

06 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

Alec Ross

Senior Fellow

School of International & Public Affairs, Columbia University

One critical priority that should be included in the EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) is a re-imagined and redeveloped strategy to counter violent extremism.

A new threat

Individual states within the EU have strategies to fight extremism with varying levels of effectiveness and different focuses. However, countering this phenomenon ought not to be programmed exclusively on a state-by-state basis, as the nature of the threat itself is inherently transnational and not bound by the structures and strictures of states.

Violent extremism is in its nature hostile to the EU's core values of unification amid diversity, religious tolerance and gender equality. The rise of extremism now presents an existential threat to the Union, with growing numbers of European citizens voting for parties which hold populist, anti-immigrant, and anti-EU political views. Often, these groups resemble the most malignant political movements of Europe's past.

In addition, there is also the persistent and real danger posed by jihadists.

An effective strategy to counter extremism would be a model of twenty-first century statecraft, accounting for and leveraging the technologies, networks and demographics of the present day.

Changing the model

As existing strategies are largely ineffective, any future strategy should not be derived from current efforts. As such, new stakeholders and institutions should be engaged to advise on the development of the strategy, including many who may be historically disconnected from the EU's policy development ecosystem. These include, but are not limited to, civil society organisations focusing on youth development, university organisations, media and technology groups that provide platforms, as well as content that can reach targeted communities.

There also needs to be a willingness to make mistakes of commission rather than omis-

sion. Thanks to its consensus-based model, the European Union tends to eschew any policies, programmes or activities that are characterised by even a small amount of risk. Its communications and programmes are designed so as to not offend. As such, when it comes to topics like combatting extremism, its policies lack effectiveness.

To the extent that consensus is necessary, it ought to be on the point that an effective strategy will test a variety of approaches, many of which will fail. If there is little or no possibility of failure, it means that the risk profile is too low. Bold strokes will be needed to effectively counter the goals of violent extremists.

New diplomacy and partnerships

Diplomacy tends to be rooted in formal interactions between sovereign nation states. Violent extremists, however, are the products of networks rather than governments. As such, a new diplomacy would supplement traditional diplomacy with outreach to – and engagement with – non-traditional stakeholders who are influential in such networks. By way of example, effective diplomacy with Islamic clergy would increase the level of activity and amplify the messages of moderates and would seek to ‘de-fang’ those that have historically been hostile to European ideals.

Radicalisation and recruitment are increasingly taking place on European and American technology platforms which are accessed through data connections provided by telecommunications companies. These firms are frequently owned or operated by Europeans (be they majority or minority shareholders).

When content inciting people to reject European values and embrace violent extremism is accessed on a Silicon Valley technology platform through

a French or British telecommunications provider, it is in the interests of the EU to ensure that these private sector entities enforce existing laws and terms of service.

The Union can also play a role in instructing these Western, private sector entities about how their terms of service can be strengthened. Furthermore, there should be an increase in the two-way information sharing that flags up potentially violent actors to the EU and which provides private sector stakeholders with the expertise of foreign policy professionals.

A programme to counter violent extremism should not just be developed and rolled out in Brussels and European capitals. There must be an active presence (including full-time staffing) in key geographies including Turkey, Pakistan and throughout the Maghreb, the Gulf and the Levant. Just as defence, intelligence and security organisations are increasing their presence and operations in key geographies, so too must our diplomats, including EU officials.

There are numerous potential priorities for the EUGS, but the most prominent threat to European integration comes from a reassertion of nationalism, xenophobia and a rise in violent extremism.

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