



Reaching the heights for the rights of the child

Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2016-2021

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Statements

Ms Sevinj Fataliyeva

General Rapporteur on Children

**Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
(absent)**

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for inviting me to speak at the present session where the issue of radicalisation of children (according to the UN definition up to the age of 18) shall be explored from complementary perspectives. I am profoundly shocked that this issue has once again become such headline news with the latest terrorist attacks against innocent people on 22 March in Brussels, and would like to express my deepest sympathy for the Belgian people and Mr De Vos here present.

As Parliamentary Assembly rapporteur on “Preventing the radicalisation of children by fighting the root causes” I would like to inform you on the main messages that I would like to see sent to national parliaments and governments after our Assembly’s plenary debate in Strasbourg on 19 April next.

I very much appreciate that this morning’s discussion is moderated by Bernard De Vos, a great expert on the subject matter who has been heard by my Committee last year and helped us



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formulate some of our policy recommendations. I also appreciate the presence of Mr Janecek on behalf of the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Terrorism (Codexter).

Whilst, in my own report, I focus on what I call the “endogenous”, thus home-made root causes of the radicalisation of children and young people, I count on him to inform us what action needs to be taken to tackle the “exogenous” causes .

Children and young people – I am convinced that we must look at both categories together because there is a continuum of children developing into young people - have always been sensitive and vulnerable to radical ideas and discourse. Often starting with the stage of identity-building during their early teenage years, they are naturally attracted by radical ideas because they want to change the world. We have seen this many times in European history, linked to both political and religious movements. However, we cannot deny that the processes of radicalisation we are currently observing are mostly caused by Islamist terrorist organisations, such as Daesh. They are specific and deserve our special attention. In my report, I therefore take a closer look at them to find out what specific policy measures are needed to prevent children from being drawn into radical Islamist movements and to de-radicalise and rehabilitate them once they have been in touch with such organisations.

As Mr De Vos often describes it against his local experience from Brussels, processes of religious radicalisation are regularly kicked off by feelings of frustration because adolescents or young people, often of Muslim-Arabic background, do not find their social purpose and a meaningful place in society, even when their families have been living in a country for several generations. Frustration generated by the fact that they are discriminated against in the educational system, in their access to good schools and training courses, and their access to the labour market and decent jobs later on. In such situations, where children and young people feel some form of social exclusion, radical ideology may serve as a “life-jacket” seemingly lifting them up.

In many cases, facing discrimination and intolerance, frustration is coupled with feelings of anger, making young people even more vulnerable and increasing their willingness to engage in violent acts or conflicts, either by committing smaller crimes locally, or in the most extreme cases, by becoming foreign fighters in distant conflicts, such as in Syria or Iraq, or even agreeing to kill themselves as “suicide bombers”. Many other factors for the radicalisation of children and young people could be added, but I will not have the time to explore them all here. I would just like to underline that the Internet and social media, as well as prisons where young offenders meet, are particularly sensitive places for spreading radical ideas and recruiting young people to extremist causes, so specific measures will certainly be needed here. A reinforcing factor for Islamist radicalism is the increasing intolerance and discrimination against young Muslims, in particular in Western societies, sometimes reaching levels of true “Islamophobia”. Coming from a predominantly Muslim country myself, I must underline that the current Islamist movements and terrorist attacks have nothing to do with the absolute majority of peaceful Muslims across the world who do not appreciate such “abuse” of their religion and condemn violent terrorist acts.

Let me share with you some of my policy recommendations aimed at preventing the radicalisation of children and young people in the long-term (and next to any urgent measures to be taken against recently observed terrorists):

Social inclusion is the key word ! To provide children with a meaningful place in society, we need to take care of them from an early age onwards. This necessarily makes education and training key tools for reaching out to them, for providing them with equal opportunities from the very start, and for allowing them to access decent and satisfying jobs later on in life. European values may also be conveyed to them via specific training courses.

Experts are convinced that specially trained reference persons are needed in many contexts: to work with children in their families directly – individually, through associations and religious communities – and in detention centres.

A special focus is needed on social media where most of the radical ideas are spread at high speed and without being controlled all the time (due to the mass of information disseminated).

To learn more about what the Parliamentary Assembly will say on this issue, do not hesitate to follow our debate via live-stream on 19 March next, and discover our Resolution to be adopted to European parliaments and governments.

Dear colleagues, the radicalisation of children and young people is an abuse of their innocence and their good will in fighting for apparently “good causes”. We therefore need to fight it by all means, but always in respect of other fundamental rights (such as freedom of expression, data protection and others).

We need to make sure that, in all our countries, children and young people of any ethnic or religious background have equal opportunities, receive the social recognition they aspire to and naturally need, and build up social ties and local communities in which they can live rewarding and peaceful lives as young Europeans. Let us all do so within our respective professional functions and social environments, including our own families!