



Theme 3

Mobilisation of Parliaments against hate, for inclusive and non-racist societies

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the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*

*“The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time of monsters” -
Antonio Gramsci*

Introduction

1. Hatred, racism and rejection are monsters afflicting our societies, undermining social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. They run counter to the values of democracy, human rights protection and the rule of law on which the Council of Europe is founded.
2. Hate speech is present in all social strata, disseminated by the media, social networks and even politicians. Calls for rejection and isolationism are being heard in our member states, sometimes at the highest levels of responsibility. The migrant and refugee crisis which Europe has been experiencing for a number of years has further exacerbated manifestations of hatred, which in some cases have been reflected at the ballot box in very high scores for xenophobic and racist-oriented parties.
3. In Europe, migrants and Roma are among the principal scapegoats of this mounting hatred, racism and rejection. But we should remember that, as Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun said, **we are all foreigners to someone**. So the potential targets for hatred are countless: migrants, refugees, foreigners, nationals of the neighbouring country, Jews, Muslims, Roma, people of African descent, people with disabilities, homosexuals, the poor, the unemployed, politicians, and so forth. All forms of intolerance must be jointly addressed because they stem from the same mechanisms of fear, ignorance and rejection.
4. Sociological studies tend to show that our societies are less racist and intolerant today than they were in the aftermath of the Second World War. Nevertheless, prejudice and manifestations of hatred and rejection do exist, including in well-established, prosperous democracies. Although some European countries that have been hit by terrorist attacks in the last decade have not experienced a backlash of hatred and violence, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that the political and media response to attacks committed since 11 September 2001 has exacerbated stereotypes and hostility towards Muslims, whose religion has all too often been equated with terrorism. The annual report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance also identified as major trends in 2015 the development of a climate of islamophobia and hostility against migrants, homophobic and transphobic violence, and online hate speech.
5. This state of affairs forces us to act to prevent a repetition of the errors of the past. Such is the magnitude of the challenge facing us. But how is this to be achieved? This document offers some pointers.

Origins and manifestations of hatred

6. Ignorance and prejudice are often described as being the cause of the sense of fear which sometimes degenerates into hatred and violence. A survey conducted by the European Commission in June 2015 on perceptions of the different ethnic and religious groups in Europe shows that **Muslims and Roma are the two groups most affected by prejudice**¹. People belonging to these two groups are also frequently the victims of attacks and hate speech in our member states, and all too many incidents reported in the news bear witness to this on a daily basis.

7. Although school clearly has a role to play in combating hatred, racism and intolerance, it cannot be denied that the high standard of education in many of our member states does not protect them from manifestations of hatred and support for political parties founded on rejection of others. For example, according to OECD figures the Netherlands and Finland are among the top ten countries in the world for quality of education, but this does not stop xenophobic and racist-oriented parties from recording very high scores in elections there. So school cannot do everything by itself. The social environment, the family and the media are equally important when it comes to forming opinions.

8. The roots of racism and rejection run deep in our societies and may vary from one country to another depending on its culture and history. One constant, however, is the observation that, in times of crisis, tensions often crystallise around **minorities** (social, ethnic, etc.), which thus become **scapegoats for majorities who perceive themselves to be under threat**. It has also been observed that the environment in which a person moves is a decisive factor in his or her attitude towards others: “the same individual may simultaneously exhibit dispositions towards tolerance and intolerance; which of them prevails will depend on the environment, information received and recent events which have made an impression on him or her. In other words, the media, the authorities and politicians have a major responsibility. The language (focus) used in talking about immigrants and minorities and the speed with which action is taken to defend them and counter xenophobic remarks are essential in ensuring that people do not fall (back) into prejudice²”.

9. In a globalised and unpredictable world, many Europeans feel excluded and overtaken by developments outside their control. Unemployment, the lack of prospects for social advancement, the feeling of being downgraded and the impoverishment of the middle class fuel **resentment** towards minority groups seen as being responsible for this situation, whether real or perceived, but also **towards a political community judged incapable of providing credible responses** to the socio-economic, migratory and technological challenges with which our countries are faced. This is reflected at the ballot box in the abstention of those who no longer identify with the political choices available. In this case, discontent is expressed outside party political structures, for example on social media or through citizens’ movements. Those who continue to vote may express their discontent by voting “against the system” or voting for parties whose arguments are based on the presence in society of minority groups alleged to be the source of all ills and a threat to national unity. For example, the serious economic crisis experienced by Greece has been identified as one of the reasons for the upsurge in racism in that country and, in particular, the election results achieved by the neo-Nazi party “Golden Dawn”. Stigmatising minorities can also be a manoeuvre to avoid addressing social and economic challenges and difficulties facing a population.

10. The fears related to a precarious economic situation have been compounded by those stemming from the **terrorist attacks** of the last few years in some member, observer and partner for democracy states. These attacks entail a serious risk of fuelling hatred towards a group of people judged to be collectively responsible, and they are also a manifestation of hatred by their perpetrators towards the societies attacked. Terrorism is known to have numerous complex roots. Several factors have been identified in recent studies on the phenomenon of radicalisation³. They include feelings of injustice and exclusion, the discrepancy between the official rhetoric of inclusion and actual experience, and the dual standards applied by states in foreign policy and human rights protection. All this fuels the hate speech of those who seek to lead or encourage the commission of terrorist acts.

11. When terrorist attacks occur, the **political response** is also very important. It has already been stressed in the context of the Parliamentary Assembly that “in condemning terrorist acts in their immediate aftermath – as they must – politicians must however measure their words cautiously. They must take particular care to avoid making stigmatising generalisations that, deliberately or otherwise, portray whole groups of the population as responsible for the acts of individuals: they must remember that it is an individual choice to act.⁴” In the same way, care must be taken not to use criminal-law measures against terrorism in a

¹ European Commission, Eurobarometer on Discrimination 2015: 30% of those questioned said that they would be uncomfortable if their child had a relationship with a Muslim, and 34% if the person was a Rom.

² National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (France), *La lutte contre le racisme, l'antisémitisme et la xénophobie – année 2013*, La documentation française, 2014, p.163.

³ See inter alia the study by Ross Frenett and Tanya Silverman, cited in the report by Mr Dirk Van der Maelen, “Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq”, Doc. 13937 of 8 January 2016; or the study produced in 2014 for the European Parliament’s LIBE Committee, *Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU*.

⁴ Combating international terrorism while protecting Council of Europe standards and values, Opinion of the Committee

discriminatory and stigmatising manner, at the risk of further exacerbating social tensions, prejudice, resentment and hatred.

12. Lastly, mention should be made of **institutionalised hatred**. There are still inter-state conflicts in Europe. Some of these are open, while others are frozen or low-intensity conflicts. In the states concerned, hatred and hostility towards the “enemy” country and all its citizens are sometimes disseminated through official political discourse, the media and history teaching and drummed into the population. Whole generations grow up hating their neighbours, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence and war.

Prioritising the fight against hate speech

13. Against this background, the fight against hate speech must be a priority. History teaches us that **violence and barbarity have always started with hateful and dehumanising rhetoric and remarks** aimed at certain groups of people.

14. In its general policy recommendation on combating hate speech, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) defines it as follows: “the advocacy, promotion or incitement, in any form, of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well as any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat in respect of such a person or group of persons and the justification of all the preceding types of expression, on the ground of ‘race’⁵, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and other personal characteristics or status”⁶.

15. In its recommendation ECRI emphasises the “harmful effects suffered by those targeted by hate speech, the risk of alienation and radicalisation ensuing from its use and the damage to the cohesion of society from failing to tackle it”. ECRI also points to the **particularly important responsibility of politicians and religious and community leaders** because of their capacity to exercise influence over a wide audience. In many European countries, however, hate speech, rejection and stigmatisation are no longer the preserve of extreme and marginal political groups. Well-established political parties incorporate elements of this discourse into their own public discourse, thus blurring political dividing lines and creating a sense that such remarks are unexceptional and even relatively acceptable.

16. Hate speech on **social media** is a source of concern which has already prompted a considerable response on the part of the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly. The Internet and social media are all too often used as a forum for racist, antisemitic, sexist and homophobic remarks, and young people are particularly exposed to this. The anonymity enjoyed by users of social media and the lack of moderators on most of them help to amplify this phenomenon because users feel, rightly in many cases, that they can act with impunity. The Internet and social media were designed as **spaces of freedom and self-expression**, but they are **not outside the law**. Arguments based on freedom of expression must be refuted and it needs to be made clear that **racism is not an opinion**. The European Court of Human Rights has held in several judgments that the right to freedom of expression cannot be used for ends which are incompatible with the letter and spirit of the European Convention on Human Rights and which, if admitted, would contribute to the destruction of Convention rights and freedoms⁷. All member states should be guided by this principle in striking a balance between the protection of freedom of expression and the prohibition of hate speech.

17. On the other hand, freedom of expression can be a useful instrument for countering hate speech, by developing not only **counter-discourse** based on true and objective information but also **alternative discourses** that promote the values of equality, respect and pluralism. Once again, political leaders have a great responsibility in this regard, even if this may cost them votes. The political and official discourse relayed by the media shapes public opinion and thus has a significant impact on collective attitudes. Politicians have a duty to react to hate speech and degrading and stigmatising remarks and to combat disinformation and the manipulation of facts and images. The **No Hate Parliamentary Alliance** set up by the Parliamentary Assembly in January 2015 is fully relevant in this context because it brings together parliamentarians committed to the defence of human rights and prepared to take a public stand against manifestations of hatred in their respective countries.

on Equality and Non-Discrimination, Doc. 13966 of 27 January 2016.

⁵ Since all human beings belong to the same species, ECRI rejects theories based on the existence of different races. However, in this Recommendation ECRI uses this term “race” in order to ensure that those persons who are generally and erroneously perceived as belonging to another race are not excluded from the protection provided for by the Recommendation.

⁶ CRI(2016)15, ECRI General Policy Recommendation no. 15 on combating hate speech, adopted on 8 December 2015, published on 21 March 2016.

⁷ European Court of Human Rights, Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala v. France (dec.), Application No. 25239/13, 10 November 2015.

Building inclusive societies

18. The concept of inclusive society was defined in 1995 as meaning “a society for all in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play. Such an inclusive society must be based on respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice and the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, democratic participation and the rule of law⁸”. This is a major challenge for our societies which are increasingly diverse but at the same time are seeing a significant increase in hatred and intolerance between the groups of which they are composed.

19. Building inclusive societies requires a **strong, long-term commitment** on the part of the state. Indeed, as pointed out in the Council of Europe’s Action Plan on building inclusive societies (2016-2019), “integration does not happen by accident. Without smart policies to foster it and to promote mutual understanding and respect, parallel societies emerge: people living alongside one and other, rather than living together.”

20. These policies must give priority to guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities, ensuring equal access to education, combating social exclusion and insecurity and unemployment, and combating discrimination and all manifestations of hatred. They must also be supported at all levels of the state and be allocated sustainable budgetary resources commensurate with the goal of building inclusive societies.

Mobilising against hatred and for inclusive and non-racist societies

21. History is tragically rich in conflicts, wars and manifestations of hatred. It teaches us that no country is spared and that when certain conditions are met, the majority may turn against minorities. **Hatred and indifference to hatred weaken social bonds** and pose a grave danger to our democratic societies. **Resolute action** against hatred and its manifestations is therefore essential to break this vicious circle and preserve social cohesion.

22. To build inclusive societies, each member of society must be able to feel part of it and not be stigmatised or singled out for blame. Political leaders and decision-makers should therefore do everything possible to prevent manifestations of hatred and rejection from occurring, not only through legislation, public policies and foreign policy, but also through their personal attitudes. Several possibilities are open to them:

- Setting an example of tolerance and respect: refraining from making racist, hateful and abusive comments; publicly condemning such comments; introducing internal mechanisms for sanctioning such comments; effectively sanctioning such comments;
- Adopting the legislative framework needed to take effective action against manifestations of hatred, combined with effective dissuasive sanctions and based on data collection;
- Adopting, putting in place and allocating sufficient budgetary resources for public policies promoting social inclusion (education, minorities, employment, the media);
- Conducting campaigns to raise awareness about respect for pluralism and countering disinformation;
- Ensuring better representation of citizens (ethnic minorities, women, social classes, persons with disabilities) and promoting political renewal.

Discussion

23. In the light of the foregoing, several questions could be put up for discussion:

- What are the main challenges which your country must meet in order to achieve a fully inclusive and non-racist society?
- What good practices are adopted in your country with regard to inclusive policies?
- What good practices are adopted in your country to combat racism and hate speech?
- What initiatives have your parliaments taken in these areas, for instance at legislative level, or in the context of the internal functioning of parliament, or in the framework of research or awareness-raising activities?

⁸ Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development, March 1995, §66.