

What is not allowed in the real world, must also be a no-go in the virtual world

EESC calls on Commission to fight violent and discriminatory online content more effectively

The EESC acknowledges the Commission's Communication *Tackling Illegal Content Online – Towards and enhanced responsibility of online platforms* as a first and useful step but is not satisfied with its scope. It therefore calls on the Commission to establish programmes and effective measures to provide a stable and consistent legal framework for the efficient removal of illegal content.

The EESC also considers the cases of illegal content mentioned in the Communication as too narrow and proposes to review and catalogue them in order to achieve greater inclusiveness rather than limit them to the explicitly mentioned ones (terrorism, xenophobic speech, child sexual abuse material). For instance, malicious defamation and dissemination of material that violates human dignity or contributes to gender violence should also be included.

"Spreading illegal content must be nipped in the bud", said [Bernardo Hernández Bataller](#) when presenting his opinion on [Illegal content/online platforms](#), adopted at the EESC plenary on 14 March 2018.

This is why the EESC also proposes to pay special attention to the development, processing and dissemination of purely informative content which appears – at a first glance – legal but is hiding illegal.

The focus should also be extended to anything that relates to mega data and the benefits that online platforms obtain by exploiting this data.

Illegal content is a complex and cross-cutting issue that needs to be tackled from a range of perspectives:

"Firstly, it is important to assess the impact of illegal online content and secondly, we need to harmonize the way it is dealt with in the legal framework of the Member States. When we talk about the adoption of criteria and measures, the starting point must be that what is forbidden in the real world must also be forbidden in the virtual world. We need to put a stop to illegal and inhuman content," explained the rapporteur.

"Publishing illegal content, hate speech or incitement to terrorism is not a peccadillo. In order to avoid, combat and remove such material, we need to strengthen the measures. This is also important in order to protect minors", said Mr Bataller.

Given the impact that digital platforms already have on our daily life and

the risks they pose, it is essential to have clear and harmonised legislation all over Europe. “We need a healthy mix between regulatory measures and self-regulatory measures”, emphasised Mr Bataller.

The EESC believes that online platforms themselves should provide users with the tools to display fake news and thus make other users aware that the veracity of the content has been put into question.

Due to the potential consequences of too much concentration of economic power, the economic growth of some digital platforms also deserves increased vigilance.

Last but not least, the EESC believes that for a more coherent approach the E-Commerce Directive, the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive and the Directive on Misleading and Comparative Advertising should be revised.

[Syria: Declaration by the High Representative Federica Mogherini on behalf of the EU](#)

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Seven years ago, what began as a peaceful demonstration in the midst of the promise of the so-called Arab Spring quickly became a full-scale civil war in Syria that has left more than 400 000 people dead, more than 11 million displaced and close to 19 million Syrians in need of assistance. Neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey struggle to cope with the largest exodus in recent history.

Pro-democracy protests started in March 2011 in the southern city of Deraa and soon expanded to the entire country, only to be met with brutal repression by the Syrian security forces. The regime’s merciless violence and brutal war against its own people has not only led to civil war, chaos and destruction, it also paved the way to the rise of extremism and terrorist

groups such as Da'esh and Al-Nusra.

Today the conflict takes civilian lives every day despite the promises of de-escalation and countless calls by the international community to silence the guns.

Saving lives in Ghouta and everywhere in Syria as well as protecting civilians must be paramount. Humanitarian needs exist across Syria but are especially critical in Eastern Ghouta, Idlib and Afrin right now. UNSC resolution 2401 is the international community's unanimous response to address the violence and deteriorating humanitarian situation throughout Syria, but it remains largely unobserved due to the continued ground offensive and aerial bombardment, as well as the deliberate targeting of civilians and medical infrastructures in Eastern Ghouta by the regime, supported by Russia and Iran. We deplore also the impeded access to humanitarian assistance due to the regime, and the consistent removal of medical items from humanitarian convoys. The EU also expresses deep concern about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afrin following the Turkish military operation. The implementation of the UNSCR 2401 by all parties is necessary to allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid and medical evacuation which are urgently needed across Syria, but particularly in Eastern Ghouta and Afrin.

Today, we reiterate our call to all parties for the immediate and full implementation of UNSC Resolution 2401 demanding a ceasefire without delay and call again on Russia, Iran and Turkey, as the EU did in the HR's letter to their respective ministers after the 26 February Foreign Affairs Council, to fulfil their obligations and responsibilities as Astana guarantors.

From the very beginning the European Union was clear that there can be no military solution to this conflict. We reiterate that this horrific humanitarian crisis can only be brought to an end by a sustainable political solution. This can only be achieved through a genuine and inclusive political process that meets the democratic aspirations and needs of the Syrian people in line with relevant UNSC Resolutions, including the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and the UNSC Resolution 2254. The EU reiterates its support for the work of the UN Special Envoy and the UN-led Geneva process in this regard. The EU played its part in the fight against Da'esh and now that this terrorist organisation is almost defeated in Syria we believe that a political agreement remains the only way towards a sustainable solution to the conflict, including the lasting eradication of violent extremism.

Reaching a meaningful and inclusive political agreement, which meets the aspirations of all Syrians and includes with adequate representation of women in intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, is vital.

Democracy, human rights and rule of law are fundamental principles and the European Union is working to translate them into concrete initiatives. There can be no meaningful transition in Syria without justice and fair representation of all communities. We commend the constructive role played by the Syrian Negotiation Commission and its engagement in the process. We call on the regime to engage meaningfully in talks and on its backers to use their

influence to ensure this.

We will pursue accountability for war crimes relentlessly; this is the indispensable basis for national reconciliation. We also condemn the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and Da'esh confirmed in the reports of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism and stress our grave concern at continued reports of chemical weapons use. These recent reports need to be thoroughly investigated and perpetrators of these horrendous crimes need to be brought to justice. The international community cannot tolerate impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The EU will continue to support the resilience of the Syrian population. In opposition held areas the local administrative structures will continue to profit from the EU support. Syria has to be brought back together as a sovereign and undivided country. In this regard, the EU will be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria, only once a comprehensive, inclusive and genuine political transition is firmly in place in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communique and will keep supporting the neighboring countries.

The European Union is the leading donor in the international response to the Syrian crisis with an overall total of over €10.6 billion since 2011. The Brussels II conference on 24-25 April 2018 will be another step taken by the EU and the UN to ensure that the international community remains focused on the Syria conflict and to address the urgent humanitarian needs of those affected by it as well as supporting the resilience of refugee-hosting countries.

Syria's destiny lies in peace, democracy, equal citizenship and the rule of law. The European Union will continue to work for this with determination and with consistency, for the Syrian people.

The EU will continue to stand with the Syrians.

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Indicative programme – Agriculture and Fisheries Council, 19 March 2018

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