INTRODUCTION

According to statistics, one out of three internet-users is under 18 years old. The fact that minors are particularly vulnerable to social influences and manipulation means that terrorist and extremist organisations see them as prime targets for their radical content.

Aware of the increased presence of minors online, many terrorist organisations and groups have strengthened their online presence, designing their communication strategies to attract younger audiences. Europol’s Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) has pointed to a trend among terrorist and extremist organisations and groups to carry out outreach, recruitment and incitement in the increasingly diverse and complex virtual environment.
To tackle these challenges, it is necessary to have an accurate and up-to-date understanding of the threat, to engage the relevant actors and to adopt the right strategies and tools to prevent and respond quickly and effectively to this threat\textsuperscript{1}.

**STATE OF PLAY ON THE RADICALISATION OF MINORS ONLINE**

While terrorist incidents have decreased in the European Union in recent years and the number of arrests has fallen, there has nevertheless been an increase in the number of cases involving minors, between 13 and 17 years of age and minors arrested for or involved in terrorist or violent extremist activities. Much of these activities take place in the virtual environment.

In May 2022, in an operation in Slovakia and the Netherlands, a minor (along with other individuals) was arrested for sharing instructions online for the homemade manufacture of automatic firearms with 3D printable parts, as well as for possession of such weapons.

In June of the same year, a 16-year-old was arrested in Spain for links to terrorist activities. The minor had become radicalised online, accessing a large number of videos and reading various training manuals, and had plans to travel to a conflict zone to join a terrorist organisation.

There is no single profile of a radicalised minor, but more males (70%) than females are among the “terrorist minors”, 50% with no prior criminal record. There are a number of factors increasing the vulnerability, such as isolation and little (parental) supervision. The TE-SAT 2022 also points to common features that have repeatedly been observed, such as psychological issues and issues in engaging socially with peers.

\textsuperscript{1} The focus of this paper is online radicalisation and how to improve preventive measures at EU level. For a broader perspective on youth radicalisation, see 13850/23 (paper by the EU Counterterrorism Coordinator).
The so-called borderline content, which is legal but harmful content, poses a specific risk to young users. Disguising hateful and terrorist ideology by softened language and humour and memes makes minors more vulnerable to the ideology and potential radicalisation. Borderline content can be used as a gateway to more violent extremist and terrorist content. A study by the EU Internet Forum has found empirical evidence that borderline content can lead to radicalisation. It can play a major role in spreading the most extremist ideologies and contribute to increasing polarisation, not crossing the threshold for control efforts by governments and internet companies.

Furthermore, the risk of minors being exposed to harmful content leading to radicalisation is increased, due to the fact that violent extremist and terrorist content are amplified by algorithmic recommender systems on various online platforms, thus gaining more visibility. Algorithms amplifying harmful content should be addressed, and assistance to small and unmoderated to do so is platforms crucial.

In addition, malicious actors aiming to recruit young people are targeting their efforts to social media and online platforms that are widely used among young people. Attempts to recruit through TikTok is an example, or through online gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms with specific audiences, to convert young people to their ideology and facilitate recruitment. Online gaming represents one of the biggest and fastest growing industries globally with over 900 million gamers. Videogames - interactive and appealing - gamifying violence may potentially contribute to radicalising also very young children.

Encrypted chat applications are also widely used to share borderline content, that can lead to more extremist content, as well as violent extremist and terrorist content recruit new followers and disseminate share materials that contributes to radicalisation and recruitment.

Social media platforms have considerably increased their efforts to moderate violent extremist content and remove terrorist content from their platforms. However, the sheer volume of harmful content and techniques adapted by malicious actors to circumvent content moderation measure by companies presents challenges to companies and leads to continuous availability of harmful content online.
In addition to softening and manipulating illegal content to avoid content moderation measures of mainstream platforms, malicious actors make use of alternative internet platforms (alt-tech platforms) and smaller platforms with fewer content moderation capacities to spread radical messages and circumvent efforts by governments and major platforms to prevent the dissemination of extremist and terrorist content online.

The Metaverse represents a new security challenge, offering, in the future, a new environment full of possibilities for young players, but also for terrorist and extremist actors and groups, who could use this environment to radicalise and recruit minors in order to plan attacks.

**PREVENTIVE MEASURES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

The Presidency acknowledges the significant efforts and progress being made by the Commission and the Member States in tackling the radicalisation of minors online, which have considerably strengthened the European Union’s response to this threat.

Particularly noteworthy are:

– the creation of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) in 2011, with a working group specifically focused on youth and education and other groups also contributing to the prevention of radicalisation of minors;

– the European Internet Forum (EUIF), created in December 2015 as a collaborative environment for EU governments, the internet industry and other involved partners to jointly prevent the dissemination of harmful, violent extremist and terrorist content online;

– the adoption of Regulation (EU) 2021/784 on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online (TCO).

– the adoption of the Digital Service Act (EU) 2022/2065 to increase oversight of the algorithmic systems used by the largest online platforms.
In the framework of these and other initiatives, research has been promoted and the EUIF has produced several deliverables to support the content moderation efforts of tech platforms and protect minors online. This includes an empirical study on the use of algorithmic amplification, a handbook on borderline content, and a handbook on countering the misuse of gaming related content & spaces for companies to support their users in detecting and reporting harmful content.

**NEXT STEPS**

The increase in the number of minors involved in online activities linked to terrorism and violent extremism could represent a security challenge for Member States in the short and medium term.

The Presidency considers it essential to increase the digital prevention knowledge of the different actors involved, from the security and social perspective, including other relevant policies (education, culture, sport, etc.) and at national and local level, strengthening their capacity to increase resilience of minors and combat internet misuse by violent extremist and terrorist.

Enhancing digital literacy and critical thinking of youth throughout their education is important to increase their resilience against harmful content. In addition, frontline practitioners should be equipped with the knowledge, skills and legal frameworks to counter and prevent violent extremism online.

Preventive action for minors and young people should be approached by considering them not only as targets of radicalisation, but also as actors who can effectively contribute to prevention efforts.

Likewise, it would be advisable to reach a consensus within the European Union on the delimitation of content considered legal but harmful. This could build on the work on borderline content by the EUIF and be carried out in the context of the Digital Services Act to strengthen guidance to industry and support their efforts in preventing the dissemination of such content.
The design of policies and funding programmes against violent radicalisation in the virtual environment must take into account the needs of the different actors involved. At the same time, greater coordination must be achieved at EU level to avoid duplication and overlapping, as must greater efficiency in the use of EU funds.

The Presidency is convinced that the future EU Knowledge Hub, to be launched in June 2024 by the Commission to consolidate knowledge and support on prevention of radicalisation, will further strengthen collaboration between policy makers, researchers and practitioners involved in preventing the online radicalisation of minors, and will promote and facilitate the training of Member States in this field.

In the light of the above:

1. **What aspects should be prioritised in the EU’s prevention strategy against the online radicalisation of minors?**

2. **What additional cooperation should be required from internet companies, in particular from alternative platforms, to minimise the risk of radicalisation of minors?**