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No Hate Parliamentary Alliance
Alliance parlementaire contre la haine

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Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

No Hate Parliamentary Alliance

Conference “Online hate, conspiracy theories and declining confidence in the media”, in Berlin, Germany

Synopsis prepared by Ms Anita Fünffinger, Journalist and moderator of the conference

13 February 2017

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The No Hate Parliamentary Alliance of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe held a conference on the initiative of Gabriela Heinrich (Germany, SOC), in the German Parliament's Marie-Elisabeth-Lüders Building in Berlin on Monday 13 February 2017 from 10 am to 6 pm. The title of the conference was "Online hate, conspiracy theories and declining confidence in the media".

Participants and guests

Invitations had been issued to politicians from the Council of Europe member States, experts, activists, journalists and members of the National Campaign Committee of the German No Hate Speech Movement. There were between 70 and 80 participants in the conference room, plus a large audience in the gallery. The event was moderated by the German journalist, Anita Fünffinger.

Conference proceedings

The conference was opened by Frank Schwabe, deputy head of the German delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the **Council of Europe**. Mr Schwabe and the speakers who followed him, Milena Santerini, General Rapporteur on combating racism and intolerance and Co-ordinator of the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance, and Caren Marks, Parliamentary State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, mentioned the considerable importance and international nature of the subjects under discussion and the relevance of countermeasures.

Panel 1 was on "**Manifestations and causes of hate speech and conspiracy theories on the internet**". It began with two experts providing input on the subject. Dr Jasmin Siri (University of Bielefeld) outlined results in the field of sociology on the subject of filter bubbles and the public, while Professor Matthias Kohring (University of Mannheim) spoke about the results of social science research into trust in the media. Both experts agreed that phenomena like hate speech, outbursts of negative criticism ("shitstorms") and belief in conspiracy theories were nothing new and had only reached new dimensions because of the internet. Milena Santerini and Cécile Kyenge, a member of the European Parliament and Co-President of ARDI (European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup), referred to the European dimension and to recurring grounds for hate speech and belief in conspiracy theories. They outlined possible countermeasures by politicians and society. In the ensuing discussion, the meaning of certain concepts was clarified. For example, Anne Brasseur, member of the Luxembourg Parliament and Ambassador of the No Hate Speech Movement, read out the definition of hate speech published by the Council of Europe.

In their discussions over **lunch**, the participants also mainly focused on the conference themes. The time available was used for networking and informal exchanges of views.

Panel 2, entitled "The impact of online hate speech and conspiracy theories", was broadcast live by the German Parliament's audiovisual Service. The conference initiator, the German MP, Gabriela Heinrich (SPD), opened this part of the proceedings and called for internet companies to assume greater responsibility, pointing to the connections between fear, hatred, propaganda, freedom of expression, conspiracy theories and actual violence. The following contributors also emphasised these connections: Johannes Baldauf, from the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, mentioned the connections between racism, hatred, actual violence and initially invisible situations, for example the fact that groups affected by hate content withdrew from using the internet. The journalist and writer, Sascha Lobo, said hatred was also an outlet for helplessness and that conspiracy theories were a form of self-affirmation. He also called for "radical pluralism in discourse ethics" and "maximum transparency" in the media. As a European perspective, Gülsün Bilgehan, member of the Turkish Parliament and the **Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe**, stressed among other things the need to boost people's online media skills.

In Panel 3, measures to counter hatred and conspiracy theories were discussed. First of all, Gerd Billen, State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection, reported on the many different activities undertaken by his ministry to have criminal content taken down from the internet and on the interplay between the responsibilities of internet companies, the judicial authorities and the state. A concrete example of how action can be taken against fake news on the internet was provided by Karolin Schwarz, who has for some years been operating the website www.hoaxmap.org, on which hoax information about refugees and fake news about refugee crime are corrected. Debunking rumours, conspiracy theories and fake news was also the theme of the statement by Sebastian Hirsch from the consumer organisation, Stiftung *Warentest*. He and his team expose fake news on Facebook in order not to leave the field open to trolls and haters and to protect

casual readers from false information. Anne Brasseur, Ambassador of the No Hate Speech Movement, pointed to the importance of countermeasures to combat hatred, which, she said, was a danger for European democracies. Barbara John, German member of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, outlined many examples of best practices of how to counter hatred and fake news in Europe. The main conclusion of the final discussion of the conference was that abuses vary considerably and therefore have to be met with a variety of countermeasures, ranging from counter-speech to legislation.

Many participants met after the conference for **discussions over dinner** and took this opportunity to say that the event had been a great success and had provided valuable insights.

Appendix I: Programme

9.30am Arrival of the participants

Conference opening: addresses (10:00-10:20)

02 mins: Conference moderator: **Ms Anita Fünffinger**, Journalist

02 mins: Welcome speech by **Mr Frank Schwabe**, member of the German Parliament, Vice-chairperson of the national delegation of Germany of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

05 mins: Welcome speech by **Ms Milena Santerini**, member of the Italian Parliament, General Rapporteur on combating Racism and intolerance and Co-ordinator of the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance

10 mins: Welcome speech by **Ms Caren Marks**, member of the German Parliament, Parliamentary State Secretary at the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ)

Panel 1: (10:20 – 12:00)

Manifestations and causes of hate speech and conspiracy theories on the internet

Contents: How does hate manifest itself, who are the victims or groups of victims? How do hate and its manifestations develop? What link exists between hate speech and belief in conspiracy theories? Why do internet users believe in conspiracies? – How and why do conspiracy theories spread? – Does controlled propaganda (domestic or foreign) play a role or do hate and conspiracy theories spread in an uncontrolled manner?

15 mins: **Expert statement:** Sociological causes of online hate speech and conspiracy theories, **Dr. Jasmin Siri** (IKG Bielefeld)

15 mins: **Expert statement:** Trust in the media, loss of trust, reasons for loss of trust, public perception of journalism and the media, **Professor Matthias Kohring** (Mannheim University)

20 mins: **Statements:** Hate speech and conspiracy theories: the situation in Europe, **Ms Milena Santerini**, member of the Italian Parliament, Coordinator of the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance;
Ms Cécile Kyenge, member of the European Parliament, Co-president of [ARDI](#) (European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup)

50 mins: Discussion

Lunch break (12:00 – 13:30)

Panel 2: (13:30 – 15:30)

The impact of online hate speech and conspiracy theories

Contents: Does online hate speech pave the way to group-focused enmity and real violence? What dangers do conspiracy theories pose? – Does hate directed at journalists pose a threat to press freedom? – Is there a crisis of trust in the leading media? If so, what form does this crisis take and what scope does it have?

05 mins: **Welcome speech** by the initiator of the conference, **Ms Gabriela Heinrich**, member of

the German Parliament, member of the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance

- 15 mins: **Practice-oriented briefing** by blogger and online journalist, **Mr Sascha Lobo**
- 15 mins: **Expert statement:** what is the impact of online hate?
Mr Johannes Baldauf (Amadeu Antonio Foundation)
- 15 mins: **Expert statement:** what is the impact of conspiracy theories? **Mr Bernd Harder** (expert for conspiracy theories at the Society for the scientific investigation of parasciences - sceptics' society, GWUP)
- 15 mins: **Statement:** A parallel with other European countries, **Ms Gülsün Bilgehan**, member of the Turkish Parliament, member of the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance
- 45 mins: Discussion

Family Photo

Coffee break (15:30 – 16:00)

Panel 3: (16:00 – 18:00)

Countermeasures

Contents: Are countermeasures needed; if so, why? – What countermeasures and what examples of best practice exist? – Do the leading media need to adapt? If so, what do they need to adapt to? – Do countermeasures need to be managed? If so, who should manage them and how? – How promising are the countermeasures? – What action do policymakers need to take?

- 10 mins: **Welcome speech** by **Mr Gerd Billen**, State Secretary at the Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection (BMJV)
- 15 mins: **Expert statement:** presentation of hoaxmap.org, **Ms Karolin Schwarz** (www.foamap.org),
- 15 mins: **Expert statement:** Debunking, **Mr Sebastian Hirsch** (German Consumer Foundation "Stiftung Warentest")
- 20 mins: **Statements:** Best practices at European level,
Ms Anne Brasseur, member of the Luxembourg Parliament, Ambassador of the No Hate Speech Movement, member of the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance;
Ms Barbara John, member of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance in respect of Germany
- 60 mins: Discussion

Dinner (19:00 – 21:00)