

After Brussels: We Must Not Turn the Terrorist Threat into a ‘National Question’

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At first, I just wanted to get out of Brussels as quickly as possible and never look back. The dreadful attacks at Zaventem Airport and Maelbeek metro station had filled me with deep sorrow and concern. So intense was my immediate reaction that my decision seemed to be final, irrevocable. Finding myself at the time of the detonation only 300 metres away from the place where people who work in (the environment of) the EU institutions including interns like myself normally get off the metro in the morning, terrorism had turned from an abstract threat into something painfully and horribly concrete.

Despite of passing this somehow unreal day safely and securely (if there are still such things as safety and security) in the office of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, what happened at Maelbeek metro station was too close for comfort. It left me with the urge to bury my head in the sand and to leave ‘the heart of Europe’ far behind me.

What struck me was the great difference between the way the attacks were experienced ‘at the inside’ and how people perceived them ‘from the outside’. In Brussels, most people responded with an almost irritating mixture of fatalism and defiance; the stubborn will to return to their normal lives was almost palpable. The day after 22 March, busses were running again, most of the shops and cafés had reopened their doors, traffic was as it always is in Brussels: breathtakingly chaotic. Only the EU quarter was nearly deserted with just a few people entering the Parliament and the surrounding institutions. It was the first time in three months’ time I did not need to stand in line for an espresso in the coffee shop at Place Luxembourg, right in front of the Parliament.

Back in Munich, it was hard to ignore the screaming newspaper headlines, the black ribbons attached to the Bavarian flag at half-mast and the barely concealed hysteria in the German news. Of course, as was the case after the Paris attacks, there is the ubiquitous feeling of solidarity with the victim. But somehow I cannot help feeling that this dismay is most of all an expression of the fear that it could happen to ‘us’. Of course, we do feel attacked as a European society: we were all *Charlie*, we were all Paris — now we are all Bruxelles. But deep inside, what we are most worried about is ‘our own country’, the threat to our national borders, and national narratives are on the rise.

Therefore, it came as no surprise that, back in Munich, the most pressing question, be it openly posed or left unspoken, was whether an attack like this could also hit German cities. Perhaps, nervously following the twitter feed and staring at amateur videos showing the destroyed area in Zaventem airport, people in Germany or other countries neighbouring Belgium were even more afraid than the Belgians themselves. Does this mean that the terrorist threat, despite of its aim to erode European values, is turning into a national question?

Since the well-known Brussels lockdown after the Paris attacks last November, Belgium, and especially its capital, has become the discredited. Brussels’ problem zone Molenbeek was singled out and reduced to ‘Jihadi capital of Europe’, a perfect target for the projection of fear, hatred and racist prejudices from all over Europe. A constructive pan-European discourse about the fact that not only Islamist radicalisation but also ignorance about what is going on poses a major threat to our society is missing. Belgium is since recently regarded as a country that is no longer able to provide security due to a malfunctioning police force and failing security services, Brussels as a city that lost control over its young Muslim population. Like with Greece in the eurozone crisis, we seem to feel the need to blame European shortcomings on certain Member States and do not cease to reiterate to the same short-sighted measures again and again instead of opting for radical joint strategies.

Today, it is only one week ago since terror came to Brussels and I had time to get over my urge to bury my head in the sand, to abstain from political involvement and to stay away for ever from the ‘most dangerous city in the whole of the EU’. And yet, I am still deeply worried because, at the same

time the police have been arresting alleged terrorists in many European countries, Islamist terrorists killed more than 60 civilians in Pakistan, mainly women and children, which shows again that the evil we are up against is hitting world-wide and targets indiscriminately. I am also afraid of the rise of right-wing actors who will without doubt do everything possible to take advantage of people's fear and fuel the hatred against refugees and all those who oppose the closing of borders at any price. It is at this moment hard to predict to what extent parties like the Front National or the Alternative for Germany will gain substantial support after the attacks in Brussels.

And yet, we should try not to be too pessimistic. We can still hope that Member States will decide to take joint and adequate measures in reaction to the tragic events. This would be crucial: we must not allow populist agitators to profit from the terrible attacks and throw away our understanding of liberty and democracy. I am sure that, if Europe decides to step back from short-term nationalistic solutions and is able to (re)define common values and to defend them, people everywhere in Europe will at least be better off than with its Member States acting as lone wolves.