



European
Policy
DIALOGUE
FORUM



POLICY BRIEF #1

PUBLISHED IN FEBRUARY 2022

Religious Actors and Countering Hate Speech in Europe

Executive Summary

This policy brief was developed for and further discussed at the 3rd European Policy Dialogue Forum on Refugees and Migrants in Lisbon, Portugal, on 19-21 October 2021, organised by the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), the Network for Dialogue and the European Council of Religious Leaders/Religions for Peace Europe (ECRL/RfP), and supported by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

Hate speech is a serious and growing problem that threatens social cohesion in many European societies. Several countries have witnessed rising levels of polarisation, with xenophobia, racism and anti-religious hatred proliferating, particularly in online fora. The Covid-19 pandemic has amplified some of these developments, with societies now struggling to find ways to curb misinformation and debunk conspiracy theories.

The dangers of violent radicalisation are significant. Policymakers and legislators in Europe have so far been slow to accept that online and offline spaces are closely linked and that hate speech, if left unabated, will inevitably have serious consequences. Offline extremist violence is oftentimes preceded by online radicalisation. Many recent terrorist attacks, such as the 2019 Mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, or the 2019 synagogue attack in Halle, Germany, were perpetrated by men radicalised over the internet. In the same vein, recent data demonstrates how offline events can lead to online hate speech and vice versa, ultimately fuelling a reinforcing cycle of online and offline hate.

There is huge potential for religious actors to become more active – and more visible – in the fight against hate speech. Religion is a major target of hate speech in Europe. Studies consistently find that the vast majority of hate speech is directed at the ethnicity and/or religion of the targeted individual or group, particularly against people with a Muslim or migrant background.¹ At the same

European Policy Dialogue Forum

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



www.policydialogueforum.eu
europe@kaiciid.org

¹ For example, a study conducted in Malmö, Sweden, found that 97% of online hate speech at the city level was directed at ethnic minorities. See Albers, J. (2021). We Can Create a Safe Digital City. Available at <https://nordicsafecities.org/we-can-create-a-safe-digital-city/>.

time, some actors continue to proliferate hate speech in the name of religion, and religious communities need to find better ways to deal with this, not least because it negatively influences public perception.

This policy paper highlights some of the challenges and best practices of religious actors in the field of countering hate speech. The featured examples demonstrate the variety of ways in which religious actors, and organizations working closely with religious communities, can contribute effectively towards preventing, monitoring and countering hate speech, both online and offline. The paper makes the case that to tackle a multifaceted and complex problem such as hate speech, no one solution will be sufficient. Rather, it requires multilevel approaches, collaboration across all sectors of society and strategies for both the short and long term.

Various responses are needed:

- Greater engagement of religious organizations in efforts to tackle hate speech and other issues that potentially lead to violence.
- Greater coordination among groups and improved awareness and support of religious initiatives among governments and funders.
- Improved awareness within religious organizations of the threats of, and responses to, hate speech as well as improved religious knowledge among government officials.

Introduction

In recent years, organizations on the international, European and national level have increased efforts to tackle hate speech at both regulatory and policy levels.² The work of civil society organizations has greatly contributed to a better understanding of hate speech and collaborations between tech companies and civil society have explored innovative ways to counter abusive online behaviour. However, to address such a multifaceted problem as hate speech, that is both symptom and cause of larger societal challenges, it will be necessary for all elements of society to respond.

Religious actors and faith-based organizations are critical in the fight against hate speech and their engagement in efforts to prevent and counter hate speech needs to be strengthened. Religious communities are among the groups most targeted by hate speech in Europe, but at the same time, hate speech is also perpetrated in the name of religion. Therefore, the actions of religious leaders and faith representatives are particularly symbolic – both for religious communities and the wider society. The experience of dealing

² See, e.g., the UN's Rabat Plan of Action: UN (2013) Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the expert workshops on the prohibition of incitement to national, racial or religious hatred, UN Human Rights Council, 22nd session, A/HRC/22/17/Add. 4. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/Articles19-20/ThresholdTestTranslations/Rabat_threshold_test.pdf; UN (2020) United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech: Detailed Guidance on Implementation for United Nations Field Presences. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20PoA%20on%20Hate%20Speech_Guidance%20on%20Addressing%20in%20field.pdf; Gleiss, H., & Laubenstein, S. (2020). Measures and Strategies for Combating Hate Speech at the European Level - An Overview. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

with hate speech directly has given many religious actors an increased understanding and empathy, as well as the ability to assess the causes of hate speech stemming from religious groups. This puts religious actors in a unique position to contribute to detecting, countering and preventing hate speech.

Challenges in countering hate speech

Hate speech is a complex problem that cannot easily be tackled. To begin with, it is difficult to define what constitutes hate speech. According to the UN, hate speech refers to:

“[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. This is often rooted in, and generates, intolerance and hatred, and in certain contexts can be demeaning and divisive.”³

However, the meaning of any speech is highly contextual and depends on the identity of the speaker, their standing in society, the make-up and actions of the audience, the historical, political and social context and many other variables. This means that in certain situations, even a phrase that contains no derogatory terms or calls for violence can still be intended – and understood – as hateful. Thus, even when there are clear definitions of hate speech, a person can disseminate harmful stereotypes or even incite violence by subtler and completely legal ways. As a reaction, some social media companies have adopted the term “dangerous speech” in the process of drafting community rules.⁴ In order to be meaningful, therefore, hate speech definitions must be constantly adopted for the specific purpose.

A related challenge is that it is difficult to regulate or prosecute due to hate speech without infringing on fundamental rights such as the freedom of speech or the freedom of religion.⁵ The problem of hate speech cannot be “solved” by simply making better laws or improving the regulation of tech platforms alone. This is why it is so important to not only focus on hate speech, the symptom, but also address the underlying causes that shape the political and social contexts in which hate speech takes place.

On the practical side, a challenge for many religious actors remains that they do not feel well equipped to counter hate speech or engage in effective prevention activities. KAICIID’s consultations during 2021 have shown that religious actors are acutely aware of the increasing dangers of hate speech – both in terms of witnessing the harmful effects and

3 UN (2020), op. cit., p. 10.

4 Dangerous Speech Project (2021). *Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide*. Available at: <https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/>.

5 See, inter alia, Bonotti, M. (2017). Religion, Hate Speech and Non-Domination. *Ethnicities*, 17(2), 257–274; Sellars, A. F. (2016). *Defining Hate Speech*. Research Publication No. 2016-20. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2882244.

experiencing a deep frustration when hate speech stems from members of their own religious communities. Many religious actors stated they did not have the capacities to manage their communication on the scale that would be needed to effectively counter hate speech. Others lacked the digital literacy needed to engage proactively in online spaces.

Experiences and good practices of religious actors in countering hate speech

In light of these challenges – addressing hate speech and mitigating its impact – the road ahead for civil society and religious actors is formidable. The following examples are good starting points to think about how religious actors, and organizations working closely with religious communities, can contribute to countering hate speech, as well as how such initiatives could be supported in the future. They are drawn from a KAICIID mapping exercise conducted in 2021.⁶

STRENGTHENING CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

As more actors engage in anti-hate speech activities, more effective coordination is needed. Collaborating across sectors allows stakeholders to look at the challenges from multiple perspectives and exchange best practices. Several programmes have shown that collaboration improves data collection, increases understanding of hate speech phenomena and ultimately helps create better responses.

The **Facing Facts**⁷ initiative was set up in 2011 by a consortium of civil society organizations with the goal of improving their capacities to recognise and monitor hate crimes, and to generate more effective responses to the problem of hate in society. Since then, it has grown into a Europe-wide multi-stakeholder network. Coordinated by CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, Facing Facts offers training to law enforcement personnel, people working in authorities and civil society actors. In recent years, Facing Facts has further developed its hate speech work and since 2015 has implemented a comprehensive online learning curriculum. By working in close collaboration with partners across sectors, the long-standing initiative has generated a wealth of lessons learned.⁸

⁶ F. Mieth (2022). Religious Actors and Countering Hate Speech in Europe. KAICIID Europe Region Research Paper #2, see <https://www.kaiciid.org/publications>

⁷ See <https://www.facingfacts.eu>

⁸ Interview with M. Sonnino and J. Mozer, CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, 13 August 2021. For the full report, see <https://www.facingfacts.eu/european-report/>

From 2017 to 2019, the **Barcelona City Council** implemented a **municipal plan against Islamophobia**.⁹ Planned as a city-wide collaborative effort against discrimination and hate speech, it engaged religious leaders and faith-based communities from the outset. The initiative employed multiple measures against discrimination that included raising awareness about Islamophobia as a form of discrimination, countering Islamophobic prejudices and stereotypes – for example, by supporting an anti-rumour network – and improving reporting procedures and victim support by city authorities. The value of establishing and maintaining good relationships between city authorities and religious communities was already apparent during the planning phase of this initiative when the Barcelona terror attacks of 17 August 2017 happened. The standing relationship with several Muslim communities allowed actors to quickly coordinate responses to ensuing hate speech.¹⁰

CHANGING NARRATIVES

Over the past years, the emphasis has shifted from promoting counter speech to the need to shape narratives on a wider level. Alternative narratives refer to powerful positive stories that resonate with audiences in such a way that they will not engage or be influenced by hateful narratives. Traditional mass media plays an important role in shaping public perception regarding the image of certain groups. Collaborations between faith-based actors and media professionals are a powerful way to increase religious literacy among media professionals to tackle misinformation and imbalances in reporting.

The Media Diversity Institute¹¹ works to ensure a correct representation of minority groups in traditional and social media. The Institute acts as a resource hub and brings together a wide range of actors across Europe through its programmes. One of the projects, “Get the Trolls Out”, seeks to monitor and combat anti-religious hate and other discriminatory behaviour on social networks. The materials and workshops of the initiative help civil society actors to identify different kinds of anti-religious hate speech in order to develop and implement counter campaigns. Because it is so widely connected, the Institute was one of the first actors to detect and report about the QAnon movement in Europe.¹²

9 See Ajuntament de Barcelona (2017). Putting Everything into Combatting Islamophobia. Available at: https://www.ciutatrefugi.barcelona/en/noticia/infobarcelonaenputting-everything-into-combatting-islamophobia_590042.

10 Interview with A. Rodríguez Basanta, Citizens' Rights Department, Barcelona City Council, 13 September 2021.

11 See <https://www.media-diversity.org/>.

12 Interview with G.Dessi, Media Diversity Institute, 16 August 2021.

In 2018, the **Libertas Center for Interconfessional and Interreligious Dialogue**¹³ implemented the “School of Interreligious Journalism,” a training project with the goal of combatting fake news and one-sided narratives on social media platforms. The Libertas Centre is a non-profit organization that was founded in 2013. Its work concentrates on promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue to contribute to peacebuilding and understanding in the Ukraine and beyond. Its School of Interreligious Journalism brought together religious representatives and media professionals and enabled joint learning and spaces for dialogue and reflection.¹⁴

BUILDING COHESIVE SOCIETIES

There is a lot that religious actors can do to influence the wider societal context in which hate speech takes place. Many religious actors work towards creating trusting relationships between religious communities, as well as between religious groups and the wider society. By increasing self-confidence and a sense of belonging within religious communities and working to build peaceful coexistence, such activities contribute to countering negative stereotypes prevalent between different groups in society. Interreligious and multifaith dialogues in particular play a strong role in countering mistrust and addressing hate speech between communities.¹⁵

The Swedish interfaith organization **Amanah**¹⁶ describes itself as the “Muslim-Jewish Partnership of Trust” and was founded in 2017 by Imam Salahuddin Barakat and Rabbi Moshe David HaCohen in the city of Malmö, Sweden. The aim of the organization is to increase trust in society and tackle discrimination and violent extremism of all kinds. Both founders remain the official representatives of their religious communities and work to improve the relationship between the communities, as well as with the wider society. Activities include visits to educational institutions and events, speaking out when there are violent incidents or tensions, organising joint study sessions, and speaking frequently with the media. The founders particularly emphasise the importance of providing a space to discuss and reflect on the religious groups’ identities, commonalities and differences. Ultimately, being more grounded in one’s own identity prevents people from feeling threatened by the identity of others and lays the groundwork for peaceful coexistence.¹⁷

13 See <https://www.facebook.com/libertascenter>; The International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) (2020). Building Trust through Dialogue in Ukraine. Available at: <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/features/building-trust-through-dialogue-ukraine>.

14 Interview with T. Dzyubansky, Libertas Center for Interconfessional and Interreligious Dialogue, 20 August 2021.

15 See, e.g., the work of the Christian Muslim Forum, <https://www.facebook.com/ChrisMusForum/>.

16 See <https://www.amanah.se>.

17 Interview with S. Barakat and M.D. HaCohen, Amanah, 25 August 2021.

City Sikhs¹⁸ is an organization operating across the United Kingdom. Community engagement is one of the pillars of Sikh tradition and culture, and in light of recent crises, many local Sikh places of worship in the UK have thought about how they can contribute to the greater good. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Sikh community kitchens provided meals for those in need. In an incident where lorry drivers were held up in prolonged traffic for several days over the Christmas period, the local Sikh community prepared Christmas meals for them, an action that received media attention. City Sikhs also ensure inclusivity in their cultural and educational work. For events, usually half of the invited speakers are female voices and at least half of the speakers are of non-Sikh origin. Increasing exposure and interaction between members of the Sikh minority and people of other faiths, or non-believers, promotes openness and may lead to better relations between different groups in society.¹⁹

Recommendations

For international organizations and European and national authorities



Raise awareness at the policy level about the critical role of religious actors in preventing and countering hate speech and include religious actors in relevant initiatives. More effort is needed to include and engage the perspectives, resources and needs of religious communities in policymaking and practice on the EU, national and sub-national levels. International organizations and authorities should also ensure that religious actors are represented in efforts against discrimination, hate speech or preventing violent extremism in general, not only when it concerns anti-religious discrimination.



Promote, facilitate and support open, transparent and inclusive interfaith and inter-religious dialogue and partnerships and lobby with the religious leadership on the importance of addressing the topic of hate speech within their own communities. By increasing exposure and understanding between members of different religious groups and between religious groups and non-believers, dialogue initiatives can contribute to countering harmful stereotypes prevalent among different groups.



Support effective collaboration and coordination among anti-hate speech initiatives across sectors. With more organizations active in the field of countering hate speech, there is a growing need for effective collaboration and coordination between different actors and programmes. Examples for cross-sector collaboration could be city-level collaborations between preventative actors or interdisciplinary platforms for data monitoring and evaluation. Such support should be sustainably funded to offer consistency.

18 See <https://www.citysikhs.com>.

19 Interview with J. Singh OBE, City Sikhs, 16 September 2021.

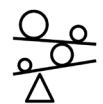
For funders and civil society organizations working with religious actors



Increase efforts aimed at understanding and informing about the root causes of social divisions that allow hate speech to proliferate. Those who perpetrate hate speech are often members of groups who feel disenfranchised and harbour certain (perceived) grievances. In addition to activities aimed at responding to hate speech, more knowledge about the specific context and reasons for such harmful behaviour can help create initiatives that tackle some of the underlying factors contributing to discrimination and hate.



Raise awareness about the importance of religious literacy for organizations and institutions that work with, or report on, religious communities. Civil society organizations, media professionals and public authorities should ensure that their staff members have a working level of religious literacy. They should possess a basic knowledge of different religions and be able to interact effectively with members of different religions. Additional training may be necessary to prevent and counteract stereotypes and inherent biases.



Support initiatives that seek to ensure adequate and balanced reporting about religions in traditional and social media. Funders could support joint training and dialogue opportunities for religious actors and media professionals to improve media coverage about religious communities and other groups often targeted by hate speech.

For religious actors



Increase awareness within religious communities about the reasons, forms and effects of hate speech. Members of religious communities should be aware of how to identify and counter hate speech occurring within their communities. Where necessary, religious actors should also increase educational efforts to promote religious literacy within their communities to prevent the spread of false information and hate speech in the name of religion.



Speak out and advocate against hate speech, acting in solidarity with other religious communities or affected groups. Hate speech is a societal challenge that affects many groups, and religious actors should not treat hate speech as a singular issue affecting only their community. Representatives should speak out against hate speech when other groups are attacked, signalling their solidarity. To support this, religious institutions need to be prepared to provide additional support in dealing with potential backlashes and mounting countercampaigns if necessary.²⁰



Promote a human rights mindset and values of peaceful coexistence, openness and inclusivity within religious communities. As role models, religious leaders are able to demonstrate positive examples of how to act with kindness and tolerance, without condoning hateful behaviour. Religious leaders should invest more efforts into reaching out to community members. They can foster inclusivity by encouraging the formation of youth and women groups, as well as encourage the participation of members of other religions or non-religious groups in events and festivities.

²⁰ Thanks to S. Speicher, World Association for Christian Communication, for pointing this out (interview, 25 August 2021).

Key References

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religion in the Media. (2021). Learning to Listen: Inquiry into Religious Literacy in Print and Broadcast Media. Available at: <https://www.media-diversity.org/resources/inquiry-into-religious-literacy-in-print-and-broadcast-media-report/>.

Bonotti, M. (2017). Religion, Hate Speech and Non-Domination. *Ethnicities*, 17(2), 257–274.

Gleiss, H., & Laubenstein, S. (2020). Measures and Strategies for Combating Hate Speech at the European Level – An Overview. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Perry, J. (2019). Connecting on Hate Crime Data in Europe. Retrieved from <https://www.facingfacts.eu/european-report/>.

Sellars, A. F. (2016). Defining Hate Speech. Research Publication No.2016-20. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2882244.

UN. (2020). United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech: Detailed Guidance on Implementation for United Nations Field Presences. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20PoA%20on%20Hate%20Speech_Guidance%20on%20Addressing%20in%20field.pdf.



European
Policy
**DIALOGUE
FORUM**

© 2022 European Policy Dialogue Forum, All Rights Reserved.

Design and Layout: Carlos Gaido

A full-text PDF of this document is available for free download from: www.policydialogueforum.eu

This policy brief is published by the European Policy Dialogue Forum, an annual event of the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID). This document is the short version of Research Paper #2 of 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