

Fighting terrorism online: Remarks by Commissioners Avramopoulos and King at the Internet Forum

Opening remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos

Dear Ministers,

Representatives of the internet companies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all to this third Ministerial EU Internet Forum. We are gathered here again today to reinforce further our work against terrorism on the internet. Because it is the internet that is the real battlefield against 21st century terrorism.

Da'esh may have lost its territorial centre of gravity, Raqqa – but on the internet it is still present. It is a presence which is clandestine and infectious, spreading from bogus social media accounts, from one platform to another, with a message of hate, a nihilist interpretation of Islam and detailed instructions on how to kill innocent citizens.

Most of the recent attacks in Europe and the US were hatched and executed from the inside: the attackers never travelled to Syria or Iraq. But most of them had been influenced, groomed and recruited to terrorism on the internet.

Da'esh was quick to capitalise on the advantages offered by the internet. Now, with the dramatic losses, it is suffering on the ground, its recruitment strategies are focussing almost exclusively on the virtual world.

We see more and more aggressive videos and messages on social media, targeting vulnerable groups and individuals in the West.

Since last year, we witnessed a rise in the volume of content being uploaded by Da'esh supporters based here, in Europe. So, while some of the recent attacks seem to have been carried out by “lone wolves”, the viral spread of Da'esh's propaganda online proves that these attackers were anything but alone.

Against this backdrop, I am pleased that our joint political investment in this area since 2015 has now gone global.

Not surprisingly, over the last year, terrorism on the internet has been on the political agenda across Europe and the world: at the European Council, the G7 and the United Nations General Assembly.

This year, we also saw the establishment of the Global Internet Forum on Counter Terrorism, an initiative from industry, with support from the UN,

whose first attendance here at the EU Internet Forum I warmly welcome.

What for me is the most satisfying is that the trustful cooperation we established here, is not about talking. It is about acting.

In Year 1, 2015, we established an efficient referral mechanism through Europol. 42,000 pieces of content were referred, and most of it removed.

In Year 2, 2016, the industry announced here its database of hashes, to make removals permanent and irreversible. 40,000 hashes now populate the database. Its impact can grow exponentially as more companies join it.

In Year 3, today, we concretely show in this Forum that we can harness Artificial Intelligence in the fight against terrorism. Facebook reports that it is now at 99% automated removals. Google/YouTube at 98%. Twitter at 95%.

For all this effort, I am thankful to the platforms that are here today, and have joined their forces with ours. This is our preferred way: to work together, with trust, and to continue working in this way to take our cooperation further.

There is a lot of room for improvement, for this cooperation to produce even better results, starting with the reporting from the companies, which must become more regular and more transparent.

The figures you give us are needed to assess and monitor our progress. And it is on the basis of those figures that we will make policy.

Then on the issue of the smaller companies – terrorist groups will always follow the path of least resistance. If the big three platforms are armed to the teeth, but all the smaller players cannot follow the arms race, we have lost the game.

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube: I urge you to work with smaller companies and help them set up their own Artificial Intelligence tools to detect terrorist content automatically.

We are always as strong as our weakest links.

I also urge you all, to share key information with Europol and law enforcement. We should not work in silos. Law enforcement is your ally in your efforts against terrorism on your platforms.

I also believe that alongside automation, we can all do better on referrals. Companies need to react faster to referrals from our Member States and Europol. It is feasible to reduce the time it takes to remove content to a few hours.

All these points are essential for further progress. This progress needs to be shown with actions and concrete facts and figures.

You know already very well that the progress we achieve here will feed into the wider debate on tackling illegal content online in the Digital Single

Market. I repeat that my preferred approach is: trust, voluntary cooperation, concrete results.

But the Commission will make a decision at the latest by May next year on whether additional measures – including legislation – are required in order to better address the problem of illegal content on the internet.

I am confident that our shared commitment to this cooperation will make that unnecessary.

Ladies and Gentleman, I hope that we can have a frank and fruitful discussion today. I genuinely believe that by working together and by coordinating our actions efficiently, we can make a difference and deliver the necessary impact against terrorism online.

Closing remarks by Commissioner King

It is important to remember why we are here today. The 38 jihadist attacks that struck the EU since August 2015 were not all due to online terror content. But internet propaganda has been the main push factor, inciting people to commit attacks, and instructing them how to do so.

Some Europeans, influenced by what they saw online, were persuaded to join Da'esh in Syria and Iraq; some of whom then returned to commit atrocities here, such as in Paris and Brussels.

Others did not even need to go so far: they got tips on how to build a bomb – and encouragement to do so – from the comfort of their own homes.

Faced with this, Member States governments feel under considerable pressure to act. Indeed, some have already begun work on legislation. For the Commission's part, as Commissioner Avramopoulos has said, we are not rushing into questions of legislation: we remain fully committed to the voluntary approach enshrined in this Forum. But, to recall what President Juncker said in his letter of intent to the Presidents of the European Parliament and of the Council, "we will monitor progress and assess whether additional measures are needed to ensure the swift and proactive detection and removal of illegal content on line, including possible legislative measures to complement the existing regulatory framework."

Today we have heard that things are moving in the right direction. Major companies are using automatic detection tools more. The database of hashes is up and running, and starting to be populated. Many pieces of content are on there – though we still need to understand their scale and importance. Member States are also investing in the capacity to refer content for takedown.

But we are not there yet. We are two years down the road of this journey: to reach our final destination we now need to speed up our work.

The first issue is how quickly content is removed. The longer illegal content stays undetected and online, the greater its reach, the more it can spread and grow.

The G7, European Council Conclusions and EU leaders have all pointed to removals within the “golden hour” as the collective goal.

The second issue is to improve how we monitor this work in a way to ensure consistency and transparency. The July action plan was a significant first step but the Forum needs consistent monitoring criteria to be able to assess progress. As it stands we do not have – for example – consistent figures on the speed of removal, so we do not know to what extent the “golden hour” objective is met. The Commission and Europol are ready to work with you, the industry, on this issue.

Third, detecting and removing illegal content is one thing; but all content removed should be shared with law enforcement.

Finally, we need to extend the reach of this forum. Europol refers content to around 80 platforms. Mostly they are here today; certainly the most significant of them. I am delighted we have new members today, like WordPress. But not all of them are here. Small and medium-sized platforms can be exploited by terrorist propaganda too. All internet companies need to be part of this joint effort.

I hope we can return to these issues and more in a senior officials’ meeting in February.

So I thank you all again for coming. This is corporate social responsibility for the digital age. I hope we can see your engagement and cooperation continue and develop over the months to come.