



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

Statement by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism

EU Internet Forum

Virtual, 25 January 2021

Commissioner Johansson,

Minister Ohisalo,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues,

I'm honoured to address this distinguished audience on such a crucial and timely subject. It is a pleasure for me to take the floor after my good colleague and friend Gilles. I am grateful to work with him on his new proposals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated our transition from in-person interactions to digital means of communication in a spectacular manner. In a period of about one year, the transformation appears to be comprehensive and, to a great extent, irreversible.

Because so many more people are spending so much time online, terrorists have more of a captive and frustrated audience from which to radicalize, recruit, and activate.

Terrorist propaganda has become more extensive and intensive, and existing inequalities have been exacerbated.

Around the world, misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, hate speech and terrorist narratives have been flourishing online.

The traditional baselines about truth have been distorted creating doubt about almost everything.

Global lockdowns and movement restrictions may have impacted terrorists' capabilities to carry out attacks– for now.

However, in many countries, necessary social-distancing measures have also reduced the ability of frontline practitioners to engage early to head-off radicalization.

The attacks by lone individuals in Europe we heard about today are a stark reminder that terrorist propaganda in cyberspace during the pandemic is increasing the threat of homegrown attacks outside conflict zones.

Excellencies, dear Colleagues,

In this challenging environment, decisive, but carefully crafted, human rights-compliant measures are needed to effectively counter the use of the Internet for the incitement, planning and financing of terrorism, in all of its forms across the ideological spectrum.

The European Union is providing commendable leadership in cooperation with the companies represented here.

Guidance and protocols to support the removal of terrorist content online, as well as regulations, anchored within a solid human rights and rule of law framework, support the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

Excellencies and Colleagues,

The United Nations has taken action together with you in response to these challenges.

The United Nations participated in the International Digital Security Forum organized by the Austrian Institute of Technology and the Austrian Chamber of Commerce on 2 and 3 December 2020.

UNESCO, the European Commission, the World Jewish Congress and Twitter launched the *Think Before Sharing* campaign in August 2020 to counter the spread of conspiracy theories.

The UN Office of Counter-Terrorism has piloted a COVID-19 ISIL Communications Toolkit, and organized workshops with the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and UNICRI on understanding and responding to hate speech and incitement to violence.

We are investing in capacity-building and technical assistance in countering terrorist narratives, in digital safety and resiliency, and in working with youth.

The risk of online video game ecosystems being exploited by violent extremists is also a growing concern that we aim to address in 2021.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Investigating and gathering digital evidence in a human rights-compliant manner is a critical step in the response to online terrorist activities.

The right to privacy, which underpins and protects human dignity and other key values, such as freedom of association and freedom of expression, is critical.

Through the United Nations Global Programme on Cybersecurity and New Technologies, we are geared towards raising awareness, accumulating knowledge, enhancing legal frameworks and promoting operational and inter-agency cooperation against terrorist use of new technologies across the criminal justice chain.

I appreciate the focus today on the issue of algorithms and how they affect individual and community-level vulnerability to terrorist and violent extremist content.

With an increasing reliance on algorithms and artificial intelligence to identify and remove content from platforms, we must ensure that:

- First, removal of content follows protocols and does not end up in deletion of evidence that could otherwise have been used by prosecutors and courts to ensure accountability for committed crimes.
- And second, that freedom of expression is respected.

Excellencies,

The EU and some of the companies here, such as Microsoft and Facebook provided important inputs to the Virtual United Nations Counter-Terrorism week last July. We are very grateful for that assistance.

As we prepare for this year's UN Counter-Terrorism Week, which will take place from 28 June to 2 July, the United Nations counts on the EU, Europol and private sector to continue supporting Member States' efforts to implement the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

We are also looking forward to working closely with EU Member States to ensure that the new challenges of the digital space to counter terrorism and violent extremism, including far-right, are effectively addressed at the seventh review of the Global Strategy during the UN Counter-Terrorism Week. I would like to emphasize that we need a working definition on far-right extremism. I agree with Minister Ohisalo.

Thank you and I am grateful for our continued and effective partnership.