

SRSG's speech at the EU organized Regional Conference on Preventing Violent Extremism in CA – Challenges and Responses at Community level, 10-11 November 2016, Bishkek

Excellences, dear participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today in Bishkek to participate in this regional Conference “Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Central Asia-Challenges and Responses at Community Level”. I would like to thank our colleagues and partners from the EUSR's Office for the invitation, and the Kyrgyz authorities for hosting this event.

Today's event is both relevant and timely. The spread of violent extremism is a threat to peace, stability, and development globally. Recent attacks across the world have demonstrated they can be carried out anywhere and take various forms. Violent extremists are posing a direct assault on the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They undermine our collective efforts to maintain peace and security, foster sustainable development, promote the respect for human rights and deliver much needed humanitarian aid.

Central Asia, as a region, and its individual states, are not spared by this growing phenomenon. Extremist organizations actively seek to recruit new followers using every arsenal in their power, including the internet and social media. In this regard, the presence of central Asian fighters in the ranks of terrorist and extremist movements in Afghanistan and the Middle East is also a source of concern.

In the past few years, UNRCCA, in cooperation with CTITF, and with the financial support of the EU, has worked with Central Asian partners to fight terrorism and extremism in the region, primarily through implementing the UN Global CT strategy. Within our ongoing regional initiative, a Joint Plan of Action for Central Asia under the Global strategy was adopted in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, back in 2011. Building upon this strong commitment by Central Asian states, UNRCCA and CTITF cooperate with countries in the region in building capacities to implement deliverables in Central Asia.

In the framework of the second phase of our regional project, we have conducted a number of events in the region, which allowed for the exchange of good practices and capacity building on the role of the media, the role of religious leaders, and the role that borders play in countering terrorism. All these activities had a significant impact, and, more recently, in March 2016, and at the request of Central Asian states, we organized in Almaty, Kazakhstan, a regional seminar on *“Recognizing and Responding to Radicalization that Can Lead to Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia”*.

On this occasion, our Central Asian partners, from both governments and civil society, underlined the need for more research and analysis to be carried out on the phenomenon, particularly regarding the drivers and triggers of violent extremism, which need to be better understood in the region. This being said, a certain correlation between economic vulnerability, exclusion, the lack of social justice, human rights violations, and violent extremist ideology was acknowledged by participants.

There was also a wide recognition that violent extremism is not something that should only be combatted, but it is also something that can and must be prevented, and Central Asian participants gave a number of examples of their respective preventive efforts. This focus on prevention is crucial, and I am glad that there is such a growing understanding in the region.

A variety of programmes put forward by Governments and non-governmental actors in Central Asia focus on countering radicalization and violent extremist messages online. Monitoring the internet for extremist ideology content and preventing online recruitment, especially of young central Asian individuals, was assessed as a top priority. In this context, there is also a growing understanding that a more effective response would require, beyond counter narrative messages, to propose alternative and more positive messaging. More generally, discussions also underlined the need for a balanced approach when preventing and countering the phenomenon, which does not impose limitations to the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms or restrict the democratic space.

During this event, we also noted an increasing number of partnerships between Governments and civil society organizations and public associations reaching out to communities to empower youth, women and religious leaders in preventing and countering the phenomenon. The UN encourages such initiatives, meant to raise awareness, sensitize, protect, and closely involve these groups and communities, using their potential as “agents of change”.

Today’s event is a unique opportunity to go farther and shed more light on the numerous community based initiatives that have been launched or implemented across the region, sometimes even across borders. There is very significant local knowledge, experiences and lessons learned out there that should be mainstreamed into preventive and countering efforts of Governments to defeat violent extremism.

This complementary bottom up approach is very much in line with the UN SG’s recently presented Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism which promotes a “whole society” approach to the phenomenon. An approach that encompasses not only essential security-based counter-terrorism measures, but systematic preventive steps to address the underlying conditions that drive individuals to radicalize and join violent extremist groups.

It is my belief that this preventive approach, which lies at the heart of UNRCCA’s mandate, is increasingly being shared and embraced by our Central Asian partners, as illustrated by recent discussions in Almaty, which we will prolong today.

This fight against extremism will require long term engagement and efforts from all, which the UN is determined to support. Today’s event in Bishkek, which I feel privileged to attend, represents a useful opportunity to come together and continue our close collaborative relationship in preventing violent extremism.

Thank you