

Opening remarks

“Together against hate speech and hate crime”

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Good morning everybody.

Let me start by thanking the NGO Platform for Social Action, which is also the Programme Operator of the NGO Fund of the EEA and Norway Grants in Spain, for taking the lead in organising this conference. A particular thank you for bringing together so many people from different sectors of society, from Spain and from abroad – all important representatives to answer the key question - how can we deal more effectively together with the challenges of “hate speech” and “hate crime”. I hope we all will benefit from discussions today and leave this conference with some new ideas on how to step up our efforts.

Why do we need to maintain a strong focus on these issues?

All though democracy prevail and is strong in Europe – we cannot and should not think it is there once and for ever. We cannot take democracy for granted – it is a daily job to nurture and develop our democracies. In Norway as well as in Spain, and in Europe as a whole.

One phenomena which challenge democracy is the spreading of hatred against some “others” to achieve conflict and violent responses against certain individuals or groups. If not taken seriously, the failure to counter hate speech and the inability to effectively identify and prosecute hate crime will undermine our democracies.

(Hate speech covers all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify discrimination in all its forms, based on intolerance. Hate speech is an attack on our most fundamental values and human rights.)

Hate speech is nothing new. And the best way to counter hate speech is more speech, active public debate and confrontation of prejudices and intolerance. But, freedom of speech can also be abused. We all have a human right to be protected from violent threats and dehumanisation.

Social media has changed the way we communicate. It has also transformed how hate speech is communicated. Hate speech has become easier to spread than before.

We know there is a link between hate speech and hate crime. If we do not actively take a stand against hate speech, both online and offline, both openly and through the law, we open the doors for more hate crime in our societies.

The present economic crisis challenge social cohesion and solidarity in Europe. We have seen an increase of nationalism, populism and extremism in Europe, but not necessarily because of economic hardship, the link between crisis and extremism is not direct.

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The EEA and Norway grants decided in 2009 to put emphasis on hate – both speech and combating crime – through programmes we support in 16 countries. We also started working with other key institutions like the Council of Europe, ODIHR and FRA, the EU agency for fundamental rights and freedoms and the presidencies of the EU.

This event in Spain is part of a series of events that has taken place in Hungary, Norway, Poland, Lithuania, and Greece. It is also on the agenda today in Bucharest, Romania at a conference for civil society actors in Central-Europe is discussing the same.

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Some will say – hatred has always been present – this is nothing new. It is difficult to measure.

At the same time most of us feel there is this increased tendency to blame somebody else for all that is wrong – the migrants, the roma , the homosexuals, again the jews or the muslims.

On the positive side we have also seen successful campaigns against harassment in social media – an example is the campaign against Facebook on gender based hate – a beginning on the ongoing dialogue with key media like Facebook Google Twitter and others.

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Just a couple of references to recent surveys carried out by the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU illustrate what we are up against in our fight against hate speech:

- A quarter of respondents to a survey of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans-sexual (LGBT) people said that they have been attacked or threatened with violence because of their sexuality in the last five years
- About half of Roma surveyed said that they have experienced discrimination in the past 12 months because of their ethnic origin

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- 21 % of respondents to a survey on discrimination against Jews had personally experienced at least one incident of anti-Semitic verbal insult or harassment and/or physical attack in the past 12 months.

And in an online survey carried out by the Council of Europe in 2012, 78% of respondents declared that they had encountered hate speech online.

This is every day experience for our youth.

The European work on hate crime has identified key priorities;

- To know more, data collection, valid and comparable
- To make the victims visible – to identify the crime
- To look at legislation
- To discuss policies and practice and cooperation between key players
- The role of law enforcement
- The role of prosecutors and judges
- The importance of education and training
- The key role of prevention, awareness, and of civil society and youth

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We need to engage the next generation.

Recognising the need for a long-term focus on hate speech, the Council of Europe launched its youth campaign – called the No Hate Speech Movement – back in 2013, scheduled to finish next year. Thirty-six European countries are taking part. This is an important initiative, and the EEA and Norway Grants have therefore joined the campaign as a strategic partner to promote the campaign.

The focus of the campaign is to work with, to train and empower young people themselves, and to focus on what civil society can do.

- NGOs are close to the citizens, meaning that awareness-raising and other initiatives are more likely to have an impact at the grass-root level of society; and
- NGOs play a crucial role in supporting individuals and groups who have become victims of hate speech or hate crime

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A campaign is not enough obviously – both the Council of Europe and the European Union should be encouraged by member states to do more.

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Freedom of expression is fundamental in our societies. It includes the right to make statements that can offend, shock and disturb.

Suppressing one of our most fundamental freedoms is not the best way to respond to hate speech. On the contrary: the best way to counter hate speech is through *more* speech.

But freedom of speech does *not* include the right to harass, to threaten or incite hatred against others. Striking this *balance* between lawful and unlawful expressions is a difficult task. Therefore, we must continuously discuss where to draw the line.

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We need political leaders that lead by example and speak up against manifestations of intolerance. We need key actors, such as journalists, editors, social media providers, bloggers and civil society organisations, prosecutors, police, lawyers and governments to act –

But as Cecilia Malmström, the commissioner quoted here, said in Vilnius in 2013– it is about leadership.

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A Norwegian think-tank, the International Law and Policy Institute, was contracted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to sum up the outcome and recommendations from these conferences and to suggest how they can be carried forward in the future of our programmes.

I will not go into any detail about the recommendations here, but you can find a copy of the report here and take it with you to the working groups.

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I look forward to listen to all the interesting speakers of today and I hope by the end of the day I have - and you have -collected some new ideas we can take with us in this work.

Thank you for listening.