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Working session 2: Challenges to the enjoyment of fundamental freedoms and human rights in the age of new information and communication technologies, including the respect for privacy

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Participating States of OSCE must counter extremist narrative on social media

The internet is rightly celebrated for revolutionising the nature of global communications. We have seen what it can achieve for democracy and political change: the internet has demanded transparency, it has brought oppressive regimes into the spotlight, it has empowered and given a voice to millions.

But the internet has also revolutionised the nature of conflict: establishing countless new channels to spread a fundamentalist, intolerant ideology, which legitimises violence.

The European Convention of Human Rights enshrines the importance of freedom of expression as one of its fundamental core values. However, terrorist and extremist groups should not be allowed to abuse this by using social media as a vehicle for promoting violence and hatred.

The use of social media by terrorists and extremist groups to promote violence and recruit people has increased significantly in the recent years. This has become especially apparent since the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS); a terrorist

organisation which has used various online platforms to extend the frontiers of war far beyond the combat zones in Syria and Iraq.

Through social media in particular, the extremist ideology is now being heard in the homes and work places of thousands of Europeans. The content is varied and their methodology is sophisticated.

Videos and photographs are in constant circulation; some of which are highly graphic in the brutal scenes they depict; some openly promote hatred; while others are simply for propaganda.

Numerous experts in this field have demonstrated that the internet - and social media in particular - is Islamic State's most effective tool for radicalising and recruiting individuals from all over the world.

The extent of this phenomenon is becoming better understood in Europe. In March, in a memo to the Council of the EU, Europol stated that, over a period of four months, more than 46,000 Twitter accounts were used by supporters of IS with 90,000 tweets a day produced in support of its extremist violent, ideology.

IS is probably the most effective terrorist organization in using social media but it is definitely not the only one. There are other terrorist and extremist organisations, such as extreme right groups in Europe and Russian extremist forces in Ukraine, using internet in an increasingly effective way. This should be especially worrying, if we take into account the current refugee crisis in Europe and the subsequent discourse of extreme right groups.

Europol launched the European Union Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) to combat terrorist propaganda and related violent extremist activities on the Internet on 1 July 2015. The Internet Referral Unit is an important initiative from the EU but further international cooperation beyond the competence of the EU is necessary in order to address this issue in an effective and comprehensive way. This is a cross-border issue that requires an international and well-coordinated response.

Recommendations:

We at the European Foundation for Democracy would like to see a more extensive debate on the issue of online radicalisation and terrorist recruitment at the international level. Now is the time for European policymakers to lay the foundations for a safer online environment in Europe, to reach out to social media companies in order to find proactive solutions and prevent online platforms from being misused by extremists. Critically, this discussion should not be confined to regulators and the companies involved. It should involve NGOs and other experts.

OSCE and Participating States of OSCE should:

- establish effective mechanisms and closer cooperation to tackle online radicalisation;
- ensure that social media companies respect national laws against incitement to religious hatred and violence;
- cooperate with social media companies to prevent their platforms from being used to disseminate propaganda, hatred and violent content;
- ensure that the laws which underpin our civil society are upheld online too in order to deter extremists and thereby send out a clear message about safeguarding European values;
- establish closer dialogue with different communities, NGOs and experts working on the ground with the aim of creating consistent and coherent counter narrative messages;
- avoid cooperating with NGOs and groups and organisations representing extremist and religious ideologies and identify new partners within different communities;
- cooperate with social media companies to develop and communicate effective and comprehensive counter narrative messaging against terrorist and extremist groups.