STUDENTS AS SUSPECTS?

The challenges of counter-radicalisation policies in education in the Council of Europe member states

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Interim report

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Foreword

In my 3rd Annual Report, *State of democracy, human rights and the rule of law – A security imperative for Europe* (2016), I declared my intention to develop a "safe spaces" education initiative around teaching controversial issues. The purpose was to make the classroom once again a place where everyone's rights are upheld, where freedom of expression can flourish and, perhaps most importantly, to ensure that controversial opinions are not driven underground to develop – and perhaps take root – away from the light of public scrutiny and open debate.

The publication *Students as suspects? – The challenges of counter-radicalisation policies in education in the Council of Europe member states* sets out recent practice and evidence from the education sector. In considering the effects of counter-terrorism policies in education, it presents the challenges facing teachers in encouraging the necessary debate and poses a number of important questions. For example, could policies designed to identify and prevent radicalisation inadvertently undermine the very social cohesion they aim to preserve? What are the issues facing educators and students and their families? Do counter-terrorism policies give rise to contradictory demands on educators, asking them to build social cohesion and resilience while at the same time requiring them to employ a logic of suspicion in spotting potential radicals? Can this contradictory mission challenge key principles of human rights and fundamental freedoms, notably education for democratic citizenship and human rights education?

This publication, useful in its own right, will now also serve as the basis for a new Council of Europe education flagship initiative entitled Democratic Schools: Safe Spaces for All, the aim of which is to assist education professionals and school communities as a whole.

From 2018, the initiative should contribute to establishing open, inclusive and safe learning environments in education systems across Council of Europe member states.

Thorbjørn Jagland

Secretary General of the Council of Europe

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Abstract

Could policies aimed at preventing radicalisation in Europe end up undermining the very social cohesion they aim to preserve? Since the mid-2000s a growing number of European governments have broadened the scope of counter-terrorism as an issue that needs to be tackled by society as a whole. This report considers the effects of such policies in the education sector through a review of the existing literature on the subject. It begins by considering the issues facing educators and students and their families and goes on to show how counter-radicalisation policies make a contradictory demand on educators, asking them to build social cohesion and resilience while at the same time functioning as informants for security agencies. The report then suggests that this contradictory mission might challenge key principles of (1) human rights and fundamental freedoms; (2) education for democratic citizenship (EDC), human rights education (HRE), competences for democratic culture (CDC) and the objectives of building inclusive societies; and finally (3) the key objectives of counter-terrorism itself. The report ends with recommendations for further research and action.

Executive summary

Since the murder of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands (2004), the bombings in Madrid (2004) and in London (2005), up to the most recent attacks across Europe, governments of the Council of Europe have emphasised the need to prevent "radicalisation". Radicalisation is understood as an individual or collective recruitment into violent extremism or terrorism (Council of Europe 2015). In this light, governments have broadened the scope of counter-terrorism: traditionally defined as the remit of law-enforcement agencies, it has been reframed as a broader issue that needs to be tackled by society as a whole. Families, teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, and community and religious leaders have all been asked to participate.

There is, however, a built-in contradiction in counter-radicalisation programmes. They require that educators on the one hand "spot radicals" and report them to the authorities, and on the other build trust and social cohesion in classrooms. As a result of these policies, the rights of students and their families may be hindered. Muslims, in particular, may be treated as a "suspect community". Yet, as Council of Europe Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland has stated over the years, counter-terrorism should not come at the expense of civil liberties. Privileging security over liberty is a false solution that results in more insecurity. Several key instruments of the Council of Europe reaffirm this central idea. This report explores (1) policy frameworks in matters of education in most European countries; (2) issues faced by educators; (3) issues faced by students and their families; (4) the challenges counter-radicalisation policies may pose in terms of human rights; (5) the principles of education and inclusion; and (6) counter-terrorism efficiency. Finally, the report suggests recommendations to address these challenges.

Counter-radicalisation and the education sector

In Chapter 1, the conceptualisation of involvement in terrorism as "radicalisation" is discussed. It finds its intellectual roots in the early 2000s among security services in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The academic community is, however, suspicious of the notion, as it contradicts years of research in conflict studies and the sociology of violence. The social science literature and community also contest the scientific grounds for the establishment of indicators of radicalisation used by governments.

Grounded in security thinking, the notion allows governments to conceptualise a radicalisation process which can be prevented. From the mid-2000s, counter-radicalisation policies – also known as preventing violent extremism (PVE) or countering violent extremism (CVE) policies – have been developing in Europe, first through the initiative of the European Union (EU), then, in the mid-2010s, through the work of institutions such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (UN), which has contributed to their widespread adoption in Europe.

The current trend shows that a majority of European countries have now devised a strategy or action plan against radicalisation, with a smaller but increasing number involving the education sector. While there is a variety of approaches on how to counter radicalisation in the education sector, the literature points to some of the key issues and challenges posed to education professionals, students and their families that are shared across the member states of the Council of Europe.

Issues faced by education professionals, students and their families

In several European countries, education professionals are asked to spot radicalisation through a set of indicators, such as support for terror organisations or refusal to commemorate terror attacks, but also more mundane behavioural changes in lifestyle and critical attitudes towards authorities and the values of mainstream society. Some policies may ask educators to report students to the authorities. In the United Kingdom, they may face sanctions if they do not. Counter-radicalisation policies address issues specific to violent extremism, but also reframe more mundane aspects of student and teenage behaviour as security problems best dealt with by security professionals.

In Chapter 2, the issues faced by educational professionals are discussed. While they express the need for adequate training and advice as to how they can deal with troubling cases and situations, some resent being asked to act as agents of counter-terrorism policies and feel that police work "is not their job". They point out that the task of "spotting radicals" on the one hand, and the need to create the trust and inclusion conducive to a proper teaching activity on the other, are contradictory. They fear that the radicalisation criteria, grounded in contested scientific evidence, might lead to unjustified referrals to the authorities.

In Chapter 3, this is considered from the perspective of students and their families. The literature shows that Muslim students in Europe may face various forms of discrimination in European schools, ranging from restrictions on their clothing or religious practices to prejudice in school curricula. Counter-radicalisation policies, which predominantly focus on Islam and have affected mainly Muslim students, can contribute to discrimination against these students by perceiving them as "potential terrorists". As a result, Muslim students and their families may feel treated as a "suspect community" and may perceive schools as confrontational spaces where they might be exposed to discrimination, restriction of freedom of expression and attacks on their privacy.

Challenges to human rights, principles of education and counter-terrorism objectives

Some aspects of counter-radicalisation policies, as they are currently implemented or discussed in the Council of Europe member states, appear to be set on three interrelated collision courses with certain aspects of the fundamental principles of

human rights that form the basis of the Council of Europe's policy, with some of the Council of Europe's key principles of education for democratic citizenship and human rights education (EDC/HRE) and with the objectives of preventing terrorism in the long run.

In Chapter 4, the review of the relevant literature, while not providing a legal analysis of counter-radicalisation policies, highlights some key elements of the relevant legal instruments that might be challenged. It shows that counter-radicalisation policies in the education sector may not always make the best interest of the child a "primary consideration" and may infringe on the right to education. Freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the right to preserve one's identity, as well as the right to freedom from discrimination and the right to respect for private and family life, may be affected or unduly restricted by certain forms of implementation of counter-radicalisation policies. Finally, key elements of protection in matters of juvenile justice can be affected when intelligence collected through counter-radicalisation in schools is used as justification for administrative and judicial measures.

In Chapter 5, upon reviewing the Council of Europe principles of education for democratic citizenship, human rights education, competences for democratic culture (CDC) and the objective of "building inclusive societies", the report finds that counter-radicalisation policies might come into contradiction with some of its key principles. Such policies might indeed be interpreted as a move to "narrow" the scope of education, thereby conflicting with some of the key values promoted by the Council of Europe in that regard. Among the key principles are the following:

- *Education is a transformative process*. Criticising the status quo and questioning established values can be a key principle of education for democratic life, grounded in the valuing of human dignity and rights, as well as the development of critical skills.
- *Schools should be safe and free learning environments*. Providing quality education means that schools should be spaces for experiencing democracy and freedom of expression in a critical fashion. The competences of respect and tolerance of ambiguity cannot be developed in an environment in which educators are required to spot and report certain opinions or behaviours.
- *Education should be based on diversity*. Promoting intercultural dialogue against racism and discrimination and improving knowledge about all cultures, which allows pupils to learn to value cultural diversity, openness to cultural otherness and respect, cannot take place in an environment that considers a section of the population a priori suspect.
- *Teachers are seen as role models*. They cannot be considered as role models for democratic education if they are perceived to be discriminating against a category of students.

In the final chapter, Chapter 6, the report considers counter-radicalisation policies in the education sector from an instrumental perspective of counter-terrorism goals and objectives. It finds that these policies attribute to educators the functions of collecting intelligence, neutralising narratives and generating social cohesion. There

is, however, a key contradiction between the task of detection and the task of building trust. Trust and confidentiality are a key condition for the exercise of "helping professions" such as social work and education work. Yet counter-radicalisation policies force professionals to undermine these relations of trust, which may ultimately delegitimise them in the eyes of their students. This outcome can have counterproductive consequences in terms of intelligence collection and, more importantly, might generate more resentment and exclusion, which in turn might fuel radicalisation.

In the concluding section, it is pointed out that, in many respects, the problems covered under the label of "countering radicalisation and violent extremism" may not be new problems, but a reformulation of old issues that educators, both in schools and sites of informal education, are regularly dealing with. Of course, the emergence of terror groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as the rise of populism and violent ideologies, constitute a specific category of challenges to students, their families and education professionals. For the most part, teachers, educators and youth workers are well equipped to deal with the problems of radicalisation. The policy move could, however, have counterproductive effects for human rights, for education and for counter-terrorism itself.

Recommendations

Taking stock of the current state of the debates, this section outlines suggestions for ways the Council of Europe might take action to counter radicalisation and violent extremism in the education sector. We are currently at the very early stages of a process that will concern more and more of the Council of Europe member states. Yet many initiatives have already been developed that can benefit the collective reflection. The key areas for further reflection are the following:

1. How can radicalisation be tackled while preserving the autonomy of the education sector?

As this report has shown, a central challenge of the implementation of counter-radicalisation policies in the education sector is the tension built into the policies between logics of suspicion and logics of trust. On the one hand, educators are asked to detect and report. On the other, they require trust to carry out their work and to foster social cohesion. While this tension exists in the mission given to educators, it also translates into uneasy relations with the security sector. Education professionals are eager to help prevent terrorism. Yet many resent being considered as aides to the security services. One of the key issues is, therefore, the question of the autonomy of the education sector. This translates into key practical questions:

- How can autonomous methods to deal with issues of radicalisation be developed that empower rather than undermine the position of educators?
- What relations can be developed with the security sector so that, on the one hand, trust relations with students and the rights of students are not jeopardised and, on the other, the legitimacy of educators and the effectiveness of their role in the prevention policies are preserved?

2. How can radicalisation be tackled while preserving the principles of human rights, education for democratic citizenship/human rights education and the competences for democratic culture?

As the report has shown, regardless of their effectiveness, one unintended consequence of counter-radicalisation policies in the education sector is that they may hinder the principles of human rights, education for democratic citizenship/human rights education and the principles contained in the competences for democratic culture. This not only infringes upon the rights of students, it may prove counterproductive for counter-radicalisation efforts, as it reinforces grievances among students and undermines trust in state institutions. This issue translates into the following key practical questions:

- How can issues be tackled that are not per se related to radicalisation (racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, social exclusion) but which might be facilitating conditions for radicalisation?
- How can mechanisms be developed to tackle radicalisation that do not reinforce issues of discrimination and breach of trust, and instead make it possible to de-escalate the possible tensions between students and education professionals?
- How can safe discussion environments be provided to address controversial issues around religion, discrimination, exclusion or foreign policy, while educating according to the core principles of EDC/HRE and their limits (such as hate speech, discrimination, violent ideologies)? In other words, how can the defence of the principle of free speech be reconciled with the idea that hate speech is not tolerated?

3. How can training for education professionals be addressed?

As this report has shown, in most member states of the Council of Europe, counter-radicalisation policies in the education sector are recent. Training for education staff raises important challenges. First, the assumption of many training programmes, namely that radical individuals can be "spotted" through external signs, is scientifically flawed and needs to be rethought while nevertheless providing tools for educators to identify problems. Second, governments are still developing the logistics of the training, such as content and methods, resulting sometimes in disappointing experiences for education professionals. Finally, training is not always in line with the human rights and EDC/HRE values that are key to successful counter-radicalisation programmes. The challenges here are therefore as follows:

- How can methods be developed to identify individuals that might require attention without resorting to external signs of religiosity or key behavioural changes? Is the identification of radicalised individuals possible?
- Can the Council of Europe, in partnership with member states and international organisations, develop training materials that support member states in addressing issues linked to radicalisation while avoiding the pitfalls identified in this report?

4. What is the next step?

On the one hand, European and international professionals and expert networks have accumulated and shared key insights into challenges and best practices at the