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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Terrorism Working Party (TWP)
Subject: Countering violent extremism (CVE) in its ideological orientations and dimensions, including online activities

INTRODUCTION

Countering violent extremism (CVE) in its various ideological orientations and dimensions, including online activities, is a core priority of the TWP under the PPEU2021.¹

Terrorism represents the peak of violent extremism, whether referring to jihadist, right-wing or left-wing ideologies. Directive 2017/541 of 15 March on combating terrorism², which is currently under evaluation³, sets out the legal framework. However, there is no legal definition of violent extremism and the typical criminal offences often committed by right-wing or left-wing actors rely on ordinary criminal legislation.⁴

¹ Addressing this topic, reference should be made to the priorities outlined in the EU Security Strategy of July 2020, reflecting some of the conclusions of the EU Parliament's Special Committee on Terrorism (*TERR Report*), dated December 2018.

² OJ L 88, 31.03.2017

³ Commission report due for October 2021.

⁴ Such as possession of forbidden weaponry, assault, arson attack, racial or religious discrimination or even criminal conspiracy with a possible aggravation based on racial-ethnic or religious hatred motivation.

Taking into consideration the latest assessments provided to the TWP, the growing polarization in society, whether based on ideological extremisms or not, seems to be a trend worldwide that may fuel violent extremism. It is also assessed that mainly, but not exclusively, due to the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new breeding ground for radicalisation has the potential to emerge.

BACKGROUND

Reality in the EU looks quite asymmetric, in terms of the incidence of violent extremism and terrorism in its various ideological orientation.

Since January 2015, jihadist terrorist attacks multiplied across the EU. Various attacks perpetrated by VRWE also occurred, but these caused fewer casualties and were mostly the work of lone actors.⁵

For a number of years, the EU has been exposed to intense migration pressure, due to ongoing conflicts in various parts of the world. This issue has been feeding, in particular, the VRWE narrative, which in turn has fuelled tensions. The flow of migrants and refugees has been cited by VRWE as evidence of The Great Replacement theory, thus inspiring violent actions in Europe and elsewhere. The same narrative inspired the terrorist attack carried out in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March 2019. VRWE has also tried to fuel social tensions by claiming that the integration of migrants and refugees in Europe is depriving ‘native’ citizens of social benefits. Finally, jihadist terrorist attacks and other crimes committed by migrants or refugees in Europe have been used by VRWE to further their narrative. All of this has allowed VRWE ideologies to flourish, attracting new militants in the Western world. The most recent series of jihadist terrorist attacks on European soil, between September and November 2020, have the potential to enlarge and feed this polarising effect, by increasing the right-wing terrorism threat and VRWE.

⁵ In this regard, the major risk emerges from the combination of ideological radicalization with possible mental health disturbances; in a broader sense this includes antisocial personality disorders, psychosocial de-adjustments, etc. That is particularly the case as regards lone actors rather than groups or organizations.

Left-wing and anarchist violent extremists traditionally claim to fight 'state repression', 'militarism', 'colonialism' and 'fascism'. In recent years, they have begun to focus more on animal rights and environmental causes, including certain infrastructural projects, and on government policies that curtail irregular migration.

Other topics, such as LGBTQ rights/gender policies and racism in Western societies, have also been polarising and increasing tensions between RWE and LWE.

Besides the increased activities of both VRWE and VLWE reported during the second half of 2020 there were two terrorist attacks inspired by those extremist ideologies (one committed by a VRWE lone actor, the other by an anarchist cell). However, today's VRWE-oriented groups are more active, and show major potential for violence and involvement in instrumental criminal activities, for funding purposes.

Mainly as a consequence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, today's ideological extremism in the EU is no longer restricted to the "classic" VRWE, VLWE or jihadist extremism. Some recent anti-system COVID-19 denier movements have obvious potential for violence; inspired by conspiracy theories⁶, they challenge governments and restrictive measures put in place, by inciting civil disobedience and unrest. Although extremely difficult to label, they need to be addressed since they pose security challenges to EU Member States.

THE ONLINE DIMENSION ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Besides its negative economic consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic has also caused severe social constraints, notably lockdowns with huge restrictions on fundamental rights. As mobility in general became limited under the restrictions introduced, people started to spend more time on the internet and were therefore exposed to more extremist content online, in particular that found on social media. Extremists benefited from additional opportunities to develop and promote disinformation activities, especially by disseminating fake news, thus spreading uneasiness and fear, and distrust in democratic institutions.

⁶ 7838/1/20 REV 1, issued by the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator on 14 May 2020.

In general, and irrespective of the ideological source of inspiration, extremists are seeking to expand their membership by attracting new recruits and supporters through social media communications. In parallel, they may aspire to raise insecurity in communities, government authorities and other services, especially those responsible for preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE).

Based on data collected via the questionnaire sent out on 7 December 2020⁷, it was possible to conclude that while the terrorist threat remains high, even if it did not increase significantly with the pandemic, some extremist activities shifted from the ‘physical’ dimension to the online setting.

As previously stated, it is expected that in the medium to long term, the economic harm caused by the pandemic will/is likely to have a negative impact on the extremist threat, as a driver or a push-factor for radicalisation.

Without doubt, the importance of the online aspect increased in the early stages of the pandemic, not only following the shift of extremist threats from the physical dimension to the virtual one, but also because CT and CVE authorities needed to move further to a more online-based approach in their daily work.

Bearing in mind this new reality, it is critical to understand the depth of today’s online threats and the extent to which extremists are using the internet. Therefore, an adequate balance between the improvement of operational capacity and the necessary security requirements on PCVE online activities should be met.

In that regard, Member States authorities and online service providers must be committed to ensure the swift detection and removal of violent extremist contents online. Additional efforts will also be made within the scope of the EU Internet Forum, including efforts aimed at contributing to the removal of violent extremist material online. Europol’s EU Internet Referral Unit (IRU) will continue to support Member States in preventing the dissemination of terrorist content, including by flagging violent RWE content, as provided for in the implementation plan on combating violent RWE and terrorism.⁸

⁷ In addition to the presentations given by INTCEN, Europol, the EU’s CTC, the Spanish and the Portuguese delegations during the first TWP meeting held under the PPUE2021 on 6 January 2021.

⁸ 14132/19.

The influence of algorithms and their role in fostering radicalisation and violent extremism is another key point that deserves attention⁹.

RELEVANT ACTIVITIES TO ADDRESS COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

From the mid-1990s to 2003, the TWP worked systematically on a project aimed at collecting information on offences committed with a racist, xenophobic or anti-Semitic motivation in EU Member States¹⁰. In 2009, the Czech Presidency included RWE and its possible links to terrorism in the TWP programme, to address ideological polarization and radicalisation. Discussions on the theme were resumed a decade later under the Finnish Presidency in the second half of 2019. Finally, the outgoing German Presidency in 2020, chose VRWE as a thematic priority.

In order to ensure continuity in addressing RWE, given that it is a major concern for the security of EU Member States¹¹, the PPUE2021 of the TWP decided to keep CVE on its programme.

Over the past decade, a number of EU-funded or EU-sponsored projects focusing on PCVE have been launched. Some aimed at raising awareness in civil society and within a number of specific groups or professional communities in particular. Others more focused on countering extremist narratives using strategic communication. The majority based on initiatives of the European Commission, such as the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), the ongoing Network of Prevent Policy Makers, its predecessor High Level Expert Group on Radicalisation (2017-2018) and the Syrian Strategic Communications Advisory Team-European Strategic Communications Network (SSCAT-ESCN-2014-2019).¹²

⁹ 12735/20 The role of algorithmic amplification in promoting violent and extremist content and its dissemination on platforms and social media.

¹⁰ An annual exercise, addressing RWE, known by acronym RAXEN, and led by the presidencies of the TWP with the support and contributions of EU Member State delegations.

¹¹ 12590/20 dated 6 November 2020, whereas the threat has increased alongside the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

¹² Other projects, such as COPPRA and DANTE, were the result of Member States initiatives, and/or Multinational consortia, benefiting from EU funding and support. COPPRA stands for ‘Community Policing and the Prevention of Radicalisation’ (2010-2014), a Belgian initiative counting on the involvement and support of a large number of EU Member States. DANTE is the acronym for ‘Detecting and analysing terrorist related online contents and financing activities’ (2016-2019) and has been developed by an international consortium comprising Italy, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Under the German Presidency in 2020, a project on persons assessed by Member States as representing a violent extremist/terrorist threat (*Gefährder*)¹³ was also proposed and is now being implemented on common indicative criteria. This is in addition to the abovementioned project ‘Handout on strategic enhancement of de-radicalisation programmes and projects regarding Islamist extremism and violent right-wing extremism’.¹⁴

Having in mind that a growing polarisation may lead to an increased risk of terrorism, we kindly invite delegations to consider the following questions in preparation for the next TWP meeting on 28 April 2021:

QUESTIONS FOR DELEGATIONS

1. Is there a growing tension and polarization between violent extremist groups in your Member State? If so, how does that manifest itself (e.g. violent actions, increasing number of members)?
2. Do you have PCVE projects/programs, to counter this phenomenon, in your Member State? If so, please provide information about them, focussing on a possible online dimension. How do you assess the impact, outcome and added value of PCVE projects?

¹³ Council Conclusions on Internal Security and European Police Partnership (13083/1/20 REV 1) and document 12506/3/20 REV 3.

¹⁴ The German Presidency also held a conference on 21 December 2020, entitled ‘Countering Violent Extremism in Europe – Where do we stand and what’s next?’.