EUROPOL

2022 EU Internet Referral Unit Transparency Report

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INTRODUCTION

This is the sixth edition of the Transparency Report of the European Union Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU). The report provides a factual snapshot of the EU IRU's activities in the area of prevention in 2022. It includes the sum of the Unit's activities aimed at reducing public access to Terrorist Content Online (TCO). The prevention activities of the EU IRU are focused on three areas of work: TCO monitoring and analysis, referrals, and public-private partnerships. The activities in these areas are highlighted in this report. In addition, the report outlines the EU IRU's activities in support of the implementation of the Regulation on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online, which was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in June 2021 and became applicable in all EU Member States on 7 June 2022.

TCO MONITORING AND ANALYSIS

The EU IRU monitors the dissemination of publicly available terrorist and violent extremist content online. The Unit maintains its policy of collecting, assessing and referring content that constitutes an offence related to terrorism (public provocation to commit a terrorist offence, recruitment for terrorism and providing training and instruction for terrorism), as defined in the EU Directive on combating terrorism (EU 2017/541).

The content is manually assessed by the Unit's experts and imported into the Check-the-Web portal. The portal is accessible to the Competent Authorities (CAs) of the EU Member States and associated Third Parties (TPs) with an operational agreement via Europol's secure network.

The analysis of the identified terrorist and violent extremist content focuses on emerging trends from different angles, such as dominant narratives, ideological motivations, dissemination techniques, and the use of new online services and technologies.

Based on this content analysis, the EU IRU produces a wide range of operational and strategic reports, such as weekly and monthly bulletins, situation reports, early warning notifications, intelligence notifications and annual reviews. These reports serve to assist counter-terrorism (CT) units in EU Member States and TPs in identifying challenges and/or operational priorities and in CT investigations.

A more detailed methodology and legal framework of the EU IRU's monitoring and analysis activities are described in the Unit's Transparency Report 2021.

REFERRAL ACTIVITIES

One of the core tasks of the EU IRU is flagging terrorist and violent extremist content to online service providers (OSPs). This involves the identification of a unique URL, or a set of unique URLs, pointing to terrorist or violent extremist content, for subsequent referral to OSPs.

A referral contains the URL(s), as well as the EU IRU expert's assessment of the content, justifying the request for removal on the basis of (a) terrorist offence(s) as defined in the EU Directive on combating terrorism (EU 2017/541). The actual request to the OSP is to review the content against its policies and terms of service. Referrals are not enforceable acts. The decision to remove the referred content is taken by the OSP concerned in accordance with its policies and terms of service.

In total, the EU IRU assessed **21 061** unique items as referable on **143** platforms in 2022.

A full explanation of the legal framework for the EU IRU's referrals can be found in the Unit's Transparency Report 2021.

Proactive referrals

Referrals to OSPs are made both at the request of EU Member States and as a result of the EU IRU's proactive monitoring of open sources. On a proactive and structural basis, the EU IRU focuses on jihadist and right-wing violent extremist and terrorist (RWVET) content.

In the area of jihadism, as in previous years, the content referred in 2022 was related to propaganda material produced by three priority terrorist organisations, notably the so-called Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, including their affiliates or supporters. Priority was given to propaganda material linked to high-profile events (i.e. terrorist attacks or communications by leaders and key figures) and/or relayed by the so-called 'official' media outlets.

In the area of RWVET, priority was given to content produced by or promoting proscribed right-wing violent extremist and terrorist groups (according to national legislation), or content disseminated in connection with attacks committed by perpetrators with right-wing motivations.

Requested referrals

On an ad hoc basis and at the request of EU Member States, the EU IRU also refers content related to migrant smuggling. Referrals in this area are made in cooperation with Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) and can be requested by both EU Member States and TPs. In 2022, the referred content was related to the advertising of illegal travel services and counterfeit travel documents (e.g. visas, passports).

Referral Action Days

The EU IRU organises and coordinates Referral Action Days (RADs) on a regular basis together with the CAs of the EU Member States and TPs. These revolve around intensive referral campaigns that take place within a dedicated timeframe.

The RADs facilitate direct cooperation between Europol, the national IRUs in the EU Member States and TPs, and OSPs. They enable the rapid exchange of best practices between all parties involved and raise awareness of TCO with the aim of improving moderation, feedback and the response time of OSPs.

RADs can be thematic or platform-specific. Thematic RADs are referral campaigns on online content related to a specific topic of interest identified across a number of platforms. Platform-specific RADs are referral campaigns on terrorist content detected on the platform of a specific OSP. Platform-specific RADs are organised in cooperation with the relevant OSP. They are followed by a dedicated discussion with the company concerned on the patterns of abuse used by terrorists and/or violent extremists, the extent of abuse of the company's services, and proactive measures for the detection of terrorist content. In 2022, the EU IRU coordinated the following RADs:

- [RAD focused on terrorist and extremist chants on SoundCloud](#)
- [RAD focused on violent right-wing extremist and terrorist content online](#)
- [RAD on explosive chemical precursors](#)

In addition, the EU IRU also supported the online component of the [second EU-wide joint action day against hate crime](#), targeting racist and xenophobic hate speech and other hate crimes online and offline.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

The EU IRU is a key stakeholder in the EU Internet Forum (EUIF), which acts as a platform for strengthening public-private partnerships in countering terrorist content online. The EUIF is the EU framework for promoting public-private partnerships to counter TCO. It was officially launched by the EU Commission shortly after the establishment of the EU IRU in 2015. The EU IRU has been a member of the EUIF ever since.

In 2022, the EU IRU contributed to the EUIF Activity Plan by participating in the EUIF Senior Officials meetings (24 June and 16 November) and contributing to specific workshops:

— **The EUIF workshop on countering terrorist operated websites** (10 March);

> The objective of the meeting was to raise awareness of terrorist operated websites among relevant stakeholders, including the industry, to discuss current challenges and develop approaches for voluntary cooperation to address these challenges.

— **The EUIF workshop on the misuse of content sharing algorithms, malicious behaviour and borderline content** (29 September);

> The objective of the workshop was to discuss the role of automated systems and manipulative tactics used in the dissemination of violent extremist content, and consult with EU Member States and other stakeholders on forms of borderline content that should be considered harmful and potentially leading to radicalisation. The outcome of the workshop should serve as an informal guide for companies on how to best identify borderline content and malicious behaviour leading to radicalisation and violent extremism.

— **The technical meeting on terrorist and violent extremist financing activities online** (12 October);

> The objectives of this meeting were to better understand and raise awareness of violent extremist and terrorist financing tactics online, explore the challenges in detecting and disrupting these activities, provide information about actions already being taken by companies, share best practices, and discuss possible solutions.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TERRORIST CONTENT ONLINE REGULATION

In June 2021, the European Parliament and the Council adopted Regulation (EU) 2021/784 on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online (TCO Regulation). The TCO Regulation became applicable in all EU Member States on 7 June 2022. Its aim is to ensure that TCO is removed swiftly, in a cooperative and coordinated manner among all EU Member States, Europol and hosting service providers (HSPs). The Regulation applies to all HSPs offering services in the EU, regardless of whether they are established in an EU Member State.

The TCO Regulation establishes rules and obligations for the CAs of EU Member States and HSPs to address the misuse of hosting services for the dissemination of TCO. One of the main provisions gives the CAs of EU Member States the power to issue removal orders (ROs), requiring HSPs to remove TCO or disable access to it in all EU Member States within one hour of receipt of an RO.

Voluntary cooperation through the referral process (i.e. content flagging) between the CAs of EU Member States and HSPs will continue, but the Regulation provides additional binding instruments for the Member States to enforce the rapid removal of TCO where necessary.

Europol plays a central role in assisting the EU Member States in the implementation of the TCO Regulation. The Regulation encourages the Member States to make use of Europol's dedicated technical solutions in support of implementation. It also provides for cooperation between the Member States and Europol with a view to improving the coordination of activities, preventing duplication of efforts, and avoiding interference with national investigations. In addition, HSPs are required to promptly inform the CA of the concerned EU Member State – or where this is not possible, Europol and the CA in the EU Member State in which the HSP is legally established – of TCO involving an imminent threat to life. The Regulation also requires that copies of the RO issued by the CA of the EU Member State be sent to Europol for the purpose of producing an annual report on the state of play of TCO.

ANNEX

Mandate of the EU IRU

On 12 March 2015, the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council mandated Europol[1] to establish a dedicated unit to reduce the volume and impact of internet content promoting terrorism or violent extremism. The EU IRU, which is part of Europol's European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC), became operational in July 2015 with a mandate to refer terrorist and violent extremist content to OSPs and provide support to the Member States and TPs in the context of internet investigations.

Since 2016, the EU IRU has also supported Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre, by flagging internet content used by traffickers to offer smuggling services to migrants and refugees. The expansion of the Unit's mandate was a result of the special meeting of the European Council of 23 April 2015 on the migration situation in the Mediterranean Sea,[2] which called on Europol to detect such online content and request its removal in accordance with national legislation.

In 2021, the EU IRU extended its activities in detecting and referring jihadist terrorist content to also include right-wing terrorist and violent extremist content online. The development of the new capability came as a result of the priorities and recommendations of the JHA Council of October 2019[3] and the new Counter Terrorism Agenda for the EU,[4] which called on Europol to step up its efforts to counter violent extremist ideologies, including the spread of right-wing terrorist and extremist content online, through continued engagement with technology companies.

The Unit's overall mission is to link the virtual face of terrorism to its physical aspect, by bridging the gap between prevention and investigation capabilities. The EU IRU detects and refers the core disseminators of terrorist propaganda, with the aim of not only restricting public access to terrorist propaganda, but also identifying and facilitating crime attribution and the prosecution of the perpetrators. Its ultimate goal is to reduce the accessibility of terrorist content

[1] Council of the European Union, "Justice and Home Affairs Council, 12-13 March 2015", https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/jha/2015/03/12-13/.
[2] European Council, "Special meeting of the European Council, 23 April 2015 – statement", 2015, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/04/23/special-euco-statement/#.
[3] Council of the European Union, "Justice and Home Affairs Council, 7-8 October 2019", https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/jha/2019/10/07-08/.
[4] European Commission Migration and Home Affairs, "Counter terrorism and radicalisation", 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation_en.

online by providing a sustained referral capability to the Member States and a core internet-based investigative support capability that responds to the Member States' priorities and operational needs. To achieve this mission, the Unit operates through four interlinked teams: (i) Operations & Internet Investigations Support; (ii) Terrorist Propaganda Analysis & Referrals; (iii) Advanced Technical Solutions; and (iv) the SIRIUS[5] team.

The EU IRU also works closely with the other two components of the ECTC; the Counter Terrorism Operations Unit and the ECTC Expertise and Stakeholder Management Unit. This cooperation ensures that Europol's mission to support the Member States (and third parties with operational agreements with Europol) in the fight against terrorism is implemented in a coherent and comprehensive manner, both within the EU and beyond.

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[5] Europol, "SIRIUS Project", 2022,
https://www.europol.europa.eu/operations-services-innovation/sirius-project.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CA	Competent Authority
CT	Counter Terrorism
EMSC	European Migrant Smuggling Centre
EU IF	EU Internet Forum
EU IRU	EU Internet Referral Unit
OSP	Online Service Provider
PERCI	Plateforme Européenne de Retraits de Contenus Illégaux sur Internet
RAD	Referral Action Day
RO	Removal Order
RWVET	Right-wing Violent Extremism and Terrorism
TCO	Terrorist Content Online