

Countering violent extremism in Vilvoorde

Vilvoorde in facts and figures

Vilvoorde is a Flemish city in the immediate vicinity of Brussels.

Over the past year, the city has received a lot of attention because of the large number of Vilvoorde citizens who have left to fight in Syria. There are many reasons why this has occurred in Vilvoorde, including activity by Sharia4Belgium, a Belgian jihadist group, and longstanding contacts between some Vilvoorde citizens and radical groups in Antwerp, Brussels and now those fighting in Syria.

Other explanations can be found in Vilvoorde's socio-economic climate. Between 2007 and 2012, Vilvoorde's population has increased by 11.5% with 42.8% of Vilvoorde's total population being of foreign origin. For children under 5 years of age, the percentage is even higher at 68.3%. The unemployment rate for people of foreign origin is 49.8%. The majority of Vilvoorde's residents are very young, which gives a green pressure of over 50%. An important part of the youngsters either grew up in the Brussels capital or came from other parts of Flanders which means they have little or no connections to Vilvoorde. The unemployment rate for those under 25 years of age, is 17.9%. On the education side, the picture is not much better: 49.8% of Vilvoorde's students lag behind. School drop-out figures are also high with 25 drop outs from 1,000 students during the 2010-2011 school year. These figures and demographics show that Vilvoorde will face many challenges in the future in terms of education and employment, social programs, youth activities, social assistance and integration.

It is within this environment that radicalization became an issue and extremist groups gained a foothold in Vilvoorde. Answering the challenge calls for a comprehensive policy approach that includes all relevant aspects. Radicalized youth present not only a personal danger, but will have a broader impact on Belgian society. In order to find a balanced solution to the challenge, close collaboration with various partners will be essential.

Local Counter-Radicalization Policy:

1. Vilvoorde's vision on radicalization

Radicalization on its own is not necessarily problematic. It only becomes a serious concern when the freedoms of others are threatened or when laws are broken and/or violence is used. Radicalization is a process often fed by negative personal experiences and including experiences between people of different backgrounds. These experiences can lead to alienation, making youth vulnerable to accepting extremist views. One's connection to society therefore, is an important point in the fight against radicalization. The approach must accord with the local context. In Vilvoorde, the focus is on early detection and with an integrated, inter-disciplinary approach to counter radicalization.

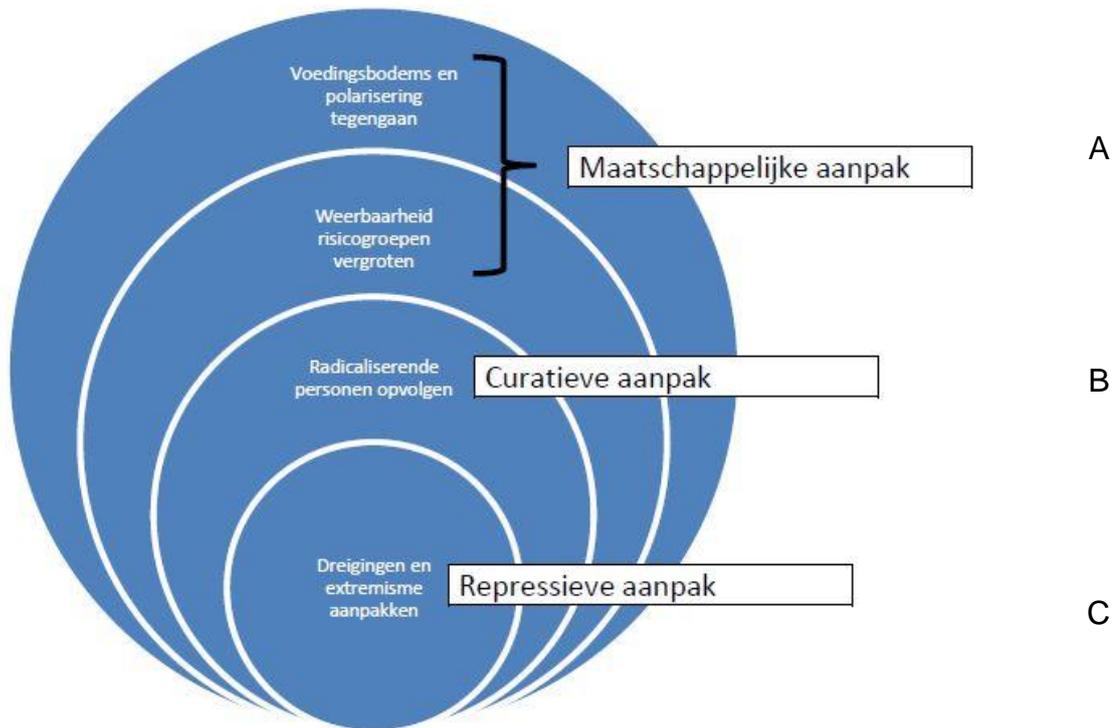
2. Analysis of the environment

The reasons for so many Belgian citizens going to Syria is due in part to the international dimension of the Syrian conflict, and the ideological discourse which calls for people to fight against the Assad regime. The reasons many Vilvoorde youth depart include activity by Sharia4Belgium and longstanding contacts between some Vilvoorde citizens and radical groups in Antwerp, Brussels, and now those already fighting in Syria. In addition, the population of Vilvoorde has increased tremendously in recent years, with a high percentage of inhabitants of foreign origin who often do not feel connected to the city. On top of all that, school performance is low while drop-out rates in Vilvoorde are high. As a result, the city relies on the involvement of the following partners in addressing radicalization:

- Sports and other leisure clubs/associations as well as city services: help identify signs of radicalization and create a social network of organizations
- Social assistance organizations: provide direct assistance
- Police and security services
- Judicial services: prosecution when needed

3. The Organization of the Local De-radicalization Policy

The goal of the de-radicalization policy is that everyone from Vilvoorde feels at home in the city and receives the opportunity to develop him/herself. This requires cooperation between all partners. The preventative and security components must be synchronized to the maximum extent. The following graphic illustrates where there is a need for policy and action. Each approach will be elaborated upon later.



A: Social approach:

Outer circle: counter polarization and the breeding grounds of radicalization;
2nd circle: increase the resistance of at-risk groups to extremist ideology

B: Curative approach:

Monitor already radicalized people

C: Repressive approach:

Handle threats and extremism

3.1. Communal Approach (Group Oriented)

The communal approach targets vulnerable people susceptible to radical ideas. The objective of this approach is to strengthen the individual by providing support and countering the feeding grounds of radicalization. The focus is on education and employment. In order to achieve this, several courses of action have been identified:

3.1.1. Actively working on citizenship and participation

Youth Committee: There is a need for a deliberative group to allow youth to participate in the city's policy making process so they can think about the ways in which opportunities are created for education, labor, and leisure time. Representatives of the Youth and Equal Opportunity Office will also take part.

Positive Imagery: Campaigns will be organized to highlight certain themes in a positive fashion.

Intercultural meetings: organized activities with the objective of bringing different communities together. One example is to appoint youth as guides within their community.

Providing a framework for the youth performance BRONKS: a performance coming to Vilvoorde in the Spring of 2015. There will be a framework for schools linked to this project.

Collection campaign for Syria: NGO SHAM was created by youth with Syrian roots in order to collect humanitarian aid for Syria. Organizers attempt to involve youth in the collection and engage them in a positive way to help Syria.

3.1.2. Sensitizing and training first-line workers

Teachers, aid workers, and youth workers: The goal is to sensitize these people concerning the importance of early detection of radicalization and to inform them of the kind of support available.

Thematic Tables: Here, all partners from one area are brought together to discuss topics concerning radicalization. The subject matter about which thematic tables can be discussed are: education, aid provision, and youth.

3.1.3. Increased Support for low-threshold youth work

Youth Work: There will be an investigation into improving the local youth well-being policy with a goal of developing a social youth policy that provides more opportunities for vulnerable youth. The creation of a low-threshold youth meeting center is being worked on.

Homework guidance: Work will be continued that provides optimal support, building on existing initiatives.

Job club: The goal is to help youth between 16 and 25 from disadvantaged backgrounds find a job and better inform them of their future potential.

3.1.4. Strengthening of local mosque operations

The Mosque is also a victim of radicalization and discourages youth from leaving for Syria. The Mosque can play an important role in teaching the core values of moderate Islam, but it is also suffering from organizational and infrastructural problems. This is why the city council wants to support the Mosque in its request for public recognition and by strengthening its internal operations. A working group has been created for this purpose.

3.1.5. Further expansion and optimization of the local capacity for aid provisions, welfare work, and youth prevention.

Time-out: Agreements must be made on how the time-out projects can be used as part of the de-radicalization policy.

Point of contact/Point of reference aid provision: The referral is always done by the family of the youngster who has left for Syria. This will be expanded to the preventative sphere. We will evaluate which organization is best placed to cope with such a request for help.

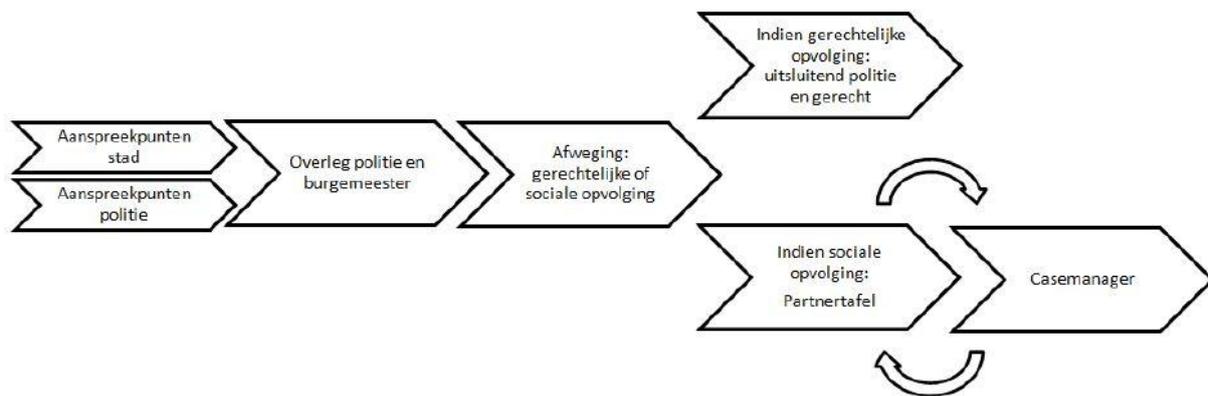
Contact Point to report Discrimination: Options are being evaluated regarding the feasibility of creating a point of contact to report discrimination, and in order to better address discrimination problems.

Discussion group for family members: This group is offered to family members of Syria fighters. The city will provide a place to meet and the necessary facilities. The rest of the needs are supplied by the families themselves.

3.2. The Curative Approach (person-oriented)

The curative approach is aimed at youth who have already come in contact with radicalized ideology or who have returned from Syria. The objective of this approach is to limit the spread of the ideology and to restore the person's ties to the community. A number of steps need to be followed in order to accomplish this.

First, the signs of radicalization must be detected by the first-line services. There are many points of contact within the city services and the police. There are frequent meetings organized between these points of contact in which an appropriate strategy is developed based on all available information. In some cases this approach may be judicial, in which case, only the police have jurisdiction. The goal however is to arrange social follow-up if possible. Partner tables are organized to facilitate the sharing of information. A case manager is also appointed who will follow up with the case. The case manager is supported by key figures who can guide the person in numerous areas to encourage social connectivity. The following graph outlines the steps.



Hotline city>

If legal only Police or Justice Dept

Consultations police & mayor > Consider legal or social action >

Hotline police>

If social Partner Table > Case Manager

This approach will also be used for youth returning from Syria. The only difference is that in these cases, police and the justice department must determine which measures to take. The police will be asked for approval before each step in the individual guidance process.

For the financial side of the story, we look first to resources provided by the federal government.

3.3. Repressive approach

The repressive approach is aimed at people who are already a threat to community security. The objective of this approach is to address extremist and terrorist threats and to prevent attacks. This approach solely falls under the jurisdiction of the police and justice department.

4. Build and Share Expertise

The importance of the issue has become increasingly clear as demonstrated by the numerous research projects, the outlining of policy plans by various Flemish towns, and the abundant discussion on the topic. Vilvoorde also participates in numerous networks for the purpose of sharing knowledge on radicalization.

5. Policy Beyond the Local Level

There are a number of specific working points that exceed local authority:

- a. There seems to be the need for guidance from the supra-local level on the exchange of information and on how to handle radicalization between various cities. Currently, there is no coordination in the approach between the various services.
- b. It would also be useful to include radicalization in the immersion and integration policy to enable work in a preventative fashion with specific target groups.
- c. Educational materials in schools and teacher training provide an added value in the fight against radicalization. Making the theme accessible to discussion is a first big step in the sensitizing process.
- d. An effort needs to be made to develop specific de-radicalization programs for people in prisons and closed institutions.
- e. A recognized status for Mosques and imam training could create a better feel for the context in Flanders and a more open climate.
- f. With additional means and expertise on radicalization in the provision of social aid, a specific program can be developed.
- g. The recognition of Vilvoorde as a “center city” and the means that come with it, would be a great added value for the development of a long term project to prevent radicalization.