

The Vilvoorde model as a response to radicalism - Hans Bonte

I felt both proud and uneasy as I packed my bags last month to head for Washington. I felt proud because it's not every day one receives a personal invitation from the President of the United States. And not just to attend the international summit on terrorism, but also to go to the White House and explain our approach in Vilvoorde. But I was uneasy too because I realised I owed this honour only to my town being on the terrorism map. The figures are very clear : in Belgium Vilvoorde is one of the chief suppliers of Syria fighters. And Belgium in the number one supplier anyway. This article may be seen as the blueprint of my message over there to the international community. The concept permeating it is that solidarity and warmth are the answer to radicalism and extremism.

We have in the meantime at least managed to stop the exodus to Syria. No one had left since the summer of 2014. An uncertain truce seems to have come about. In Washington I had the opportunity to explain our policy (prevention where possible, repression where necessary) and to listen to other approaches. It is our common task not only to safeguard our model of society – be it in Vilvoorde, Paris or New York - but most of all to ensure it will resist those forces that wish to destroy that model. Co-operation is the key word : between countries, between cities, between communities, between people . That is the very essence of the message I brought to Washington.

THE CASE OF VILVOORDE : SOME FEATURES

Vilvoorde, with its 42,000 inhabitants, is a small town, a stone's throw from Brussels, at the heart of Belgium and Europe. You may reach the capital's Grand' Place in just ten minutes, by train. Just as you can travel to Paris in one and a half hours. Cities like Amsterdam or London are just extra half hour away. Anno 2015 Vilvoorde's small-town reality has long since been engulfed by the complexity of the big city : sociologically by now we form one whole with Brussels.

That doesn't only bring with it opportunities, but challenges too that we need to deal with. Despite our excellent position in one of the leading economic areas, the dualisation process of the big city is also spreading to our small(er) community. The gap between those who manage to surf on the waves of economic prosperity and those that can't is growing all the time. The

key question is : how do we deal with this and what resources do we have to stop the gap widening, how can we reduce it again or how can we build bridges?

Vilvoorde is the fastest growing town in the country. A striking feature is that the growth is due primarily to a rapid expansion of the non-native community, mainly from North-Africa. Today 1 in 4 inhabitants isn't of Belgian origin, whereas among under-18's that figure rises to 40%.

A common language, Dutch in our case, is one of the main keys to making it easier to live together , to really being part of a society . But that is often the rub. And there are consequences, particularly when hunting for a job in times of crisis. A daily helping of racism and discrimination – I won't mince my words - makes it a lot more difficult still to achieve a warm society with a fair chance for all. Add a permanent shortage of places in our schools and nurseries, and a lack of playgrounds and sports facilities, and you'll realise what numerous and diverse challenges a small town on the northern Brussels periphery has to face.

SYRIA AND IRAQ FIGHTERS : FACTS AND FIGURES

Over the last years an estimated 380 fighters have left our country for Syria or Iraq. 50 are known to have been killed. Just over 100 have returned in the meantime. Vilvoorde – once again : with 42,000 inhabitants – saw 28 leave to take up arms in the Middle East. 5 of them died and 8 have returned, 2 of whom are in prison. We now estimate the number of potential leavers to be 45, including a number of under-age girls. It is important to point out that since the summer of 2014 nobody has left. And we'd like to keep it that way for as long as possible.

There is no such thing as “a standard profile of the Syria fighter”. It is striking they are often young people – both boys and girls – and of non-native origin, although we see some young people of local origin going to the war zone too . But we do discern a consistent radicalisation methodology. It is essentially a dual process based on *indoctrination* and increasing *isolation*. And all of them have one thing in common : they are young people who don't feel at ease the way they are now. All are marked by frustrations and a profound lack of prospects.

Young people who are susceptible to radicalisation (the vast majority through lack of prospects, low social status or an identity crisis) are actually bombarded with a very radical message. This gives them the idea that they have a special role to play in the historical development of the only true Islamic state. Indoctrination takes place simultaneously in the intimacy of a room - by means

of images on internet or chat sessions on Facebook or other social media – and equally during personal conversations with recruiters. Yes , in Vilvoorde as well. The content of the message is two-pronged. Western civilisation – or your country, or your town – doesn't want Muslims, and as a real Muslim you can make a difference by joining friends in IS.

Another component is increasing isolation. As indoctrination progresses the young person is systematically and progressively cut off. He or she has to sever all links : with family and friends, sports or youth club, the adviser at school or colleagues at work. That way the person is supposed to feel that he or she has been chosen to fight , as it were. Add to this the endless flow of war images from Iraq, Syria or Israel, with the West standing idly by or reacting with fighter planes, and the process of radicalisation is complete

VILVOORDE, A LABORATORY

By now Vilvoorde has begun to function as a laboratory for Belgium, and beyond that, for Europe and the world. This is because in my town a number of conditions (see above) for radicalisation are present more powerfully than in other towns and cities. But the zero departures is no coincidence and of that I am proud. Our approach over the last two years has produced results. It is a pro-active approach, off the beaten track if need be. There was no manual for dealing with these problems.

Obviously we made some mistakes, but our trial and error system enabled us to make progress. In the end we made a virtue of necessity and, step by step, adapted our plan to fit the needs encountered in practice. And we kept far away from ideological or political rigidities and close to everyday reality.

Over the last year what I modestly call the “Vilvoorde method” has aroused the interest of other towns and authorities in Belgium. They wanted to know what the secret was, whereas there wasn't one. We just set to work with the means at our disposal then and now. Our contacts with the Flemish and federal authorities also revealed that there existed no general plan. They often looked (and still look) to us. And so , de facto, Vilvoorde became a source of inspiration for other authorities' policy, and not just local ones.

THE POWER OF CONVICTION

In order to give the international community a clear, though concrete view of the situation in Vilvoorde I have found it essential to explain our local way of seeing things. I have made it clear that we have a very diversified town administration and town council, made up of people firmly embedded in our community and who have a direct view of the processes and risks involved when a heterogeneous community attempts to function homogeneously. Thanks to their knowhow we can keep an ear to the ground for radicalisation processes. Better still, they often are the first personal contact, which is a great asset. Without the popular ethnic councillors – who enjoy the confidence of the Muslim community – we would be nowhere in our search for solutions.

Deradicalisation is work in progress . It is society as a whole that has the problem, not just our police and security forces. And society, that's we all together : friends, family, sports club, youth club ,the mosque, town council ... , all of us. Only by sticking together can we make a stand, and no other way.

And we play this trump card every day to deradicalise a local community. Our strategy rests on a number of basic principles, devoid of clichés :

1. Radicalisation and extremism prosper most in a context where integration is failing, in a context where people - young people – are given no prospects.
2. By now we have learnt in Vilvoorde that the best way to counter frustration is with a policy offering support and warmth.
3. *“Giving respect, demanding respect”* is another guiding principle. My experience as a youth and community worker has taught me how important it is to show respect when approaching people in a problematic situation who might radicalise. Only that way will you earn the necessary respect yourself. That balance is decisive.
4. In the same vein all subjects must be debatable. I said in Washington that I go personally to speak to young people who have returned from Syria or Iraq. The more we show we're involved, not just in words but in our deeds too, the more progress we can make.
5. Finally, deradicalisation is work in progress. It is society as a whole that has the problem, not just the police and security forces. And society, that's we all together : friends, family, sports club, youth club, the mosque, town

council ..., all of us. Only by sticking together can we make a stand, and no other way.

The essence of our approach is trust. The authorities need to enjoy the trust of vulnerable people, the old and the young, non-natives and Belgians. This trust you must earn. This means being close to people and accessible. And showing in your attitude that everybody is equally precious. You see, there is a long way to go before vulnerable mums and dads come to tell you that their child is in the grips of violent radicalism. And that input you need. You need to know where radicalism is growing in order to develop anti-radicalist strategies.

ONLY WARMTH CAN MELT AN ICEBERG OF RADICALISATION

Extreme radicalisation and terrorism are like an iceberg. We should not be mesmerised by the visible part. To stop the iceberg causing damage or to avoid the iceberg or, better still, to make it melt, we need to watch its foundations, the support if you like. For that reason our society needs an injection of solidarity, love, human warmth. Warmth and warmth alone can make an iceberg melt.

We obviously welcome the fact that the fight against radicalism is at the top of the political agenda. It wasn't there less than a year ago. And yet ... I observe quite a number of Belgian and European cities continuing to stick their heads in the sand. Only too often do I see them ignore the problem, hoping it will go away by itself. Simply symbolic responses are offered, like taking away nationality, or alternatively only a repressive approach is used. But it doesn't work that way.

In Vilvoorde our conviction keeps us going. We are convinced, however pedantic this may sound, that we really do know what needs to be done to counter radicalisation, and to go beyond that and push it back. Instead of investing in more fighter planes as the federal government in Belgium is contemplating, we firmly believe we should first and foremost be investing in people and groups.

For half the price of one fighter aircraft we can provide the resources for the Vilvoorde approach to be extended to the whole country. Politicians and policy-makers thus bear an awesome responsibility in this.

It is an investment that demands a lot from us , town authorities and public services, but also from our inhabitants. It means that wherever we can , we provide support and additional chances for the unlucky ones and the people who risk falling by the wayside , so as to give them the prospects they deserve. Most of all it entails mobilising civic forces close to the radicalising persons to deliver the message that they are an integral part of the society they are growing up in.

At the end of the day that will cost society far less than one fighter airplane. For half the price of one aircraft we can provide the resources for the Vilvoorde approach to be extended to the whole country. Politicians and policy-makers thus bear an awesome responsibility in this. I therefore call upon them to make the right and certainly sustainable choices. At the local level we have reached our limits. Without a wider framework and supra-local support we will soon be back to where we started almost two years ago.

THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY

Radicalisation is a worldwide problem. I am the mayor of a small town in Belgium, but not so long ago I felt I was the mayor of a town in Syria. The answers to the problems we are confronted with are to be found locally.

Starting from our analysis of the symptoms of radicalisation and an exchange of know-how with other towns, we have developed, by trial and error, a practice that has borne fruit. We have succeeded in deradicalising young people by creating exactly the reverse of the radicalisation process :

1. In the case of vulnerable groups we endeavour mainly to strengthen and restore those social relations that are often broken off abruptly : friends, family, clubs are encouraged to renew contact.
2. At the same time we seek out key figures – often within the mosque or the Muslim community - who reason with the radicalising person and make him or her see that extreme violence has nothing whatever to do with the real doctrine of Islam or with living one's faith.

In sum, we are only able to reverse the radicalisation process by reconnecting the person to his or her social environment and with

substantive input by the Muslim community itself. Obviously this approach is monitored by police and security services for the sake of our security, still the primary concern of public authorities anywhere in the world.

So how do we go about things in practice?

Town and local police constantly invest in raising the awareness of the various actors on the ground : schools, parents, frontline workers, social workers, civil society, the mosque ... Signals of potential radicalisation thus come in through different channels. It is crucial that local authorities should be as accessible as possible on all sides to pick them up . Having one central contact doesn't work well; all of society needs to be on the alert and the authorities need to have lots of eyes and ears open for these signals.

Regarding the social relations aspect, we introduced *partners' tables* (with monthly meetings) and *case managers* who monitor the radicalizing youngster closely . These tables bring together various partners from education, community and social work and the leisure sector to attempt to draw up a coherent road map. The case manager does the individual monitoring and gives all partners feedback.

In theory partners' tables seem the ideal solution. By now figures have proved that they are. However, practice has taught us not to ignore any shortcomings. We have still a long way to go to what is possibly just a dream : a "deradicalisation mind map" that tells everybody, be it a community worker, a trusted adviser, an imam, a social worker or a sports club manager exactly what to do and whereby every move is plotted on a kind of timeline for the young person . In other words , the local authorities then acquire a counselling function and become a *trusted guide* for deradicalisation, instead of being inundated with complaints, as is too often the case today.

TAILOR-MADE MEASURES AND RESOURCES FOR A ROBUST SOCIETY

Despite our excellent figures we have reached our limits. Our groundbreaking approach is catching on. In Flanders and Belgium our message has been understood and internationally there is awareness of the necessity not just to tackle the new radicalism with a coalition of army units, but also to engage in a social campaign in specific Western

cities and neighbourhoods. This international summit would not have taken place otherwise. And Vilvoorde would never have come up for discussion in Washington. The Americans want to learn from us.

So much is clear : the train is firmly on the tracks and moving. There is a willingness – not just politically- to tackle this together. This we welcome. The tragedies in Paris and Verviers have woken people up, all the way to the top. We must avail ourselves of this public debate to get to fight the symptoms of radicalisation with the right medicine.

In the wake of those good intentions some measures, be they preventive or repressive, are more effective than others. If day-to-day reality on our streets and sports grounds , in our schools and on the shop-floor tells us one thing, it is that even the finest texts on promoting integration and countering radicalisation don't do the trick. You can't create a "we together" feeling with only words and laws. And it cannot be done by the authorities alone. This is a collective task , a challenge to society as a whole. When young people comes to tell you extremely seriously that it is their greatest ambition to go and die a martyr's death in a distant and divided country, you begin to have doubts about their mental health. But there is no doubt that a society that delivers its children, its future into the hands of radical extremists just like that, is seriously ill. That society is suffering from an acute deficit of solidarity and warmth. And that is the essence of our deradicalisation policy : an urgent injection of warmth and respect for young people who don't know where they belong anymore in our society. If the "Vilvoorde model" can contribute one tiny bit to finding the recipe for this , then all the misery my town has suffered won't have been in vain. And we'll also owe a debt of gratitude to all those who still believe despite everything that we can improve our society.

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