

Regional Conference

Role of Women in Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that lead to terrorism (VERLT) in the Western Balkans

Opening remarks Ambassador Vincenzo Del Monaco, Head of the OSCE Presence

14 October 2021

Dear Deputy Minister Nikolla, dear madame Director Dervishi, National Coordinator from North Macedonia, dear guests and participants,

I am pleased to open today's conference. When I looked at the programme, I thought to myself this is us, this is really the OSCE live and whole. Addressing a security issue from multiple different perspectives, giving it all a human, a rule of law, a regional and an international dimension. Right here in Tirana, jointly with our partners from the government and the CVE center; true partnership.

Dear friends,

Today's subject is of utmost **relevance, actuality and complexity.**

Relevance, because according to a study released in January this year by the Albanian Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 1,353 men, women, and children travelled from the Western Balkans to Syria and Iraq over the last five years. Roughly 15 percent of those leaving the Western Balkans to fight for extremist groups were women. In Albania, we know that whole families left Albania jointly, women and kids travelling together with their husbands and fathers. 79 men, 27 women and 38 minors were part of this group. Very much consistent with international pattern, the places where the families left from form proper 'clusters', all of which affected by religious radicalization.

Actuality, because increasing numbers of former IS supporters are flocking back into the OSCE area as we speak. In more and less organized processes actually. Albania deserves credit here for transparent and cognizant processes of repatriating women and children from Syria, embedded in an immediate medical and psychological support and supervision programme upon arrival.

Complexity, because a study from the Woman Center for Development and Culture from last December found that key factors influencing Albanian women's participation in war zones include high social marginalization levels, poor local governance in rural areas and women's

experiences of domestic violence along with gender-based discrimination in the workplace and overall gender inequality.

That said, women cannot simply be treated like victims. Some are, otherwise are not. Many women, including from this region, commanded relevant roles within the terrorist organization that is ISIS. The role of women as a member of terrorist groups or as an extremist are often reduced to a stereotypical simplistic approach, describing women either as an accompanying family member or a non-significant member of the group. This ignores the actual role of women in terrorist organizations. Which not only poses a security risk, but also puts justice at jeopardy. And Justitia is herself female. Women must face justice just as much as men.

Likewise and finally, however, the role of women in actively – and successfully countering violent extremism and radicalization needs to be acknowledged and fully understood. Whether through their work in community organizations, schools, families, women tend to be the first to identify the initial symptoms of the disease of radicalization, and of finding ways to resolve issues before it is too late.

And this, dear colleagues, is what we – you – are here to discuss today: the various active and passive roles played by women in the context of radicalization and terrorist organizations. And what policy conclusion to draw therefrom, in the OSCE's comprehensive security and whole of society approach.

Today's conference is an excellent platform for policy makers, for practitioners, for the academia to comprehensively assess the role of women in violent extremism and terrorism in the Western Balkans' context. Please do share your experiences so that we can all learn from each other.

I am convinced we will take away from this event some concrete, practical suggestions as to how to devise effective policies and interventions on countering violence and radicalization, on prevention, prosecution and rehabilitation, based on gender-responsive analysis and data.

With this, I wish you very productive discussions and am looking forward to receiving your analysis and your recommendations.

Thank you very much!