

Official justifications for Brussels lockdown unravel

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Popular frustration spread across Belgium yesterday as contradictions mounted in the official justification for the continued police lockdown of Brussels and the national state of alert.

Yesterday, the Belgian government's Organ for the Coordination of Threat Analysis (OCAM) announced that it would maintain the alert level at four, the highest level on Belgium's one-to-four scale, until next Monday. It decided, however, that subways, schools and universities, which have been shut since the beginning of the week, would reopen on Wednesday.

"The potential targets [of terrorist attacks] are the same as we listed yesterday," Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel declared on Monday, citing shopping districts and mass transit. He said the authorities were allowing them to reopen on Wednesday, however, because "we do not want to let the terrorists win by letting them shut down the country."

In fact, the Belgian government has used the threat of terrorist attack to implement extraordinary measures that essentially dismantle all democratic rights. Paramilitary forces have flooded the streets of Brussels and have been given unlimited powers to search and detain individuals declared suspicious. These measures parallel those taken in France, where a "state of emergency" granting the government extraordinary powers has been extended for three months.

The massive police manhunts launched Sunday night in several neighborhoods across Brussels produced no obvious results. Of the 16 people detained after the manhunts, 15 were released yesterday without charge. One was "charged with participating in the activities of a terrorist group and a terrorist attack," according to the Belgian federal prosecutor's office. However, the supposed target of the Brussels raid—the fugitive alleged planner of the November 13 terror attacks in

Paris, Salah Abdeslam—was not captured.

A further five people were arrested Monday morning in Brussels, but two were released last night. Three were still detained for further questioning.

The prosecutor's office was forced to defend its actions after so little emerged from the 22 police searches and 16 arrests on Sunday night. It issued a statement declaring, "It is not unusual that, in the context of a large-scale operation like that of Sunday, many people are taken away for detailed questioning or to explain why they are present in certain areas."

The statement is ludicrous. It may be that the Brussels police force has the habit of detaining many innocent people during its operations. However, it is surely unusual to place the entire city on lockdown for several days and launch multiple police manhunts in separate neighborhoods in response to only one individual.

Different levels of the Belgian state also issued contradictory instructions to the population. Belgian Education Minister Joëlle Milquet and Rudi Vervoort, the prime minister of the Brussels region, made different statements on whether daycare centers would be open, and there was similar official confusion as to whether elementary schools would open.

As a result, despite a broad consensus in the ruling elite in favor of police-state measures, criticisms are emerging of the lockdown, particularly in the opposition parties and the media.

Greens and Socialist Party (PS) officials warned that the government would have to shift its explanations for its policies. "Nothing has changed, but the schools and the subways are reopening Wednesday. There are some messages we can't push on people anymore," warned Zakia Khattabi, the co-president of the Belgian Greens.

"Independently of the OCAM's recommendations, one sees very clearly tonight that the decision to put

Brussels on lockdown is political. We trusted it, a priori,” she said.

Khattabi did not call for opposition to the lockdown, but called for Michel to give more credible explanations for what was being done, explaining that now “the legitimacy of the actions ... require explanations.”

Tensions also emerged between Michel’s right-wing Reform Movement (MR) and Willy Demeyer, the PS mayor of Liège. After MR members asked whether “everything is really under control,” Demeyer replied flatly that based on intelligence furnished by the Belgian national authorities, “there is no particular threat on the municipal territory.”

Demeyer applauded the sizable police presence in Liège, boasting that purchases of €750,000 in weapons and bulletproof vests had allowed for large-scale police deployments in the city.

La Libre Belgique pointed to the economic costs of the lockdown, editorializing that “the way all of this has been presented and explained is certainly not apt to reassure the population.”

It slammed comments in international media calling Brussels “a center of jihadism” or a “failing state,” complaining that they were “really not the best way to attract investors and terrorists to our country.” It warned of the “catastrophic” impact of a possible cancellation of the Brussels Christmas fair, the Winter Pleasures, for the city’s tourist industry.



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