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Engaging Culture and Media to Counter Hate Speech in Big European Cities

Executive summary

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The rise of hate speech is one of the most pressing social issues that world faces.¹ Its sharp increase in Europe has led to social division, xenophobic behaviour as well as an increase in violence and hatred towards minority groups.² The proliferation of hate is always damaging, but it has dire consequences in urban environments. Big cities have more segregated communities than small towns where close-knit neighbourhoods support a sense of common belonging.³ In Europe, with immigration pushing population growth in most cities,⁴ the rising level of hate speech has serious consequences for already isolated communities. While all forms of hatred and intolerance deserve attention, hate speech targeting religious communities is particularly prominent. Targeting people on the ground about who they are and what ethnic or religious group they belong to creates an

The European Policy Dialogue Forum brings together religious leaders, policy-makers and experts to discuss pertinent issues of social cohesion in Europe.

www.kaiciid.org
@europe@kaiciid.org

1 Bakowski, P. (2022). "Combating hate speech and hate crime in Europe". European Parliament Research Service. Full report at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733520/EPRS_ATAG\(2022\)733520_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733520/EPRS_ATAG(2022)733520_EN.pdf)

2 2016 Eurobarometer revealed three quarters of people surveyed have experienced abuse, hate speech or threats directed at people active on social media, being journalists, bloggers or ordinary citizens. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/image/document/2016-47/sp452-summary_en_19666.pdf

3 Neirotti, P., De Marco, A., Cagliano, A. C., & Mangano, G. (2014). Current trends in smart city initiatives: Some stylised facts. *Cities*, 38, 25–36.

4 Today, 56% of the world's population live in cities, a proportion that is expected to increase to 68% by 2050. Source: The World Bank's report on urban development available here: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/overview>

atmosphere of fear, stimulates hate crimes and fuels social exclusion. Researchers, policy-makers and civil society organizations have called for a systematic approach to countering hate speech, but integrating policies and action remains a challenge.

Raising awareness about the danger of derogatory talk and the need to counter hate speech asks for coordination of all social actors. Among them, the media and cultural sectors play an instrumental role in countering hate speech, providing alternative narratives and building a sense of common good. These institutions – newspapers, television, radio, online news outlets as well as film, theatre, art centres, libraries and music halls – are spaces where social narratives are created and shared.

This policy paper argues that the full involvement of cultural industries and the media is needed to promote an inclusive society. Using best practice case studies of fostering social inclusion in big European cities, the paper makes a case for developing values-driven narratives as a tool in countering hate speech. Media and cultural industries are two spheres of social action that enforce and reinforce value systems on which the well-being of society exists. As vehicles of public conversation, they have the potential to counter hatred and activate narratives of tolerance and understanding by:

- promoting values-driven narratives as the best strategy for countering negative narratives;
- recognising social interactions as a key element for building intercultural communities;
- approaching hate speech as a symptom and not only a cause of social problems.

Introduction

Countering hate speech is gaining momentum on a global scale. Restrictions on hate speech legislation have been expanded, the scope of groups that deserve protection has broadened and collaboration between regulatory bodies has provided a range of innovative ways to counter abusive behaviour. Still, breaking down hate speech remains a challenge. Addressing hate speech and its damaging consequences requires a shared understanding of its dangerous forms, the acknowledgment of the harm done to the individuals and groups targeted, and the active participation of social agents that lead the process of countering hate speech. This policy paper outlines the role of religious actors and media and cultural sectors in this process.

Hate speech is a multidimensional phenomenon. It can be rapidly and widely disseminated both online and offline with dangerous consequences for the individuals and groups that it targets. Hate speech is generally understood as an extreme form of offensive language targeting a group or an individual because of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation.⁵ The UN definition of hate speech specifies that these forms of communication can take place in speech, writing or behaviour, and “is often rooted in, and generates

⁵ Waltman, M. & Haas, J. (2011). *The communication of hate*. New York: Peter Lang.

intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive”⁶

KAICIID has argued that hate speech is both a symptom and a cause of wider social problems, and “while the EU, European governments and civil society organizations have significantly increased their efforts to combat hate speech and hate crimes ... more efforts are necessary to address these issues”⁷

Indeed, the Council of Europe’s recommendation on hate speech⁸ specifies that in assessing the severity of hate speech and determining which type of liability, if any, should be attributed to any specific expression, Member States should take into account several factors: the content of the expression; the political and social context at the time of the expression; the intent of the speaker; the speaker’s role and status in society; how the expression is disseminated or amplified; the capacity of the expression to lead to harmful consequences, including the imminence of such consequences; the nature and size of the audience; and the characteristics of the targeted group.

The Council of Europe’s Intercultural Cities (ICC) programme, which now involves 153 cities in Europe and other world regions, was among the first to recognize the importance of a collaborative approach to countering hate speech.⁹ Its Founding Director, Irena Guidikova, points out that the persistence of hate speech, especially online, is always a symptom of a wider social problem.



Hate speech is a symptom

Irena Guidikova, Council of Europe

Our understanding has always been that hate speech is a symptom. If you create the fundamental change, the fundamental conditions for every individual to prosper, then there’ll be less hate speech and it will be easier to counter it. And to drown it in positive voices. So that’s how we have always approached hate speech, not frontally, because frankly, it doesn’t work. You create more hate speech if you try to counter it directly.

6 United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action Against Hate Speech. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf>

7 Mieth, F. (2022). “Religious actors and countering hate speech in Europe”, KAICIID Europe Region Research Paper #2, available at <https://www.kaiciid.org/publications-resources/research-paper-religious-actors-and-countering-hate-speech-europe>

8 Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on combating hate speech (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 20 May 2022 at the 132nd Session of the Committee of Ministers). Available at: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a67955

9 Other programmes, such as [Eurocities](#), have been developed over the years but ICC was the first and most comprehensive one.

In order to prevent and counter hate speech it is important to understand its roots, forms and impact on society. The traditional approaches to inclusion policies are very much rights-based – economic, civic and cultural rights of immigrants for example. The ICC programme moved towards a wider concept of inclusion. Founded in 2008, it was a revolutionary attempt to change the concept of integration policies of migrants by focusing on social interaction and on building trust between people. It created a framework based on three courses of action that still resonate.

- Seek real **equality** by preventing discrimination and adapting the city’s governance, institutions and services to the needs of a diverse population.
- Regard **diversity** positively, as a resource, and understand that all cultures change as they encounter each other in the public arena, and build a shared vision and common values.
- Public policies that support **interaction** between diverse groups and promote greater mixing, active citizenship and participation.

At the core of these programmes stands a strong belief that difference matters and should be celebrated as a social good. The more voices that are heard, the stronger an individual and social capacity for protecting the rights and freedoms of all; and for all is, “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 2).

Big cities in Europe have learned that identifying social exclusion requires a systematic approach that has to be based on retaining a space for remembering the past while living in the present and planning for the future. Research has shown that cities have the potential to elevate the promotion of positive narratives among the people living in them, but also to be leaders of inclusivity at national and international levels.¹⁰ This power comes from the city’s authority to bring together public, private and voluntary sectors of social life to promote certain narratives over others – to convene and coordinate the work of city councils as well as non-governmental and civil society organizations, community centres, faith groups, media and cultural institutions.



Why big cities?

Irena Guidikova, Council of Europe

Big cities seem to be the best places to start because it is possible for people to co-create, blend, interact positively and be a part of any decision or any activity that’s taking place, from festivals to education and to the workplace. Bringing

10 Field, O. (2021). Migration and integration: which alternative narratives work and why. Intercultural Cities Unit, Council of Europe. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/policy-brief-migration-and-integration-which-narratives-work-and-why-o/1680a20cfc>

public officials and teachers, artists, journalists, doctors, academics and all kinds of professionals, to have their perspective on the diversity, climate and cultural potential of the city proved to be crucial for the success of intercultural cities.

We also wanted to see if they were willing to play an active role in constructing new narratives based on a collective understanding of diversity as an asset. Diversity is an advantage.

Religious leaders and faith groups have an important role in addressing the problem of hate speech. Dealing with issues that reflect differences requires a careful approach, so as not to turn them into divisive problems in society. In the case of the last waves of immigration in Europe, religion is often pushed aside because it is seen as something that could potentially stir tensions, and because it is so specific to each community, it makes it difficult to bridge. Yet many migrants are profoundly religious. Creating a narrative where religion is a powerful source of positive motivation has the potential to make a change. Rather than focusing on the difference in doctrine, positive social action requires focusing on common ground – what unites religious communities – rather than focusing on that which divides and pulls them apart. A study of alternative narratives on migration and integration,¹¹ commissioned by the Council of Europe, demonstrated that investing in projects that support interaction across cultural, religious and ethnic divides provides the best results. KAICIID's research on religious actors and countering hate speech in Europe¹² emphasises the role of religious actors and faith-based organizations in the fight against hate speech: “The experience of dealing with hate speech directly has given many religious actors an increased understanding and empathy, as well as the ability to access the causes of hate speech stemming from religious groups. This puts religious actors in a unique position to contribute to detecting, countering and preventing hate speech”.

Indeed, faith groups have contributed to public efforts aimed at countering hate speech. Events and activities that bring together religious leaders and artists, journalists and representatives of the humanist and philosophical worlds, demonstrate the potential of intercultural dialogue to counter the toxic mixture of hate speech and discriminatory practices that have grown exponentially across Europe.

Culture and media sectors significantly contribute to equality, diversity and interactions in big cities. Their capacity rests on the ability to draw on expertise, creativity, skills and talents in producing, reproducing, promoting and disseminating information and cultural goods necessary for the well-being of society.¹³ This policy brief provides examples of such practices. The most recent projects such as “What is app'ning in your city” developed

11 Ibid.

12 EPDF (2022). Religious Actors and Countering Hate Speech in Europe. EPDF Policy Brief #1. Available at: <https://www.kaiciid.org/publications-resources/research-paper-religious-actors-and-countering-hate-speech-europe>

13 More details in the 2021 ICC annual report available at: <https://rm.coe.int/icc-annual-report-2021/1680a55b42>

by the Portuguese Network of Intercultural Cities (RPCI), brings together media developers, civil society organizations and policymakers to support persons who have recently arrived in the country and to help them learn how to navigate the Portuguese system and services. The “Sustainable and inclusive tourism” project, run by Bilbao and Valencia (Spain) offers educational and community-led guided walks that contribute to the generation of new narratives for the targeted neighbourhoods, empowering local communities through co-creation and implementation, while dismantling negative perceptions and stereotypes about the territory and its residents.

This policy paper expands on the substantial body of work developed by KAICIID over the last seven years.¹⁴ Based on a series of original interviews with members of faith communities, policymakers, representatives of civil society organizations, journalists and documentarists¹⁵ and the recommendations from KAICIID’s European Policy Dialogue Forum (EPDF)¹⁶ pre-workshop on “Social Inclusion in Cities”, which took place on 7–8 June 2022 in Stockholm, it examines the potential of media and cultural industries in big European cities to counter hate speech.

Challenges

Experts consulted for this policy paper agree that the main challenges in countering hate speech come from the ambiguity of defining hate speech in a particular context and the tension between two equal rights – freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination. Each is fundamental for the enjoyment of other human rights. Efforts to make them complement each other instead of being at odds with each other face a number of challenges.

- The complexity of the new media landscape includes mainstream media, social media and a vast area of digital content (blogs and suspect websites) that take the format of news outlets but are spaces for promoting particular discriminatory agendas.
- The lack of intercultural competence that fuels preconceived ideas of what communities that are different from one’s own are like.
- The lack of trust and commonly shared values.
- The power of negative narratives over positive ones.
- The lack of multi-stakeholder initiatives.
- Cultural production based on stereotypes.
- The lack of knowledge about the fundamental rights framework and legislation.
- The lack of religious knowledge.

¹⁴ More details here: <https://www.kaiciid.org>

¹⁵ Interviews were conducted in June–August 2022, list of interviewees on page 16.

¹⁶ The pre-workshop of the 4th European Policy Dialogue Forum (EPDF) on “Social Inclusion in Cities” was held outside of Stockholm in Sweden on 7–8 June 2022.

While all these experts agree that encouraging intercultural and interreligious dialogue should involve civil society, faith groups, the media and culture to promote tolerance, trust and mutual understanding, as well as practical experience highlights several obstacles:

Crisis-driven communication: countering hate speech tends to be limited to crisis communication and thus does not tackle root issues. This prevents sustainable solutions to underlying issues and creates the possibility for hate speech to reoccur. The issue of countering hate speech usually arises when the problems hit a tipping point. This crisis-driven communication, like any social action, is reactive, focused on risks rather than solutions, and has the capability to respond to hate speech but is less likely to address the question of its roots.

Communication skills: poor communication often creates confusion and contributes to social tensions. A lack of communication skills prevents people from being motivated to learn from each other, to build trust and collaborate in responding to and countering hatred. Current political and social tensions, the economic crisis, populist narratives, the latest waves of migration and pandemics affect citizens' engagement.

Individuals and groups targeted by hate speech are, in the vast majority of cases, already marginalised, isolated and rarely heard. This has proved to be the main obstacle for many faith groups whose members perceive media engagement as an opportunity to discuss theological matters – preach – instead of addressing a social problem at hand.

The downside of social media platforms: the digital area has blurred the line between online and offline spaces, creating an environment where hate speech travels fast and with dangerous consequences. While the ability to connect and share provides a space for bringing people together, this is an unregulated space, often driven by algorithms that influence the structure of public discourse and people's opinions about political and social reality. This comes at a time of decreasing trust in media and institutions, and “at a time when social actors of many kinds pursue a deliberate strategy of disinformation for political or financial purposes, including through forms of computational propaganda”,¹⁷ scholars warn.

Projects have short time frames: countering hate speech is a long process that requires investment over time. When projects have short timelines they may have short-term effects that are less sustainable.



How long does it take to make a change?

Milica Pešić, Media Diversity Institute

There is no problem in getting people together to do better. We create projects, we work with journalists, artists, and young people, we produce media and cultural content and by doing so we make a change, relevant change. But how long does it last and how much social change we can expect if it lasts one year or two

17 Ekström, M., Lewis, S. C., & Westlund, O. (2020). Epistemologies of digital journalism and the study of misinformation. *New Media & Society*, 22(2), 205–212.

years which is a usual duration of a project? Our funding organizations create 10-year-long strategies to counter hate speech but they expect us to finish the work in a year or two. So, I would say funders are the obstacle and their expectations from civil society organizations.

Best practice

Countering hatred is a long process. Some of the following best practice examples in raising awareness, bringing religious actors together, creating media and cultural content that stands against hate speech, and taking social action against tensions, started more than 10 years ago. Some are short-lived but all of them build on the previous work of the organizations that lead them. This long-lasting experience creates an environment where knowledge-sharing is a precondition for social change. The best practices are based on collaborative work and the alignment of many actions, policies, activities and energies. They involve professionals working in the media and cultural sectors contributing to social change.

FIGHTING PREJUDICES

We start the overview of best practices by looking closely at one of the first European campaigns, the “Anti-rumour campaign”, designed in the city of **Barcelona** in 2010. It was one of the actions of the city’s Intercultural Plan, drafted through a participatory process that involved over 3,000 people. The Anti-rumour campaign started by identifying factors that prevented people of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds from interacting with each other. Its aim was to find a common ground as a foundation for dealing with discriminatory and racist attitudes. It has been both a public policy and a framework within which media and cultural industries played an instrumental role in the process of social change by changing perceptions, attitudes and behaviours among the general population and specific target groups. Rather than just identifying the rumours, the Anti-rumours campaign focused on what people thought of prejudices and how they were manifested.



Ideas that spark curiosity

Dani de Torres, an expert of the Council of Europe in the Intercultural Cities programme and director of the Spanish Network of Intercultural Cities (RECI)

From the very beginning, the Anti-rumour’s aim was to engage and empower a cross-section of society, to promote critical thinking, unleash creativity, raise awareness, and influence the public and policy agenda. One of the good things about the campaign is that it leaves a lot of flexibility to create a participatory process that includes not only NGOs but also motivated professionals, experts, citizens, people

from different religious groups, social classes, ages, origins, but also a social majority with a more ambivalent and ambiguous approach to diversity. We realized that the usual concepts of diversity and inclusion left that majority ambivalent, so we introduced the concept of rumour and sparked a lot of curiosity. Its campaign didn't start from zero, it was just a new concept used to unpack what was already there. It was a long-term process of fighting prejudices, trying to influence perceptions to bring a change by using the multidimensional approach and relying on all segments of society to get involved. We had everyone on board, the City Council promoting policies, artists creating work on the topic, citizens raising an anti-rumour flag and media reporting on the happening. The Anti-rumours campaign succeeded in bringing together all people committed to fighting hate speech.

Bringing people together, using critical thinking and creative potential to develop new narratives opens a space for finding allies both within institutions and civil society as a whole. Having a broad umbrella of social actors gives authority and legitimacy to the initiatives in terms of the political will to participate in social change.

GETTING MEDIA ATTENTION

The media, a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed and where access is supposed to be guaranteed to all citizens, plays an instrumental role in this process. People, issues and events – three domains most relevant for news media operation – co-exist in the public space but compete for media attention.

The Baha'i International Community's approach to working with media is illustrative. It starts with inquiries into the media structures of a particular country or region and identifying media practitioners who are genuinely interested in the promotion of the common good.



Talking to journalists

Saleem Vaillancourt, Baha'i International Community

We have been having ongoing series of conversations with groups of journalists. We really do try and, I think, open up the thinking of journalists about narratives and language because so many of the hate narratives that the media perpetuates are taken on almost unthinkingly because it's what's prevalent and most compelling or most likely to attract an audience regardless of the ideology any given news outlet has. We call to take a step back with media practitioners and start to interrogate some of that language. I remember a perfectly succinct comment by one of the participants of our workshop. To be a good journalist, you just have to be a good person.

When journalists cover breaking news stories such as terrorist attacks, there is not much space for journalists to find alternative narratives. The Faiths Forum for London, a non-governmental organization that brings together religious leaders and communities from nine faiths, decided to take a proactive approach. They created the “Turn to Love” campaign, that was launched on 22 March 2017 to mark the anniversary of terrorist attacks in **London, UK** and **Brussels, Belgium**. Run by volunteers, this campaign has promoted the idea of religious people of all faiths living peacefully together, to spread messages of unity and love to reach a wide, global audience.



Turn to love

Mustafa Field, Faiths Forum for London

Turn to love became a major campaign after a series of terrorist attacks. The Manchester Arena bombing was a turning point for us. People from faith communities come together to say no to violence and hate. We organized big demonstrations, holding up arms and saying we're choosing love. We were inexperienced but our message was strong and we were able to get the mass media's attention. It was important to get an opportunity to talk to the media because people started seeing their faith was misrepresented and people wanted to present it in a different way. We were very lucky to have people in our team who have a very wide network of contacts across the country. And so we were able to tap into that network. And I suddenly had a wave of media interest, but also we had very good contacts with the local community and the Manchester Arena bombing was really devastating. It killed children, it targeted innocent children so the sentiments across the Muslim community, as well as across all communities, were particularly strong.

THE POWER OF CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Getting visibility in the mainstream media is a prerequisite for the creation of much-needed counter-narratives in combatting hate speech. The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), a world-leading alliance of public service media, has made diversity, equity and inclusion its top priority to create a better working environment for journalists but also to help media reach, represent and resonate with all audiences. The “New Neighbours” project involved nine public service media broadcasters across Europe who produced documentaries to challenge stereotypes and expose commonly held myths, placing migrant voices at the heart of discussions on migration but also including locals who have had to accept new neighbours. One of these documentaries, *Hope House*, tells a story of the clash between the Baptist Church – which got permission to renovate an abandoned building in the suburb of **Zagreb, Croatia** and turn it into a place for refugees and an asylum protection centre – and the local community that protested against it.



Hope House

Daniela Drastata, Croatian Radiotelevision (HRT) senior editor and producer

Our ambition with the project New Neighbours was to extend the dialogue about refugees and their difficulties in encountering hostile environments by looking closer at the question of why local communities reject new neighbours. We wanted to show the complexity of the issues, to unpack the layers of suspicions, sometimes fear, and ignorance towards a group considered to be the “Other”, and to ask why is that? Is it ignorance, experiences or maybe something that they have read on social media? We wanted a format of a documentary where these two groups will have to come together, a new neighbour who is an immigrant and an old neighbour, a member of a local community. And we were looking at individual dramas around which these stories will be told. We went to the public forum, both sides were present, filmed their discussion and then conducted interviews with the protagonists, witnessing how the encounter has changed them. Public service broadcasting is often seen as a protector of ‘our values’ and we rely on that audience’s trust to start the conversation about universal values, not by telling stories that touch upon humanity as such.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING

Refugees face many prejudices and stereotyped attitudes in host societies. The issue of the status and socialisation of cultural and religious minorities in European countries has been on governments’ agendas across Europe. Two examples from **Stockholm, Sweden** illustrate ways of creating opportunities for interfaith connections. The Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities acknowledges the role faith communities play in terms of the enhancement of the fundamental values on which society rests. The agency provides also financial support for faith communities and more broadly contributes to the knowledge about religion. One of the funded projects is leadership training for women from different faith communities.

COLLABORATION AMONG RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Effective collaboration and cooperation among different religious communities at the city level proves to be effective in countering hate speech. Another example of promoting collaboration across religious and cultural boundaries is “God’s House” in Fisksätra, a suburb in Stockholm. Three denominations – the Muslims Association in Nacka, the Catholic Diocese of Stockholm and Nacka Parish (the Church of Sweden) – are working together to build a communal God’s House by joining a new mosque and a glazed atrium to the already existing Fisksätra Church.

AIMING FOR LONG-TERM CHANGE

The “Silence Hate”¹⁸ project aims to make a contribution to long-term change. In Florence, Italy, the project focuses on two public domains – media and education. It started at a time when hate speech was mainly associated with racism targeting migrants and refugees. The spreading of hate speech was accelerated through social media raising widespread interest in what people think about derogatory speech and building respect on the Internet. The partners organised a media camp for journalists, filmmakers and other artists to learn more about creating media content that serves as a counter-narrative.

The idea was to give people the time to work together. Five journalists from each of the six European countries participating – some of them migrants themselves – went to London for five days to brainstorm ideas and come up with proposals that would be developed as media production when they got back home. In the end, 16 media projects were created – short movies and podcast stories that were published both in the mainstream media at a national level and on social media platforms. The general goal of the project, preventing and combatting online hate speech against minorities and vulnerable groups, has been creatively transformed into developing new narratives about migrants, narratives that address the issue of stereotypes and prejudices. Each partner brought unique experiences, agreeing that the fight against discrimination had to start with public education and working with youth.



Silence Hate

Alessia Giannoni, Co-Operation for the Development of Emerging Countries (COSPE) – Together for Change

For the schools, it is important to rely on the existing relationships with teachers and people working in this sector. COSPE has run a lot of workshops in Italian schools and we are used to working with students. We invited a filmmaker and a photographer who used to work with young students and asked them to co-design workshops on the subject of stereotypes, with a lot of games and role plays that allow students to create something new that will change the stereotypes. Students felt their creative work has meaning and social resonance. We also created stories for social media platforms because everyone is talking about immigration, except the protagonists: migrants and refugees themselves. Most of the population would know what happens with migrants when they get to Europe, but [what] about before? Who could tell us if not them? For this reason, Sabika Shah Povia created a web series in the form of “Stories” for Instagram. The aim of the project was to fight hate speech against migrants arriving in Europe by giving them a voice and a medium to tell their own stories, as well as to deconstruct stereotypes against countries and populations people know very little about.

18 The project involved in Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom and was run across major cities in these countries.

VALUES-DRIVEN NARRATIVES, ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Post-conflict societies are particularly fragile when it comes to the continuation, or a resurgence, of hate speech. Small Steps, a non-governmental organization in **Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina** developed the project “Speech4Change” which included 24 initiatives in the main Bosnian cities involving young people in producing creative values-driven, counter-narratives in the form of theatre, podcasts and social media content.

The experience of working with young people demonstrated a significant shift in terms of overall digital literacy, but it also reflected the rise of social media platforms’ awareness that policies have to change to prevent the proliferation of hate speech online.



Messages of hope, not hate

Amra Pandžo, Small Steps

The most effective counter-narratives are positive narratives, messages of hope and not hate. The mission of Small Steps is to promote peace and non-violence based on the values ingrained into the historical ethnoreligious mix that can still be felt despite the segregation produced by ethnic cleansing during the war. We focus on the Internet and the strategies for creating an alternative public discourse that supports the harmonious functioning of society. What we have learned so far is providing facts to rebut lies is necessary, bringing ethics and universal human values into the media content is important, and that humour helps, but what always works and what stays in people’s minds are positive narratives of people we call Freedom People. Learning from people who use the language of respect, tolerance and understanding, who talk about the future more than about the past, and who are empathetic, supportive and optimistic, their messages bring hope.

Other civil society organizations share this view. Textgain, based in **Brussels, Belgium** and partners have developed the European Observatory of Online Hate,¹⁹ a multiplatform hate speech monitoring tool available in 24 languages.

Tracking Twitter’s responses to the UK’s treatment of asylum seekers from Rwanda, they found that Twitter users drew parallels and showed their opposition to the Government’s new scheme, with many using hateful rhetoric to do so. The Twitter rules specify that all people should participate in public conversation freely and safely but unless the tweets breach particular rules related to violence, abuse or terrorism, to name a few, harmful speech remains in the public domain. Still, there is a change on the horizon due to European

¹⁹ The European Observatory of Online Hate is a two-year project supported by the European Commission’s Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme. It is implemented by the Textgain in the lead, and in cooperation with Dare to be Grey, Hogeschool Utrecht and PCDS. See: <https://eoooh.eu>.

efforts to create a safer digital space where the fundamental rights of users are protected. Discussions about online services, hate speech and algorithmic systems that amplify the spread of disinformation led the European Commission to propose the Digital Services Act in 2022. Consultations over the Act have already made an impact.



Social media platforms and civil society: shift of dynamic

Lydia El-Khoury, Textgain

Working in the civil society sector for many years I have noticed the changes in the way social media platforms and the civil society sector relate to one another in particular in the domain of media. There will always be tension between the two because civil society frequently monitors and evaluates the impact of regulation and moderation on society and indeed the lack thereof. Personally, in the past, I observed a nervousness on the part of platforms toward civil society which I assume is connected to the possibility that media monitors may discover an illegal activity that platforms are not aware of. But with the DSA, I think the dynamic has shifted - a new urgency and imperative for meaningful collaboration have grown. Some platforms are more so than others, of course. I think the seriousness of potential consequences of breaches of the DSA is behind this. There are a lot of unknowns around the DSA's practical application but it is a positive step toward giving individuals the freedom to be on social media without fearing discrimination or abuse.

Conclusions

Expressions of hatred have severe consequences on civic life in big cities. Segregation levels might differ in the cities that hosted initiatives described in this policy paper, but the divisions are there and they go across religious, political and cultural differences. Our research has demonstrated that fighting social exclusion in big European cities requires a systematic approach and collaborative work that integrates policies and actions. The change comes from the alignment of many actions, policies, activities and energies that go in the same direction. In the end, hate speech is only a symptom of social problems. Without addressing the root causes of hate speech across sectors, it will be hard to expect social change. Identifying its roots starts with recognising and fighting prejudices and situating intolerance, hatred and discrimination within the social and cultural context.

Developing effective anti-hate initiatives requires highlighting what is destroyed by hate speech and basing them on values that envision more humane communities. Counter-narratives can be utilised to support and enable a response to hate speech by emphasising respect for difference and equality. Policies, actions and activities that mobilise, support and elevate counter-narratives and positive narratives of inclusion are rich material for media and cultural industries and can help in engaging these industries. The media and cultural

sectors are important players in social change and their engagement is for values-driven narratives to supersede narratives of hate.

Funding and education programmes remain fundamental building blocks to ensure sustainability. Countering hatred is a long process. Some of the projects we presented in this policy paper started more than ten years ago, and all of them have built on their organization's previous work. This experience demonstrates that knowledge sharing is a precondition for social change. Developing opportunities for creating and maintaining relationships between various social groups requires the support of media and cultural institutions. Analysis of the projects highlighted in this policy paper indicates that there is not one magic solution that can stop hate speech. Still, more could be done.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS



Treat hate speech as a symptom of a social problems. It is important to identify the sources of hate speech, the groups affected, and the connections between different types of hate speech. Social actors must publicly respond to, and address, social problems that have contributed to tensions between communities and to the rise of hate speech. City councils, local policymakers and political leaders have a particular responsibility to identify causes and enact solutions for social problems that enable hate speech to grow.



Invest in education and training. Education is the most powerful strategy to counter hate speech. There is a growing need for effective collaboration of governmental and non-governmental organizations, schools and universities, as well as media and cultural organizations for developing specific educational and training programmes on how to reduce hate speech and minimise its consequences. Such programmes need to be clearly designed. To be effective, the programmes need to outline who will receive the training, who will conduct the training, and make careful linkages to relevant issues such as human rights, migration, or asylum.



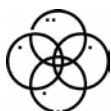
Develop a sense of ownership through partnerships in countering hate speech. By developing fair and equitable partnerships with clearly outlined responsibilities, public authorities would gain insight from the professional knowledge and the skills offered by those partners. Public authorities would be more effective in developing counter-narratives if their work was based not only on the participation of, but on partnership with civil society organizations, the media, and cultural industry professionals.



Improve funding systems to support initiatives countering hate speech. There is a need to develop stable and consistent support for initiatives aimed at countering hate speech. Government funders, especially local governments, should make a greater effort in ensuring the long-term funding – extending beyond the typical three-year project cycles – of

initiatives that reach out to different communities in big cities. Conversely, it is important for initiatives to be designed to be creative, effective, impactful, and sustainable, increasing the likelihood of government funders to continue supporting these initiatives in the long-term.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CULTURAL AND MEDIA INSTITUTIONS



Engage media and cultural industries in promoting social inclusion. Big European cities have the potential to strengthen the culture of tolerance and understanding by engaging media and cultural industries, including social media companies, in the promotion of social inclusion and encouraging them to more strictly enforce ethical codes of conduct. Media and cultural organizations should take a leading role in integrating ideas of inclusive society in the programmes they produce.



Develop creative, small, replicable initiatives to promote sociocultural diversity. Creative strategies, and small, replicable initiatives often have greater impact and garner more interest by funders for repeat successes. Additionally, the involvement of the media, including social media companies, and cultural industries is needed to highlight the value of difference as an element of creative strategies to promote sociocultural diversity. Media, social media, and cultural industries need to engage with all actors working on social inclusion and countering hate speech on smaller, yet replicable, initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS ACTORS



Take responsibility for developing commonly shared values. Many religious practices are based on promoting dignity, respect, peace, integrity, and equality as shared values. More has to be done to develop commonly shared values and take responsibility for their visibility in the wider social arena. Religious leaders must take responsibility for facilitating open and inclusive interfaith dialogue. They need to engage with the media, and through the media with the wider society on issues that have nothing to do with one's own religion. This can be done through the submission of publishable letters or opinion pieces. Such actions will help build stronger ties and trust between religious actors and the media, facilitate greater visibility of religious communities in society, and help to better work together on countering hate speech.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CSOS



Utilise existing legal instruments and connect with common issues to address hate speech. Understanding the connections and making the linkages connecting hate speech to common issues, such as refugees, migration, populism, city dynamics, and poverty helps guide the design of and facilitates more impactful and sustainable initiatives. CSOs need to develop and provide information to those working on countering hate speech initiatives on how to contextualise counter-hate speech action within existing legal

frameworks, including how to integrate dialogue as an effective tool in building empathy and trust into a hands-on community initiative on shared issues of concern.



Build bridges between actors. In addition to other CSOs that work on countering hate speech or with victims of hate speech, CSOs would benefit from connecting and build ties with, religious actors, grassroots actors, and local authorities. To ensure that needs are met in the design and implementation of initiatives, reach out to the beneficiaries, such as refugee and migrant-led associations or religious and minority communities. CSOs could also work towards reaching out actors spreading hate speech and trying to engage them in dialogue. To ensure that needs are met in the design and implementation of initiatives, reach out to the beneficiaries, such as refugee and migrant-led associations or religious and minority communities. CSO's also need to be proactive about involving media and cultural institutions, and engaging policymakers and other actors.



Create sustainable spaces for shared experiences. Sustainable, shared spaces should be used as opportunities for contact, dialogue, listening, learning, and the exchange of narratives and concerns. CSOs need to develop creative strategies for initiatives within such spaces to promote sociocultural diversity. In addition to involving beneficiaries in the process of developing the content of the shared spaces initiatives, the media, cultural institutions, policymakers and other actors need to invited to engage in such spaces and initiatives.

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LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Council of Europe, Intercultural Cities Programme – Irena Guidikova
Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities – Jana Jakob
Faiths Forum for London – Stewart Yarlett and Mustafa Field
Baha'i International Community – Sina Varaei, Rachel Bayani, Saleem Vaillancourt
Silence Hate COSPE – Alessia Giannoni
Antirumour campaign – Dani de Torres
Textgain – Lydia El-Khouri
New Neighbours – Daniela Drastrata
Small Steps – Amra Pandžo
Media Diversity Institute – Milica Pešić
The Church of Sweden (Lutheran) – Carl Dahlbäck



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Author: Verica Rupar
Design and Layout: Carlos Gaido

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