

RSC BLOG

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Europe: Changes in the Perception of Terrorism

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One of the biggest threats the world currently faces is the terrorism with a variety of reflections and types of expressions. The terrorist attacks became a usual part of the news feeds around the world. They not only happen more often, but also attack new destinations and spread the environment of threat and fear worldwide. The latest terrorist attacks in Paris in January and November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016 revealed some changes in the perception of the terrorism in Europe and gave new shades to the concept. The terrorism seems to be closer to Europe now than ever before.

Europe Is Not Safe Anymore: Terrorism Evolving in Europe

The EU lost its genuine image of being one of the safest spots in the world during the last decades. The continent of democracy, human rights and rule of law seems not to be ready to properly address the current threat of terrorism. The policy priorities and the main policy cornerstones lack relevant flexibility in the process of the management of the new threats to the security of EU.

More specifically, the open borders policy among the EU member states sets additional challenges in security in terms of inability to control the people entering certain EU countries; mismanagement in the border controls in general; poor mechanisms of cooperation between the states; differences in the visions of member states on how to solve the issue, etc.

At the same time it is worth mentioning that even if most of the terrorists are the second or third generations of EU citizens, terrorism is considered to be imported to Europe from other continents mainly from the “Muslim” countries. The result is that the current situation set a ground for the right wing parties who started playing the nationalism card. Their arguments become stronger in the context of the current refugee crisis around the Europe and lack of actions to address the issue in a decent way.

In addition, the euroskeptics found new frameworks to put their arguments on the table again. In many of the European countries the right wing parties won the local elections. Even the latest elections of the European parliament showed the change of the balance. This is bringing a new set of tactical issues for the EU, which is in urgent need to rethink the current common strategies and adapt them to the current realities.

Refugee crisis and Rise of Terrorism: Are They Connected?

The discussion on the migrants and refugees were among the hot topics of the EU for the last year especially. After the escalation of the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and in different countries of the Middle East more than 1.3 million refugees entered EU. The countries of origin of most of the migrants created a perception that all of them are from Muslim countries.

The terrorist attacks in the heart of Europe coincided with the timing of the refugee crisis there. The misinformation in media, especially social media, misinterpretation of the current reality and propaganda on both issues created a big gap in understanding and a perception among the society that those issues should have something in common.

As a result the average European citizens have started seeing the refugees as potential threats not only to the economic stability of the destination countries in EU, but also are perceived as threat to the national security. So, the existence of many different issues in EU lead to a situation when the panic rose and the people started thinking about the main needs they have in the Maslow triangle, which is the physiological needs and security on the first places. The theory of the “clash of the civilizations” has become real at least on the society level. The fake image of the other and the enemy is found in the “terrorist,” which is promoting intolerance in Europe against the refugees in general.

Islamism: A New Term Replacing Terrorism?

The connection of some of the terrorists to the Islamist groups and their public announcements on it created a situation when each of the terrorist attacks is being considered to be connected with them. At the same time the usage of the terms “islamism” and “fight against Islamism” creates a renewed wave of hate speech not only against the islamists as such, but also against the Muslim people in general.

This shapes additional dividing lines internally between the Muslim and Christian populations in different EU countries. The wider public in EU does not go into details to find the differences between the “Islam” and “Islamism” which is Islam’s interpretation by the religious fundamentalists and extremists. As a result both the terms start to be considered to be “negative.”

This situation bolstered a debate on the religions in terms of Christianity as a tolerant and inclusive religion and Islam as the one which serves as a ground for discrimination for non-Muslim population. The discussions do not go deeper to find the real backgrounds of the religions and there are few who bring in the Christian Church’s attitude towards for example sexual minorities to judge how tolerant Christian Church is in general. Or on the other hand the lack of understanding of the Islam and Muslim culture is being fixed with mainly media propaganda which does not reflect the reality. So, even in countries where there is a big Muslim

community for centuries there is a rising hostility and intolerance between Muslim and Christian communities.

Double Standards of International Organizations and International Community

Despite the fact that the terroristic attacks have happened in different parts of the world for decades the response of the international community was mainly dependant on one factor: where did they happen?

In Turkey, for example, there were four attacks recently: in Ankara in February and March 2016 and in Istanbul in January and March 2016. Turkey is not far away from Europe and even more serves as one of the EU candidate states; however, none of the EU high officials went to Turkey or did anything else other than sending condolence messages. But when the attacks happened in France, everyone hurried there to be the first in the commemoration events and to ensure that they are in solidarity with France in the fight against terrorism. This opened a new debate on the issue with the focus on the difference in the threat perception in EU and its closer neighborhood.

Conclusion

Although the EU accepts the existence of the new challenge of terrorism but it does not do it enough to adapt its policies to the new reality. It currently faces a situation when the European values are being violated in Europe itself. Europe fights against terrorism from the very beginning calling it a fight against “Islamism” and thus promoting a new wave of hate speech towards the Muslims in Europe. In this context the main challenge is not to create artificial issues or indirectly promote the emergence of new dividing lines in the society.

In conclusion, the recent terroristic attacks shook the basis of the EU system, setting new priorities for common action. However, the Europe is not ready yet and the issue is continuing to go deeper and involve new aspects and fields. If the EU wants to gain the status of being the continent of safety and prosperity it should create better system of cooperation between the EU member states and rethink the common strategies. At the same time ignoring the issues in the neighborhood and beyond it had a precedent that the EU sooner or later will face the same challenges or be directly affected by them.