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D'Amato, S.; Terlizzi, A.

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Strategic European counterterrorism? An empirical analysis

Silvia D'Amato ^a and Andrea Terlizzi ^b

^aInstitute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA), Leiden University, Den Haag, Netherlands; ^bInstitute of Law, Politics and Development (DIRPOLIS), Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa, Italy

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the extent to which the European Union is strategically engaging against terrorism. It builds on traditional scholarship on strategic thinking and elaborates an analytical framework to empirically assess strategic policy formulation at the supranational level in the case of terrorism. The framework revolves around three analytical categories: i) threat assessment; ii) objectives setting; and iii) policy measures. Through qualitative content analysis of text data, we show that, while objectives are clearly presented in the documents, the threat that the strategy is supposed to counter is unspecified. In addition to that, the formulation of concrete policy measures remains largely vague. Overall, the article adds to the growing academic debate on EU security governance and offers fresh empirical insights on strategic thinking in counterterrorism policy.

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Introduction

In a highly dramatic way, recent events in Afghanistan have raised new debates and concerns about counterterrorism worldwide. In Europe, after the series of attacks by transnational terrorist organisations between 2015 and 2017, the question of responses to terrorism and “Jihadist” violence suddenly regained the central stage in late 2020. On 2 November, a young assailant shot at the crowd in the city centre of Vienna, killing four persons. On 29 October, three people were killed in Nice and a police officer was attacked in Avignon. One of the victims in Nice, a 70 years old lady, was beheaded. The same fate befell Samuel Paty, a high school professor in northern Paris. Mr Paty was killed by an 18-years-old teenager born in Chechnya few days after he had shown in class the (in-)famous cartoons of Mohammad originally published by the French satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015. In the following days, the French authorities opted for a hard response, ordering massive police controls on Mosques and Muslim non-profit organisations, announcing the dissolution of different Islamic organisations considered as “extremist”, and expulsing more than 200 people owning double citizenship. Both President Emmanuel Macron and his Austrian counterpart, Prime Minister Kurz, mentioned the need to rethink European internal space of free movement as designed by the Schengen Agreements, opening a new debate on the status of counterterrorism (CT) in Europe.

CONTACT Silvia D'Amato  s.damato@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

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In the following weeks, European Institutions showed a renewed activism. On 13 November 2020, the European Union (EU) home affairs ministers released a Joint statement to reinforce surveillance of religious worship places and online interactions.¹ Shortly after, on 9 December 2020, the EU has published a document titled *A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond*, the first official agenda to be released after the 2005 *Counterterrorism Strategy*. The new agenda confirms the attempt by the EU to build internal and international credibility as a “security provider”, in line with long-term efforts dedicated to develop a EU strategic vision. Indeed, the fight against terrorism seems to subscribe to the declared intention by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to make geopolitics the leitmotiv of the EU, currently involved in the development of the so-called Strategic Compass for security and defence expected for Spring 2022. The announcement arrived as a response to mounting challenges facing the EU in recent years, summarised by Emmanuel Macron’s remark on the EU finding itself at “the edge of a precipice” surrounded by a “hostile world” (Economist 2019). Yet, despite its clear policy relevance and the efforts made in this direction (Bossong and Rhinard 2018), the specialised literature on counterterrorism still lacks a systematic account of the novel propositions and strategic formula elaborated by the EU in relation to this policy field and in light of this new security scenario. It is therefore pressing, we believe, for the literature on European security to go beyond the evaluation of institutional changes and provide empirically-based and threat-specific accounts of how security issues are interpreted and related responses evaluated. There are, indeed, a number of relevant questions that we find overlooked: How strategic is the EU counterterrorism strategy? What are the strategic elements that characterise the EU counterterrorism policy? Are there elements the EU is neglecting?

This paper aims to fill this gap by addressing these questions and by therefore exploring the extent to which the EU is currently *strategically* engaging against terrorism. To do so, we build on the renewed debate in International Relations (IR) and security studies on whether the EU can be considered a strategic actor (Winn 2019, Cottey 2020) and, if so, what are the key features of the EU strategic thinking (Léonard and Kaunert 2017, Nitoiu and Sus 2019, Panke 2019). The ability of the EU to think and act geo-strategically has been investigated in light of different, though overlapping, concepts such as EU security culture (Meyer 2006), EU international actorness (Kaunert 2010, Brattberg and Rhinard 2012, Čmakalová and Rolenc 2012, Ferreira- Pereira et. al 2016) and EU grand security strategy (Economides and Sperling 2018, Szewczyk 2021). Yet, empirically, there is still a lot to be shown, specifically in relation to the threat of terrorism. Indeed, in light of its cross-border and transnational nature, terrorism allows to investigate strategic thinking in its internal and external projection, a combination that is largely underestimated. In order to explore whether and to what extent we can talk about a strategic EU in the field of counterterrorism, we draw from traditional scholarship on strategic thinking. Largely and mostly used to address foreign policy issues or military affairs of state actors as well as warfare strategies of non-state actors, analyses of strategic thinking overall tend to ignore transnational or supranational actors such as the EU.

We believe that investigating the strategic features of European counterterrorism appears even more relevant in light of the crucial historical stage in which EU institutions are demanded to act, divided as they are between the expectations on their external projection and the dynamics of international fragmentation in both political and security

terms. Hence, through content analysis of EU policy documents on counterterrorism, this article analyses the empirical salience and relevance of different strategic dimensions, namely: i) threat assessment; ii) objectives setting and iii) policy measures. The paper finds that, while objectives are clearly presented in the documents, the threat that the strategy is supposed to counter remains unspecified. It also shows that the formulation of concrete policy measures remains largely vague resulting in a set of different instruments – information sharing, border control, reliance on security expertise – rather than an ultimate CT strategy.

The article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the main research agenda concerning strategic thinking. The third section details the analytical framework and the methods. The fourth section presents the main findings. Finally, section five concludes and discusses potential policy implications.

Strategic thinking from Sparta to Brussels

Historical approaches to strategic studies rely on the idea that the core nature of strategy and strategic thinking has remained essentially unchanged throughout history (Kelly 1982), regardless of technological innovations which might have influenced their practical implementation (for an overview, see Platias and Koliopoulos 2010). As a consequence, contemporary scholars interested in studying strategy design and formulation still largely rely on lessons learned from the most eminent historical thinkers such as Thucydides, Sun Tzu or Carl von Clausewitz² (see Heuser 2010). Understood in ancient Greece as the art and set of skills of the General (*strategós*), Thucydides emphasises *fear* as the explanatory factor for war, and therefore, for the need of strategy. Used for the first time in its modern interpretation by the French officer Paul Gideon Joly de Maizeroy in 1777, strategy was defined as “the science of the General [...] to formulate plans, strategy combines times, places, means and different interests” (de Maizeroy 1777, p. 2, quoted in Coutau-Bégarie 2002, p. 57). As Rousseau (2012, p. 75) points out, “strategy provides a theory of success” and as such, it entails considerations over means and capabilities to ensure security, survival and preservation of national interests. This essentially means that strategy is a process of coordination among the whole set of available policy options and instruments. In fact, as Beaufre (1965, p. 22) clarifies, “[strategy] is the art which enables a man, no matter what the techniques employed, to master the problems set by any clash of wills and as a result to employ the techniques available with maximum efficiency”.

Going beyond strategic studies, we find a number of research traditions interested in understanding how actors respond strategically to relevant challenges. Among these, the literature on public policy and public administration has recently offered some useful reflections on strategy, understood as the process that links capabilities and aspirations. More precisely, strategy can be defined as “a concrete approach to aligning the aspirations and the capabilities of public organizations or other entities in order to achieve goals” (Bryson and George 2020, p. 3). In *doing strategy*, actors make “sure that aspirations can actually be achieved” by taking into account existing resources and constraints (Bryson and George 2020, p. 2). Therefore, strategising implies that policy-makers evaluate the costs and benefits of different options and adopt certain behaviours on the basis of the instruments they can access or create and the goals they expect to reach. Yet, strategic thinking does not operate *in a vacuum*. Strategy implies a relational opposition to

a rival who would probably do everything in his or her power to nullify it (Tsakiris 2006). In other words, echoing Thomas Schelling, it seems safe to argue that the interpretation of strategy goes beyond a mere calculation of costs and benefits, or ends and means. By stressing the relational dimension of strategy, Schelling (1960, p. 3) defines it as “the best course of action for each player” with respect to “what the other players do”. While we agree on the importance of thinking about the practice of strategy in its broader understanding as “the set of arguments and organising principles, embodied in documents and decisions, that explains the myriad of foreign policy choices and helps guide future paths” (Szewczyk 2021, p. 15), we also argue that a better understanding of strategy starts with an empirical grasp into the options and strategic evaluation an actor is considering with respect to a specific policy area. Overall, the conceptual framework we propose relies on a conception of strategy as a process of evaluation of policy goals identified to respond to a specific security challenge on the basis of an existing set of aspirations and capabilities.

Hence, when considering the current threat that transnational terrorism represents to European states, the EU not only *could* but also *should* be regarded as a strategic actor or, at least, investigated as such (Engelbrekt and Hellenberg 2010, Biscop and Coelmont 2013). Yet, in spite of the numerous recent institutional accounts (Bureš 2015, Monar 2015, Ferreira-Pereira *et al.* 2016), little has been researched about how the EU is currently strategically responding to it. Therefore, by adapting a traditional conceptualisation of strategy, this paper represents an original contribution to the current debate in EU security scholarship, specifically in the field of counterterrorism. Moreover, this study offers insightful elements also from a policy perspective. Investigating the EU strategic vision seems indeed crucial to better analyse the process of both policy formulation and implementation.

Analysing the EU strategic thinking: the methodological approach

In analysing strategic thinking in counterterrorism, we conceive of strategy as an evaluation based on the existing set of aspirations and capabilities to respond to a specific threat and achieve clearly articulated policy goals. From an operational point of view, first, we need to assess how the threat that the strategy expects to counter is conceived of and what kind of features are highlighted. Second, strategy also implies the setting of a certain goal to achieve. Operationally, this means examining the aims that actors intend to achieve given the existing capabilities and possible need to develop new ones. Third, strategy elucidates the concrete efforts needed to achieve goals. In this respect, at the operational level, we need to assess the policy measures and practical tools that are put in place. On these premises, our conceptual framework elaborates on the state of the art in strategic thinking scholarship and focuses on the above defined three operational dimensions: i) threat assessment; ii) objectives setting; and iii) policy measures.

As for the methodological approach, we depart from the idea stressed by Doyle (2007) that strategies can be implicit or explicit. Whereas implicit strategies require an analysis of actor's interaction with its political and security background, explicit strategies – contained, for example, in documents published by governments and political actors – represent an actor's official and public announcement about the way it expects to achieve

goals and respond to inputs and challenges deriving from its environment. In this paper, we focus on the explicit dimension of strategy. Indeed, we argue, essential features of security strategies can be empirically captured through the analysis of key documents such as policy debates, white papers and public security documents. In this sense, we emphasise, strategy is also about communication. In this article, we have therefore investigated EU strategic thinking through computer-assisted qualitative content analysis of text data using NVivo. IR scholars have increasingly relied upon content analysis as a research method to systematically explore the content of communication (Pashakhanlou 2017) and, in line with this tradition, the empirical material for this research has been drawn from selected policy documents ($N=11$) covering a period from 2015 to 2020. This time frame has been characterised by an unprecedented wave of mass-killing transnational attacks that has led to a renewed internal pressure on EU counterterrorism policy that we find particularly relevant to analyse.

We have systematically interpreted the documents and translated all the relevant meanings in the material into categories of a coding frame. The coding frame has been deductively generated in a concept-driven way and it is structured around the three above-mentioned operational dimensions (Table 1). The units of coding were defined in relative terms as those parts of the material that could be interpreted in a meaningful way with respect to the coding frame. In particular, they consisted of sentences or paragraphs (Schreier 2012).

The first category, “threat assessment”, specifically considers the way the EU is interpreting the terrorism threat. In this respect, the analysis distinguishes between the “form and cause” – which concern the threat *per se* – and the “target” of the attacks. The category of the “objectives setting” refers to the aims the actor wants to achieve on the basis of existing resources and “constraints”. The third identified dimension, “policy measures”, specifically relates to the practical “means” and “responsible actor” (Table 1).

Analysis: talking the talk while walking the walk?

After the 2005 *Counterterrorism Strategy*, the 2020 *Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU* is the second official EU document describing the EU strategy against terrorism. The text is structured along four points which mirror the four main pillars of the strategy: i) anticipate; ii) prevent; iii) protect; and iv) respond. Differently from the 2005 strategy, there

Table 1. Coding scheme.

Categories	Definitions
Threat assessment	It concerns any references to terrorism that describes meaning and characteristics associated with the threat.
form and cause	It specifically includes references to characteristics of the threat and the causes of its actions
target	It concerns references to the identified target of potential attacks
Objectives setting	It includes evaluations on the balance between goals and potential costs
aims	It includes references to beneficial prospects of implementing a specific strategic option
constraints	It includes references to the costs of potential strategic options, being economic, political or social costs
Policy measures	It concerns the set of measures that are discussed to reach the expected objectives
means	It includes references to the practical tool that are expected to be employed
responsible actors	It concerns the designated actors to be in charge of a specific measure

Source: Authors' elaboration.

is an additional fifth (cross-)pillar which relates to the strengthening of international collaboration. As mentioned, we decided to analyse the latest 2020 Agenda together with a variety of documents published between 2015 and 2020 in order to better account for the process of strategy formulation (see [Appendix](#)).

What emerges from a preliminary analysis of the ensemble of text data is that EU strategic thinking against terrorism appears partially predictable but enlightening from different perspectives. [Table 2](#) details the results of an explorative phase of analysis. Not surprisingly, the threat (i.e. terrorism) is definitely the most recurrent concept.³

Overall, this explorative search does not display any specific unexpected words. However, we do find a first primary insight on the EU approach to counter-terrorism, extensively focused on police and judicial cooperation. Interestingly, “Europol” is the most mentioned word ($N=761$) followed by a relatively high number of references to “informing” ($N=629$), both pointing to the question of information sharing both within institutions and between law enforcement organisations. As we shall see, this theme recurs throughout the analysis in different ways. In the remainder of this section, we present what the qualitative analysis of the texts reveals with regard to the EU strategic thinking.

Threat assessment

Text data show the absence of specific characterisations of the terrorism threat. As an overall evaluation, it seems fair to argue that the strategy does not develop or communicate a clear image of the threat, which is instead generally referred to as “terrorism”.

There are, nonetheless, some relevant findings worth exploring. When analysing the category referring to “form and cause” ([Figure 1](#)), two interesting features emerge. Whereas the description of the “form” reveals particular attention dedicated to the spatiality of terrorism, the “cause” mostly pertains to the processes of radicalisation.

The spatiality of terrorism seems particularly relevant in relation to foreign fighters and terrorist networks. Both aspects confirm and insist on the transnationality and cross-border nature of the threat – which present the highest saliency in the data (22%) – and display an interesting geographical sensitivity. In particular, these aspects point to the relation between the external and the internal dimension of European security. The reference to the foreign fighters (17%), and specifically to “returnees”, speaks to the long-standing debate about European citizens or residents who left Europe to fight along the lines of armed groups in the Middle-East:

in reality the number of returnees has declined significantly in the last two years, and some argue that it is probable that most of the remaining foreign fighters have been killed in the

Table 2. Most frequent relevant words across documents.

Word	Count	Similar Words
europol	761	europol
european	747	european, europeans
informing	629	inform, informant, information, informed,
Terrorism	593	Terror
persons	469	person, personal
terrorists	466	terrorist
security	460	secure, secured, securing, securities

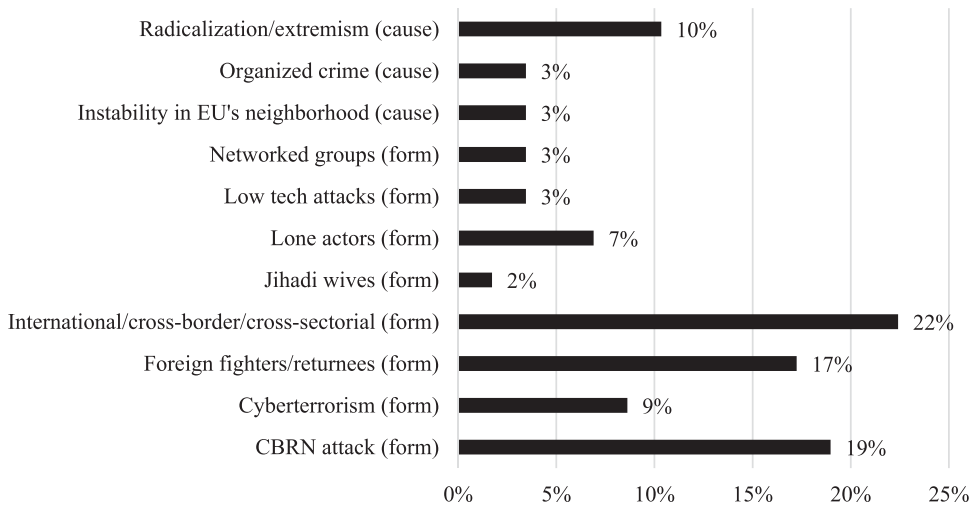


Figure 1. Form and cause (% of coded text passages).

conflict zone or imprisoned there. Nonetheless, the issue of returnees raises many challenges: First, they are perceived as a security threat. During their stay in conflict zones, they acquire combat experience, which prompts fears that they may perpetuate the terrorist threat to the EU through radicalising, fundraising and facilitation activities⁴

The nexus is also repeatedly emphasised through the issue of political instability in the EU neighbourhood (3%):

whereas developments and instability in the Middle East, North Africa, and Caucasian regions have enabled Daesh and other terrorist groups to gain a foothold in countries bordering the EU such as those of the Western Balkans, and the nexus between internal and external security has become more prominent.⁵

In both cases, the external origin of the threat is emphasised and the connection between the external source of violence and the status of internal security is stressed.

Yet, document analysis confirms that the terrorism threat against Europe is mostly addressed as a micro-level security challenge as opposed to a symmetrical state-related threat. In particular, the micro-nature of the threat is also explored in relation to terrorism conceived of as a networked threat (3%). Networks, the documents insist, are the channels that connect terrorist organisations operating along the MENA region and Europe, where indeed there are “home grown terrorists operating in networks”.⁶

As already mentioned, an overly discussed element that functions as *trait d'union* among these forms of threat is radicalisation, defined as a process “leading to terrorism and violent extremism”.⁷ Despite the fact that the documents do not specify in concrete terms how radicalisation leads to violent extremisms, the two concepts are seen as strictly related:

Terrorism in Europe feeds on extremist ideologies. EU action against terrorism therefore needs to address the root causes of extremism through preventive measures. Throughout the EU, the link between radicalisation and extremist violence is becoming ever clearer.⁸

In discussing radicalisation and its connection to the above-mentioned issue of foreign fighters, an interesting generational dimension emerges. In fact, part of the preventive

discourse emphasises the youth as potential source of danger – *de facto* criminalising youth. In particular, the EU warns about the return to Europe of those children taken or born in countries exposed to major terrorist events:

child returnees pose specific problems as they can be both victims and potential perpetrators at the same time.⁹

some of these children (aged above 9 years) have undergone military training in conflict zones, prompting questions about the impacts this might have upon their return on EU soil, the “threat” this might pose, and the possible social/criminal response.¹⁰

Whereas, on the one hand, young people and children are firstly discussed as the victims of a process of indoctrination, on the other they are also depicted as potential sources of the threat.

Overall, the attention dedicated to individuals or groups of individuals – being foreign fighters or radicalised people – confirm a general understanding of terrorism as a micro-level security threat. This stands out as a process of individualisation of counterterrorism, where individuals are considered the main threat to national security.

Nonetheless, when looking at the way the documents address the description of potential targets of the threat, counterterrorism efforts remain mostly focused on the characteristics and resources of the referent actor, namely, Europe (understood as both the EU and its member states). As [Figure 2](#) displays, the strategic vision of the EU insists on the collective nature of key sensitive areas – the so-called soft targets – defined as public spaces and mass public events where terrorists are more likely to attack and cause victims.

However, we do find some connections between the target and the characteristics of the threat. Indeed, public spaces are chosen in order to maximise lethality – despite the fact that many attacks are implemented with “low tech” instruments such as vehicles and white weapons:

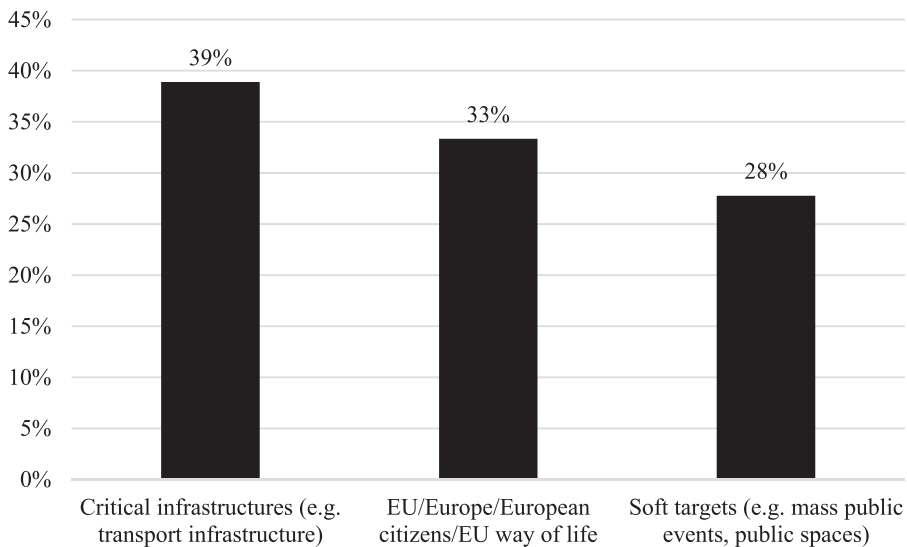


Figure 2. Target (% of coded text passages).

Besides more complex “high intensity” attacks combining explosives and firearms, Europe has also been hit by a growing number of “low tech” attacks against public spaces carried out with everyday items such as a vehicle for ramming or a knife for stabbing. The targets are often chosen with the intent to causing mass casualties.¹¹

Interestingly, and differently from other cases (D’Amato 2019), the references underlining Europe as a target do not refer to any normative dimension. Indeed, documents do not necessarily discuss terrorism as a threat to liberal and democratic values, nor European values to be under attack. In this sense, we find a more materialistic and mostly geographical understanding of Europe.

Objectives setting

Analytically, the process of objectives setting includes references concerning the aims associated to a certain policy option and those related to potential constraints and limits to its implementation. As Figure 3 shows, much of the objective-setting effort is based on what Europe can do better and, specifically, on the attempt to increase coordination among different actors.

Not surprisingly, the crucial objective discussed across documents is the need to increase cooperation and coordination, which implies intense cross-national and multi-actor information exchange (39%). A stronger cooperation would first pass through a more effective and harmonised implementation of legal instruments adopted by Member States. In this sense, the EU seems engaged in emphasising how the threat of terrorism could represent the needed pressure on European actors to force them to act coherently. This is all in line with a typical neo-functionalist, problem-driven approach to further integration in the security policy field.¹² Accordingly, another relevant aim concerns the connection between the internal and the external dimensions of security (8%), which is crucial to the creation of a cross border space of intervention.

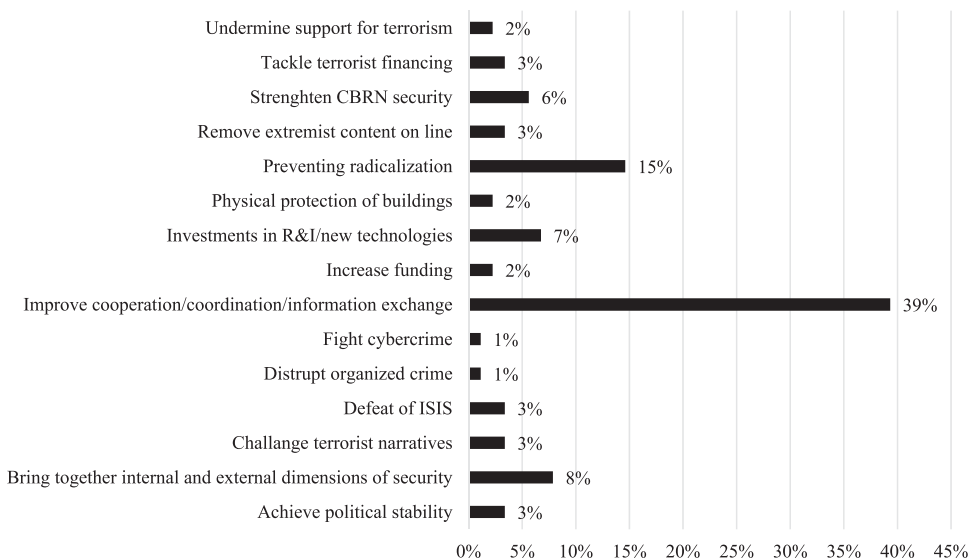


Figure 3. Aims (% of coded text passages).

With respect to the broader aim concerning the prevention of radicalisation (15%), much of the discussion revolves around the need to develop indicators able to signal processes of radicalisation. Here, the EU confirms a typical preventative approach focused on targeting radicalisation, which is seen as a pre-condition to terrorist violence.

As far as the constraints are concerned, we consider both expected material and potential political costs. In this regard, it is interesting to notice that much of the constraints are in fact related to the internal characteristics of European countries as examples of liberal, rule of law-based, political orders (Figure 4).

Documents are indeed outspoken in terms of limits and standards of procedure imposed by existing legislations specifically safeguarding fundamental rights:

All measures taken to counter terrorism must comply with international law, including human rights law (including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, where appropriate), refugee law, and international humanitarian law.¹³

By making reference to the rule of law and fundamental rights as constraints, the EU clearly intends to emphasise the existence of legal limits to the implementation of security measures. It is no secret that security threats might generate public and political pressure to implement hard and more invasive measures, posing critical challenges to the constitutional structure of liberal governments. In this sense, the EU directs a part of its strategic effort internally. Indeed, text data confirm that the realisation of strategic objectives is influenced by the nature of the European political and legal project as heir of liberal constitutionalism, which is made of sustained efforts to curtail discretionary actions, especially those associated with the executive.

Policy measures

In order to evaluate the third aspect of strategic thinking, namely, policy measures, we focus on two categories: means and responsible actors. Our analysis reveals that in the

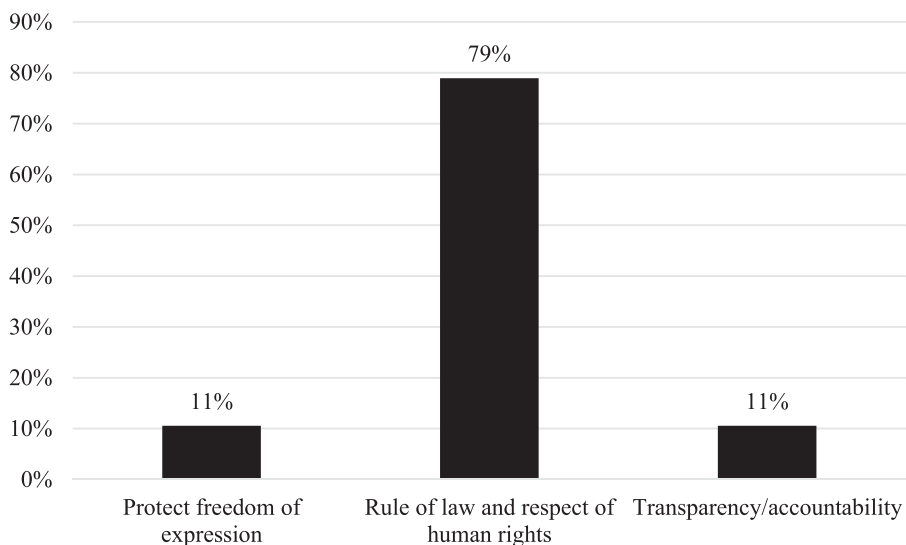


Figure 4. Constraints (% of coded text passages).

case of the EU approach to CT, key policy measures can be distinguished into: i) practical means and networks/experts groups; and ii) agencies as responsible actors. Coherently with what has been discussed above in relation to coordination, these categories suggest that, in its response to terrorism, the EU focuses mostly on the development of policy instruments for information and knowledge exchange. Yet, there is consistently less accuracy across the documents in describing and communicating measures and practical solutions. Specifically, as for the first category, we find it interesting that the EU is discussing means on two levels. On the one hand, documents present a series of practical initiatives and tools that are expected to be employed in the fight against terrorism. On the other hand, a large part of the discussion is dedicated to the creation of and support to networks and expert groups that are understood as a means to increase the engagement of different expertise and, therefore, as a specific tool at EU disposal in its fight against terrorism. [Table 3](#) presents the different means that are presented across the documents.

In particular, the relevance of the Passenger Name Record (PNR) and the Prüm framework as information exchange tools is highlighted. The PNR is the system containing the ensemble of information provided by passengers and collected by airlines and then stored by Passenger Information Units (PIUs). The PNR is defined as

fully compatible with the Charter of Fundamental Rights while providing a strong and effective tool at EU level [...]. PNR data has proven necessary to identify high risk travellers in the context of combatting terrorism, drugs trafficking, trafficking in human beings, child sexual exploitation and other serious crimes.¹⁴

As for the Prüm framework, it offers “automated comparison of DNA profiles, fingerprint data and vehicle registration data – which are key to detecting crime and building an effective case”.¹⁵ However, the documents also stress that:

the system is falling short of its potential because at this stage only a limited number of Member States have implemented their legal obligations and integrated the network with their own systems. This impedes the overall effectiveness of the Prüm framework in catching and prosecuting criminals.¹⁶

As for the rest of the measures, in most instances, they are simply mentioned without any clear explanation of their nature or relevance within the overall strategic approach.¹⁷ It seems important to highlight here that the documents refer to information sharing both as a crucial tool to support European cooperation on terrorism and as a prosecution resource. Indeed, as stressed across texts, the strengthening of information-sharing is key for the correct implementation of legal instruments and therefore for cooperation in criminal matters.

Table 3. Presented CT means (2015–2020).

CBRN action plan
Common risk indicators
EU soft target site assessment tool
European criminal records information systems
European police record index system
Passenger name record (PNR)
Prüm framework

There is another interesting aspect emerging from the analysis of the measures that we believe is worth exploring further: the attention to border management. While we could not detect any reference to any specific CT means as the ones shown in [Table 3](#), border management is still often mentioned as an important means to fight terrorism. This finding appears interesting considering that irregular border crossing or migration are never mentioned in the threat assessment. We find then that, by discussing and justifying control over borders as a mean to respond to the transnationality of the terrorist threat, specifically in relation to the question of foreign fighters, the documents do stress the relationship between terrorism and migration. To put it more clearly, the attention to border management to fight transnational movements of foreign fighters reinforces a general security-oriented discussion about mobility and therefore migration. Such an emphasis on the dangers of transnationality when discussing terrorism clearly impacts another category of actors, namely, the migrants (see Baker-Beall 2019 and Ragazzi and Walmsley 2020).

With regard to the networks and experts groups, the documents highlight the need to create and institutionalise them to strengthen the cross-national and multidisciplinary dialogue among actors engaged at different levels in the fight against terrorism. This would also increase the potential of information-sharing practices. [Table 4](#) presents an overview of the networks and expert groups discussed in the documents. These networks and expert groups gather together practitioners from national and supranational security agencies as well as scholars and civil society actors. In this sense, the circulation of information and expertise in the form of shared knowledge across professional domains is considered to be crucial to counterterrorism action.

In describing networks and expert groups, the documents make direct references to local actors, specifically in the cases of the EU Crime Prevention Network (established in 2001 and that focuses on crime prevention knowledge and practices among EU Member States¹⁸), the Policy Dialogues on Security and the radicalisation awareness network (RAN).¹⁹ However, whereas great emphasis is put on the need for cooperative work, the exchange of knowledge and distribution of power and responsibilities among relevant actors remain essentially a blind spot. Overall, we find a prevalence of references to EU actors that seems to reinforce the attempt to develop a stronger EU counterterrorism capacity also through a more ambitious taking on responsibilities. Even in this case, however, it is worth considering that the operative role attributed to EU actors remains limited and rather confined to a supporting role. The documents, in fact, rarely mention or elaborate on internal and external operative actions to be undertaken directly by EU agencies.

Table 4 . Networks/Expert Groups.

EU crime prevention network
High risk security network
Radicalisation awareness network
Networks of national specialised units
EU policy group on soft target protection
Policy dialogues on security
High-level commission expert group on radicalisation
Global Counterterrorism Forum

In relation to the second category of responsible actors, we find that, other than important references to Member States' apparatuses, much of the responsibility is put on agencies. Specifically, the analysis clearly shows an *agentification* of policy solutions where responsible actors – the agencies – are described as policy measures *per se*:

Given the increasing nexus between different types of security threats, policy and action on the ground must be fully coordinated among all relevant EU agencies [...]. These agencies provide a specialised layer of support and expertise for Member States and the EU. They function as information hubs, help implement EU law and play a crucial role in supporting operational cooperation, such as joint cross-border actions. It is time to deepen cooperation between these agencies.²⁰

EU agencies play a crucial role in supporting operational cooperation. They contribute to the assessment of common security threats, they help to define common priorities for operational action, and they facilitate cross-border cooperation and prosecution. Member States should make full use of the support of the agencies to tackle crime.²¹

Interestingly, we also detect a process of *specialisation* of policy measures. Indeed, documents insist on the need to create, within these agencies, specific offices and services that are directly presented as “counter-terrorism structures”,²² such as the European Counter Terrorism Centre at Europol, the CT division European External Action Service, EU INTCEN and Network of CT/Security experts (Table 5).

There is a clear attempt to emphasise a larger role and responsibility of the EU in the general European response to terrorism by legitimising the creation and work accomplished within specialised security agencies such as EUROPOL, EUROJUST, EASS and FRONTEX. It is also worth considering that the emphasis across the macro-categories of policy instruments is put on knowledge, not necessarily understood as intelligence-sharing but also as an attempt to develop a cross-national practice of learning and a common state of the art on terrorism affairs.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to offer fresh empirical insights on the most recent development in the EU security landscape. More specifically, by providing an innovative analysis of the EU strategic thinking in counterterrorism affairs, this paper contributes to the existing debate on the EU security strategy (Economides and Sperling 2018, Nitoiu and Sus 2019, Szewczyk 2021) and counterterrorism approach (Bures 2011, Christou and Croft 2011, Bossong 2012, Monar 2015, Argomaniz *et al.* 2017). More specifically, while many have investigated

Table 5. Agentification and specialisation of CT policy measures.

Agencies

EU Agency for Law Enforcement Training (Cepol)
EU-LISA
Eurojust
Europol
Frontex

Counter-terrorism structures

European Counter Terrorism Centre at Europol
CT division European External Action Service (EEAS)
EU INTCEN
Network of CT/Security experts

institutional changes (Monar 2007, Kaunert and Della Giovanna 2010, Argomaniz 2011), focusing on the role of agencies for internal (Kaunert 2010, Bureš 2016) or external security actorness (Wagnsson *et al.* 2009, Kaunert and Léonard 2011, Brattberg and Rhinard 2012, Ferreira-Pereira *et al.* 2016), there is a lack of empirical studies concerning the EU strategic thinking. Hence, this paper sought to contribute to the existing research in a two-fold way. First, by defining strategy as the process of evaluation grounded on existing aspirations and capabilities and initiated to respond to a threat, we provide a framework to empirically evaluate strategic thinking by relying on three categories: (i) threat assessment; (ii) objectives setting and (iii) policy measures. Second, through content analysis, we assess quantitative relevance and qualitative meaning of the three categories in the EU counterterrorism policy formulation between 2015 and 2020. Beyond the contribution it makes to the literature on counterterrorism, we believe that this framework offers the crucial advantage to see strategy in practice and how it is performed with respect to specific security threats. This issue-specific approach can help better understand broader perceived inconsistencies of European security.

The empirical analysis of the three dimensions of strategic thinking has revealed some mixed results. On the one hand, the documents emphasise the need of a more operative role of EU institutions and agencies in the design of a EU strategic vision. On the other hand, while objectives are clearly presented, the “enemy” that the strategy is supposed to counter remain largely unspecified. In other words, there is no clear consideration of the potential relational aspect of the strategy. Echoing Shelling (1960), what the other could do to nullify the EU strategic options does not appear to be taken into serious consideration. In addition to that, policy measures remain largely vague. In sum, while efforts have been made in clarifying priorities and critical issues to be addressed, the EU seems to be reluctant in developing a clear practical transnational strategy.

Different from other foreign and security issues (Cottey 2020), we find that the problem does not necessarily lie on the lack of agreed assessment of the security environment. We found that, although rarely addressed in detail, there was a general convergence on the causes and targets of terrorism across documents and years with much of the emphasis that has been put on processes of radicalisation and the potential risk associated with the youth. We also found that the description of terrorism as a potential source of destabilisation of European democratic equilibria is accompanied by a continuous discussion regarding the democratic constraints for the implementation of counterterrorism measures. Here, we find it interesting to elaborate on the normative content of the strategic discussion that is clear and effective. Indeed, the EU appeared interested in highlighting the concrete relevance of funding principles of human rights and lawful use of force – which represent those unnegotiable values to uphold while developing counterterrorism responses. Safeguarding the rule of law is crucial to EU counterterrorism policy formulation, while this has not always been the case as research on the United States and the Global War on Terror has shown (see, e.g. Mashaw 2009).

The main problem our analysis underlines concerns the elaboration of concrete policy measures that remain vague and disperse. Specifically, in order to increase cooperation, coordination and information sharing, the EU has created diverse specialised agencies and promoted the proliferation of several networks and expert groups. However, these initiatives fuelled precisely those information exchange problems they were meant to address. In this respect, the EU counterterrorism strategy appears as an opaque and

fragmented set activities which result in a dispersion of efforts. A clear definition of what it really means to counter terrorism for the EU could help reduce such dispersion and shape policy coherence across the Union.

Notes

1. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/11/13/joint-statement-by-the-eu-home-affairs-ministers-on-the-recent-terrorist-attacks-in-europe/>
2. Recently, Duyvesteyn and Worrall (2017) have called for a renewal of the debate within strategic studies.
3. By summing up the results for “terrorism” and “terrorist” categories, the number of references to the terrorism threat equals 1059.
4. European Parliamentary Research Service – The return of foreign fighters to EU soil, 2018, p. 5.
5. European Parliament - Draft report on findings and recommendations of the Special Committee on Terrorism, 2018, p. 4.
6. Council of the European Union – Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Counter-terrorism, 2017, p. 2.
7. Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating terrorism, 2017, p. 11.
8. European Commission – The European Agenda on Security, 2015, p. 14.
9. European Parliament – Draft report on findings and recommendations of the Special Committee on Terrorism, 2018, p. 4.
10. European Parliamentary Research Service – The return of foreign fighters to EU soil, 2018, p. 5.
11. European Commission – Action Plan to support the protection of public spaces, 2017, p. 2.
12. For a recent study on the Communitarisation of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice see Trauner, F., and Ripoll Servent (2016)
13. Council of the European Union - Outline of the counter-terrorism strategy for Syria and Iraq, with particular focus on foreign fighters, 2015, p. 2.
14. European Commission – The European Agenda on Security, 2015 p. 7.
15. European Commission – The European Agenda on Security, 2015 p. 6.
16. European Commission – The European Agenda on Security, 2015 p. 6.
17. An exception here is the discussion on chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) material as the action plan presented by the European Commission is quite detailed. The relevance in the fight against terrorism remains, however, limited.
18. See <https://eucpn.org/>
19. See https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran_en
20. European Commission – The European Agenda on Security, 2015, p. 4.
21. European Commission – The European Agenda on Security, 2015, pp. 8–9.
22. Council of the European Union – Outline of the counter-terrorism strategy for Syria and Iraq, with particular focus on foreign fighters, 2015, p. 3.

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ORCID

Silvia D'Amato  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8962-5987>

Andrea Terlizzi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4417-2405>

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Appendix

Table A1 . List of documents.

Year	Title
2015	Council of the European Union – Outline of the counter-terrorism strategy for Syria and Iraq, with particular focus on foreign fighters European Commission – The European Agenda on Security – COM(2015) 185 final
2016	Regulation (EU) 2016/794 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) and replacing and repealing Council Decisions 2009/371/JHA, 2009/934/JHA, 2009/935/JHA, 2009/936/JHA and 2009/968/JHA
2017	Council of the European Union – Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Counter-terrorism European Commission – Action Plan to enhance preparedness against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear security risks – COM(2017) 610 final European Commission – Action Plan to support the protection of public spaces – COM(2017) 612 final Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA Directive (EU) 2017/853 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 May 2017 amending Council Directive 91/477/EEC on control of the acquisition and possession of weapons
2018	European Parliamentary Research Service – The return of foreign fighters to EU soil European Parliament – Draft report on findings and recommendations of the Special Committee on Terrorism (2018/2044(INI))
2020	European Commission – A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond – COM (2020) 795 final