Written contribution to JPSG
Reporting on the fight against right-wing extremism and terrorism (RWE)

The threat

Many Member States (MS) assess that the threat from right-wing violence is increasing. At the same time, the number of right-wing attacks that are classified as terrorism under national legislation remains relatively low. It is important to keep in mind that the relatively low numbers of right-wing terrorism reported by EU MS for the purpose of the TE-SAT do not necessarily correlate with lower levels of violence perpetrated by right-wing extremists. Furthermore, several countries reported right-wing terrorist attacks for the first time, possibly indicating a spread of violent extremist activity or an increased awareness of authorities.

In 2019, right-wing extremists in Europe were responsible for a number of violent attacks. Several of the perpetrators referred to the attacks in Christchurch (New Zealand) on 15 March 2019, thereby highlighting the mobilising effect of right-wing attacks internationally. Online spaces were observed to strengthen international links between right-wing extremists. Right-wing terrorists and extremists primarily use networked communication via online platforms to recruit, build and maintain their community and disseminate calls to violence, which makes the online space one of the main drivers of the right-wing threat.

Like jihadists, violent right-wing lone actors are embedded in wider online communities that preach hate and dehumanise certain groups of our diverse societies. COVID-19 could further escalate some of these trends, given the potential economic and social impact of the pandemic worldwide. So far, it has been observed that the propaganda of the various scenes has addressed the COVID pandemic, trying to capitalise from it and reinforce own narratives, propagate misinformation and perceived societal division.

The response

Europol is working on the fight against RWE through three lines of action, fully aligned with the work strands agreed by the JHA Council on 8 October 2019.

- **Foster the exchange of information and intelligence via the dedicated Analysis Project (AP Dolphin):**

Europol sees a steady increase of operational contributions on RWE. Furthermore, the European Counter-Terrorism Centre (ECTC) provided operational support post attack (including on-the-spot support) and support to major international events connected to the RW extremist scene to EU MS and Third Parties in a number of cases. Upon request from MS to concentrate on and expand work strands in relation to activities of specific right-wing extremist groups within AP Dolphin, notable operational activities focus on the right-wing music scene and relevant organizations.

- **Improve the EU strategic awareness and intelligence picture:**

In order to sufficiently and proactively inform the MS, we are continuously monitoring the developments, including in relation to the possible exploitation of the COVID-19 crisis by violent extremists and terrorists. The findings of our analyses have been made available to MS via several reports: “Right-wing violent extremism and terrorism in the EU” (September 2019); six-monthly reports “An outlook on developments in terrorism in the...
EU"; Various editions of Europol’s reports on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on different crime areas; “An outlook on developments in terrorism in the EU - Europol’s Special COVID-19 Report” (June 2020). The delivery on this objective has been facilitated also by the engagement with specialists in the framework of the Counter-Terrorism Programme Board (CTPB) and a workshop held in December 2019.

- **Counter RWE propaganda online:**

The political mandate of the EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) as integral part of the ECTC was initially entirely focused on jihadist terrorism and the EU IRU capacities were developed in this direction (e.g. languages, platforms monitored, cooperation with respective private partners). With RWE, we are facing very localised individuals and small networks rather than massive connections, which require a different approach.

However, the EU IRU has supported, on ad hoc basis, online investigations and detection of violent extremist content in a number of cases (i.e. Christchurch, Halle, Hanau).

The attack in Christchurch highlighted the need for a coordinated cross-border response across online service providers and EU law enforcement in relation to terrorist or violent extremist incidents with a significant online component. The EU IRU has therefore invested resources in developing an EU Crisis Response Protocol together with the European Commission/DG Home. Consultations with MS are ongoing, with the aim at refining the Protocol and developing it into an operational practical guide for MS to use in the aftermath of a terrorist incident with significant online impact. To that end, in November 2020, the EU IRU will host an online tabletop exercise. Several virtual rooms will be set up where participants can share their response to the given scenarios, one of which will simulate a right-wing terrorist attack with an online component.

The PERCI concept is critical to manage a complex information flow that involve different types of terrorist content and urgent action in the event of viral dissemination of this content. It is intended as a Europol-hosted centralised platform to ensure coordination of the referral and removal order process. It will not only serve MS’ operational need, but also help Online Service Providers build resilience against terrorist abuse of their services.

**Challenges**

Differences in approaches and legislation in MS may lead to only a partial and insufficient threat picture. This carries the risk of underestimating the phenomenon and its significance. It also influences Europol’s response strategy. Our role is to focus on politically or ideologically motivated violent extremism and terrorism in all its forms. The non-violent expression of right-wing political views is not part of Europol’s mandate.

While Europol has started to gradually build up expertise and capabilities in the area of RWE, the scope and speed at which this can be done depends on overall resources for the ECTC and appropriate resources to Europol for developing the related expertise and technical capabilities. Political and operational expectations go beyond what can be achieved by reallocating existing resources.

Expanding activities on RWE should not be done at the expense of scaling down efforts in the fight against jihadist terrorism (including the online component), which is still representing an enormous challenge for law enforcement authorities in the MS.

In that respect, Europol welcomes the updated CT policy recommendations (as agreed by COSI on 15 June 2020), which call for MS to consider seconding national experts to Europol and specifically to the EU IRU, to reinforce the EU IRU capabilities to support MS’ actions to prevent the dissemination of all types of terrorist content. A secondment from Germany, with a focus on enhancing the RW expertise at the EU IRU, has already taken effect on 1 September.