Preventing VERLT on Social Media

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Youth Perspectives on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism within a Human Rights Framework

#PERSPECTIVES20·30

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Executive Summary

Terrorist organizations exploit social media platforms to serve a number of their purposes[1]. Hence, many states have responded with prevention and countering measures, as seen with the adoption of numerous pieces of complex and vague legislations, regulations, and administrative decisions. Some of the implemented measures to prevent and counter terrorism have also led to infringements of human rights[2]. However, there are also positive examples of introduced effective strategies that address the issue of Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism (VERLT) online aiming to bring private and state practices into compliance with fundamental principles of human rights, such as transparency, due process, and oversight. The international community as a whole has also taken a number of approaches towards protecting and promoting human rights whilst preventing and countering VERLT. Because of the complexity involved in mitigating this issue, the cooperation and compliance of all stakeholders in the private and public sectors is required. Therefore, this policy paper, having identified the problem of the abuse of social media for the purposes of VERLT and of human rights infringements committed in the name of preventing and countering VERLT, will, based on the good practices mentioned throughout the paper. It will offer recommendations for the OSCE and OSCE Participating States, for a human rights-based approach informed by youth perspectives that have been empowered with a meaningful seat at the table in order to contribute towards this dialogue.

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1 United Nations, 2012, "The use of the internet for terrorist purposes" pp. 3-4.

2 United Nations, 2016, "Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism" pp.12-13.

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Introduction

"Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world..."[3] In the age of digital developments which have magnified humanity's unity and division, protecting human rights is more important than ever. Social media has the ability to bring people together or alienate them, bringing positive change or facilitating the passage towards VERLT. Although it can be a great tool in the fight against the latter, it has also complicated the work to prevent VERLT dynamics whilst respecting human rights. Thus, the issue is a two-tiered one, as both VERLT and some of the practices used to prevent or counter it have led to human rights infringements by states.

The fact that the term "extremism" in both national and international law is too vague or excessively wide without an internationally accepted definition and a direct connection to violence or incitement to violence, has increased an arbitrary application of the law which has resulted in abuses of human rights. Acknowledging this challenge, the OSCE uses the term "**violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (VERLT)**" instead. However, difficulties arise in tackling the issue due to some actions taken by states which may result in human rights violations. Many anti-terrorism initiatives have a significant potential to impact the human rights to equality and freedom from discrimination, the right to privacy, and the freedoms of expression, association, and religion or belief.[4]

The complex nature of the progression towards VERLT, considered to be the *"dynamic process whereby an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action"*,[5] demands a **multi-layered approach** in its prevention both online and offline that includes joint actions at global, state, and individual levels. Furthermore, since young people are directly targeted by terrorist propaganda and recruitment efforts on social media, the issue of *"Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism (VERLT) on Social Media through the Framework of Human Rights"* needs to be effectively addressed

through a youth lens. In order to determine and set the framework, the following research questions will be addressed: **Why and how do terrorist organizations use social media? What are states and international organizations currently doing? What is the role of youth in this matter? How to prevent and counter VERLT on social media whilst respecting human rights in compliance with international human rights law?** In this regard, we examine these questions and within the conclusion, we elaborate recommendations that are directed to each stakeholder.

The Problem

Social media has given terrorist organizations direct access to the public on a scale unprecedented in the history of technological development and has become a platform through which terrorist organizations have the opportunity to broadcast *en masse* whilst also taking a tailored approach to spreading their ideologies, gathering funds, recruiting followers and conducting operations.

Terrorist organizations use social media for their own purposes, taking advantage of the **personal information** of potential recruits available online, so as to feed vulnerable users a meticulously picked information diet that appeals to their "humanitarian or moral imperative, ideology, and identity."[6] When combined with **algorithms** used by online platforms that are designed to keep the user engaged, the technique ends up creating an "echo chamber" around the user and facilitating a passage towards VERLT by relying on emotional responses rather than logic or common sense. Terrorist recruiters also contact suggested "**friends/connections**" and engage with

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3 United Nations, 1948, Universal declaration of Human Rights.

4 William Robert Avis, 2016, The role of online/social media in countering violent extremism in East Africa.

5 OSCE, 2019, "Understanding Referral Mechanisms in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism – Navigating Challeanges and Protecting Human Rights" pp. 17-23.

6 Reitano, T., Trabulsi, A., 2016, "Virtually Illicit: The Use of Social Media in a Hyper-Connected World" in Beyond Convergence: World without Order, edited by Matfass, H., Miklaucic, M., Center for Complex Operations, Washington DC., pp 217.

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online forums, groups, or discussions to either find like-minded people or share their radical ideologies[7].

In terms of sharing content, violent extremist groups such as ISIL and Al-Qaeda, as well as groups affiliated with them, rely on **human and non-human social media accounts** to share a high volume of propaganda.[8] Whereas a core group of highly engaged users who share content that is spread by human support groups manages human accounts, the non-human accounts are "social bots" or algorithms that mirror human behavior and have the ability to create new content and interact with people.[9] Whereas the aforementioned methods aided in initial contact, for further online communication terrorists widely used **encryption keys or encrypted messaging applications**. When encrypted, data is converted into code, thus preventing unauthorized access to it, which facilitates sharing of clandestine information not only during the recruitment process but also in the planning and execution of terrorist operations. For instance, the November 2015 attacks in Paris took eleven months of preparation, during which the organizers managed to evade being detected by communicating through encrypted channels that could be accessed through an encryption key shared through a USB stick[10].

However, the progression towards VERLT in the digital world does not take place in a vacuum. Research has shown that **a lack of respect for and assurance of fundamental human rights and needs has acted as some of the principal push factors towards VERLT**. Since social media functions as an online magnifying glass that inflates offline factors, protecting human rights is of vital importance at all stages of combating and preventing VERLT.[11] To stop the spread of VERLT in the digital domain, the **Internet needs to be regulated**. However, difficulties arise in ensuring that the national and international regulations are compliant with human rights. As mentioned above, "radical" views need to be tolerated, unless it incites violence, because such views are protected under the freedom of thought and freedom of belief. As previously mentioned, many of the introduced regulations in the digital domain have been and remain vague and arbitrary, allowing states to decrypt encrypted data, block websites, manipulate content, gather data, attack and impris-

on bloggers, and coerce website owners to remove content, in order to reduce political opposition.[12] The 2011 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, for instance, emphasized that unless governments can show the direct and immediate connection between the expression and the occurrence of violence, restricting radical expression is not justified.[13]

Even though it is important that all actors adhere to the principle of respecting human rights, in the post-Westphalian world, the state as an entity, has greater influence (both for amelioration and deterioration) than other actors and its role in combating and preventing VERLT online has been filled with complexities. Governments may claim the right to control the content posted on social media under the pretext of national security. This has led to an intensification of digital repression directly affecting users' human rights. Bearing in mind that International Law allows certain rights - non-absolute or qualified rights - to be subjected to certain restrictions, states have been performing certain practices that infringe human rights.

7 Waskiewicz, T., 2012, Friend of a friend Influence in Terrorist Social Networks, Air Force Research Laboratory Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, US., pp 1.

8 Reitano, T., Trabulsi, A., 2016, "Virtually Illicit: The Use of Social Media in a Hyper-Connected World" in Beyond Convergence: World without Order, edited by Matfass, H., Miklaucic, M., Center for Complex Operations, Washington DC., pp 219.

9 UNICRI, 2020, Stop The Virus of Disinformation: the risk of malicious use of social media during COVID-19 and the technology options to fight it, Torino, Italy. pp 16.
See also: Gambetta, D. and Hertog S., 2016, Engineers of Jihad: the curious connection between violent extremism and education.

10 Bipartisan Policy Center, 2018, Digital Counterterrorism: Fighting Jihadists Online, pp 16.

11 UNDP, 2017, "Journey to Extremism in Africa: drivers, incentives and the tipping for recruitment" pp 66.

12 Freedom House, 2020, Freedom on the net 2020, The Global Drive to Control Big Tech, pp 15.
See also: Damien Sharkov, "Russia is Threatening to Close Facebook Like it Did LinkedIn," Newsweek, September 26, 2017.

13 United Nations General Assembly, 10 August 2011 (A/66/290).

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Good Practices

Despite these common practices in place by some states, some effective legislations address the issue of VERLT online by bringing private and state practices into compliance within the principles of human rights such as transparency, due process and oversight.[14] For instance, **Norway's Action Plan against Radicalization and Violent Extremism**, introduced in 2014[15] was constructed following a widely inclusive process of consultations **that involved stakeholders from domestic and foreign state institutions, the private sector, civil society and researchers**. The result includes 30 specific measures in five domains of activity both online and offline, one of which is "preventing radicalization and recruitment through the internet".[16] The commitments are transparent and targeted at specific government departments with the obligation to publish results on public websites. A similar approach has also been taken by the government of **Albania through their National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism**[17] that is based on international initiatives like the ones taken by the UN, the Global Counterterrorism Forum and the OSCE. One of the pillars of the document are the measures taken in "countering extremist propaganda while preserving democratic values". These examples of adhering to internationally agreed standards and practices that assure the safeguarding of human rights whilst countering and preventing VERLT needs to be emulated by all member states of the OSCE.

While preventing and countering VERLT national strategies and plans of action are primarily designed and driven by state authorities, **their implementation is typically not limited to national government actors and includes a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including local and other subnational authorities, civil society, and the private sector**. Social media platforms, for instance, are owned by private companies, which while also having a responsibility to protect human rights, can be harder to hold to account, according to international human rights standards, such as those protecting freedom of thought and freedom of expression.[18] Nevertheless, a number of initiatives have been taken to tackle the spread of VERLT. For instance, in 2017, Facebook, Google, Twitter and Microsoft

founded The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) - an NGO "designed to prevent terrorist and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms."[19] Apart from implementing such techniques as "hash (hashtag) sharing" which "allows a company that discovers terrorist content on one of (its) sites to create a digital fingerprint and share it with other companies,"[20] they have also introduced measures individually to remove "extremist posts" from their platforms.[21] In order to create a cooperative relationship between states and tech organizations by sharing best practices for tackling terrorist use of online platforms whilst respecting human rights, the United Nations Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate, for instance, has launched the Tech against Terrorism. Due to complications involved in the mitigation of the issue, it requires **cooperation** and compliance by all **stakeholders** both in the private and public sector.

On the need for further cooperation, the **role of youth** cannot be overlooked. **Provided with the right opportunities**, young people have, on a number of occasions, shown their abilities to act as "**stakeholders, not spectators**"[22], and have taken the lead in introducing measures aimed at preventing the spread of VERLT online and supporting their fellow web users. This has been evidenced by the **peer**

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14 Freedom House, 2020, Freedom on the net 2020 - The Global Drive to Control Big Tech, pp. 13.

15 Action Plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism", Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2014, p. 10.

16 Ibid., p. 13.

17 Albanian National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism Adopted by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania (Decision no. 930) on 18 November 2015.

18 Bipartisan Policy Center, 2018, Digital Counterterrorism: Fighting Jihadists Online, pp 10.

19 For more information see: https://gifct.org/about/.

20 Walker, K., 2017, "Working together to combat terrorists online," Google Public Policy.

21 Shaban, H., 2017, "Facebook wants to use artificial intelligence to block terrorists online," The Washington Post. See also: Dave, P., 2017, "Google broadens takedown of extremist YouTube videos," Reuters.

Also: UNICRI, 2020, Stop The Virus of Disinformation: the risk of malicious use of social media during COVID-19 and the technology options to fight it, Torino, Italy.

22 Core Group of Experts, 2019, Engaging Youth for a Safer Future, pp 6.

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education initiative launched by the OSCE Perspective 20-30 Initiative alumni David Huah - "2ThinkCritically"[23] - which equips young people with the skills needed to critically evaluate content they encounter online, in order to avoid being manipulated and potentially recruited by violent extremists.[24] Furthermore, mindful of the fact that the average age of the foreign recruited terrorist fighters who travelled to join ISIL was between 16 and 25 years old[25], and that youth were also at the forefront of the **online campaign** #Rewind[26] with a message of countering hateful and extremist content that reached 2 million people within a year, it is clearly demonstrated that young people have a critical role to play in shaping the future of security sector governance.

The **international community** as a whole has also taken a number of approaches towards protecting human rights whilst preventing and countering VERLT as it is at the core of all the international Community's interests concerning security. Organizations such as the United Nations[27] or the European Union[28] have introduced in their agendas different strategies to ensure respect of international human rights law whilst defining the counter terrorism agenda. It has been stressed by both the negative consequences of counter-terrorism and P/CVE on human rights, affecting especially to vulnerable or marginalized groups that includes youth.[29] **Young people are particularly vulnerable to online VERLT due to the specific need for a sense of belonging, recognition and fellowship**.[30]

At the OSCE level[31], the approach to the fight against VERLT corresponds to the strategy, which recognizes that states have legitimate and urgent reasons to prevent and counter terrorism, but the responses to the threat of terrorism must not unlawfully infringe upon, damage or destroy the very standards, principles and values of human rights, rule of law and pluralistic democracy.[32] Being aware of the challenge of protecting human rights and effectively countering terrorism, ODIHR has been specifically mandated to assist OSCE participating States in ensuring the compliance of their counter-terrorism initiatives with international human rights standards and OSCE human dimension commitments. The human rights and fundamental freedoms particularly at risk in preventing terrorism and countering VER-

LT are explored throughout several ODIHR manuals and guidebooks[33] identifying different restrictions of human rights that the states use when implementing their strategies in the context of countering terrorism. The main focus thereby has been twofold:

1. the promotion and **protection of human rights** and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism as well as
2. the promoting and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while preventing and countering VERLT.

The OSCE's commitments to involve youth in its activities across the region represent a significant lead in good practice for international organizations

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23 2ThinkCritically has combined efforts with #UnitedCVE to mutually increase their outreach.

24 Critical Thinking as a Tool against Violent Extremism. Available at: https://www.osce.org/secretariat/475496.

25 Bipartisan Policy Center, 2018, Digital Counterterrorism: Fighting Jihadists Online, pp 5.

26 #Rewind Campaign is available at: http://www.oficialrewind.com.

27 Within the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy the working groups "Countering the Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes" and "Protecting Human Rights While Countering Terrorism" are the two main pillars in the UN system. Additionally, the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) contributes to the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force.

28 The EU has recently included a new regulation on removing terrorist content online. The Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) has recommended some legislative proposals in order to ensure the protection of human rights on the impact of the Directive (EU) 2017/541 on combating terrorism, on fundamental rights and freedoms.

29 Special Rapporteur, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin in several Reports to the GA (A/73/361) and Human Rights Council (A/HRC/40/52 and A/HRC/46/36).

30 Reitano, T., Trabulsi, A., 2016, "Virtually Illicit: The Use of Social Media in a Hyper-Connected World" in Beyond Convergence: World without Order, edited by Matfass, H., Miklaucic, M., Center for Complex Operations, Washington DC., pp 217.

31 Update of the "Overview OSCE Counter-Terrorism Related Commitments (28 July 2020); Preventing Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: A Community-Policing Approach (17 March 2021) A Whole-of-Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism- A guidebook for Central Asia and another one for South-Eastern Europe.

32 The OSCE Bucharest Plan for Combating Terrorism (2001); OSCE Charter on Preventing and Combating Terrorism (2002).

33 Countering Terrorism, Protecting Human Rights: A Manual (2008) and Preventing Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: A Community-Policing Approach (2014).

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looking to effectively counter alienation through meaningful inclusion. The OSCE works with youth in a variety of ways, which is evidenced by it providing **education and training** through such programs as Perspectives 20-30 Online Academy, in addition to Leaders Against Intolerance and Violent Extremism (LIVE); by supporting **online campaigns** such as #UnitedCVE; and through institutionalizing **cooperation with key stakeholders** through the establishment of the Youth and Security infrastructure represented by the Special Representatives on Youth and Security, the Group of Friends on Youth and Security, and the Adviser on Youth and Security.

This policy paper has sought to provide evidence-based recommendations and the opportunity for decision-makers to benefit from a youth perspective on the critical issue of meaningfully addressing VERLT online. Effectively addressing the challenges discussed throughout the paper requires recognizing young women and men as valid stakeholders in shaping the future of security sector governance, and acknowledging that the capacity for the OSCE to deliver successful solutions necessarily depends on the invaluable contribution of young people.

Recommendations

Addressed to OSCE:

1. Raising awareness among young people, especially those exposed to VERLT through social media, is one of the most important preventive measures. That is why, we firmly believe that the OSCE should spread their vision, messages and recommendations through the channels youth are using in their daily lives to communicate to each other: TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc accordingly.

2. Creating guidebooks and/or providing training to underline the threats in the digital domain should become a regular practice. By explaining good practices in dealing with those threats, the OSCE could potentially encourage participating States to integrate those practices into their national strategies.

Addressed to the OSCE Participating States:

1. It is important that states recognize the need for strategies countering and preventing VERLT to be human rights-based, as human rights violations can lead to further alienation of individuals and this may contribute to their path towards radicalization. Strategies without a fundamental respect for human rights will ultimately prove counterproductive and will undermine efforts aimed at preventing and countering VERLT.

2. States should continue developing online counter-terrorism prevention mechanisms as this form of VERLT is becoming more and more popular and widespread. Plans and strategies should be real, achievable and transparent with a respect of the fact, that countering terrorism is a multidimensional problem[34]. The OSCE must continue encouraging participating States to use the resources and the different executive structures in preventing and countering VERLT whilst respecting human rights.

3. Effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of the OSCE National Plans of Action for preventing violent extremism are essential to ensuring that policies have the desired impact.

4. Strengthening subregional and regional organizations, including information sharing and the exchange of good practices should be systematic and working closer together to agree on common yet effective methods. In developing the strategy, the broadest possible group of experts should take part: stakeholders from domestic and foreign state institutions, the private sector, civil society and researchers.

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34 OSCE, Preventing Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: A Community-Policing Approach, Vienna, February 2014, pg. 40-46.

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Youth-Related Recommendations:

1. <u>Structured youth inclusion in decision-making spaces</u>: Appreciating the challenge presented by youth alienation, the OSCE should continue to demonstrate its commitment to youth inclusion and offer young people a meaningful seat at the decision-making tables across its executive structures. <u>It is recommended that the Chairpersonship, following consultation with participating States, establishes an Advisory Panel on the Political Participation of Young People</u>: the panel would complement existing Youth and Security infrastructure and, as an advisory body, would be mandated to contribute a youth lens in performing consultative functions such as providing comments on provisions concerning youth in Ministerial Council draft texts.

2. <u>Enhancing young people's media literacy</u>: In this increasingly digital world that we occupy today, and thinking ahead to what technological trends hold for the future, it is imperative that every young person is empowered to be able to confidently engage with online content, and to have developed an awareness for the relevant risks associated with maintaining a presence online.

3. Avoiding tokenism in designing youth engagement strategies: Acknowledging the difficulties in reaching out to engage with youth populations who may feel disaffected by decision-making institutions, it is vital that decision-makers commit to ensuring youth engagement opportunities - whether formal or informal - are accessible, inclusive, and transparent for participants to take account of the impact their voice can have in contributing their time and efforts to such processes. <u>Assessing whether youth engagement activities will likely be meaningful or merely perfunctory and performative should form a mandatory element of youth outreach planning</u>.

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Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

With 57 participating States in North America, Europe and Asia, the OSCE – the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – is the world's largest regional security organization. The OSCE works to build and sustain stability, peace and democracy for more than one billion people, through political dialogue and projects on the ground. The OSCE is a forum for political dialogue on a wide range of security issues and a platform for joint action to improve the lives of individuals and communities. The Organization helps to bridge differences, build trust and foster co-operation within and between states. With its expert units, institutions and network of field operations, the OSCE addresses issues that have an impact on our common security such as arms control, terrorism, good governance, energy security, human trafficking, democratization, media freedom and national minorities.

The Secretariat, which includes the Conflict Prevention Centre, assists the OSCE Chair in its activities, provides operational and administrative support to field operations and, as appropriate, to other institutions.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw promotes democratic elections, respect for human rights, the rule of law, tolerance and non-discrimination, and the rights of Roma and Sinti communities.

The OSCE Academy in Bishkek provides a regional and international public forum for professionals and students in the spirit of co-operation in the fields of international relations, comprehensive security, democratization, the rule of law and human rights.

In cooperation with

OSCE Organization for Security and
Co-operation in Europe

FES ROCPE in Vienna

The goal of the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (FES ROCPE) of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Vienna is to come to terms with the challenges to peace and security in Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union a quarter of a century ago. These issues should be discussed primarily with the countries of Eastern Europe – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – and with Russia, as well as with the countries of the EU and with the US. The security order of Europe, based until recently on the Helsinki Final Act (1975) and the Paris Charter (1990), is under threat. This is, among others, a result of different perceptions of the development of international relations and threats over the last 25 years, resulting in divergent interests among the various states.

For these reasons, ROCPE supports the revival of a peace and security dialogue and the development of new concepts in the spirit of a solution-oriented policy. The aim is to bring scholars and politicians from Eastern Europe, Russia, the EU and the US together to develop a common approach to tackle these challenges, to reduce tensions and to aim towards conflict resolution. It is our belief that organizations such as the FES have the responsibility to come up with new ideas and to integrate them into the political process in Europe.

We support the following activities:

- Regional and international meetings for developing new concepts on cooperation and peace in Europe;

- A regional network of young professionals in the field of cooperation and peace in Europe;

- Cooperation with the OSCE in the three dimensions: the politico-military, the economic and the human.