



OSCE-Wide Counter-Terrorism Conference 2021

Reinforcing a Comprehensive Approach to Preventing and Countering Terrorism and VERLT in a Changing Landscape

20 April 2021, Vienna, Austria (ONLINE)

Address by OSCE Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid

Minister Linde, dear Ann
Under-Secretary General Voronkov,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to this year's OSCE-Wide Counter-Terrorism Conference.

Terrorism remains one of the most significant threats to security, social and economic development, and the enjoyment of human rights.

The OSCE is committed to providing a substantive and a comprehensive contribution to the fight against terrorism, in partnership with the UN and other international and regional partner organizations, and in accordance with the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

During this Conference, we will discuss a wide array of issues and feature contributions from a number of highly distinguished experts. I thank you all for joining us!

This Conference also takes place at a very special time in global counter-terrorism efforts. This year marks the 15th anniversary of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, but it also marks the 20th anniversary of the 9/11; and the 10th anniversary of the Norway attacks; the 5th anniversary of the Brussels bombings, among many other sad events across the globe.

Our Co-ordinator of Activities to Address Transnational Threats, Alena Kupchyna, reminded us of recent terrorist attacks in Vienna's city centre and in France in 2020 are a stark reminder of the deadly agenda of terrorist networks, who take innocent lives and seek to sow divisions in our societies. In an increasingly globalized world, we have all become neighbours, and everyone feels the shock of events even in seemingly distant places.

Since last year, COVID-19 has been an important factor in the evolution of the terrorist threat worldwide. Socio-economic grievances exacerbated by the pandemic are proving fertile ground for terrorist propaganda but also for terrorist recruitment. More extensive use of the Internet and social media during lockdowns are giving terrorist groups renewed opportunities to tap into social discontent and other forms of alienation. On account of the pandemic alone, I am convinced that there will be many interesting angles to our discussions this year.

Dear colleagues,

The OSCE's core strength lies in its comprehensive approach to security – our extensive and crosscutting expertise of political-military, economic and environmental, as well as human aspects of security. In combination with our considerable regional knowledge and the presence of field operations on the ground, the OSCE has strong potential to contribute to the fight against terrorism. But we can only succeed in concert with others. That's why we have once again brought a plurality of voices to this meeting to exchange ideas and to strengthen our ability to act in concert, in line with international human rights obligations.

As the theme of today's conference demonstrates, we truly believe in comprehensive approaches.

For one, hard security alone cannot win the day. Over-reliance on the security sector – at the expense of inclusive prevention programs, with civil society at the forefront – can have a corrosive effect on good governance, rule of law and human rights. Counter-terrorism laws and security measures should not be an excuse to shrink civic space, to curtail freedom of association or deny other fundamental rights. Instead, we need measured, proportionate and human rights centred counterterrorism strategies and law enforcement bodies that are aware of their human rights obligations and that act accordingly.

We also put a premium on gender considerations.

Indeed, mainstreaming a gender perspective in legislation, policies or programmes is essential. When designing, implementing, monitoring or evaluating our activities, we must be mindful of the diverse concerns and experiences of women and men, girls and boys.

That is exactly what we are doing in a number of training and capacity-building initiatives, such as the Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism, which is aimed at strengthening civil society resilience and the meaningful inclusion of women in law enforcement and security services.

In addressing evolving challenges, the use of technology demands stronger attention and coordinated responses.

Spanning multiple linguistic audiences, the Internet continues to be misused for terrorist ends: to glorify terrorist acts, incite violence, fundraise, radicalize and recruit.

Counter-measures include investing in media literacy and the capacity of the online community to help guide vulnerable users to positive narratives, instead of letting them fall prey to terrorist propaganda.

Governments, civil society, private companies and other relevant stakeholders will also need to develop effective strategies to address harmful and illegal content, while preserving freedom of opinion and expression. A recent webinar organized by the Transnational Threats Department addressed these very issues. The recommendations from this event will be fed into ongoing OSCE efforts to counter the use of the Internet for terrorist purposes.

In this context, I note that the European Union recently passed specific regulation on the removal of terrorist content and is deliberating the proposal for a Digital Services Act concerning illegal content and disinformation. This is why I am particularly happy that the EU Counterterrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove will join us today, with whom I worked closely in my previous capacity.

In our Internet-related efforts, we regularly join forces with our partners from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), including in table-top-exercises that take place with the help of OSCE field operations and their respective host countries in South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia. With UNODC, we are also addressing challenges in connection with the gathering and sharing of electronic evidence.

As a final point, I want to mention Foreign Terrorist Fighters. Their return, rehabilitation and reintegration, and that of their families, remain a major challenge. Several OSCE participating States have repatriated their citizens from the conflict zones in Syria and in Iraq. Many more are still working on feasible solutions.

Proper risk-assessments, prosecution strategies that are gender and age-sensitive and comply with human rights, as well as coordinated exit programs are crucial to break the cycle of violent extremism.

This topic was also the focus of last year's Regional Conference on Foreign Terrorist Fighters, organized jointly with Switzerland and the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism. We are grateful to the former co-hosts, Under-Secretary-General Voronkov and Deputy State-Secretary Matyassy from Switzerland for joining us today.

Together with our field operations, we have assisted the efforts of criminal justice institutions in the OSCE area, other government stakeholders and civil society organizations in dealing with returning foreign terrorist fighters and other violent extremist offenders. I want to thank the Head of the Anti-Terrorism Centre of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Mr Andrey Novikov, for the good cooperation on a number of OSCE seminar series, to which experts from the Commonwealth of Independent States regularly contribute.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have a full program today and tomorrow, and many issues to discuss, so I am sure that everybody is eager to delve right into what I believe will be an in-depth and fruitful conversation.

Thank you very much.