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Religious Actors and Countering Hate Speech in Europe

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Executive Summary

Hate speech is a serious problem that threatens social cohesion in European societies. Not only does hate speech have devastating effects on the targeted groups and contribute to increasing polarisation in society, but an increasing number of research studies demonstrate that hate speech is directly linked to hate crimes and violent radicalisation, and that online and offline forms of hate can have a reinforcing effect.

Over the past years, the European Union, national governments and international organizations have increased efforts to tackle hate speech at both the regulatory and policy levels. The work of civil society organizations has greatly contributed to a better understanding of hate speech and hate crimes. Recently, collaborations between tech companies and civil society have been exploring innovative ways to counter different forms of abusive online behaviour. However, to counter such a multifaceted problem, that is both symptom and cause of larger societal challenges, it will be necessary for all elements of society to respond.

Religious communities are both targets and sources of hate speech. This puts religious actors in a critical position in the fight against hate speech and its underlying causes. As this report shows, religious actors address hate speech in various ways. They mitigate the devastating effects of hate speech on communities and individuals. They contribute to efforts of monitoring and reporting hate speech and advocate for peaceful coexistence and speak out against hate and discrimination against their community as well as other targeted groups. Their intimate knowledge of the local context and the unique situation of their communities allows them to address some of the causes that lead to hate speech originating from within religious communities.

Despite their important role, very little consolidated information is available about the activities of religious actors in the field of countering hate speech. This report reflects on the experiences and promising practices of religious actors working in several countries in Europe on various aspects of preventing and countering hate speech. It is hoped that the findings discussed here will help in designing effective measures to support religious actors in their efforts against hate speech.

Introduction

Amid increasing polarisation in many European societies, hate speech has become a growing concern for civil society and policymakers. Individuals and organizations working to promote human rights and foster social cohesion are observing the many manifestations of hate speech that have devastating effects on those who are targeted and threaten the peaceful coexistence of the wider community.

Hate speech is a complex phenomenon that has been tied to a feeling of disenfranchisement of certain individuals or groups. Driven by grievances, perceived or real, and faced with the uncertainties brought forth by economic and societal changes, some people decide to behave abusively towards members of other groups in society. In European countries, the majority of hate speech is directed against minority groups such as certain ethnic or religious groups as well as migrants and refugees.¹

At the same time, increasing levels of hate speech must also be seen in the context of global shifts characterised by an overall fragility of democracy. The past years have seen a rise of illiberal democracies across Europe and beyond and many European countries are witnessing rising levels of xenophobia, anti-minority hatred and polarisation in society. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the alarming extent to which malicious actors are willing and able to spread misinformation and conspiracy theories that reinforce negative stereotypes of certain groups in society.² In some countries protests against pandemic-related restrictions are being infiltrated by radicalised actors who openly call for a disregard of democratic principles. In other countries, right-wing actors are seeking a growing media exposure to spread derogatory and hateful messages about minority groups, often helped by media outlets that seem to support their cause and provide space for them.³ Research has shown that the mere exposure to derogatory language and hate speech can have negative effects on people's levels of empathy and erode social cohesion.⁴ Hate speech is thus both

¹ For example, a study conducted in Malmö, Sweden, found that 97 percent 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/>.

² See, e.g., Laub, Z. (2019). Hate Speech on Social Media: Global Comparisons. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/hate-speech-social-media-global-comparisons>; see also Peters, M. A. (2020). Limiting the Capacity for Hate: Hate Speech, Hate Groups and the Philosophy of Hate. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 1-6; sCAN. (2020). Hate Speech Trends During the Covid-19 Pandemic in a Digital and Globalised Age. Available at: http://scan-project.eu/resources-and-publications/#Covid_19.

³ France 2 (2021). Temps de parole des candidats à la présidentielle: Quand Eric Zemmour écrase la concurrence sur CNews. Available at: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/eric-zemmour/video-temps-de-parole-des-candidats-a-la-presidentielle-quand-eric-zemmour-ecrase-la-concurrence-sur-cnews_4832399.html

⁴ Bilewicz, M., & Soral, W. (2020). Hate Speech Epidemic: The Dynamic Effects of Derogatory Language on Intergroup Relations and Political Radicalization. *Political Psychology*, 41(S1).

cause and symptom of larger societal challenges and must be addressed holistically, innovatively and collaboratively.

As authorities and civil society organizations are becoming more and more aware of the dangers of hate speech, efforts to counter and prevent hate speech have increased.⁵ Yet, the role of religious actors⁶ in countering hate speech has received comparatively little attention so far. This is notable, as religious communities are both a main target as well as a source of hate speech. What activities do religious actors engage in that address discrimination and hate speech? How do they work within their communities, with other religious groups, or with secular actors in society? What are their experiences and lessons learned, and what could be done to support the work of religious actors in their efforts to combat hate speech?

This report showcases the experiences of religious actors and organizations working closely with religious communities on the issue of preventing and countering hate speech.⁷ It introduces selected initiatives in several European countries that seek to prevent hate speech, mitigate its impact on the targeted groups, or respond to it with various activities. Based on findings derived from interviews and desk research, the report highlights promising practices to contribute to developing effective measures to counter hate speech in the future.



Religious Actors and Countering Hate Speech: an Emerging Field

Hate speech has only recently emerged as a separate subject of scholarship and practice. Previously, the issue of hate speech was primarily discussed as a sub-topic of other debates, such as genocide prevention and the incitement of violence, or in the fields of preventing radicalisation and violent extremism. One of the difficulties one encounters when studying hate speech is that the topic is discussed by very different actors and cross-cuts a range of disciplines and sectors:

- Conflict transformation, peacebuilding, reconciliation
- Violent radicalisation, preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE)

⁵ 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 (2020b) 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.

⁶ In this paper, the term "religious actors" is used in a broad sense and includes religious leaders and other faith representatives, organizations or associations based on faith, as well as other entities or individuals that play a prominent role because of their faith or their links to religious institutions.

⁷ The report draws on the findings of regional and expert consultations that were organised by KAICIID in 2021, as well as information gathered in desk research and interviews with 14 selected initiatives across Europe. Interviews were conducted with either religious leaders, or representatives of faith-based organizations, civil society organizations or municipal authorities who work closely with religious communities. For a detailed methodology and interview list, please see the Annex.

- Human Rights Studies, Human Rights Education
- Xenophobia, discrimination, racism
- Legal debates in national and international criminal law

This means that academics and practitioners in these fields who are studying hate speech may not necessarily have been aware of each other's work or might not have communicated with each other. It also means that the relevant literature is spread out broadly and uses different definitions or keywords. As hate speech is shaping up as a separate field of interest, more consolidation of these existing fields is happening.

Recent years have seen a growing recognition of the important role of religious actors in dealing with challenging societal transformations. Scholars, practitioners and policymakers have argued for an increased involvement of religious actors in transforming conflicts, preventing violent extremism and countering racism and discrimination.⁸ More efforts are now undertaken by internationally operating organizations to promote the participation of religious actors and faith-based organizations in both practice and policy.⁹

Religious actors play a pivotal role in preventing and countering hate speech. Religious communities are disproportionately affected by hate speech and many religious actors have directly experienced hate speech directed at them. Their experiences and the intimate knowledge of their communities puts religious leaders in a unique position to empathise with those victimised by hate speech and mitigate the impact of such harms on the wider religious community. As role models, they can lead by example, demonstrating positive and effective ways to deal with these challenges.

At the same time, a significant share of hate speech originates from within religious communities, highlighting once more the critical role of religious actors. This concerns both the perpetration of hate speech as well as the omission to speak out when hate speech or hate crimes are perpetrated by members of religious communities, or even by representatives of religious institutions. In times of increasing populism, this is particularly grave in contexts where political and religious institutions are deeply intertwined, reinforcing each other's rhetoric. Religious actors' knowledge of and familiarity with local communities puts them in the position to address the more intangible societal effects of hate speech and discrimination.

⁸ See, e.g., McDonagh, P. (2018). Religion and Security-Building in the OSCE Context: Involving Religious Leaders and Congregations in Joint Efforts. Vienna: OSCE Network. Available at: <https://osce-network.net/projects-activities/detail/religion-and-security-building-in-the-osce-context>; UNDP (2014). UNDP Guidelines on Engaging with Faith-based Organizations and Religious Leaders. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/publications/undp-guidelines-engaging-faith-based-organizations-and-religious-leaders>.

⁹ See, e.g., UN (2020a). Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan_of_Action_Religious_Prevent_Incite.pdf.

What makes religious actors crucial in the fight against hate speech is the elevated symbolism of their actions. When a religious actor engages in hate speech – or seems to condone hate speech by others – it is not only noticed by members of the respective community, but equally observed by others in society. Some of the debates on countering hate speech have revolved around whether religious actors have the power to impact on hate speech. In some of the consultations organised by KAICIID, for example, participants have expressed their frustration that despite all their efforts, members of their own community cannot be stopped in engaging in harmful behaviour. In these cases, it is important to realise that there are many “silent observers,” and that their action matters even in the absence of an immediate or measurable impact.



The Complex Nature of Hate Speech

It is difficult to provide a clear definition of hate speech. There are several angles from which to evaluate whether a certain utterance is hate speech. Is it perceived as hateful by a person or group affected by it (does it inflict harm?) Or is it meant by the speaker as a demeaning or hateful act (does it have malicious intent?) Or must it fulfil both criteria to be labelled as hate speech?¹⁰ And from a political and legal viewpoint, a major difficulty lies in defining and dealing with hate speech in ways that do not harm fundamental rights to free speech.¹¹

A major factor that complicates the definition of hate speech is that it is always contextual. In fact, any speech act is deeply embedded in its specific context. Human speech is incredibly complex and the meaning of what is said (or written) is situational; it 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 in which it is spoken or written, 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. All of the above characteristics make it difficult to define speech as hate speech.

The legal scholar Andrew Sellars provides a useful reflection on the intricacy of hate speech. Refraining from providing one singular definition, the author rather discusses eight criteria of hate speech:

- The speech targets a group or an individual as a member of a group
- The message expresses hatred

¹⁰ The discussion in this section draws heavily on Sellars’s reflection on the complexity of hate speech, see Sellars, A.F. (2016). Defining Hate Speech. Research Publication No.2016-20. Available 2021 at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2882244; see also the work of the Dangerous Speech Project, e.g. Dangerous Speech Project (2021). Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide. Available at: <https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/>.

¹¹ Bonotti, M. (2017). Religion, Hate Speech and Non-Domination. *Ethnicities*, 17(2), 257-274.

- The speech causes a harm
- The speaker intends harm
- The speech incites malicious actions beyond the speech itself
- The speech is either public or directed at a member of the group
- The context makes violence possible
- The speech has no redeeming purpose¹²

The intention of providing this list is to make it easier to identify hate speech; the more of these criteria that are true, the more likely a speech act would constitute hate speech.

In practice, however, concrete definitions are needed for governments and organizations to act on the increasing threat of hate speech online and offline. A growing number of international and national governing bodies are working with concrete definitions or at least guidelines on countering hate speech. In its 2020 Strategy and Plan of Action against Hate Speech, for example, the UN 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. This is often rooted in, and generates, intolerance and hatred, and in certain contexts can be demeaning and divisive.”¹³

The strategy document states, however, that this definition is primarily for implementation purposes, and cannot constitute a legal ground for any proceedings. It must be kept in mind, therefore, that while the official definitions of hate speech are now widely accepted and worked with, the above-described inherent difficulties with the term remain.

Understanding the complexity of hate speech is important, as it points to the fact that hate speech is not a problem that can be easily “solved,” certainly not by adopting singular actions like enforcing certain laws or implementing strategies

¹² Sellars, *op. cit.*, p. 25ff. The UN Rabat Plan of Action also provides a list of criteria that helps to define hate speech, see 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.

¹³ UN (2020b), *op. cit.*, p. 8.

that focus on isolated aspects of the problem, such as improving monitoring. Rather, responses to such a multifaceted problem must be equally multifaceted.

Countering Hate Speech

The past decade has seen several overarching trends in the field of countering hate speech. In particular, the last five years have seen an increased awareness of the importance to address the problem of hate speech, resulting in a growing number of governmental and civil society initiatives active across Europe and worldwide.¹⁴ There is also a growing recognition of the complexity of hate speech and how this topic overlaps with many other issues, such as the interconnection between hate speech and hate crimes. The interviewed organizations that provide training for law enforcement or public authorities reported, for example, that there was an increased demand for training on hate speech that specifically informs about these interconnections. On the EU level, there is now increased cooperation between EU entities; whereas previously separate task groups would debate on hate speech, hate crime, discrimination, etc., there are now more efforts to coordinate between these topics and create more holistic approaches.¹⁵

Most action to date has focused on tackling online hate speech. More initiatives are being launched that seek to analyse and mitigate online hate speech. This is also a result of a growing knowledge about the direct link between online and offline violence. Moreover, in the past two years the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the alarming extent to which malicious actors are targeting online users to incite hate and spread misinformation.

Another key trend of the past years has been that social media companies have become somewhat more involved and cooperative in the fight against hate speech. A contributing factor here is the European Commission's Code of Conduct that was launched in 2016. The document spells out certain rules and guidelines on how to deal with hate speech online, and all major social media companies have signed up.¹⁶ Several of the organizations interviewed for this research stated they are now cooperating more frequently and more effectively with these companies and that there are now more organised forms of interaction such as the "trusted flagger" status for organizations that monitor hate speech.¹⁷ Others reported that social media companies have reached out to religious communities to learn more about the manifestations of hate speech.¹⁸

¹⁴ For an overview of publications about recent EU-wide programmes see Gleiss, H., & Laubenstein, S. op. cit.

¹⁵ Interview 2.

¹⁶ Jourová, V. (2019). How the Code of Conduct Helped Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/hatespeech_infographic3_web.pdf.

¹⁷ Interviews 3 and 8.

¹⁸ Interview 2.



Detection, Monitoring and Reporting

In order to improve the understanding of the phenomenon of hate speech, the following programmes focus on the detection, monitoring and reporting of hate speech. Ongoing research and monitoring are needed to understand where, when and how hate speech occurs, who the perpetrators are, and how certain trends are evolving over time. Such efforts also provide specific information about content, such as trending words, phrases or images. Ultimately, systematic data collection, of better quality, is crucial. It can be used to inform different actors about the problem, convince them to become more involved and improve concrete countering measures and policymaking.

The **Facing Facts** initiative was set up in 2011 by a consortium of civil society organizations with the goal of improving capacities to recognise and monitor hate crimes. Coordinated by CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, the initiative has since grown into a Europe-wide multi-stakeholder network aiming to generate effective responses to the problems of hate crime and hate speech in Europe. The core of the programme encompasses a wide range of training on hate crime and hate speech monitoring, prevention and response, as well as researching and synthesising the mechanisms of cooperation across different stakeholders in the area of hate crime and hate speech in the National countries. In 2015 Facing Facts set up an e-learning platform¹⁹ and implemented a comprehensive online learning curriculum to increase the reach of its training activities. Finally, in 2021, CEJI took the Facing Facts initiative to the next level by forming the Facing Facts Network.²⁰

Many initiatives at local and country-level collect information on hate speech incidents in order to support victims and increase awareness about the problem in their local or national contexts. The **iReport project** in Germany, for example, was initiated by CLAIM, a non-governmental organization that works to address Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate and coordinates a network of Muslim and non-Muslim organizations in Germany. The project features a website where citizens can report any anti-Muslim incidents, offline and online, and submit evidence, if available. This information goes to designated focal points and the organization publishes reports on its website.²¹ The data collected through such reporting and monitoring exercises can function as supporting information in establishing overall trends on a regional or national level, both quantitative and qualitative.

A good example of an initiative that sought to learn from best research and monitoring practices across several European contexts was the “sCAN

¹⁹ See <https://www.facingfactsonline.eu>.

²⁰ Interview 2; see also Perry, J. (2019). Connecting on Hate Crime Data in Europe. Available at: <https://www.facingfacts.eu/european-report/>.

²¹ For more information, see <https://www.i-report.eu/>.

– **Platforms, Experts, Tools: Specialised Cyber-Activists Network**” project that ran between 2018 and 2020. Managed by the French organization **International League Against Racism and Antisemitism**, the project goals were “gathering expertise, tools, methodology and knowledge on cyber hate and developing transnational comprehensive practices for identifying, analysing, reporting and counteracting online hate speech.”²² sCAN was a collaboration of ten partners, mostly organizations working against racism and discrimination across Europe. The project produced a wealth of course materials, manuals for dealing with online hate speech, and published policy recommendations.

A growing field in the detection and monitoring of online hate speech is the use of artificial intelligence. As stated earlier, hate speech can be very complex and hidden, as certain groups will use coded language or images. Therefore, some forms of hate speech cannot be simply detected automatically. Rather, specific phrases and terms must be learned by an algorithm.²³

“**Safe Digital City**” is a pilot programme implemented in Malmö, Sweden. In an attempt to take hate speech monitoring a step further by combining localised online and offline data, the project provides a more detailed look at what actually happens in a location both online and offline. The project maps the linkages between online and offline behaviour related to specific instances of hate speech and hate crimes, demonstrating how real-life events are linked with localised online hate speech data. A first analysis was made public in March 2021, finding a high correlation between real events and “peaks” of online hate speech. This data was then shared with the cities’ preventative actors, including religious communities. The launch of the first project phase included a public discussion between local authorities, religious actors, civil society and citizens to discuss how to tackle the identified challenges.²⁴

The collection and analysis of hate speech data on the organizational level can also be a very valuable activity, as the project “**Despised Diversity**” by the Evangelical Church Germany illustrates. In 2017, the Study Centre of Gender Questions, an entity belonging to the German Evangelical Church Service, collected and analysed four sets of data consisting of communications that were directed at representatives of the Church. A report was then published with the title “**Despised Diversity. An Analysis of Hate Speech in the Space of Church and Diakonia with Comments.**”²⁵ The second half of the report contains guidelines for religious practitioners on how to classify and deal with hate speech directed

²² For more information, see <https://scan-project.eu>.

²³ See, for example, the work of Hatelab in the UK and the CEMAS Institute in Germany, <https://hatelab.net/projects/digital-social-research-tools-tension-indicators-and-safer-communities-a-demonstration-of-the-cardiff-digital-research-platform-cdrp/> and <https://cemas.io/>, respectively.

²⁴ Interview 12; see also Albers, J. (2021) op. cit.

²⁵ Title translated by author. See Lukas, A., Radtke, E., & Schulz, C. (Eds.). (2017). *Verhasste Vielfalt. Eine Analyse von Hate Speech im Raum von Kirche und Diakonie mit Kommentierungen*. Hannover: creo media, and <https://www.gender-ekd.de/projekte/29155.html>.

at them. By using real-world examples, the guide explains when to engage and respond, or when to delete or report a communication as hate speech.

The “Despised Diversity” report is a good example of what individual organizations can do with such data. The project helped the organization understand the patterns of hate speech it received, produce guidelines for responding to hate speech, and raise awareness about the issue among the broader public. In addition to the publication, a conference was organised which brought together different actors in a discussion of how to deal with hate speech.²⁶



Figure 1: A figure in the “Despised Diversity” report depicts how derogatory utterances can be ranked from merely being contrary statements to incitements of violence. The report then offers recommendations about what to do when faced with messages that fall into grades 1–4, when a response (still) makes sense, or, when an utterance falls into grades 5–8, a response is seldom recommendable, as writers of such speech should not get more attention. *Figure translated by author and adapted from* Lukas, A., Radtke, E., & Schulz, C. op.cit., pg. 173ff.

Based on this experience, the Evangelical Church is carrying out another monitoring exercise that looks at hate speech directed at their “Info Service” department. The Info Service was established as a centralised service that deals

²⁶ For a summary of the conference (in German), please see <https://www.gender-ekd.de/33402.html>.

with all incoming communications from the public, in order to relieve individual parishes from this work. Over the years, the centre has also experienced a growing number of hate messages, especially after the refugee crisis in 2015.²⁷

////// Changing Narratives

This section encompasses initiatives that focus on how to respond to hate speech, emphasising, in particular, which practices have worked well for religious actors. Hate speech perpetrated in online settings and social media was the most persistent problem reported by religious actors in KAICIID's earlier survey and regional consultations, ranging from misinformation, defamation or fake news to direct attacks and threats of violence. What are some of the best ways to deal with these harms, online as well as offline?

Counter speech

Counter speech can be a very sensitive activity, especially online, as it exposes the person or institution in question to more abuse and could potentially make things worse. Dealing with such forms of abuse when they are already happening thus requires not only internet "literacy", but also strategic knowledge about how to react effectively. Yet, when done right, counter speech by community organizations can be more effective than the original hate speech. Counter speech by "credible, capable and willing actors" was found by a recent study to have a wider reach and longer survival than the original antagonistic speech and can thus be an effective measure to engage with online hate speech.²⁸ This emphasises the impact of civil society in countering online hate speech and increasing people's trust in social media.

There are a multitude of guides and toolkits available that are published and regularly updated on resource platforms online.²⁹

The project "**Get the Trolls Out!**" is jointly carried out by eight European civil society organizations that are in and of themselves established actors in fighting racism and discrimination. The project is managed by the **Media Diversity Institute**, a British organization working internationally to encourage accurate and nuanced reporting on race, religion, ethnic, class, disability, gender and sexual identity issues in media landscapes around the world. "Get the Trolls Out!" aims to reduce and degrade hate speech, discrimination and intolerance based on religious grounds in the European media space. The project monitors traditional

²⁷ Email communication, EKD staff member, 5 August 2021.

²⁸ Ozalp, S., Williams, M. L., Burnap, P., Liu, H., & Mostafa, M. (2020). "Antisemitism on Twitter: Collective Efficacy and the Role of Community Organizations in Challenging Online Hate Speech." *Social Media + Society*, April-June, 1-20, p. 1.

²⁹ Please see the "Selected Resources" section of this paper for a list of useful links.

media, new media and social media in seven European countries. When incidents of hate speech are identified, official complaints or other responses are produced and launched. The materials and workshops of the initiative focus on teaching young people and civil society organizations how to identify and respond to different kinds of anti-religious narratives and hate speech in the media and provide examples of reactions.³⁰

The two-year project “**Netzteufel**” (**Devil in the Net**) of the Evangelical Academy of Berlin, Germany, focused on supporting church employees in dealing with online and offline hate speech. By providing materials and running workshops, the project informed about the typical strategies and narratives employed by perpetrators of hate speech and the ways to counter each of these. The project developed and conducted “Hope Not Hate” workshops, maintained a social media presence and published detailed training materials with many practice examples as well as a final report with recommendations.³¹

Building Alternative Narratives

Over the past years, the emphasis has shifted from counter speech to proactively creating narratives on a wider level. Counter speech can be done, in principle, by any individual, as it refers to the act of speaking against hate speech that has already happened. Alternative narratives work on a broader level; they can challenge existing stereotypes of a minority group by providing new information or surprising facts that show that the group is more diverse and complex than the stereotype suggests. Alternative narrative campaigns are more large-scale efforts that require a dedicated strategy and increased resources.

Narrative building is not an easy task, and some people are better communicators than others. Moreover, when it comes to highly emotionally charged issues like those at the base of hate speech, people’s opinions can often no longer be changed by simply offering them certain facts, they must be engaged on an emotional level as well. This is why it is important to consider working with artists and using more creative approaches.³²

“Narrative building is [...] inviting people along for the journey. It’s not about lecturing to people.”

– Zahed Amanullah, Senior Fellow, Institute for Strategic Dialogue

Several initiatives have focused on how to help religious and other actors develop powerful alternative narrative campaigns.

³⁰ Interview 3. For a full description, please see <https://getthetrollsout.org/the-project>.

³¹ For more information, please see <https://www.netzteufel.eaberlin.de>.

³² Interview 13.

The **World Association for Christian Communication (WACC)** has developed a number of resources for individuals and organizations that want to engage in countering hate speech and develop alternative narratives. WACC seeks to promote communication as a human right, advocating on an international level for equal access to communication for all people and for an open and balanced reporting in the media. Since 2018, the Association's priority issues also include digital communication and digital justice.

The project "**Breaking Down the Social Media Divides**" is a comprehensive online guide that provides materials with concise theoretical information and practical advice on how to identify and deal with hate speech online as well as how to plan and implement counter speech and alternative narrative campaigns.³³ A lesson learned by the coordinators of this project is that it is necessary for organizations to have clear strategies when planning such campaigns that ensure enough resources and calculate "back-up" plans for different scenarios. For example, if a representative of a religious community is active online or engages in a counter campaign, the institution in question needs to be ready to step up support in the case of backlashes, including providing the necessary financial resources.³⁴

The "**#ALTerHate**" campaign, which ran from 2019–2020, consisted of a number of online workshops and ongoing content provision and support on social media and other online platforms.³⁵ The project was initiated by the non-governmental organization Youth for Peace, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in cooperation with the European Interfaith Youth Network of Religions for Peace, with the aim to build capacities and offer insights about best practices in developing alternative narratives. A number of online workshops brought together religious leaders and civil society organizations, a format that generated a lot of interest and received positive reactions.

"If we are trying to counter hate speech from a religious perspective and from an interfaith perspective, it's important to really use the language of the religion that people can relate to. Like the 'Ten Commandments', that's a brilliant idea."

– E. Frljak, Programme Coordinator, Youth for Peace

A lesson learned concerns the power of language in creating meaningful

³³ For more information, see <https://www.wacceurope.org/projects/social-media-divide>.

³⁴ Interview 10.

³⁵ For an overview of the workshops offered by this project, please see <https://www.youth-for-peace.ba/en/projekti/column-1/alterhate>.

images. Often religious leaders are vague when condemning the use of hate speech. However, when speaking concretely, using words from the respective scriptures, for example, the meaning of the message is elevated. Identifying and using strong, “good words,” as a representative of the programme described it, can create a better resonance.³⁶

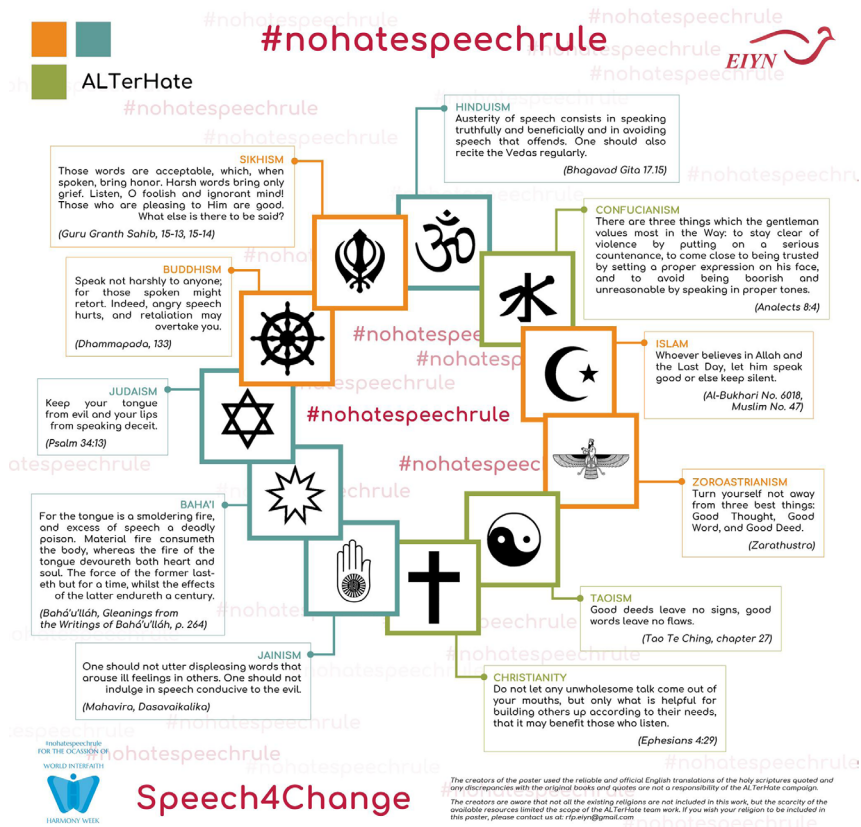


FIGURE 2: For an online campaign, the #ALTerHate group gathered statements from several religious scriptures that contained positive messages related to the use of language or positive speech. The campaign was created to counterbalance statements online about how religious scriptures contain elements of hate speech or call for violence.

On the EU level, the **We CAN Initiative** on Countering Hate Speech by the Council of Europe made a toolkit available for human rights speech, supporting organizations in creating human rights-based narratives. The materials also include exercises for self-reflection, designed to help organizations develop creative and authentic material.³⁷

Finally, the work of building narratives is not limited to mounting campaigns on social media or online platforms. Narratives are equally shaped by the actions

³⁶ Interview 4 and 5.

³⁷ For more information, see <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-speech/home>.

of individuals and organizations. Some initiatives have been able to challenge stereotypes by actively engaging in community activities. **City Sikhs** is one of the largest Sikh organizations operating across the UK, which currently has more than 8,000 members.³⁸ It is not a religious organization as such but could be best described as a religio-cultural organization. Community engagement is one of the pillars of Sikh tradition and culture, and in the 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 a number of days over the Christmas period, the local Sikh community prepared Christmas meals for them, an action that received media attention.³⁹ Over time, such initiatives are able to shape narratives on a wider level, because they shift the focus of attention to a group's positive actions in society, making it harder for hate speech actors to simplify or dehumanise certain minority groups.

//// //// //// //// //// //// //// //// Education and Training

Education is arguably the most powerful preventative tool against hate speech. Many civil society organizations active in the field of countering hate speech emphasise the importance of education in preventing and countering hate speech, and this concerns programmes for target groups of all ages, both through formal and non-formal channels.

More specifically, within the scope of this project, during the various 2021 KAICIID consultations on countering hate speech, religious actors mentioned that capacity building in *digital literacy* was often a need in religious communities. Many religious actors stated they felt overwhelmed by the need to be present online, or with the task of reacting or responding to online hate speech. Some organizations interviewed for this report also mentioned that many religious actors are not fully aware of the complexities and challenges of digital communication and that there is a need for more sensitisation and professionalisation in the area of communication.⁴⁰

Many of the organizations introduced throughout this report provide materials and guidelines aimed at building capacities in dealing with digital media and communication, such as the “Breaking Down the Social Media Divides” project by WACC Europe, or the “Get the Trolls Out!” project by the Media Diversity

³⁸ For more information, see <https://www.citysikhs.com>.

³⁹ Interview 14, see also Goddard, E. (2020). Sikh Community Cooks Hundreds of Meals for Stuck Lorry Drivers. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/uk-border-chaos-lorry-drivers-kent-sikh-meals-b1778160.html>.

⁴⁰ Interview 10.

Institute, and other organizations also providing workshops and training to improve digital media literacy.

“[Hate] speech is in itself an issue, but it has to be tackled in [context:] How do we reach trusted information? How are we educated in what we’re seeing? How do we make sure we provide a diversity of opinions? How do we support public interest media essential for information and accountability?”

– S. Speicher, Deputy General Secretary, WACC

Religious literacy shall be highlighted here as one aspect of education and training that plays an important role in countering hate speech and one that is less often discussed. It refers to both the knowledge of religion as well as one’s ability to interact with members of other religions or non-religious groups.

In the context of hate speech and the prevention of violent extremism, religious literacy is important for two reasons. On the one hand, it is important for members of general society to have religious literacy, as increased understanding of religions both in terms of traditions and current practices can curb stereotypes and prevent hate speech. On the other hand, increasing religious literacy is equally important within religious communities, in order to prevent hate speech originating from religious groups towards members of their religion, other religions or specific groups in society.

In an attempt to get a better understanding of religious literacy and its relevance for policymakers, the **All-Party Parliamentary Group “Religion in the Media”**⁴¹ in the UK conducted an inquiry with organizations working on religious matters and the media. In its report the group highlighted two important dimensions of religious literacy:

— First, a **“broad, balanced knowledge** of religions in the world today including a basic understanding of their histories, central beliefs, and practices, and the many ways in which religion intersects with wider society and influences everyday life.”⁴² This means a person possesses a basic knowl-

⁴¹ All-party parliamentary groups are informal groups of the UK House of Commons or the House of Lords that are formed by members of all parties and can involve external members.

⁴² 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/>, p. 17, emphasis by author. See also Sclafani, R. (2018). A Jewish Educational Approach to Religious Pluralism. In A. Melloni & F. Cadeddu (Eds.), *Religious Literacy, Law and History: Perspectives on European Pluralist Societies*. Abingdon: Routledge.

edge about a religion, its historic origins and the many ways in which it is practiced in everyday life.

- The second dimension concerns the “**ability to engage** successfully with religious ideas and navigate the cultural codes which define both particular religions and the wider conceptual categories of religion and belief.”⁴³ This means that a person is able to interact with members of other religions and non-denominational groups.

Religious literacy is thus not only a form of knowledge that can be taught and learned, but equally a competency that needs to be built and practiced in real life. The report includes a wealth of policy recommendations on how to increase religious literacy.⁴⁴ While this activity was geared toward media professionals, the arguments are in fact true for other professional groups as well.

Promoting religious literacy is central to the work of several initiatives interviewed in the course of this research. A project of the **Libertas Center for Interconfessional and Interreligious Dialogue** in the Ukraine, for example, has focused on training media professionals to ensure a better representation of religion in print and online media. The Center is a non-governmental organization founded in 2013. Its work concentrates on promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue to contribute to peacebuilding and understanding in the Ukraine and beyond.⁴⁵

In 2018, the Center implemented a project called the “School of Interreligious Journalism” with the goal to combat fake news and one-sided narratives on social media platforms. Both religious representatives and media professionals were able to participate in the project, which enabled joint learning and space for dialogue.⁴⁶ Such projects are needed, especially for journalists and media professionals, as the way these groups portray religions influences public opinion.

Improving religious literacy both within religious communities and for specific groups in society such as civil society practitioners, media professionals or policymakers would be a great opportunity to address a fundamental aspect of combatting hate speech.

⁴³ Ibid., emphasis by author.

⁴⁴ For more information, please see <https://twitter.com/appgreligion>.

⁴⁵ For more information on the Center’s work, please see <https://www.libertas.org.ua>, <https://www.facebook.com/libertascenter>, and 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>.

⁴⁶ Libertas Center for Interconfessional and Interreligious Dialogue (2021, June 13). Intercultural Achievement Award 2018 - Innovation. Youtube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_jr5cvcMg4.

Identity and Communication

The need to mount effective counter campaigns or develop alternative narratives also brings with it a host of questions related to religious groups' own standing and identity. The ability to speak out against hate – to speak up for one's own community – requires a certain amount of confidence and self-knowledge. Indeed, in several of the consultations held by KAICIID, religious actors explained that there is a need to promote reflection within religious groups, particularly when people are confronted with changing societal circumstances. Questions that arise are: who are we, as a religious community, in today's diverse societies?; what is our role in the specific country context?; what is our viewpoint vis-à-vis other religious communities, vis-à-vis the wider society?

Strengthening identity and coexistence

Hate speech is personal. Being targeted by hate speech or witnessing hate speech in one's own community has effects beyond the immediate experience of (online) abuse. Anti-religious hate speech in particular targets a core part of a person's identity. In the same vein, hate speech between religious groups, or even within a religious group, is often rooted in differing understandings of one's identity and traditions, or a lack of religious literacy.⁴⁷

To begin with, **Scriptural Reasoning** is a method that interreligious groups can use to jointly study texts and reflect on similarities and commonalities. The method was developed by the **British Rose Castle Foundation**. Those interested in the method can obtain a range of materials on the organization's website.⁴⁸

The Swedish interfaith organization **Amanah** describes “deepening identity and roots” as one of the core areas of their work to build trust between religious communities. To reflect on the role of different identities and traditions, they organise joint sessions for both Jewish and Muslim participants, providing a space in which community members can learn about the respective religions together, while honouring both commonalities and differences. It is precisely the differences, say the founders, that are important to address. Much interfaith work remains rather shallow or focuses overly on the commonalities. “Deepening the roots” however, also means to understand what makes one unique.⁴⁹

A similar stance is propagated by **Coexister**, a French interfaith movement founded in 2009 with the aim to contribute to peaceful coexistence in France and beyond. The movement brings together religious and non-religious youth in local groups all over the country. These groups then engage in a dialogue process

⁴⁷ UN & World Bank (2018). Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict. Last accessed on 23 August 2018 at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28337>, p. 122.

⁴⁸ For more information, please see <https://www.scripturalreasoning.org>, for more information about the Rose Castle Foundation, see <https://www.rosecastlefoundation.org/>.

⁴⁹ Interview 9; for more information, please see <https://www.amanah.se>.

that seeks to enhance understanding and joint learning. The movement states that “unity is not uniformity,” that people are different but can still learn to not feel threatened by other identities.⁵⁰

Confessional academies or other **faith-based associations** can also act as inspiring and reflexive spaces to discuss religious identity and the role of religion in greater society. Such institutions exist in many European countries for all faiths, often acting as a space for the public featuring educational or cultural events.

The **Muslim Academy of Heidelberg**, Germany, for example, organises conferences, workshops and debates that explore questions of Muslim identity and how religious institutions can interact productively with wider society. The Academy was founded out of the realisation that there is a need for a dedicated space in which the role of Islam in Germany can be discussed openly, by believers and non-believers alike.⁵¹

On a more global scale, the **Concordia Forum** has been organising retreats for “leaders from Muslim backgrounds” since 2009.⁵² The forum brings together leaders from all sectors of society, such as business, arts, non-profits, politics, etc., to offer a common space to learn and exchange their experiences of creating social change in their countries. Even though leadership is the main focus of these events –and not religion– such networks help their members reflect on the role of their backgrounds in their work and in the context of their respective societies, ultimately helping them become more knowledgeable and rooted in their identities and even use them to build positive narratives.⁵³

The above initiatives all emphasise the importance of promoting self-knowledge and self-reflection, helping religious communities to discuss the role of their identities, traditions and practices in larger society and finding a voice with which to speak to others.

Promoting Openness and Inclusion Within Religious Communities

There is a lot that religious actors can do to encourage particular attitudes of the members of their communities. To promote inclusivity, religious actors could encourage the formation of youth groups and women groups and ensure that representatives of these groups are present in decision-making circles or during official events. Several of the interviewed initiatives of this research also emphasised the importance of facilitating interactions with “outsiders” to encourage openness and help people feel more at ease in dealing with members of other faith groups or non-believers. Here, lessons learned included that such events need to be thoroughly prepared by researching the background of invited speakers and

⁵⁰ For more information, see <https://www.coexister.fr>.

⁵¹ For more information, please see <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/en/project/muslim-academies>. See also <https://www.islamakademin.se> for a similar project in Malmö, Sweden.

⁵² For more information, see <https://www.concordiaforum.com>.

⁵³ Interview 13.

if possible, having professional moderators present in order to deal with potentially difficult situations. Moreover, in some instances religious representatives felt uncomfortable or were hesitant about discussing freely with members from civil society or media or declined to participate in livestreamed events. To mitigate this, initiatives should invest time in building good relationships with all involved speakers.⁵⁴

City Sikhs' approach to organising community events is a good example of how organizations can ensure inclusivity in their cultural and educational work by creating spaces in which members of different backgrounds interact and exchange their views. For events, the rule is that usually half of the invited speakers are women and at least half of the speakers are of non-Sikh origin. Increasing the exposure of members of the Sikh minority to people of other faiths, or non-believers, promotes openness and can ultimately contribute to building better relations between different groups in society.⁵⁵

Providing Guidance on Digital Communication

One of the core activities of religious actors is to provide direction and guidance, and in a rapidly changing world, these are needed more than ever. The following two initiatives highlight a more subtle contribution to addressing hate speech. Both projects encourage their audience to think and reflect about the “big picture” – how they, as Christians, but also as human beings, should make use of language in a responsible way, particularly in online environments. They also provide guidance of how good behaviour and respecting each other’s freedom also means refraining from abusive communication online.

The idea behind the initiative “**#anstanddigital**” (translated into “digital decency” from German) is to provide a space dedicated to the reflection on what is good communication, particularly as our lives are incorporating much more online interactions. The founders – the director of the Catholic Academy of Berlin in collaboration with the Head of the cultural office of the Evangelical Church Germany – set up the initiative as a reaction to the increasing levels of hate speech that they observed in Germany, particularly on issues such as migrants and minorities. The main output of the project is a website that features reflections, a questionnaire for the reader inviting them to take part in the discussion and a media centre, featuring, for example, contributions on YouTube by prominent German figures who each discuss an aspect of digital “decency.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Interviews 4, 5, and 6.

⁵⁵ Interview 14.

⁵⁶ Interview 1; For more information, please see <https://www.anstanddigital.de>.

“Church groups, congregations, family education centres, educational institutions...have always been places whose purpose is very essentially to practice the art of communicating with each other.”

– J.H. Claussen, Cultural Office of the Evangelical Church Germany, Co-initiator of #anstanddigital

Also in Germany, the project “**EKD-Digital**” of the **Evangelical Church** offers guidance on how to navigate the digital transformation for church members and interested others. The website and accompanying publication explore different aspects of how scripture and lived religious practice could provide meaningful guidance in a time of digital change. “What could a free and responsible life in a digital society look like? [...] What can we learn from [the ten commandments] about dealing with digital media, artificial intelligence and social networks?” This is how their website introduces the topic about transitioning to a digital society. The website features ten commandments that deal with a different aspect of digital life. Each is supported by excerpts from scripture, commentaries and links to online resources and events. The ninth commandment addresses hate speech: “Ninth Commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.”⁵⁷

A similar guidance has been published by **Faith Associates** in the UK, in collaboration with **Google** and the **Institute for Strategic Dialogue**. “**A Muslim Digital Citizen’s Guide**” uses five core values from Islam to illustrate how important it is to exemplify good behaviour online, and that online behaviour has the same consequences as offline behaviour. The guide has now also been animated.⁵⁸

These projects demonstrate that religious concepts and scripture can be used to encourage reflection on good communication and the prevention of violence and hate speech online.

//// //// //// //// //// //// //// //// Engagement and Collaboration

In order to increase the impact of their work and to advocate for an improvement of policies, anti-hate speech initiatives form partnerships and collaborate across sectors. These examples of promising practices illustrate the importance of partnerships.

In some cases, to increase their engagement in society, religious actors are required to reassess their positions in relation to other actors. A staff member of the Evangelical Church in Germany explained, for example, that previously, the Church understood itself more as a state authority. Church entities would

⁵⁷ Translation by author. For more information, please see <https://www.ekd-digital.de>.

⁵⁸ For more information, see <https://faithassociates.co.uk/publications/muslim-digital-citizens-guide/>.

naturally seek cooperation with government ministries or other state authorities, or on the state or municipal level, and did not cooperate with civil society associations or NGOs. However, in the recent years there was a realisation that the Church also belongs to civil society and, as this field is growing, there was a sense that they have to position themselves more strategically by forming partnerships with smaller organizations.⁵⁹ This experience points to a changing landscape of how governance happens in several European societies today, and how policies come about. Religious communities and institutions thus need to situate themselves in this new landscape.

Building Successful Partnerships

The Center for Cultural Dialogue, based in Zagreb, Croatia, is a non-profit organization that seeks to promote tolerance and respect in society by promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue.⁶⁰ Many of the current programmes focus on migrants and refugees, who are increasingly subjected to intolerance and hate speech in Croatia. The organization is not confessional itself but maintains close ties with the Islamic community in Croatia. One of the board members of the organization is the Head Imam of the Islamic community of Croatia.

Over the years, the Center has established exceptionally good working relations with the authorities as well as other religious communities in the municipalities where it is active. Several factors have helped them:

- Having, on the state level, a memorandum of understanding that recognises Islam as an official religion in Croatia
- Receiving support from religious leaders, particularly the Head Imam, in approaching potential partners
- Proactively speaking up and engaging in city-level activities⁶¹

Moreover, as a representative explained, the Center puts a lot of effort in building relationships with all political actors to ensure they act, and are perceived, as being as politically neutral as possible, which in turn also helps in building a positive reputation.⁶²

The experience of the **“NEVER AGAIN” Association**, a Polish civil society organization, illustrates that when it comes to politically sensitive topics such as countering hate speech, an organization may require a long period to develop successful collaborations. Established in 1996, “NEVER AGAIN” has been active in monitoring, training and advocacy against racism and discrimination, closely

⁵⁹ Interview 1.

⁶⁰ For more information, please see <https://www.ccd.hr>.

⁶¹ Interview 7.

⁶² Ibid.

working with minority groups in the country, including religious communities.⁶³ Many of the organizations' successes in countering hate speech in Poland derive from sheer perseverance. For example, for many years the organization tried to persuade a corporation that hosts a large consumer-to-consumer sales website to remove Nazi artefacts posted by private sellers. It was only after ten years that the corporation finally agreed to do so. From this point a working relationship has developed, in which members of the "NEVER AGAIN" Association flag such artefacts when they appear and the corporation swiftly removes them from the websites.⁶⁴

Strengthening Cross-Sector Collaboration

To really influence policy and contribute to wider societal efforts in countering hate speech, organizations need to form successful collaborations. This requires more planning and resources, as well as skilful coordination.

Collaboration across sectors is a central element of the **Facing Facts** initiative's work on improving the monitoring of and responses to hate crimes and hate speech. The initiative provides learning and capacity development training for law enforcement personnel, people working in authorities, civil society actors and other relevant actors. Cross-sector collaboration and coordination is equally critical in the programme's training and advocacy activities. According to the representatives of the initiative, some of the most important aspects of building and maintaining successful partnerships are more intangible. They include, for example:

- Having a well-defined, shared goal among all partners
- Building a strong foundation of the partnership which requires some elements of trust-building
- Maintaining an open-minded and learning oriented atmosphere that allows for mutual exchange

A recent report contains a separate section on best practices of establishing successful partnerships.⁶⁵ In this spirit, the newly established Facing Facts Network has started to transform understandings of and responses to hate crime and hate speech in Europe and beyond, with the shared aim of securing fundamental rights for all.

Finally, the **Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI)** is a good example of how civil society organizations and technology companies could work together.

⁶³ For more information, see <https://www.nigdywiecej.org/en/>.

⁶⁴ Interview 8. This is also noteworthy as many organizations in the field of hate speech see themselves confronted with the need to report about "outputs" and "impact" for funders. One interviewee reported, for example, that a donor remarked that there was still hate speech after the conclusion of a project. Initiatives carrying out anti-hate speech projects need to be able to explain why their work is nevertheless important.

⁶⁵ Interview 2; see also <https://www.facingfacts.eu/principles-and-practices-of-connection/>; for the full report, see <https://www.facingfacts.eu/european-report/>.

Set up in 2016 by **Facebook**, the OCCI's aim is to support and strengthen the capacity of civil society to deal with hate speech targeted at them and mount countercampaigns on social media platforms and beyond.⁶⁶

The above initiatives demonstrate that while considerable effort is necessary to form and maintain successful collaborations, more impact can be accomplished in cooperation. Ultimately, in the light of an increasing professionalisation and collaboration among malicious actors spreading hate speech and misinformation, it becomes clear that in order to counter and prevent hate speech on different levels, all actors in society need to increase their efforts and contribute to collaborative efforts.



Building Cohesive Societies

At the broadest level, anti-hate speech initiatives focus on the context in which hate speech occurs, seeking to address societal root causes and other enabling factors for hateful behaviour.

The following initiatives focus on trust building and cooperative approaches on the societal level to reach a better understanding of hate speech and find responses to it. Hate speech is situational and related to the specific social, cultural, economic, and political context. This unique “mix” differs among locations and requires preventative actors to engage proactively with the local surroundings.

Increasing Trust Between Religious Communities

A range of dialogue programmes have been set up to increase the understanding and prevent and mitigate hate speech between religious communities, as well as between religious and non-religious groups.

In the UK, the **Christian Muslim Forum** was initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury to improve interreligious relations. Its main aims are to discuss the difficult topics that may lead to hostilities between the two religions and to promote joint activities. Among the topics of discussion are free speech, hate crimes, or anti-Muslim or anti-Christian sentiments among religious communities.⁶⁷

The Swedish organization **Amanah**, which describes itself as the “Muslim Jewish Partnership of Trust,” was founded by Imam Salahuddin Barakat and Rabbi Moshe David HaCohen in Malmö. The aim of the organization is to increase trust in society and to tackle discrimination and violent extremism of

⁶⁶ For more information, see <https://counterspeech.fb.com/en/initiatives/online-civil-courage-initiative-occi/>, see also Gatewood, C., Boyer, I., Guerin, C., & Fourel, Z. (2020). *Fostering Civic Responses to Online Harms: Learnings from the Online Civil Courage Initiative and the Online Civic Fund*. Available at: <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/fostering-civic-responses-to-online-harms/>.

⁶⁷ For more information, please see <https://www.facebook.com/ChrisMusForum/>.

all kinds. The organizational set-up is noteworthy; it is a non-profit organization in its own right, but both founders remain the official representatives of their religious communities in the city and thus also speak for their religious institutions. A consequence of that is that they need to regularly consult with their religious communities before making official statements.⁶⁸

The organization's work consists of activities that seek to improve the relationship between the two religious communities, as well as build trust between religious groups and the wider society. Activities include:

- Joint visits to educational institutions, conferences and general events to discuss the two religious leaders' work and common vision and encourage the participants to stand up internally against discrimination
- Speaking out and taking a stance on preventing or diffusing violence or tensions in the city, especially standing up for the other religious group when it is attacked
- Strengthening the intercommunal relationship between the Muslim and Jewish communities by organising joint study sessions and other activities
- Proactively speaking out about discrimination to the wider society (being available for media inquiries etc.)

By way of these activities, the organization has become known throughout Malmö and beyond and the founders are now regularly contacted to speak about topics such as discrimination, minorities and religious rights. Moreover, the fact that the two communities are working closely together creates a strong message for the wider society and raises awareness about the different forms of discrimination that exist throughout Swedish society.⁶⁹

Cities as Actors in Countering Hate Speech

Over the last years, cities have emerged as innovative actors in the fight against extremism and radicalisation. As distinct geographical entities, cities are a practical and meaningful context for cross-sector collaboration that allows stakeholder to come together and work on very concrete challenges. City-level stakeholders – municipal authorities, civil society, religious actors, local businesses, etc. – are uniquely positioned to combat hate speech as they operate on a level that allows direct engagement with both groups that perpetrate harm and groups that are affected by harm.

The Municipal Plan against Islamophobia, developed and implemented by the **Barcelona City Council**, is a good example of a city-level collaborative effort against discrimination and hate speech. It engaged religious leaders and

⁶⁸ Interview 9. For more information, please see <https://www.amanah.se>.

⁶⁹ Interview 9.

faith-based communities from the outset of their programme.

This city-wide initiative was implemented from 2017–2019 and employed multiple measures against discrimination that included preventing and countering anti-Muslim hate speech. Based on the observation that Muslims in Barcelona were subject to increasing levels of Islamophobia, the plan was developed based on a broad consultative process. It integrated a wide range of activities to reach three overarching goals:

- Raising awareness about Islamophobia as a form of discrimination by supporting Muslim communities in informing them about anti-Muslim hate speech and crimes, improving data gathering and supporting initiatives in schools
- Countering Islamophobic prejudices and stereotypes by bolstering intra-city networks against rumours, engaging people from religious communities in media and information campaigns, and promoting education and mediation initiatives
- Strengthening reporting and victim support by increasing coordination among institutions, furthering legal actions against discrimination and fighting discrimination against Muslims in public services⁷⁰

The initiative was viewed as positive in terms of increasing collaboration and improving the relationship between municipal and religious actors. However, it has not been formally evaluated with regard to engaging ordinary citizens.⁷¹

Exchange Between Cities

The following initiatives seek to encourage and enhance cooperation and exchange between cities on the issues of fighting extremism and increasing safety of citizens.

Based in Copenhagen, the non-governmental organization **Nordic Safe Cities** was initiated by the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2016, partly as a response to the 2015 terrorist shootings in Copenhagen. The organization functions as a coordinator of a network of cities, linking more than 40 cities across northern Europe on safety-related issues, such as preventing violent extremism and fighting hate speech online and offline. The network facilitates the collaboration between municipal leaders, civil society and law enforcement, who come together to work on joint projects and exchange best practices. According to the director of the organization, adaptation of good practices across cities can be realised relatively easily as the Scandinavian countries share similar languages and cultures and cities face similar challenges. While religious actors are not

⁷⁰ Interview 11; see also Ajuntament de Barcelona (2017). Putting Everything into Combatting Islamophobia. Available at: https://www.ciutatrefugi.barcelona/en/noticia/infobarcelonaenputting-everything-into-combatting-islamophobia_590042.

⁷¹ Interview 11.

explicitly mentioned in the programme's materials, most of the participating city actors have well-established relationships with local religious communities and collaborate often on prevention activities. The initiative maintains a website that showcases how member cities are tackling these problems.⁷²

The **Strong Cities Network** was launched in 2015 by the UN General Assembly and is managed by the **Institute for Strategic Dialogue**. Its goals are to support cities in their responses against “hate, polarisation and extremism in all its forms.”⁷³ The January 2021 conference featured a talk by His Holiness the Dalai Lama about compassionate leadership, providing an example of how religious leaders can play an important and inspirational role in such fora.⁷⁴

The **European Coalition of Cities against Racism (ECCAR) set up by UNESCO**, maintains an informative website that provides hands-on advice on how to strengthen a city's efforts to combat racism and xenophobia. Many of these best practices are also relevant for the fight against hate speech and ensuing radicalisation.⁷⁵

Focusing on a city or other sub-national entity may appear to be an innovative and pragmatic approach in countries where populism and polarisation are employed by politicians on the national level. In practice, however, this is more complicated. As the “NEVER AGAIN” Association reports from Poland, for example, political pressure from the national level may be too strong for city actors. The organization had encouraged all mayors of major cities in the country to join ECCAR in order to tackle increasing hate and polarisation, yet only one city joined the network.⁷⁶

There is much room to highlight the important role of religious actors in city-level initiatives. The above examples do not elaborate on the role of religious actors in their publicly available materials, but the separate case studies reveal that religious actors and faith communities are often deeply involved in the activities on the ground.

⁷² Interview 12; for more information, see <https://nordicsafecities.org/>.

⁷³ For more information, see <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org>.

⁷⁴ Strong Cities Network (2021). A Conversation on Kind and Compassionate Leadership with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Available at <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/a-conversation-with-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama/>.

⁷⁵ See www.eccar.info; for a detailed documentation such as a 10-Point plan <https://www.eccar.info/en/10-point-action-plan> or a toolkit for equality: <https://www.eccar.info/en/eccar-toolkit-equality>.

⁷⁶ Interview 8.

Conclusion

The initiatives introduced in this report all demonstrate ways in which religious actors, and organizations working closely with religions, can effectively prevent and counter hate speech.

Responses to hate speech cover a wide range of activities organised by diverse groups. On the one hand, there are small and explorative projects, such as #anstanddigital, which was pulled together by two representatives of religious institutions who encourage reflection on what it means to communicate well, and how ordinary citizens can fight hate speech. On the other end of the spectrum, programmes like Facing Facts have been running for a decade or more, steadily expanding their educational and training work with many different partners worldwide. Youth-led initiatives like the #ALTerHate group focus primarily on social media, where they explore how to counter negative stereotypes and create a more balanced discussion. And religious leaders such as the founders of Amanah are operating “on the ground,” directly with communities, working tirelessly to build trust between different groups in their city and beyond. To address a complex problem such as hate speech, this range of initiatives is needed, as each approach, each initiative, addresses a different aspect of hate speech.

The consultations held by KAICIID in 2021 and the interviews conducted for this mapping study have also revealed a number of open questions that should be addressed in future research efforts. To begin with, many interviewees have mentioned that there is a need for more digitalisation among civil society, and for civil society actors but also law enforcement to increase their presence online, where a lot of hate speech happens in unstructured environments. Second, and more specifically, on the role of religious actors, several respondents have shown concern about how much influence religious actors can really have, particularly in societies with large numbers of non-believers. This points again to the importance of cross-sector collaborations and how this could increase the reach of religious actors and make their work more visible to the wider society. Third, some interviewees also mentioned the need to bridge the gap between religious leaders, who often belong to older generations, and younger community members, asking how religious leaders can increase their relevance among the younger generations. Finally, others have mentioned that in addition to supporting religious actors in countering hate speech, there is also a need to address practical issues, such as how to ensure the safety and security of religious communities and places of worship.

To conclude, while the EU, European governments and civil society organizations have significantly increased their efforts to combat hate speech and hate crimes, the interviews and consultations have shown that still more efforts are necessary to address these issues. Ultimately, this is a task for all parts of society, as the effects of increasing hate speech will not only be felt by the groups that are directly targeted, but also by the wider society.

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Selected Online Resources

Guidelines and Toolkits

Council of Europe, European Union: We CAN for Human Rights Speech
<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-speech/home>
Toolkit for human rights speech

Dangerous Speech Project: Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide
<https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/>

European Coalition of Cities against Racism (ECCAR): The ECCAR Toolkit for Equality
<https://www.eccar.info/en/eccar-toolkit-equality>
Chapter 11: Combatting Racism and Hate speech: Building a Non-racist Society

Facebook: Counterspeech Resources
<https://counterspeech.fb.com/en/resources/>
Includes information packs from the Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI)

International Centre for Policy Advocacy: Reframing Migration Narratives Toolkit
<https://www.narrativechange.org/>

OHCHR: Faith for Rights framework and #Faith4Rights Toolkit
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/faith4rights-toolkit/Pages/Index.aspx>

sCAN project: Platforms, Experts, Tools: Specialised Cyber-Activists Network (2018-2020): Resources and publications
<http://scan-project.eu/resources-and-publications/#AnnualReport2>
Includes Advanced Monitoring Training Manual

World Association for Christian Communication: Breaking Down the Social Media Divides: A Guide for Individuals and Communities to Address Hate Online
<http://www.wacceurope.org/projects/social-media-divide/>

Reports and Documentation of Best Practices

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religion in the Media (2021). Learning to Listen: Inquiry into Religious Literacy in Print and Broadcast Media.

<https://www.media-diversity.org/resources/inquiry-into-religious-literacy-in-print-and-broadcast-media-report/>

Evangelische Akademie zu Berlin (2019) "From #HateSpeech to #Hopespeech: Netzteufel. Brochure, initiative "Netzteufel"

<https://www.netzteufel.eaBerlin.de/>

Facing all the Facts Report

<https://www.facingfacts.eu/>

Institute for Strategic Dialogue Youth Innovation Labs programme report

<https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/youth-innovation-labs-a-model-for-preventing-and-counteracting-violent-extremism/>

Annex

Methodology

This report draws on literature research, interview data and the findings of a number of consultations that were organised by KAICIID in 2021. The research took place between July and September 2021.

Together with the European Council for Religious Leaders and Religions for Peace Europe, KAICIID held an expert consultation in April 2021 and four regional consultations between April and June 2021.⁷⁷ The talks were supported by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and explored the role of interreligious, intercultural and cross-sector collaborations in countering hate speech. During the consultations, religious leaders and representatives of faith-based organizations expressed a need for a better understanding of successful strategies in countering hate speech in order to improve their efforts in preventing and responding to such harmful behaviour.

This study combined desk research with gathering information through interviews of selected initiatives across Europe. First, to provide an overview of the recent developments in the field of countering hate speech in the European context, available academic and practitioner literature was consulted. The desk research was complemented by an analysis of the video recordings of the four regional consultations organised by KAICIID in June 2021 to assess regional differences as well as the needs of religious actors regarding countering hate speech.

Second, to gain a deeper insight into best practices and challenges of countering hate speech in different regions of Europe, 14 interviews were conducted with either religious leaders, or representatives of faith-based organizations, civil society organizations or municipal authorities that work closely with religious actors. The initiatives were selected for variety, so that interviewees represented the wide range of countering hate speech work. Featured initiatives also ranged widely in the size of the organization, as well as the topic areas and levels of intervention (e.g., from policy level to local level). Interviews were semi-structured and reflective in nature and were held with up to three representatives per organization via videocall. Conversations were recorded for analysis purposes where interviewees gave their consent.

Due to the explorative nature of the research and the small number of interviews, the research material was analysed using a qualitative lens. This means that the primary emphasis of the data collection and analysis was to get a deeper understanding of the interviewees' perspectives and the topics that were relevant to them,

⁷⁷ See also KAICIID. (2021). Expert Consultation on Countering Hate Speech through Interfaith Cooperation and Multi-Stakeholder Partnership. Last accessed on 4 December 2021 at: <https://www.kaiciid.org/publications-resources/expert-consultation-countering-hate-speech-findings>.

rather than trying to make more general statements or draw regional or other comparisons. For the data analysis, transcripts were analysed individually for categories. Findings and categories were then compared across the rest of the dataset and with the available best practices literature. The resulting categories informed the structure and thematic grouping of the findings section of this report.



List of Interviews

| | | |
|--------------|--|-------------------|
| Interview 1 | Dr. Johann Hinrich Claussen, Co-Initiator #anstanddigital, Kulturbüro des Rates der EKD, Germany | 12 August 2021 |
| Interview 2 | Melissa Sonnino, Facing Facts Coordinator, and Julia Mozer, Communication & Policy Officer, CEJI - A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, Belgium | 13 August 2021 |
| Interview 3 | Giulia Dessí, Project Manager, Media Diversity Institute, United Kingdom | 16 August 2021 |
| Interview 4 | Emina Frljak, Educational Programmes Coordinator, Youth for Peace, Bosnia and Herzegovina | 18 August 2021 |
| Interview 5 | Lejla Hasandedic-Dapo, Europe CC Liaison Officer, United Religions Initiative, Turkey | 19 August 2021 |
| Interview 6 | Taras Dzyubansky, Director, Libertas Center for Interconfessional and Interreligious Dialogue, Ukraine | 20 August 2021 |
| Interview 7 | Nejra Kadić Meškić, Director, Center for Cultural Dialogue, Croatia | 23 August 2021 |
| Interview 8 | Dr. Rafal Pankowski, Co-Founder, 'NEVER AGAIN' Association, Poland | 23 August 2021 |
| Interview 9 | Imam Salahuddin Barakat and Rabbi Moshe David HaCohen, Founders; Sara Glaser, Chief of Office, Amanah, Sweden | 25 August 2021 |
| Interview 10 | Sara Speicher, Deputy General Secretary, World Association for Christian Communication, United Kingdom | 25 August 2021 |
| Interview 11 | Ana Isabel Rodriguez Basanta, Head of the Citizens' Rights Department, Barcelona City Council, Spain | 13 September 2021 |
| Interview 12 | Jeppe Albers, Founder and Director, Nordic Safe Cities, Denmark | 15 September 2021 |
| Interview 13 | Zahed Amanullah, Resident Senior Fellow, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, United Kingdom | 16 September 2021 |
| Interview 14 | Jasvir Singh OBE, Founder and Chair, City Sikhs Foundation, United Kingdom | 16 September 2021 |



About the Author

Friederike Mieth is a researcher and consultant working on conflict transformation, social cohesion and active citizenship. She is co-founder of the consultancy Reflectory and holds a PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology and Peace and Conflict Studies.



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