

**Thursday 11 October at 14:00**  
**High-Level Conference on Child returnees and released prisoners – opening remarks**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to welcome you all to the Fourth High-Level Conference under the framework of the Radicalisation Awareness Network. I believe it is of great benefit to bring together such a diverse range of stakeholders working on prevention issues, so that you can share expertise and experience in what is an extremely challenging field.

Your work is crucial to improving the security of Europeans – the recent spate of terror attacks on our soil, largely carried out by those brought up within our borders and societies who were radicalised without having ever visited a conflict zone, make that perfectly clear.

In particular, I would today like to extend a special welcome to our guests from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia. You are also facing the same challenges as our Member States when it comes to radicalisation. Terrorism and violent extremism are not bound by borders so it is crucial that we work together to address these issues.

In this regard, I welcome the significant effort that has already been undertaken and hope to continue in this collaborative spirit through the recently agreed Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans.

I would also like to welcome our international partners, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the European Forum for Urban Security, La Mission de Recherche Droit et Justice and the French Federation of the Victims of Catastrophes. There is a clear need to build cooperation at all levels in order to tackle the challenge of terrorism on a global scale.

I will start by briefly outlining what we are doing at EU level to ensure a coherent European response to the challenge of violent extremism, building on the final report of the High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation, as well as the work of the RAN. Then I'd like to address the main issues of the day – child returnees and the rehabilitation and reintegration of those leaving prison.

The Expert Group process has created a strengthened EU Cooperation Mechanism to better focus our actions towards the needs and policy priorities in Member States. But it also

highlighted the need for practitioners and policy-makers to work closely together.

Efforts to prevent violent extremism cut across numerous sectors of society, such as policing, education, social work and healthcare. So whilst local practitioners are undoubtedly best placed to provide the necessary interventions, there is often a need for further resources, or other forms of support at a national or European level.

To put it another way, we need a bottom-up as well as a top-down approach.

To achieve this, the Commission has been reinforcing cooperation between stakeholders on several levels.

Firstly, we have set up the Steering Board for Union Actions on Preventing and Countering Radicalisation, composed of Member States (with the EU Counter Terrorism Coordinator and the European External Action Service as observers). The first meeting of the Steering Board will take place on 24 October in Vienna.

Secondly, the Commission has formalised the network of national Prevent policy makers, which prepares and informs the work of the Steering Board.

We are also creating a coordination and support structure within the Commission to better serve those working in the Prevent area. I would encourage Member States to support this initiative by seconding national experts – the aim is to have 5 experts before the end of the year.

Thirdly, we have appointed within the Security Union Task Force a coordinator for the prevention of radicalisation, to help ensure the streamlining of Prevent efforts across all relevant Commission departments.

Since the Commission launched the RAN network in 2011 it has formed the cornerstone of our Prevent work. It supports local practitioners including teachers, healthcare workers, social workers and prison officers, as well as NGOs.

I am pleased that the RAN is so well represented here today. Those in attendance tasked with identifying best practices and developing guidance are aware of the benefits gained from sharing expertise. In the last year we have seen increased cooperation between different working groups through

crosscutting issues, such as ideology, mental health and evaluation methods, that are of relevance to different professions.

Another innovative feature introduced by the RAN is the Policy and Practice events, where Prevent policy makers at national level learn about successful intervention measures at the local level, and help guide practitioners about the development of policy and tools at the national level.

We will have a panel of Ministers here this afternoon to outline some of their national approaches. This provides an opportunity for the network to strengthen the partnership and to consider how best to use this platform to identify future gaps and challenges.

Tomorrow, the RAN plenary will debate the Annual Activity Plan for 2019, identifying the most pressing issues. Please do contribute with your views on the most effective ways for collaboration not only among practitioners but also with policy-makers and researchers.

Today's conference and tomorrow's plenary meeting offer a chance to reflect on the work that has been carried out but also to look ahead to what still remains to be done.

Notably, the issue of child returnees and the rehabilitation and reintegration of prison leavers.

Children returning from conflict zones – with or without their families – are particularly vulnerable.

The violence, death and trauma to which many have been exposed will have lasting consequences on their wellbeing and mental health. Their vulnerability makes them ideal candidates for Da'esh recruiters. It is essential, therefore, that we address their needs, protect their rights, and ensure they are reintegrated into society and provided with the necessary long-term support from the relevant professionals.

This is a long term investment – they will need support for many years.

Prison leavers represent a different challenge. In the next year, more than 120 radicalised prisoners are due to be released in Europe, while more than 2,000 more are flagged as being at risk of holding extremist views.

These people pose the highest risk in terms of engaging in violent extremism or criminality. Take one recent example – in

May this year a prisoner, Benjamin Herman, convicted of drugs charges while on temporary leave murdered two police officers and a passer-by in Liege, taking a further hostage before being shot dead by police. He had been radicalised in prison after having had contact with Islamist radicals.

Attacks like this underline that preparing for reintegration into society should start in prison and continue after release. There are already a number of programmes along these lines. France, for example, has started a project called PAIRS focusing on rehabilitation and alternatives to detention. This programme also involves a support framework of educators, psychologists, a psychiatrist, a religious referee and a lawyer, to enable re-entry into society.

The UK's Desistance and Disengagement Programme focuses on those who have served prison sentences for terrorist offences, and provides a range of intensive, tailored interventions and practical support designed to tackle the drivers of radicalisation. We often talk about the need for a multi-agency approach, and this project is a good example of it. Support to prison leavers includes mentoring, psychological support, and theological and ideological advice. Unlike the majority of programmes that make up part of the Prevent

strategy, both the French and British approaches are mandatory.

We need to consider the impact of these programmes and make use of the lessons learned. Because it is only by working together, pooling our experience, that we can win the fight for those who might otherwise be susceptible to the hateful propaganda espoused by the likes of Da'esh.

And I am sure that today will prove an excellent opportunity for you, the experts, to engage and have fruitful exchanges on what is a priority field of security for the EU.

Thank you.