

Berlin, 11 November 2020

Statement by Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe, on behalf of the Council at the  
November I Plenary Session of the European Parliament

President, Honourable Members,

I regret that I cannot be with you in person on the occasion of this plenary session, and I would like to thank President Sassoli for granting me this opportunity to address you in writing. I will follow this important and topical debate attentively from Germany.

The heinous terrorist attacks committed in France and Austria in recent weeks show with all clarity that our common efforts are needed to ensure the security of our citizens.

The brutal murder of French history and geography teacher Samuel Paty on 16 October was shocking and provoked a tide of emotions across Europe. The assassination of someone who, as part of his job, teaches pupils about freedom of expression, is an attack against our fundamental values in open and democratic societies.

Less than two weeks after this attack, on 29 October, once again, Europe witnessed an Islamist terrorist attack, this time in a church in Nice, where three people were killed by a young Jihadist.

And on 2 November, in the evening, Vienna was attacked by a terrorist in a series of shootings, causing the death of four persons and injuring many others.

European common values, including respect for fundamental rights, are the foundation of our Union and our societies. Acts of terrorism constitute one of the most serious violations of our values and principles.

Since the terrorist attacks at Charlie Hebdo in January 2015, and the EU leaders' statement of 12 February that year, substantial progress has been made at Member State and EU level to enhance the EU's ability to prevent and fight terrorism. The European Council is following developments closely, and has called for tailored actions to address issues of concern.

This Parliament has played a very important role, not only as co-legislator on the legislative files, but also by adopting, in December 2018, a comprehensive report on counterterrorism, drafted by your Special Committee on Terrorism (TERR).

Violent extremism and terrorism should be addressed in all their forms, also taking into consideration the increasing polarisation in society.

We have in particular witnessed a series of lone actor attacks, with attackers inspired by international terrorist organisations or extremist content online without any or only marginal links to other terrorists or violent extremist organisations. Daesh-inspired individuals and groups in EU Member States continue to encourage terrorist attacks on European soil.

This implies that it can be difficult to identify/detect persons constituting a threat. However, there is still room to improve our measures.

More concerted efforts at EU-level are needed to recognise and handle, at an early stage, public security threats stemming from persons regarded by the Member States as posing a terrorist threat. It is a Presidency priority to improve the sharing of information on such persons, on the basis of the existing national and European regulatory frameworks.

Recent attacks also remind us, once again, that the Internet too often plays a major role in the process of radicalisation of individuals leading to violence and terrorist attacks. Many recent terrorist attacks had a strong online dimension, with some perpetrators live-streaming their acts and justifying the shootings in manifestoes posted on the internet.

Agreeing on the proposal for a Regulation on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online, after two years of discussion, has now become a matter of urgency: we owe this to our citizens and we strongly encourage you, as co-legislator, to engage with us to reach this objective before Christmas.

Pending the adoption of the Regulation, both Member State authorities and hosting service providers should ensure that terrorist content online is swiftly identified and removed to avoid more live-streaming of attacks.

The impact of algorithms and their contribution to radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism deserves further examination. In this regard, it is important to improve our understanding of the radicalisation process, including the role of ideology - of all violent ideologies.

It is also important to make best use of the funding available in the areas of education, youth, social affairs, employment, etc., for preventing radicalisation. Efforts to support the development of alternative and counter narratives to radicalisation should also be continued, acknowledging the important role that victims of terrorism can play in this respect.

Honourable members,

The EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights enshrines the right to hold opinions, freedom of expression, the right to education and the respect of media freedom and pluralism.

Rule of law is a key guarantor that our common values are well protected and complied with. This was recalled by the EU Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024, and based on the Commission's first annual rule of law report, a first horizontal discussion was organised at the General Affairs Council last month. Following up on that, a first country-specific discussion, analysing the situation of the rule of law one by one in every single Member State, is to be held at the General Affairs Council next week.

And we know that education can play a crucial role in promoting our common values.

In March 2015 - after the January attacks - EU Education Ministers met at an informal meeting in Paris and agreed on a Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education. The Declaration called for renewed efforts to reinforce the fundamental values and principles on which our societies are founded. The commitments of that Declaration remain very valid today.

Before concluding, let me assure you that the prevention of terrorism, as well as the right to freedom of expression and education will remain high priorities for the Presidency.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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