

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

Speech by Leen VERBEEK (Netherlands, SOC), Congress' spokesperson on radicalisation

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Debate on “North-South cooperation to combat violent extremism”

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Dear Colleagues,

In my home country, the Netherlands, I am Commissioner of the King in the province of Flevoland. A position comparable with that of Governor. I have also served as Mayor of Purmerend, a city in the Greater Amsterdam Area.

But today I am here to speak as the spokesperson of the Congress for anti-radicalization strategies. Through the Alliance we set up three years ago, but also as individual politicians in our countries, many of us have been working for some time on what cities and regions can do to counter attacks against civilians in our cities.

As we developed responses and took action to convey good practices, I must admit that we did not focus much on cooperation with neighboring countries outside of Europe.

The European Union, on the other hand, has been much more active in this respect and could serve as a role model for us. They have funded projects in Syria to promote social cohesion and facilitate intercultural dialogue. They have a similar program in Lebanon, which looks at strengthening the capacity of Sunni Institutions to address the root causes of Islamic radicalism and to promote religious tolerance. They have now begun working with Tunisia to identify local practitioners who could eventually benefit from capacity-building activities. And since 2015, there have been funding projects to prevent and counter radicalization and violent extremism in the Maghreb and Sahel region.

I think we can view these as good practices for us to enlarge the scope of our thinking.

This is why I welcome this discussion panel and am very glad to see the Mayor of Rabat with us today. In two weeks' time members of the Council of Europe will participate at a conference that Mr Sadiki is organizing in Rabat on building inclusive societies where citizen participation, integration of migrants and combating radicalization will be on the agenda. They will do so with the purpose of learning from each other, building trust, getting together: these are the initial key elements of future cooperation.

When I say that we must learn from each other, I do not say this lightly. These countries are facing similar threats as we are, but they often have a very different approach as well as experience in dealing with these problems.

If we haven't benefitted from it until now, maybe it is because we haven't been listening.

Our annual summits can also function as a regional forum to facilitate the sharing of data and experience with the participation of mayors from our neighboring countries.

Both as regards prevention and security related issues, we can discuss and develop measures promoting community resilience and social cohesion on the one hand and reaffirming democratic values on the other.

A multi-stakeholder approach combating extremism should bring together actors beyond traditional security practitioners, such as the police.

Involving in this cooperation people from the welfare, healthcare and educational sector, since they are the ones that often receive the first signals of individuals that are in fact radicalizing.

We need to include actors from both the public and private sector, each contributing to prevent and respond to acts of violent extremism within their respective expertise, in accordance with the law.

I'd like to emphasize that the solutions to prevent violent extremism are circumstantial. They depend on several circumstances like for instance culture. In countries that have a culture of authority, we see repressive measures as the dominant approach. Soft spoken words are not enough in strongly authority driven societies. Each and every time the right approach to de-radicalization is tailor-made.

The Council of Europe sees an important role for local authorities in preventive measures. For example, a preventive approach is facilitating an intercultural or interfaith dialogue. In which you can provide a platform for citizens to express their feelings and frustrations through for example cultural programs on primary schools. This approach is a tool to get in touch with citizen with extreme or populist ideas.

We need to listen to them, in order to come to an effective counter narrative. Which in essence is – when you chose for radicalization, you chose for rejecting democratic values.

And this – ladies and gentlemen – brings us back to the core business of the Council Europa: protecting democracy

Thank you.