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### **Bart Somers**

*Mayor of Mechelen*

Lately the “Mechelen Model” has gathered a lot of attention. That’s why I feel it’s important to stress that my city Mechelen is not a paradise. It’s a city of 86,000 inhabitants, located between Antwerp and Brussels. We’ve grown in our superdiversity, with more than 130 different nationalities living together in our city. Strikingly, one out of two children born here has a foreign background, most of them Moroccan. The latter being one of the most vulnerable groups to violent radicalisation. Fifteen years ago Mechelen had a very bad reputation. Polarisation was high and over 30% of the people voted extreme right. We had one of the highest criminality rates at that time, middle class families fled the city and deprivation was high. Nowadays, Mechelen is considered as one of the reference point cities in Flanders. The appreciation for the integration policy is one of the highest in the country and the extreme right has less than 8% of the votes. The overall culture has changed and there is a growing openness towards each other.

Mechelen is at the heart of the bigger Antwerp-Brussels agglomeration, with over 2.5 million inhabitants. Nearly 10% of all European terrorist fighters came from this region. Two hundred left from the Brussels region (which is only 25km south of Mechelen), nearly 100 from Antwerp (only 25km north), 27 from Vilvoorde (only 5km away from Mechelen). Today Mechelen has no foreign terrorist fighters and that’s a statistical conundrum. Consequently, people started asking questions: “how did they manage to do this?” Of course it has a lot to do with luck. At any time, even while writing this, someone might be leaving to Syria. But there is more to it than just luck.

To explain the why and the how of our policy, I would like to start with two inconvenient truths. First of all if the number of violent radicalised people grows it becomes impossible to follow them all. Secondly, once someone is radicalised, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to deradicalise them. It is very time consuming, it costs a lot of money and there is absolutely no guarantee of success, no guarantee that we can bring them back to our society and convince them of our democratic, liberal principles. So the most important thing is to prevent people from getting radicalised in the first place. But how can we prevent people from getting radicalised?

The key answer is a policy of inclusiveness: make people part of their society, make them feel like citizens. It is about recruiting them for your society so others don't have a chance of recruiting them for ISIS. When people feel part of this society and that society respects them, if they feel that their future can grow here, the battle is won twice. First of all the attraction of a totalitarian society will be less intense. People can have critical thoughts about their own society, but they still live in it and appreciate it. Moreover, they will not choose a radical alternative to replace it because they see possibilities to fit in with the current situation. Secondly it is important to realise at all times that there might still be people choosing the radical narrative. But if they find themselves surrounded by people embracing the narrative of our society in which there is no space for a violent, extreme alternative, the totalitarian narrative loses its strength. Because when they look around, they will be surrounded by people that feel like citizens of this inclusive society. People who feel like they can trust the mayor, the police, youth workers – enough so that they can go to them in times of crises. When they feel that someone is slipping away, when they are afraid of losing their son, daughter, friend, colleague to a totalitarian regime such as ISIS, they will see the ones that can help them as fellow citizens instead of enemies, as people who are in the first place there to help their friend, instead of finding ways to punish him/her.

ISIS recruitment is clearly based on a recurrent strategy. It aims at vulnerable people, in a complex situation, with a bad history, that have hit rock bottom. "A zero" they say they are able to transform into "a hero" – which fits perfectly within their simplistic black and white rhetoric and view of the world. It feeds upon frustrated individuals who are disappointed and no longer trust society, they feel abandoned by the many failed promises and feel they have changed into or have always been second-rate citizens. Therefore, I believe in a preventive method where people are confronted at an early stage with a more realistic view, when they are still open for reasoning and discussion. At that early stage it's crucial to bring in people they still trust and respect. In that way these people can try to stop the radicalisation process, to change their thoughts, and show them there are alternatives.

But the bigger and even more important question is: how do we include people in our society? How do we make sure they feel themselves to be equal citizens? It has to be more than just an attractive slogan. Since I have been mayor of Mechelen for more than 16 years, long before the caliphate was introduced to our cities and long before the uprising of this radically violent ideology, I've witnessed the process we've been through. We worked hard on our city and most importantly we worked together, with our citizens. Not knowing of course that this regime of ISIS would hit our borders one day, but from a general positive attitude to make our city and its citizens better. It seems now that it has empowered our city to offer some resistance. Our strategy is built on seven points.

First of all it's essential to take safety issues seriously. We invested a great deal in police forces and in fighting criminality. We didn't want to leave neighbourhoods behind where children would grow up with the idea that police officers are the enemy and drug dealers are role models. We did not want generations of people to grow up in a city where you can buy stolen goods in shops, where there's no respect in the public domain, where streets are dirty and where there are no parks to play

in. In short: where the rule of law has been replaced by the rule of the jungle. The people growing up in these neighbourhoods can in no way identify themselves with our society as equal citizens. They do not see a society they belong to. Because they are obviously not part of society. It is my personal belief that in these places, where criminals rule the streets, extremists will follow. They can easily fill in the gap that has been created: "What are our values? What is our ideology? No way do we share the same values as the state. They left us behind, they are our enemy and not present in our community". To fight this I have been a very strict mayor and I still am today. I have used a zero tolerance policy in certain areas or during certain times. There has been criticism that I have a lot of cameras in my city, but they're never aimed against a specific community. Moreover, I try to mobilise people to be part of the security story. Because I believe that we're fighting a social battle. For example: if my car is stolen, it's a small inconvenience but I will have my insurance company who will make sure I can buy a new one. But if you're poor and your car gets stolen, it's far more dramatic. You don't have money to buy a new one right away, you can't get to work, you can't drop your children at school. So in the long run a security policy is actually a social policy. That's why we try to mobilise people to help us. In my city we work with the "older brothers programme". It's a project where in summertime we recruit young interns who live in our town to be social workers in their own neighbourhoods, more specifically in the playground. They are in charge of the local playground and they tell other youngsters not to vandalise the place, to keep it quiet after 10pm, for example, because little children have to sleep. This creates a growing sense of responsibility for these interns and it stimulates them to think about the rules in society. On the other side the younger children respect them as "playground leader" because it actually is someone's older brother, or the nephew of a friend, etc. In that way society gets a familiar face. It's not a white policemen, but it's Mohammed from around the corner. Another reason why this first point of security measures is so important is because of other inhabitants who are reluctant about this new society in which diversity is the new reality. If you can show them that there is someone at the city hall who takes security seriously, they can feel less threatened and become more open towards this new reality. So it's not a left- or right-wing answer. The ideal is a mixture of both sides, to evolve into a new paradigm.

My second strategic point would be to create a new narrative for diversity. If your city's identity is based on a nostalgic worldview of a faded monocultural past, everybody will be frustrated. On one hand is the indigenous group, who feels that the past was better and that with every step they lose something. They have the wrong idea that they need to give something away. On the other hand we have the new group, the migrants who will also be frustrated because they can never be part of that identity. That's why it's crucial to create a new narrative, a new story every single inhabitant can be a part of. It's a new story about who we are and about a new shared identity. We can obtain this through policy, of course, but symbols are equally important in this story building. For example: a couple of years ago we, as a city, with all our inhabitants, celebrated the 124 different migration backgrounds living in our community. Fifty years of immigration was remembered in Flanders but was a festive occasion in Mechelen. We put 124 photos of 124 citizens all with a different national background in the main square in the centre of the city for one year. It shouted clearly: "we're proud of this, they are part of us and our city".

Another example of creating this narrative is what we did after the terrorist attacks in Brussels. On Friday I, as a mayor, went to the mosques in my city, about 1000 people sitting there, all afraid of possible retribution and consequences against their group in society. At the same time they were also afraid of these terrorists. I told them that for me they were victims twice over. First of all as citizens, like every one of us. But secondly as Muslims. Because these terrorists hijacked their religious identity and transformed it into something barbaric. Consequently they now always have to explain that they are not like these terrorists, that they hate them just as much as we do. They're drawn into a corner and have to apologise for who they are. They shouldn't have to do that, because they are just as much victims as we are. This visit, these festive occasions, and other initiatives are crucial moments in bringing people with different backgrounds and identities together.

The third important principle is to avoid groupthink. It's a typical classic left- and right-wing fallacy. The classic left uses groupthink too often to point out that people with migrant background are victims. They are a discriminated against group in society and should get special attention. Meanwhile right-wing politicians abuse it to criminalise people, saying that they're abusing our social system or that they often get trapped in crimes. They both make a striking mistake, namely thinking in a one-dimensional reality. But people have many identities: Flemish, Belgian, European, father, lawyer, liberal and so on. Depending on where we are and who we are talking to, our identities shift. When I'm in Barcelona I'm a Belgian. When I'm in Belgium I'm an inhabitant of Mechelen. We need to see people as individuals, not as groups. If we tag them as belonging to a group, e.g., Muslims we are blind to all their different and other identities, e.g. mother, sister, artist, and so on. We succumb to one-dimensional thinking and by doing so we're making caricatures of one another. Let me explain this by giving another example: a while ago we had a Moroccan youth club who did many good things, but they were always thinking and discussing what makes them different from the rest in society. How we Moroccans differ from the non-Moroccans. If you keep heading down that track it results in playing Moroccan music exclusively, because of course all Moroccans exclusively love Arabic music. As if I would only love Schlager music. As if Moroccans only eat couscous and as if I only eat mussels and French fries. This caricature creates an enormous group pressure, and the biggest trap is that we don't see the success stories anymore because they don't fit in with this groupthink path. In my city we have Moroccan doctors, professors and teachers but also criminals. We have people who go to the mosque every day and people that have never been there and everything in between. We need success stories to destroy the groupthink dynamic.

The fourth requirement is to fight segregation. Progressive people speak positively about diversity – they see the benefits of a diverse society. But in a lot of cities we don't actually live in a diverse reality. We live in a kind of archipelago of monocultural islands. If we allow different groups to live next to each other without living together, we create an illusion of diversity. All problems start when people keep living in a segregated reality. The us versus them vision becomes a threat: "why do they get a park and we don't? Why do we get police control and they don't?" So if we really want to have an inclusive society, we have to fight segregation. At schools, in neighbourhoods, in sport clubs – everywhere possible. This

strategy demands efforts, because we cannot force people of course. One of the most beautiful projects we organised in our city is called School in Sight (*School in Zicht*). It's an organisation supported by our city that makes home visits to white middle-class parents whose children live near to a local school, but prefer to go to a school much further away. They talk to these different parents and convince them, in groups of 10 or 12 parents, to sign their children up at the nearby school, a place that is, for the moment, dominated by one ethnic group. This mixture is not only a good thing for the monocultural group which was already present at the school. It's also a good thing for those other ten children who will now learn to play together from an early age. The school has to be a reflection of the reality that evolved outside of the school gates. Over two years we convinced 160 parents to enrol in this project and change schools. And now it's time to look at the white ghetto schools. Because that's an equally important segregation problem. We talked to a head principal in order to make the school feel more like a home base for all cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Why shouldn't there be halal food on the menu, if vegetarian food is no problem? This process has to be conducted in every segment of society. We invested a lot in poor neighbourhoods to give them equally fancy parks and playgrounds. Normally when policymakers decide to renew something in a poor neighbourhood they are convinced to use "vandal-proof" materials, creating a reinforcing signal of being ghettoised. That's why we consciously chose the same high quality materials, because every citizen deserves the same quality. Indirectly it attracts the middle classes to come back to the city, creating a superdiverse city in all its aspects. These middle-class citizens are actually unpaid social workers. By organising street activities, they bring people together because they have the social capacity to do so. For example, when their children come back from school, they have to finish their homework first before they can play. Consequently, the boy around the corner, a fellow classmate, is also invited into their home and gets the same help with his homework as their own children. It is in such a manner that upward social mobility can grow and real integration begins.

The fifth command, which is probably the most unattractive one, is that we all have to reintegrate into a new reality. If we want to fight segregation, we all have to make some effort towards achieving this. In Brussels for example it's often been put aside as a problem of integration. But already we have a third generation of migrants living here. They were born here, their parents lived here, they are citizens of their city. We don't possess a firstborn right over them. Since 1520 my family has lived in Mechelen, for 17 generations, but I'm the first generation that lives in a multicultural superdiverse Mechelen and I don't have more rights than Mustafa, whose family has been here since 1966. To put it in a well-known quote from an American president: "don't ask what society can do for you, but ask what you can do for society". We all have to integrate into a new reality and it requires efforts from all of us to give a city power tools to fight against terrorism and extremism.

The sixth strategic point has to do with values. There's a lot of talk about values, which is a good thing. We have to discuss our common values because they're a very important part of our society – they're what our society is built upon. They give us our freedom, for example: the equality of men and women, democracy, the rule of law and so on. These values should be used to create bridges towards one another instead of walls.

The latter is what populists aim for because they abuse these values to exclude people, and do exactly the opposite of what these values preach. In my country for example a right-wing party claimed we should diminish freedom of speech to ensure our freedom. It's similar to the phrase: "okay, we proclaim to be an open and free society, but "they" have to adapt to us, to our traditions and habits". By falling for this fallacy we fear freedom because it inevitably brings change. The group of people who have changed our society the most are women: through emancipation all our traditions and habits have changed. A typical reaction against such change is the zero-sum reasoning: if they take something, then I will lose something. For example if women take a place in the labour market, then men will lose their job. Eventually all these changes made society stronger, and their demands were based on the same premises as those of today's people with migrant backgrounds. A city in diversity can be attractive if we keep the promise it seems to make: if you work hard, if you do your utmost best, you can get a future for yourself and your kids. Racism and discrimination destroys that dream.

My last point, which is probably the most urgent one, is to put a stop to Wahhabist propaganda.

Today if Muslim women or men want to find information about her/his religion either in a bookshop or online, 95% of everything (s)he finds is Wahhabist propaganda. Wahhabism is a totalitarian reinterpretation of the Islamic religion. Every religion has a pluralistic background, a rich history in discussing different types of the same belief, recognising each other in their own identity. In contrast, Wahhabism makes from Islam a totalitarian religion, one that should stand alone and is better than all the other interpretations. Our Belgian security services have reported that since the seventies Saudi Arabia has invested €3 billion in Wahhabist propaganda in Europe. In comparison: that's more than what all democratic parties have spent on their campaigns. To strike an even more dramatic note: if Nazi Germany still existed and spent billions in propaganda for their fascist ideology, we would not accept it. Not even for one day. Not even for one hour.