

**Summit of mayors – City Hall, Barcelona, Spain, 15 November 2017**

**Speech by André VERVOOREN, Public Safety Department Director,  
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*Check against delivery*

**Debate on “Strengthening communities to prevent polarisation and violent extremism”**

**City Hall, Barcelona, Spain, 15 November 2017**

Please allow me to introduce myself very briefly. My name is André Vervooren. I'm Director of Public Safety for the City of Rotterdam.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to tell you something about my city and the way we deal with radicalization.

First, I will give you a short introduction of Rotterdam.

Rotterdam is the main port of Europe and a vibrant city. The city has 616,000 residents, divided between more than 176 different nationalities. This diversity creates a wonderful vitality and variety, which makes the city what it is. A place where people meet, work and live.

These differences are not a weakness, but a strength. A strength in economic terms: Rotterdam's young, multilingual population has valuable contacts all over the world for our business community. Our youngsters are tomorrow's entrepreneurs. In social terms: cultural cross-fertilization leads to amazing concepts and innovation in the field of science, arts and culture. In our globalizing economy, world cities have the future.

Of course, this story has also another side. The influence of international conflicts can also be felt in cities like Rotterdam. Many people living in Rotterdam are struggling with feelings of indignation, disbelief and fear arising from the numerous armed military conflicts all over the world. Day en night we are flooded with news of disturbing events and political developments via (social) media.

This struggle of feelings has impact on our society. By now, the threat level in the Netherlands has been raised to substantial, and the problem of dealing with radicalization and terrorism plays a prominent role in both our national and local security policies.

However, we keep calm and we may have even found the key of creating a more peaceful society. We are certainly not powerless. I sense there is a lot of support for an approach that broadly unifies the goodwill of well-intentioned citizens, and simultaneously establishes clear boundaries.

The citizens of Rotterdam are striving for co-existence without social tensions, polarization or radicalization: a WE society, where people from different cultural backgrounds come together, respect

each other, and have consideration for the circumstances of others. In a city with more than 176 different nationalities, it is vital to have an open dialogue.

Our city council has the confidence of many Rotterdam citizens. This has enabled us to build a strong network at schools and in neighborhoods and with community and religious organizations. Although the breeding grounds and causes of radicalization are diffuse, recruiters are keen to take advantage of feelings of doubt, uncertainty and desperation.

With our network, we are working on empowering young people against the indoctrination of recruiters. We support mothers to improve their children's resilience against radicalization. We train professionals and volunteers in dealing with radicalization.

At the same time, we are laying down the boundaries for what is considered acceptable behavior and taking appropriate corrective action when we have to. In any case, it is extremely important that we maintain this dialogue.

Expressing our feelings is the first step towards understanding each other. It is also the first step towards shared hopes, ideals and dreams. I have faith in the one thing that unites us all – the love for our city. What kind of method do we have in Rotterdam in the approach of radicalization? Let me illustrate this.

### *The Rotterdam Anti Radicalization Approach*

The Rotterdam Anti Radicalization Approach has four main action points:

**The first action point** is about fighting polarization and preventing social tension. Keywords here are: identifying and analyzing existing social tensions, building a network of key individuals and helping them recognize signs of radicalization, and facilitating and stimulating dialogue.

Rotterdam has a tradition of outreach programmes, which is also highly relevant to our approach to radicalization. We do not passively wait for signs of radicalization. We make sure that both experts and volunteers representing community and religious organizations know us and that we have short lines of communication with them. By investing in contact with these organizations and individuals, we have built up a broad network of key individuals in the city that report to us and is able to play a role in combating social tensions and the approach to radicalization.

**The second action point** is prevention. Keywords here are supporting public initiatives to maintain open dialogue and discussion, facilitating these gatherings and supporting the development of new prevention measures.

Rotterdam has a longstanding tradition of openly discussing controversial subjects. We do not avoid subjects, but open them up for discussion instead. The five 'WE' meetings held after the attacks in Paris are a good example. Rotterdam citizens were given the opportunity to share their feelings regarding the attacks with the city council. Hundreds of people from Rotterdam with different backgrounds spoke openly about issues such as freedom of expression, radicalization, extremism, discrimination and integration.

**The third action point** of our approach is identification and training. Keywords are the instruction and information for volunteers and professionals, distributing factsheets on Rotterdam's anti-radicalization approach, and raising awareness and the general knowledge of radicalism and extremism. By investing in the awareness of professionals and volunteers, we try to detect signs of radicalization as early as possible. Depending on the seriousness and level of radicalization, we will then coordinate with all relevant parties to design an approach tailored to the individual concerned.

**The fourth action point** is the individual approach. This approach is coordinated by the Radicalization Contact and Advisory Point (MAR). The MAR is a central contact point for radicalization concerns that everyone can contact and ask general questions and discuss individual cases if signals of radicalization are detected. We have meetings at the Security House Rotterdam about each case of radicalization, where information can be shared with all partners involved. The network of professionals and advisors will constantly be reinforced as well the individualized approach and interventions. This include things such as the passport measure, taking child protective custody measures, termination of benefits, offering day facilities, psychological counselling and open discussion of key issues.

Of course, in order to bring these four points to bear successfully, we need to collaborate closely together with a wide range of local, national and international partners.

Finally, we should not let ourselves be held hostage by a small group, but focus on the good citizenship of the majority. Only a relative small group preaches hatred and violence.

In open societies like ours, we cannot guarantee attacks will never happen again. What we can do is making society as strong as possible. Governments can do this by seeking common grounds and setting limits, citizens by investing in the WE society. The more people we keep on board, the fewer will fall by the wayside and turn against society.

The problem of religious violence and extremism cannot be solved in Europe alone. We can, however, be a shining example, by remaining ourselves. A society where you can be who you are and can become whatever and whoever you want, as long as you respect other people's choices as well.

It is an honor to share our visions with you today.  
Thank you.