



European  
Policy  
DIALOGUE  
FORUM



INPUT PAPER #1  
PUBLISHED IN OCTOBER 2023

## Words that Heal: The Role of Young People in Addressing Hate Speech

This EPDF input paper was developed for the 5th European Policy Dialogue Forum in Rotterdam, Netherlands, on 13-15 November 2023, organised by the International Dialogue Centre – KAICIID, the Network for Dialogue and the European Council of Religious Leaders/ Religions for Peace Europe (ECRL/RfP Europe), and supported by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

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

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**Nelson Mandela**

*No one is born hating another person (...)  
People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate,  
they can be taught to love, for love comes more  
naturally to the human heart than its opposite.*

### Executive summary

In the 'post-truth era',<sup>1</sup> polarised opinions and knowledge fragmentation make it particularly difficult to get oriented and make sense of the world, especially for young people.<sup>2</sup> Although more information than ever before is available at one's fingertips, it has become easier to ignore, discount or discredit evidence-based facts. Biased narratives and hateful expressions, exacerbated by echo chambers and artificial intelligence tools, exponentially raise the risk that social media users, including young people, shape and spread discriminatory contents or are victims of hateful messages. Long-lasting psychological and – at times – physical damage are the consequences that they are increasingly experiencing. Religious and ethnic affiliations are often the triggers of such derogatory language, further inflamed by experiences of social exclusion and boosted by the vicious spirals of algorithms.

As digital natives, young people are the most suited to be involved in initiatives that prevent and counteract hate speech. Partnerships between secular and religious actors hold the promise to embolden and amplify young people's efforts in addressing discriminatory narratives. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue approaches substantially contribute to impactful on- and offline undertakings. Nurturing critical thinking and unpacking prejudices and stereotypes are necessary to challenge the grounds for hate speech to flourish. Based on experiences across Europe, this input paper serves as a source for reflection on how to build systematic alliances between secular and religious actors to support a conducive environment where young people can step up their role as active community members that promote mutual understanding and appreciation over mistrust and hatred.

## Introduction

This paper is drafted on the 25th anniversary of the first publication of the *Le racisme expliqué à ma fille* (Racism Explained to My Daughter). In a recent interview Tahar Ben Jelloun, author of the book, highlighted the importance of preparing the young generation to face standing challenges related to peaceful coexistence of different religious, ethnic, cultural groups. Tahar noted that although nowadays we talk about racism more, the problem has not diminished, but: “It’s always there”. What has changed significantly since the publication of the book are the places where discrimination occurs: not only in places of socialisation such as school, work, community but increasingly online.

Often lost in a fast-evolving world, young people can find a suitable compass in religious and secular institutions, which, in turn, can galvanise young people’s efforts in promoting shared values of equality, human dignity and respect for diversity, on- and offline. The ‘No hate speech’ movement and similar initiatives promoted by youth in urban areas prove that European cities are ideal places to offer a safe and dynamic space to mobilise young people to respond to the ever-evolving threats of hate speech.

## Why facts do not matter



### Defining hate speech:

*In the absence of a universal definition of hate speech under international human rights law, the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech provides a unified framework for the United Nations to address the issue globally. The strategy defines hate speech as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.” The concept is still under discussion, especially in relation to freedom of opinion and expression, non-discrimination and equality.<sup>3</sup>*

According to neuroscience, adolescence – between 12 and 24 years of age - is a crucial time of life for the formation of an adult capable of feelings of empathy, compassion and understanding towards the others. Studies suggest that exposing young people to harassment and violence, on- and offline, can disrupt the neurocognitive processes responsible for understanding others’ pain, possibly leading to a relentless cycle of animosity, distress and suffering.<sup>4</sup> Inflammatory remarks and violent behaviour – often triggered by ethnic and religious affiliations – disproportionately affect young people. This can deeply damage the individual’s and community’s wellbeing, as well as potentially inflict lasting psychological harm.<sup>5</sup>

Both individual and contextual factors are drivers of discriminatory messages and hate speech. Culture, education, family, media, peers, politics and religion, all contribute to shaping our overall perception of what happens around us and the meaning we ascribe to those experiences.<sup>6</sup> When such experiences are scarce, generalisations tend to arise from isolated events or other beliefs. This provides fertile ground for ‘**cognitive dissonance**’, the level of discomfort that occurs when existing worldviews get contradicted by new information. To relieve this discomfort, the mind resorts to several defensive mechanisms — either rejecting the new information or finding a way to reconcile it by modifying it substantially or persuading itself that no conflict really exists.<sup>7</sup> These unconscious mechanisms forge negative biases, prejudices and stereotypes that can poison our understanding of the others.

Data confirms that negative stereotyping of Jews – deeply rooted in Europe – has been exacerbated by the recent economic recession, fuelling hate speech against them. Similarly, members of Muslim communities are increasingly targets of discriminatory and derogatory messages throughout Europe, often as a result of negative stereotyping connected with extremism. Muslim women tend to suffer from a double prejudice and hateful language as both women and Muslims.



Coordinated by A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe (CEJI), the **Facing Facts Network** works across communities and institutions to transform understandings of and responses to hate crime and hate speech in Europe for the benefit of victims, communities and European societies. The network delivers training courses through its eLearning platform, provides research activities and advocates for increased victim support, protection and justice. <https://www.facingfacts.eu/>

Dr. Lenka Dražanová, an expert in migration narratives at the European University Institute, points to cognitive dissonance to explain the inclination of people to seek information on media, which adheres to the person's pre-existing views, and the simultaneous side-lining of conflicting information. This process, known as 'confirmation bias', is a major factor behind the increase of so-called 'alternative facts', which feed prejudices and stereotypes and contributes to the success of conspiracy theories. Harmful examples, such as the 'replacement theory',<sup>8</sup> provide fertile ground for hate speech against migrants and refugees.



The **Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration** at the European University Institute is considered a promising practice in the field of collection and elaboration of data related to public attitudes to migration, which are critical to counter negative narratives, hateful expressions, discrimination and violent behaviour against migrants and refugees: <https://www.eui.eu/research-hub?id=opam-observatory-of-public-attitudes-to-migration>

## Pixel and Hatred

Although scapegoating individuals or groups is as old as mankind, digital technologies have dramatically increased its spread. Young people are particularly at risk of being involved in vicious online dynamics both as victims and as perpetrators of abusive language. Intending to gain followers, 'influencers', but also anyone active online, can affect people's lives in unexpected ways with a single post that is not fact-checked. Digital, fast and apparently spontaneous, social media accelerates the spread of people's emotional expressions of aggression, contempt and primordial fears.

This environment fosters 'emotional reasoning', whereby users of social media tend to conclude that their emotional reaction proves that something is true, despite contrary empirical evidence. Algorithms assure that virtual communities of like-minded people are formed. These so-called 'echo-chambers'<sup>9</sup> reinforce partial views and reduce the opportunities for open debates and the assessment of alternative opinions. At the same time, trolls<sup>10</sup> and artificial intelligence tools such as chatbots<sup>11</sup> cause the viral spreading of unfounded opinions and hate speech. In this climate, information is no longer a tool to understand the world but the self-expression of the ego, further confirmed through comments, likes and shares. This process leads to a self-perpetuating loop of preconditions and prejudices, resulting in an ever-increasing polarisation of opinions.



**European Union:** The 2022 evaluation by the European Commission on the "Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online"<sup>12</sup> showcases the general tendencies of groups being targeted in Europe: anti-gypsyism (16.8%), xenophobia [including anti-migrant hatred] (16.3%) and sexual orientation (15.5%) are the most reported types of hate speech. Antisemitism (9.9%) and anti-Muslim hatred (8.7%) also feature prominently on the list.

The ripple effects of hate speech threaten the fabric of the European societies, as online hateful narratives often migrate to the physical world and vice versa. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has explicitly highlighted "the dangerous link between hate speech and violence".<sup>13</sup> Political, religious

and other public figures are neither neutral nor immune from influencing the shaping of polarised opinions. Especially worrying are those cases when politicians misuse religious scripture to validate their political and social agendas. In such cases, the silence of the religious leadership can be perceived as an endorsement of derogatory messages and behaviour and a lack of solidarity. However, when religious leadership speaks out in response, it can have a powerful countering effect, due to the influence on its communities and the symbolic nature of its engagement.



**Bálint Josa**

Director of UNITED for Intercultural Action on Solidarity

*“(A political party in Germany) expressed significant concerns about migration. [As a response] The Bavarian religious party, along with the Catholic Church and other denominations, stressed the principle of not separating religion from solidarity. Their message is that without solidarity for all humanity, considering that every individual is created in the image of God, we should not distinguish refugees from ourselves just because we were fortunate to be born in Germany. This notion underscores a fundamental truth: every refugee is a fellow human being.”*



**The Muslim Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC) Statement on Quran Burnings in Sweden.** *The MJLC comprises an equal number of Muslim and Jewish members, who have extensive personal achievements in promoting social cohesion, and intercultural and interreligious dialogue with significant impact on their community. The MJLC condemned in the strongest possible terms the burning of a copy of the Quran during Eid al-Adha outside of Stockholm’s central Mosque.*

<https://mjlc-europe.org/Article/mjlc-statement-on-quran-burnings-in-sweden>

Neringa Jučiukonytė, Founder and CEO at “Media for Change”, points out that journalists are neither free from political pressure nor from their own inherent biases. Discussing stereotypes about migrants and refugees, she remarked that biased narratives about refugees and migrants are often formed based on media-induced opinions. To address this negative stereotyping, “Media for Change” launched the “Social Distancing Survey”, which aims to gauge public sentiment.<sup>14</sup> This initiative detects shifts in societal perspectives in line with media portrayals and evaluates articles based on ethical standards set for journalists.



The **Charter of Rome** is a **code of conduct for journalists** elaborated by the National Council of the Journalists’ Association and the Italian National Press Federation on the use of appropriate language when providing information regarding asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking and migrants. Guidelines have been developed for the application of the Charter <https://www.cartadiroma.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Guidelines-English.pdf>

In such a divisive environment, it is increasingly difficult for young people to find direction and effectively channel their efforts. Religious leaders and actors can play an important role offering guiding values and spaces for dialogue with a view to foster mutual understanding and boost young people’s efforts to prevent and counteract hate speech.



**Aisté Šlajūtė, International project manager at Varėna Cultural Center & Former Coordinator of No Hate Speech Movement Ireland**, points to a unifying sentiment across religions, noting: *“In an in-depth examination of faiths like Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism, one identifies an intrinsic emphasis on non-violence. This central ethos champions treating others with kindness, promoting mutual aid, and embracing shared well-being.”* From Buddhist principles of ‘Metta’ (loving-kindness) and ‘Karuna’ (compassion) to the Christian edict of ‘Love thy neighbour’, the core message of all faiths is harmonious coexistence.

## Fostering a Conducive Environment for Youth to Address Hate Speech

The unpredictable impact of the Internet on information and the need to hinder the damaging impact of hate speech on individuals and societies pose the dilemma of how to balance freedom of expression – essential to well-functioning societies – with the need to prevent misinformation, discrimination and hate speech. Promoting policies and operational approaches to prevent and counter hate speech cuts across many areas of policymaking, including the criminal prosecution of hate speech perpetrators, assistance for victims, preserving freedom of expression while addressing the responsibilities of media professionals and tech companies, Internet governance and the wide spectrum of antiracism and anti-discrimination policies.

A whole-of-society approach is therefore best suited to address hate speech in a holistic manner, calling for broad-based alliances to foster an environment that's conducive to mutual appreciation over hatred. Cities have the ability to offer spaces for such cooperative endeavours, setting examples of 'unity in diversity'. In this context, although some religious leaders have been responsible for promulgating divisive sentiments, many others have also been effectively referencing theological teachings from scriptures and traditions that promote reconciliatory messages and exude sentiments of inclusion and peaceful coexistence.<sup>15</sup>



*The KAICIID-supported European Policy Dialogue Forum (EPDF) and the Network for Dialogue (N4D) have produced a number of resources on the role of religious leaders and actors in countering hate speech, such as: EPDF Policy Brief #1 and the Research paper: Religious Actors and Countering Hate Speech in Europe; The EPDF Research Paper: Using Education to Counter Anti-Refugee and Migrant Hate Speech in Europe; Network for Dialogue Policy Brief #3: Reshaping narratives on migration through intercultural and interreligious dialogue. <https://www.kaiciid.org/resources/publications?page=0> ; <https://network4dialogue.eu/resources/>*

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue are key tools that can help individuals change their own perspectives and instil feelings of empathy for 'the Other', tackling one of the root causes of hate speech. Yet, the complexity of the media, psychological and societal influences that contribute to hate speech suggest the need to develop multi-layered strategies. As digital natives, young people are particularly well placed to act as catalysts of initiatives online and support those community members that are less familiar with the inherent dangers of social media. **Promoting youth's digital literacy** can help them suitably navigate an ever-complex online environment, especially with the emergence of Chat GPT and the slew of Artificial Intelligence (AI) content creation software. Digital upskilling equips young people with the necessary knowledge to utilise AI tools for beneficial purposes, such as increasing social media users' resilience to misinformation and derogatory language online by providing the digital means to check sources of images, texts and videos.



*In the framework of the **CORE and Co-Inform projects** funded by the European Commission, digital tools such as a browser plugin, a fact-checking dashboard and a Twitter channel have been developed to stimulate critical thinking and draw attention to misinforming content without censoring the Internet. These tools offer possibilities for debunking misinformation while highlighting the fact that information might come from a source that already has a reputation for spreading misinformation. The aim of these tools is to break the cycle of intuitive reaction based on personal perceptions or emotional feedback. <https://coinform.eu/>*

Dr. Dražanová emphasises the need to act on two interconnected aspects: **nurturing critical thinking** to unpack negative narratives and **promoting young people's media literacy skills** to craft alternative narratives and more inclusive stories. While traditional approaches such as 'myth-busting' are unlikely sufficient, this '**pre-bunking**' approach has the potential for greater impact, particularly when partnered with tech companies.



The **Pre-bunking Anti-Refugee Rhetoric in Central & Eastern Europe** project by **Jigsaw** – a division of Google that works to find new ways to address misinformation – produced videos that were launched in Poland, Czechia and Slovakia taking learnings from research on pre-bunking. The two-minute clips were surprisingly effective.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL12X50gJBPRoxFWCaofWntrPj3DgDB5Jh>

In this same vein, young people have a key role to play at the city level in **fostering a vibrant and independent media ecosystem**. To boost their efforts, secular and religious institutions are in a key position to invest in the young people's storytelling talents. Community media is better placed to gain the trust of their local audience and confront disinformation and misinformation, critical to counteracting hateful narratives and stereotyping.



The **European Youth4Media Network** gives young people a voice through digital media. It is a European association of 52 organizations from 32 countries working in the field of **community media** and civil society to promote political and intercultural dialogue. <https://youth4media.eu/our-mission/>

Jorge Orlando, policy expert at the Portuguese Ministry on Youth and Sports and Chair of the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) at the Council of Europe, aptly points out that in shaping initiatives at the city level to prevent and counter hate speech “youth should be engaged as decision makers not as service providers”. Pulling from the experience of the **No Hate Speech Movement campaign**, he emphasised that the active participation of young people helped ensure the movement's longevity and adaptability. Providing spaces where young people can interact with religious and secular actors, including civil society organizations, holds the promise to shape campaigns that resonate with audiences across generations as well as ethnic, religious and social groups.



The **#ChangetheConversationChallenge** developed by the **United Nations' Major Group for Children and Youth** (UNMGCY) offers an online platform of and for young people to engage in shaping alternative narratives about contested matters like climate change, migration and refugees. Participants receive support, including mentorship, seed funding and the chance to participate at the Youth Forum at the Global Forum on Migration and Development. <https://www.unmgcy.org/youth4migration>

Complementing online initiatives with offline ones are likely to provide long-lasting results. Allport and Pettigrew's 'contact-theory' confirms that getting in touch with differences and otherness not only increases mutual knowledge, but also, and more importantly, empathy. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue encounters are crucial to dismantling prejudices. Encouraging forward-thinking faith leaders capable of driving grassroots change is central to broader efforts to provide safe spaces for intergroup interaction and dialogue encounters across generations, as well as cultural, ethnic, religious and social groups. Such efforts should champion cooperation and celebrate those who use faith to raise awareness, encourage pluralism and promote harmony. When city authorities back these initiatives and ensure the long-term viability of spaces for dialogue, the chance for lasting change significantly increases.



Debora Barletta, Vice-President of APICE and the former National Coordinator at the No Hate Speech Movement Italy, commends **community initiatives** like those in **Brighton, UK**, where **regular gatherings** involving a **mix of religious and secular participants** are held to jointly address community concerns. These gatherings inform the **local municipal policies on equality** <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/equality>

At the core of community initiatives, the call for non-violent communication goes beyond just moderating discussions. According to Dr. Kishan Manocha, Head of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination at ODIHR, many young people often struggle to articulate their grievances without loading them with offensive statements – which might inadvertently border on hate speech. It is therefore essential to ensure that young people can confidently engage in discussions without fearing vilification while **nurturing emotional intelligence**. Such efforts range from offering a healing environment for those targeted by hate speech to providing spaces to discuss and build affective skills, strengthening the emotional side of interpersonal relations – which is critical to dismantle negative prejudices and stereotypes. The deep understanding of their communities allows faith actors to empathise with those affected by hateful messages, support the modelling of appropriate responses and spread messages of compassion and respect for diversity. Religious values and the engagement of religious leaders are key in shaping a spiritual infrastructure in support of cohesive and inclusive communities that reject hate speech as a violation of human dignity.



In the **Houses of Empathy** project young people were involved in capacity-building activities focused on team building, communication and assertiveness, problem solving, emotions, self-esteem and empathy. The project took place in Portugal, Spain, Northern Ireland and Ireland and was implemented by a consortium of civil society organizations. <https://housesofempathy.eu/>

Upscaling young people's leadership skills and competencies can bolster youth's abilities to shape initiatives to counter hate speech. The **'youth ambassadors' model** can offer a suitable and effective method to boost their active role as responsible leaders within their own communities. In referring to this model, Aistė Šlajūtė underscores the **nurturing of cultural and religious sensitivity** to improving intergroup behaviour in diverse communities.



The KAICIID-supported Muslim Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC) Ambassadors Programme is building a **network of young European Jewish and Muslim leaders** who share the enthusiasm for interfaith work, consult regularly and can coordinate interreligious activities through city chapters to spread accurate information about their faiths and traditions and to promote their communities' shared rights and interests. The programme is held annually. In 2022-2023, it covered **projects in four European cities** involving a total of eight young Jewish and Muslim 'Ambassadors', mentored by locally based MJLC members and contacts and reviewed with the help of trainers. <https://mjlc-europe.org/Article/mjlc-statement-on-the-ambassadors-programme>

In addressing drivers of hate speech, feelings of injustice and discrimination cannot be underestimated. Young people who experience pronounced social exclusion are particularly vulnerable. Cities are ideally placed to support youth-led initiatives that include **young people from diverse backgrounds, including minority youth**, in partnership with religious and secular actors as a way to counter marginalisation and prevent hate speech in the long-term.



The Training-on-Acceptance-Minorities-and-Against-Marginalization (T.A.M.A.M.) project implemented in **Thessaloniki, Greece**, helped equip **youth workers and young leaders from European and Balkan countries** with skills to plan and implement activities against discrimination, racism, xenophobia and exclusion as well as to advocate for policies that contribute to social inclusion and increase minority youth participation in community and political life. <https://www.usbngo.gr/en/international-programs/tamam-training-course>

Many youth-led organizations are actively campaigning to educate their peers on antidiscrimination policies and lobby politicians for more comprehensive policies. They are driven by the vision that greater equity will reduce frustrations arising from unequal treatment and access to opportunities.



The **Youth4Inclusion project** implemented by ODIHR offers a combination of learning opportunities for young people and the chance to transform their ideas into activities implemented in their local communities, such as forming coalitions or networks and organising dialogue or awareness-raising activities, etc. Individual coaching sessions are provided to support participants as they translate their ideas into concrete initiatives including interaction with the local authorities of **Krakow, Lublin, Gdansk, Rzeszow and Wroclaw** <https://www.osce.org/odihhr/545632>.

According to Dr. Kishan Manocha, to ensure that the prevention of hate speech generates lasting results, religious and secular actors need to implement a wide range of initiatives at local level that foster a **community ethos** that values diversity, inclusivity and mutual understanding. A robust legal anti-discrimination framework paired with strong competencies, innovative approaches and the creative arts should underpin these efforts.



**Raise! Toolbox for youth workers** to build resilience of young people against hate speech is the result of the collaboration of six partner organizations located in Italy, France, Greece, Portugal, Spain and the UK to act against hate speech. The toolbox provides guidance for youth workers, including for religious leaders and actors willing to engage young people in responding to the multifaceted challenges of hate speech. <https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/toolbox/tool/toolbox-for-youth-workers-to-build-resilience-of-young-people-against-hate-speech.3226/>

Considering their influence in promoting values of mutual respect, human dignity and peaceful coexistence, religious institutions can grow opportunities and initiatives to empower young people in preventing and counteracting hate speech. While examples exist, much more engagement is needed. In renewing a call for a whole-of-society approach, the recently adopted resolution by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (2686/2023) urges the international community to prevent incitement, condemn hate speech, racism and acts of extremism, and distinctly mentions the role of religious actors in this process. In this vein, the symbolic nature of religious leaders' words and actions and their capacity to inspire their communities – including their young members - deserve the systemic recognition of their transformative power and that of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in preventing hate speech.<sup>16</sup>

**Acknowledgements:** This Input paper was developed based on desk-research and interviews with stakeholders and experts. Our thanks go to the interviewees: Aisté Šlajūtė (Project International project manager at Varėna Cultural Center & Former Coordinator of No Hate Speech Movement Ireland), Bálint Josa (Director of UNITED for Intercultural Action), Debora Barletta (Vice-President of APICE - Agenzia di Promozione Integrata per i Cittadini in Europa & former National Coordinator at No Hate Speech Movement Italy), Dr Kishan Manocha (Head of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination at ODIHR), Georgina Laboda (Board member at Phiren Amenca & former Rapporteur on Roma issues at the Advisory Council on Youth and at the Joint Council on Youth at the Council of Europe), Jorge Orlando (Director of the Department of Information, Communication and International Relations at the Portuguese Ministry on Youth and Sports & Chair of the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) at the Council of Europe), Margarida Saco (Expert at Portuguese Ministry on Youth and Sports & ), Youssef Arooj (Founder of منظمة تقيظ طلب الامة من ال - Med Baltic Organization and the Mediterranean Youth Foundation), Dr Lenka Dražanová (Research Fellow at the European University Institute), Neringa Jučiukonytė (Director of Media4Change & Board member at the No Hate Speech Network). Additional thanks to the reviewers: Teresa Albano, Europe Region Programme Officer KAICIID, Johannes Langer Senior Programme Manager KAICIID, Kishan Manocha, Head of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination – ODIHR, Renata Nelson, KAICIID consultant.



## Emerging Recommendations



### FOR LOCAL POLICYMAKERS

- Support local anti-hate speech movements and awareness-raising campaigns co-created with young people through grants and funding opportunities.
- Provide young people with spaces and opportunities to improve digital and media literacy skills by offering community spaces and upskilling opportunities.
- Support a vibrant independent communication ecosystem at local level, expanding capacity-development opportunities for young media professionals and the involvement of tech companies.
- Organise regular meetings at the community level with religious leaders and actors, civil society actors and young people to discuss and tackle youth discrimination and social exclusion.



### FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND ACTORS

- Provide young people with safe and inclusive spaces to enhance emotional intelligence and affective skills.
- Support regular opportunities for inter-faith meetings, exchanges and dialogues involving young people across cultural, ethnic, religious and social groups.
- Offer a healing space for young people who are victims of hate speech and for those who are engaging in derogatory or hate speech and other forms of aggressive communication bordering hate speech.
- Enhance religious leaders and actors' positive presence on social media involving young people, including young religious leaders, as digital storytellers.

### FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS



- Enhance capacities of youth workers to offer a variety of actions to prevent and counteract hate speech, such as by providing capacity development opportunities and mentorship programmes.
- Together with religious actors and local authorities, offer young people safe spaces to nurture critical thinking, by convening dialogues, discussions and community-based activities for young people.
- Promote the participation of local young people in youth movements and platforms – including at global level – that deal with the prevention of hate speech and disinformation
- Support young people's leadership in countering hate speech at the community level, such as the 'Ambassadors' model'.

## Questions for reflection:

*Which competences do both secular and religious entities need to enable young people to prevent and address hate speech effectively and actively?*

*Which joint actions by secular and religious entities should be carried out at the city level to enable environment young people to prevent and address hate speech effectively?*

*Which places and opportunities secular and religious entities offer to allow young people to act as leading agents of change in their own communities?*

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Design and Layout: Carlos Gaido, George M.Rofaail

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This policy paper is published by the European Policy Dialogue Forum, an annual event of the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID)'s Europe Region programme. The European Policy Dialogue Forum brings together religious leaders, policymakers and experts to discuss pertinent issues of social cohesion in Europe.