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Subject:	Council Conclusions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism, including the impact on CT and CVE authorities and their activities – *Council Conclusions* (7 June 2021)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council Conclusions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism, including the impact on CT and CVE authorities and their activities, approved by the Council (Justice and Home Affairs) at its 3799th meeting held on 7 June 2021.

ANNEX

COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON

'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism, including the impact on CT and CVE authorities and their activities'

Introduction

1. The Council of the European Union finds that the terrorist threat to the Member States, although it remains high, has not so far increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some terrorist activities have moved more online and increased radicalisation can already be perceived amongst some groups.

2. The Council recognises that the CT and CVE authorities have had to adapt to the constraints created by the COVID-19 pandemic and increasingly rely on online (secure and efficient) capabilities.

3. The Council also assesses that, in the medium to long term, the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic may have a negative impact on terrorist and violent extremist threats, contributing to the growth of breeding grounds for radicalisation on various ideological spectrums.

4. The Council is therefore committed to ensuring that the CT and CVE authorities in the Member States have at their disposal the adequate means and tools enabling them to respond continuously and efficiently to the evolving terrorist and extremist threats.

Current situation

5. The Council notes that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CT and CVE authorities has varied; security intelligence services and most law enforcement agencies were confronted with constraints on some of their activities, such as physical meetings or operational work, while other competent authorities have not experienced this.

6. The Council emphasises that the role of the online dimension has increased since the beginning of the pandemic, not only because some of the terrorist and extremist threats have shifted more and more from a physical to an online environment (e.g. communications, financing, propaganda, radicalisation, recruitment etc.) and used more extensively a wider range of new technologies and tools (crypto-currencies, encrypted applications, decentralised 3.0 websites etc.), but also because CT and CVE authorities have needed to shift to (more) online activities for their day-to-day work.

7. The Council acknowledges the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic situation has created for the daily work of CT and CVE authorities, especially when dealing with classified information and recognises the need to find the right balance between guaranteeing operational capacity and security for CT and CVE online activities, while respecting the rules for handling classified information.

8. Nonetheless, the Council points out that even though physical meetings and activities are critical to CT and CVE activities, especially when based on 'relationships of trust', joint efforts and mutual synergies can be achieved online, enabling authorities to save time and preserve financial and environmental resources when confidentiality requirements and network security allow for it.

9. Although the Council recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic has not resulted in a clear increase in terrorist attacks, in the medium to long term, it is likely that the pandemic and its socio-economic consequences might prove to be a propitious breeding ground for extremist narratives (for various ideologies). In this regard, it should be noted that far-left, far-right, and Islamist extremists' groups have already incorporated COVID-19 into their narratives. Further considerations relate to the uncertainty and anxiety created by the pandemic, as well as the fact that more time is being spent online which can increase vulnerability to violent extremist narratives.

10. The Council acknowledges that some violent fringes of 'corona-virus denier' movements and groups opposing government measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19, which have attracted extremists from various ideological backgrounds, might eventually pose security challenges due to their potential to commit violent acts and, therefore, depending on how they evolve, further efforts to address them may be required.

Need for action

11. Considering the situation, the Council acknowledges the work already accomplished in the Member States, within their own national frameworks and through their competent authorities, to constantly update the understanding and assessment of the online dimension of the terrorist and violent extremist threat, and invites the Member States to continuously contribute to the understanding and assessment on a voluntary basis by providing information to the relevant EU bodies. In this context, and within their respective remits, INTCEN and Europol should continue to deepen their assessment of the impact of the pandemic on terrorist operations as well as possible attempts by terrorist organisations and violent extremist groups to exploit the current crisis.

12. The Council INVITES the Member States to swiftly give effect to the provisions of the Regulation to address the dissemination of terrorist content online[1], and INVITES the Commission and the EU Internet Referral Unit to provide continuing support for Member States with their technical and operational expertise.

13. Based on the online dimension of the terrorist and violent extremist threats and other related phenomena, such as the polarisation of society, disinformation and violent 'coronavirus denier' movements, as well as current technological possibilities such as those connected with artificial intelligence, the Council UNDERLINES that the influence of algorithms and their role in fostering radicalisation and violent extremism is another key point that deserves attention[2].

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1 OJ L 172, 17.5.2021, p. 79.

2 12735/20: The role of algorithmic amplification in promoting violent and extremist content and its dissemination on platforms and social media (paper from the EU CTC of December 2020).

14. Member States and the Commission are ENCOURAGED to continue their efforts to prevent all types of illegal extremist and terrorist propaganda, the incitement of violence and the illegal financing of hate speech and violent extremism, UNDERLINING the important contribution that internet service providers' intermediaries can provide in the fight against illegal content and its amplification, also in the context of the Digital Services Act currently under discussion.

15. The Council also notes that increased attention should be paid to emerging threats and security risks, as well as opportunities stemming from new technologies. It underlines the role of the EU Innovation Hub as an observatory of new technological developments and a driver of innovation, including by developing standard technical solutions for Member States in the field of internal security in accordance with the mandates of the agencies involved.

16. In particular, taking into consideration the constraints and restraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the assessment that part of the efforts and synergies might take place online - regardless of the secure communication platforms and systems already used by the competent authorities for cooperation between and within the Member States - the Council also RECOGNISES and UNDERLINES the utmost importance of continuing to develop secure VTC systems that allow classified information to be discussed. The Council also ACKNOWLEDGES the importance of continuing to develop secure channels for the written exchange of classified information.