about radicalisation:

The Vulnerability Assessment Framework encourages the agencies of protection to look at whether the young person has a need for identity, meaning and belonging; a desire for status and a desire for excitement and adventure. (*Y (A Minor: Wardship)*, 2015)

While elements of this case may suggest that the young person involved was indeed at risk of being adversely influenced, the use of certain elements of the Vulnerability Assessment Framework as court evidence is problematic. In effect, what may, to some at least, appear to be common elements of adolescent journeys from youth into adulthood, have the capacity to be institutionally recast as ominous “risk factors” that can influence decision making within the criminal justice system. Drilling down to the operationalization of ERG 22+ – and aside from the dubious character of some of its elements – the decisions of Channel panels are not determined by reliable quantitative assessment. As a report commissioned by the human rights charity CAGE (2018, 27) suggests: “items are not scored – more factors does not mean higher engagement or higher intent or higher capability. Therefore, if one factor is identified and professional judgment ascertains that the risk is significant, but the protective factors are not substantial, singular risk factors could lead to Channel and *Prevent* referrals”. Here there is significant scope for unconscious bias and “groupthink” within panels, with subjective judgements potentially influencing outcomes. Aside from the processual problems, their appears to be a highly delayed – but creeping – recognition that the threat presented by far-right groups is serious and has previously been overlooked. Despite a palpable historical concentration on Muslims, it is notable that of *Prevent* cases referred on to

Channel panels in 2019–2020, 43% related to right wing extremism compared to 30% that were connected to Islamist radicalisation (Grierson and Sabbagh 2020).

In addition to the somewhat specious measuring of “risk” by the VAF, it is imperative to document some of the ramifications of the significant changes to the *Prevent* strategy introduced in 2015 (Home Office 2015a). At this point, the reissuing of the *Prevent* Duty Guidance incorporated a statutory responsibility for public authorities to actively enforce *Prevent* policy. This safeguarding guidance was legally formalised in statute under Section 26(1) of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, which requires that “a specified authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”. Importantly, whereas previous *Prevent* Duty Guidance required that those working in areas in which the risk of radicalisation was palpable to be watchful of individuals exhibiting behaviours that may lead to “violent extremism”, the issuing of the 2015 Duty Guidance legally responsabilized a much broader range of groups – including teachers, lecturers and child minders – to proactively report individuals at risk of both “violent” and “non-violent” extremism to local *Prevent* referral teams. Within this public sector workers were to receive training to identify signs of radicalisation. While the breadth and depth of this training is subject to scrutiny, the UK Government have claimed that over a million frontline workers – including teachers, university lecturers, doctors, nurses, youth and probation officers – have received *Prevent* training (Aked 2020, 6). The introduction of the revised Duty Guidance in 2015 thus raises to the fore a range of salient issues around the uses – and abuses – of risk as a mode of governance in this context.

In relation to issues of definition, in the *Prevent* Duty Guidance (Home Office 2015a, 7), extremism is described as “vocal or active opposition to British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs”. This definition is palpably imprecise and does not provide a sound basis for what constitute consequential and life changing interventions to be made. The rather nebulous concept of “British values” effectively renders individuals who may choose to criticize government and State institutions at risk of being labelled as “extremists”, thereby criminalizing legitimate forms of ideological opposition and political dissent. Examining the practices of State institutions and challenging legislation that is perceived as unreasonable should be considered part and parcel of routine public activity in healthy, functioning democracies. Here it should be remembered that several UK counter-terrorism measures introduced in haste have subsequently been revoked and some have been declared illegal, including control orders, detention without charge and police Section 44 stop and search powers (see Dodd 2009, Walklate and Mythen 2015). Furthermore, there have been several cases where counter-terrorism legislation has unjustly been deployed in areas in which it is wholly inappropriate. One current example of this is the surveillance, interrogation and arrest of members of the non-violent climate change activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR) under counter-terrorism legislation (Grierson *et al.* 2020). This again raises to the fore the issue of how “extremism” is being defined and who it is that gets to determine what is deemed to be ideologically problematic. It is worth noting at this juncture that a leaked counter terrorism police report formally listed XR as a promoter of extremist ideologies, alongside groups such as National Action and al-Muhajiroun (see Dodd 2020). In particular, the report urges referrals to *Prevent* of young people who support the



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ecological values of XR. The report states: “Anti-establishment philosophy that seeks system change underlies its activism; the group attracts to its events school-age children unlikely to be aware of this. While non-violent against persons, the campaign encourages other law-breaking activities” (Dodd 2020, 16). Given the overwhelming evidence that radical changes in lifestyles, production and consumption are urgently required to address the climate emergency – and disregarding whether or not one supports the methods of activism deployed by XR – labelling the group as extremist and seeking to intervene in cases where individuals show support for its values is as ill-judged as it is misguided.

Returning to the introduction of the *Prevent* Duty Guidance in 2015, what has been remarkable is the sharp rise in the overall number of referrals made. From April 2015 to March 2016, 7,631 referrals were lodged, with a slightly lower number of 6,093 being reported from April 2016 to March 2017 (Home Office 2018). These statistics from the period post the revised *Prevent* Duty Guidance can be contrasted with figures from the period directly before of 3,955 in 2014–15 and 1,681 in 2013–14 (see Halliday 2016). The obvious question to ask here is whether these statistical patterns signal an escalation in the scale of the terrorist threat, or whether the sizeable rise in referrals is connected to heightened vigilance in public bodies rendered legally responsible for alerting the authorities to individuals believed to be at risk of extremism. Given the professional risks of “missing” cases of radicalisation, the danger of over-reporting as a direct consequence of the 2015 Duty Guidance is tangible. Further, it is highly likely that some public sector workers may have reproduced cultural stereotypes regarding groups and individuals afflicted with terrorism and extremism. In such instances, practitioners may “become more likely to slip into practices that both exacerbate structural racism and expand surveillance in ways that could seriously constrain free speech and undermine human rights” (Busher and Jerome 2020, 165).

It is notable that the number of young people being referred to *Prevent* has also risen sharply, with over a third of referrals post the introduction of the 2015 Duty Guidance coming from schools and colleges (see Travis 2017). Statistics obtained under freedom of information laws by the *Observer* show that 624 children under six have been referred to *Prevent* from 2016 to 2019. During the same time frame, over 1,400 children aged between six and nine were also referred to the scheme (see Stein and Townsend 2021). The volume of referrals made by public bodies since the introduction of the *Prevent* Duty Guidance (Home Office 2015a), particularly from nurseries, schools and colleges is a cause of concern. The responsabilisation of millions of members of the public in various forms of employment – who may not ultimately be best prepared nor trained to make accurate, granular decisions about risk in a large-scale national surveillance exercise – is nothing short of astounding (see Massoumi *et al.* 2019a, Mythen *et al.* 2020). Furthermore, with regards to whether those legally bound to report suspicious and/or vulnerable individuals are suitably qualified to do so, it has been pointed out that formal *Prevent* training is patchy across sectors, with low uptake rates being reported (see James 2018). This brings to the surface the thorny question of whether referrals are actually being made on the basis of sound evidence or misguided suspicion. To this end, it is worth considering just how few referrals lead to subsequent intervention and meaningful rehabilitative action. As Aked (2020, 9) points out: “just a small fraction – between 5–10% of all *Prevent* referrals – are deemed to warrant ‘Channel’ intervention. This means

that at least 90–95% of referrals were, even in the eyes of the police, false positives”. Indubitably, there have been a series of cases – well publicized in the media – where the evidence for referral has been extremely questionable (see Quinn 2016). These include reports of referrals of children as young as three years old in circumstances where there is no discernible evidence that would indicate risk of adopting extremist views (see Khaleeli 2015). The production of false positives and false negatives and a climate of over referral not only produces micro level effects, it also impacts at the macro level on civil liberties and public safety (see Robinson 2016, 20). Within the health service, while there was variation between different regional trusts, the “false positive” rates – measured as the proportion of Prevent referrals not leading to Channel interventions – ranged from 98% to 58% (Aked 2020, 5). Out of 7,631 individuals referred between April 2015 and March 2016, the education sector was the largest source of referrals (33%) and individuals referred under the age of 15 comprised 28% of total referrals. Of the 381 individuals that received support through the Channel programme, 108 were aged under 15 (28%). Whilst troubling *per se*, as Ahmed (2017) points out, it is important to look beyond the data: “the reality is that many *Prevent* referrals of children under 15 are linked to wider family issues and they can be referred as siblings or children of those convicted of terrorism offences. In many cases there isn’t the need for specialist mentoring intervention via Channel and mainstream support. For example, vocational or mental health services are often enough to manage vulnerability”. It is important to note that young people – and young Muslims in particular – have been inordinately affected by *Prevent* (see Aked 2020, 7). These include a thirteen year old boy reported to *Prevent* for wearing a “Free Palestine” badge and a fourteen year old who used the word “eco-terrorist” in a French class (see Khaleeli 2015). Whilst these examples may seem to border on the farcical, the detrimental consequences for young people caught up in such interventions is palpable. The parents of the child in the latter example are currently pursuing legal action, having made public the negative impacts of the intervention on his confidence, self-esteem and identity (see Grierson, 2019). Thus, while under researched at present, it is clear that *Prevent* referrals have the capacity to impact negatively on people’s physical and mental health, as well as that of their families, in both direct and indirect ways (Khaleeli 2015, Aked 2020, 6).

The assorted problems associated with the *Prevent* strategy very much relate to underlying assumptions about the process of “radicalisation” in legitimizing violent extremism. Further, the specific targeting of young people – particularly Muslim youth – is predicated on the view that terrorism is inspired by the acceptance of what the former UK Prime Minister David Cameron (2015) referred to as “warped ideologies”. While the number of referrals involving individuals suspected of being “at risk” of – or prone to – far right wing extremism has amplified in recent years, it is Muslim Minority groups that have historically borne the brunt of the surveillant tentacles of the *Prevent* strategy (see Allen *et al.* 2019, Grierson 2019, Stein and Townsend 2021). As suggested above, flawed assumptions about “risky” populations and the susceptibility of particular communities to extremism has directly driven policy and strategy. As we have argued, the implementation of erroneous assumptions in regulatory practice can generate a range of iatrogenic effects. This itself raises some important questions worthy of further exploration: What are the alternatives to pre-emptive risk-based

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interventions? How is the problem of “radicalisation” approached in countries where less individual centric and ideationally focussed policies have been practised?

### **3. Turning to Belgium: Developing context sensitive approaches to the problem of radicalisation**

In order to respond to the questions above, we wish to discuss the findings from a qualitative study conducted in 2017 and 2018 in a collection of Belgian municipalities, including Brussels, Molenbeek, Mechelen and Halle-Vilvorde (see Baillergeau 2018). Belgium is a country which has been deeply affected by politically and religiously motivated violence. As early as 2012 it became apparent that troubling numbers of Belgian citizens had enrolled as “foreign terrorist fighters” in the Middle East – with the country being thought in following years to have the highest per capita number of such recruits in Western Europe (see Traynor 2015). Several individuals that had travelled to Syria to fight with rebel groups against the Government forces of Bashar al-Assad were involved in the attacks occurring in Brussels in May 2014 and March 2016, as well as the November 2015 attacks in Paris in which 130 people were killed and over 350 injured.

In Belgium, counter-terrorism is best characterised as being directed by a criminal justice orientation, involving a multi-agency approach under the leadership of judicial authorities, with the Federal prosecutor’s offices presiding over terrorist and returnee investigations. The cornerstone of this strategy, the Belgian penal code, was adjusted in 2015 to “expand (...) the definition of what constitutes a terrorist offence and [to] lower (...) the threshold for conviction. Travelling to join a terrorist organisation abroad, providing or receiving terrorist training or funding a terrorist organisation are now considered terrorist offences” (Renard and Coolsaet 2018, 25). The parameters of terrorist offences was also adjusted to include a greater range of preparatory acts and to outlaw the provision of logistical support for those preparing terrorist attacks. The national strategy in Belgium is twinned with socio-preventive monitoring of individuals and groups at the local level, under the leadership of municipal authorities. Elsewhere in continental Europe, socio-preventive modes of monitoring have been influenced by the United Kingdom’s Prevent approach (see Lindekilde 2013, Bonelli and Ragazzi 2019). So, what of Belgium, a country known for having been a prominent contributor to the development of social crime prevention but increasingly influenced by situational crime prevention in the last decades? (see Hebberecht and Baillergeau 2012) Whilst approaches toward counter radicalisation vary within the country, recent research conducted with practitioners in a collection of Belgian municipalities indicate that there are alternative ways of engaging with the problem in the round that extend beyond the narrow risk focussed approach furthered in the *Prevent* strategy (Baillergeau 2018). Prior to discussing what some of these alternatives look like, it is first worth contextualising the study and providing a capsule account of the methods adopted. The overall objectives of the research project were to explore the ways in which frontline social and educational professionals conceived of some of the problems and issues of implementing counter-terrorism policies in the round and how they understood their more specific role in countering radicalisation in practice. Carried out between October 2017 and June 2018, the method was inspired by the “thick description” methodology advocated by Geertz (1973) and popularised by Paul Willis (1977). Engagement across the spectrum consisted of a sequence of two phases of in-depth interviews with frontline social and educational

professionals engaged in counter-terrorism (N=17+4) and participant observations conducted in professional contexts of dialogue, largely seminars and panel discussions involving Belgium-based professionals active in the area of counter radicalisation. These groups of professionals included, *inter alia*, youth welfare and support officers, community mediators and community support “street corner workers” involved with the implementation of various methods of engaging with individuals, families and communities where the risk of violent extremism was tangible. In particular, the research sought to explore practices utilised within “counter-radicalisation units”, primarily established in areas where sizeable numbers of young Muslims had travelled to be involved in armed combat in conflict zones in the Middle East. These counter-radicalisation units were designed to address a variety of circumstances and situations in which parents, teachers and youth workers had expressed concerns about particular individuals. The units also have responsibility for engaging with those convicted of “minor” terrorism offences, such as publicly celebrating violent extremism and interfacing with returnees from areas of military combat. In contrast with the formalised assessment architecture used in the *Prevent* strategy – such as the VAF – in all instances, assessment was situational and conducted on a case-by-case. Thus, rather than applying a specific risk based metric formula, contemplation and decision making took place in a deliberative manner and was sensitive to the biographies and material lived experience of the individual being considered. In addition, a relatively wide range of professionals were involved in the process, including social and legal scientists, social workers, psychologists and criminologists.

In comparison with the individual and ideationally oriented UK *Prevent* strategy, approaches observed in the municipalities in Belgium tended to be more sensitive to local cultures and contexts of action, with complex situation assessments being conducted. Furthermore, practices and processes of intervention were focally oriented around the principle of social mediation, with a variety of forms of engagement and conflict resolution being used. What was also noteworthy was the consideration made regarding not only the individual referred, but also the nature and the source of referral. While *Prevent* has been hampered by a huge number of erroneous or unnecessary referrals – estimated by CAGE (2018) to be circa 90% – the multi-agency teams in Belgium began discussions by considering in detail the source and credibility of the referral, whether it be made by a teacher, family member, friend or someone more distant from the individual. A further difference that we observed was the ways in which practitioners involved in multi-agency interventions were acutely aware of the potential for stigma to be attached to individuals and families, with concerted attempts being made to both address this and mitigate against it. As recounted previously, individuals that voluntarily go through the Channel programme within *Prevent* do have the possibility of receiving ideational mentoring designed to change their values, the approaches used in Belgium afforded greater recognition of a variety of factors – in addition to inculcation of extremist ideas – that may be involved in shaping a person’s journey toward extremism. Bluntly put, while the aspirations of *Prevent* appear to be oriented towards micro-managing the individual, in Belgium interventions with young people took due account of both meso and macro factors. Rather than being based on the assumption that terrorist activity is driven solely by ideology – resulting from religious and/or politically based indoctrination – interventions in Belgium were more

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sensitive to both structural factors that may be significant – such as inequality, education and employment – which were comprehensively analysed. Hence the objectives of professionals involved in counter-radicalisation efforts in Belgium appear to stretch beyond simply neutralising potentially dangerous individuals who may have the capacity to be violent. Rather, multi-agency units also seek to address problems of frustration, alienation and social exclusion experienced by young people who may be prone to being caught up in complicated and compromising situations. To this end, various forms of communication and mediation were used to support individuals and their relatives in managing conflicts and emotions in a variety of contexts, such as at school, work and within family settings.

While potentially offering a more progressive approach to countering radicalisation, there are some caveats that need to be mentioned at this juncture. First, the context-sensitive approaches we observed in Belgium are utilised unevenly across the country. While such approaches are commonly in use in both French-speaking and Flemish-speaking parts of the country, not all Belgian municipalities have prioritised context-sensitive responses. Second, context-sensitive approaches themselves co-exist alongside more traditional risk-focused modes of prevention. Nonetheless, in the municipalities in which we discussed professional processes and practices with practitioners, the former were used as often as possible and the former only as a last resort. Of course, it is impossible to measure the relative success or otherwise of the context sensitive, structurally focussed approaches above in preventing young people from being involved in political or religiously motivated violence. Nonetheless, it would seem that a deeper and more honest appreciation of the full range of social, cultural, and economic factors that may nudge young people toward life journeys involving such forms of violence is more likely to yield positive outcomes and less likely to generate iatrogenic effects. Whilst we do not wish to suggest that such approaches can act as a panacea to what remains a complex and multi-faceted problem, it is highly probable that context sensitive approaches that take seriously young people's motivations for engaging with extremist ideologies and attempt to better appreciate their habitus, social networks and cultural milieu are both preferable and stand a better chance of being effective than net casting mass interventionist policy initiatives, such as *Prevent*.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Whilst it is incumbent upon those involved in government – both globally, nationally and regionally – to make concerted efforts to combat violent extremism, such efforts have to be informed, considered and subject to change in instances of inoperability or iatrogenic effect (see Mythen and Walklate 2016). In comparing practices in the municipalities in Belgium with the UK, it appears that a blanket approach runs the risk of being ineffectual. Furthermore, “one size fits all” approaches such as *Prevent* elide the salient structural factors that are often important factors in steering individuals toward violence. In concentrating on inculcation of ideas, the material and historical factors that are often significant in shaping both the biographies and the lived experiences of those prone to flirting with problematic values and beliefs become obscured. The tangible risk is that the impacts of poverty, familial disruption, exposure to violence and abuse, mental health issues, social marginalization and institutional discrimination become muted at the same time as the volume around grooming and exposure to “warped

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ideologies” becomes raised. Regrettably, the “modelling” of radicalisation in many countries impacted by terrorism has, up to press, focussed too strongly on the vulnerabilities of the individual and not sufficiently on the underlying and systemic factors that may nudge individuals toward seeing violence as a viable means of venting anger or frustration and seeking means of retribution. As Hussain and his colleagues (2020, 1) posit: “pathways into extremism are highly diverse, situational and not explicable through a single model. It follows that interventions to prevent or stem radicalisation must also be multiple, individually honed and context sensitive”. The evidence regarding the effects of the UK *Prevent* strategy indicates that it is a decidedly blunt tool and one which impacts particularly badly on specific ethnic groups. As Aked (2015, 5) observes, “the negative impacts of false positive Prevent referrals, including on physical and mental health, confidentiality and trust, are felt disproportionately by minority groups, which risks worsening existing health inequalities”. At a broader level, the association of Muslims with terrorism – which is rendered both implicit and explicit – in the Prevent Strategy segueways into negative characterisations and the tandem othering of Muslim minority groups in political, social and cultural aspects of life (see Abbas 2020).

The findings of this article suggest that further research is required into the efficacy of counter terrorism policies in general and counter radicalisation strategies specifically. Further, it is important that transparent and accountable evaluation of the effectiveness of such policies should take place processually within the institutions responsible for its delivery. For example, the implementation of the *Prevent* strategy in the UK costs in excess of £40 million pounds per year, yet the strategy has never been subject to independent evaluation and there is no solid basis to suggest that it reduces the risk of terrorism (see Heath-Kelly 2017, Aked 2020). Aside from iterative reflection on security policies and practices, it is important that policies and strategies are based on reliable evidence and based on a broad rather than a narrow understanding of security (see Mythen *et al.* 2013). As the experiences of those impacted by erroneous or unnecessary Prevent referrals show, macro level security seeking can lead to insecurity for individuals and groups caught up in the surveillance net (Mythen and Walklate 2016). Further, there is a need to address and broach some of the underlying, long-term determinants of violence (Aked 2020, 7). Further research into the potentialities of mediated dialogue approaches to engage those adopting problematic views (see Hussain *et al.* 2020), alongside wider experimentation with the kinds of context sensitive interfaces adopted within some municipalities in Belgium would seem to be make for a constructive way forward.

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