HATE SPEECH: UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENON FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

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Although hate speech is not a new phenomenon, new forms of this societal problem have proliferated, and with them, new threats not always easy to identify and address. In the current crises of Covid-19 pandemic which has intensely impacted the socio-political and economic context across the world, 'the fear from the Other' will be yet again part of the public discourse, following the trend of post-2008 Financial Crisis. In this sense, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) affirms that hate speech is increasing year after year since 2017, but still there is a lack of reporting on the issue.

But what does exactly hate speech mean? How can we identify and take action against it? With the objective of bringing some clarity to this problem, the EPIC project – European Platform of Integrating Cities – hosted its first of a series of webinar on migration narratives last Tuesday 28th of April. Moderated by **Ron Salaj**, a total of 70 participants benefited from the insights and lessons learnt of **Menno Ettema**, staff at the Council of Europe - Anti-Discrimination Department, and **Dariusz Grzemny**, Youth Worker and Human Rights Educator actively involved in many initiatives against hate speech with youth in Poland.

A comprehensive approach for a complex issue: from the perspective of the victim to a multi-stakeholder inclusive involvement

The first obstacle we face when trying to address this problem is to have a clear understating of what we are looking for. While hate speech is difficult to define in a clear and short way, Ettema presented a very comprehensive definition elaborated by ECRI

What's hate speech?

> *"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, stigmatisation 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", colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and other personal characteristics or status".*

ECRI's General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating Hate Speech

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This definition includes not only attacks in different forms (insult, aggression, denigration, harassment, etc.) and for different reasons (race, colour, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), but also the justification of such attacks that goes against the victims' memorial reparation, such as war crime propaganda or the justification of a genocide. The starting point must therefore, be the perspective of the person or groups targeted, to continue with the whole environment, actors and context surrounding it. The one cannot go without the other to understand and approach it effectively.

Another conflict that often arises is where to find the balance between the protection of human rights and freedom of expression. While freedom of expression is also a fundamental right, it is not an absolute one. It must always be put into context.

Ettema summarised to the audience the different legislations we could look at, with particular attention to the considerations regarding permissible and impermissible speech done by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)

- the political and social context at the time the speech was made,
- the purpose of the speaker,
- his or her role and status in society,
- the content of the speech,
- the form of its dissemination and
- the nature of the audience

The national context is key to understanding if somebody is 'crossing the red line' from freedom of expression to hate speech. The role of the person sending the message, the purpose of saying it, to whom the message is addressed, in which context and within which community define the sometimes blurred margins.

Limit competition, together we are more!

Not that we have a better picture on how to recognise hate speech, how can we tackle it in practice? Both experts Menno Ettema and Dariusz Grzemny acknowledged the necessity of involving all actors to make the society resilience and push back against hate speech.

People confronted with this problem are sometimes reluctant to report hate speech and discrimination not only because of fear but also because they lack full understanding of their rights. They do not know where to go and where to get support, which can become highly demotivating and thus result in dropping out the attend of reporting it or getting support. In this context, Grzemny explained how young people nowadays experience different forms of hate speech, not only online but also offline, happening most of the time in schools. This transforms the problem into a common and widely accepted phenomenon among this group of the population. It normalises hate speech among youngsters who are increasingly witnessing it in their daily life. 'At some point, either they do not care about it anymore or are not able to recognize it and therefore, ignore the problem as such, as if it were something normal' said Grzemny.

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While all the panellists highlighted there is no magic formula to solve the problem at once, an action plan involving a comprehensive multi-stakeholder approach can have a big impact in tackling this issue. Recommendations coming from their research and experience in implementing anti hate speech projects are:

Raising awareness of the dangerous consequences of hate speech, improving education and media literacy. Perpetrators of any age need to be aware of the negative consequences they will face and the harm caused to the victim(s).
Vulnerable groups need to receive information about their rights and how to access and activate the mechanism to benefit from such rights in a language and format they can understand and access (i.e. some groups might not have an internet connection). This will empower them to be an active part of the society and take actions.
Defining a clear procedure under a single contact point. Navigating a difficult bureaucratic system, and going from one place to another reliving again a traumatic situation can demotivate the victim to report it. Encouraging speedy reactions by public figures against use of hate speech. Public figures such as a major or well-known and admire role models such as athletes or artists will send a more powerful message.
Establish different mechanisms to punish attacks. Criminal actions are not the most effective measures in all the cases, other consequences can be the withdraw of financial and other support from political parties that actively use hate speech, or the obligation to participate in mediation programs to develop a better sense of solidarity and empathy with other groups.
Promote use of self-regulation by public and private institutions and criminalising its most extreme manifestations, while respecting freedom of expression, are among the recommendations contained in the GPR.
Recognition of the fundamental importance of freedom of expression, tolerance and respect for equal dignity. Make clear both sides must be respected but that there is a 'red line' which must not be crossed. Identification of the conditions conducive to the use of hate speech and taking appropriate measures to remove them. Intercultural activities such as social meetings, sport encounters, camps or artistic performances, as well as communication campaigns to the general public can help to remove wrong misconceptions and stereotypes that trigger hate speech attacks against some communities.
Collecting data in a comprehensive way, gathering information and figures from the different actors playing a role under a single unit. Lack of data is a very common problem when it comes to hate speech analysis. Data collection and analysis will help to elaborate new policies that responds to the reality of that problem in each local area.
Involving a wide range of private, public and non-governmental actors and train them. All actors involved need to understand how to listen, how to react to unexpected and difficult situations, very often involving a lot of emotions. Media experts, police officers, teachers, public servants, practitioners, etc. All of them need to be trained in the matter, but not only. Citizens at all can be trained. Young people can become mediators as well and conducting peer-to-peer interventions for both victims and perpetrators that can release the tension of speaking with an adult.

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We can conclude that part of the success lies in the fact of developing a holistic human-rights based and inclusive plan, where all actors have clear interventions and receive first support to carry out their part. Although such plan need to be tailor to each reality, Grzemny outlined how we can involve different actors in the community in preventing and acting against hate speech:

NGOs	Local authorities	Schools	Media	Young people	Others
•Research and data collection on the ground •Community mobilisation •Organising activities •Advocacy actor •Campaigning •Providing suport	•Validation and recognition •Advocacy actor •Enabling and facilitating •Listen to the victims •Policy development and implementation •Financial support	•Education •Campaigning •Mobilising young people •Recognising the problem and reacting againts it	•Campaining •Awareness raising •Learning how to counterbalance it •Reacting publicly	•Education •Campaigning, especially at school •Mobilising other young people •Recognising and reacting •Advocacy actor	•Police •Educational institutions •Neighbours •Local institutions •All of them can help to prevent and identify cases, raise awareness and campaign againts it

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Materials from the CoE campaigns against hate speech presented by Menno Ettema during the EPIC webinar

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