

Combating Hate Crime in the EU

10th Anniversary Celebratory Dinner of the AJC Transatlantic Institute

19 February 2014

Cecilia Malmström: "Ladies and Gentlemen. Let me start by congratulating the Transatlantic Institute on its 10th birthday. It is an honour to be here tonight and talk about hate crimes in Europe. Hate crimes attack the core of what we believe in as Europeans. They undermine values that we hold dear, values we have enshrined in the Treaty on European Union: respect for human dignity, freedom, equality, and human rights. Each and every time a hate crime is committed, these values are put in danger.

Through my entire political life, I have worked to protect those values, and to promote human rights. As part of that work, I attended an event early this year in the European Parliament commemorating the atrocities committed at Auschwitz. We were shown a very moving black and white film on the horrors of the Warsaw ghetto. Later that evening we saw a film showing young men marching through the streets, harassing, attacking, and screaming at Roma people. But that film was in colour. It was from Hungary, today. It is not just in Hungary that we see these problems. Hate crime is becoming increasingly visible all over Europe. Last summer, far-right extremists beat to death a young man in Paris, solely because he was gay.

More recently, Greece was shocked by the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, a hip hop artist who campaigned against the rise of extremism. I could go on. But these examples are sufficient to remind us that the problem of hate crime is not about to disappear. In fact it is growing, and there is still a lot of work to be done to address it. These are not isolated incidents.

Across Europe, prejudice and hatred are motivating criminal behaviour. We have seen the development of Islamophobic, anti-Semitic and white supremacist ideology in far-right groups. These groups are also anti-democratic, intolerant, and violent. They are divisive, using one another to create suspicion and hatred between communities. These groups are behind a mounting wave of harassment and violence targeting asylum seekers, immigrants, ethnic minorities and sexual minorities in many European countries.

This wave of violence has been documented in surveys and reports, by the Fundamental Rights Agency and others. These reports show some chilling facts: for example, in 2011 almost one in every five sub-Saharan African was physically assaulted, harassed or threatened on account of their ethnic origin. Roma populations suffer similar levels of abuse. And around 10% of North African and Turkish people reported being the victim of crimes with a racist motive in the same period.

Over the past five years, around one in four lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans- or intersex people have been attacked or threatened with violence. The recent report by the FRA on discrimination experienced by these groups shows the impact that intolerance and abuse has on their everyday lives: over half of the respondents feel they have to hide their sexual orientation in public places for fear of assault, abuse or discrimination. Anti-Semitic hate crime was experienced by one in every four Jewish people responding to a recent survey, while every second Jewish person responding feared becoming the victim of a hate-crime. In countries that collect reliable data on such hate crimes, one sees high levels of anti-Semitic incidents.

It is not just in the streets that these minorities face abuse. Online tools like chatrooms and social media is a force for good when countering intolerance and discrimination. But these tools can also be hijacked to deliver messages of hate. Hate crimes have their roots in intolerance and ignorance. I am therefore very concerned that we are not just seeing more hate crime being committed. We are also seeing a shift in attitudes towards minorities. During the last decade, attitudes towards Muslims, Jews, and Roma worsened, according to the European Values Study. The same is true of attitudes towards immigrants.

This trend is playing into the hands of populist parties. We have already seen a neo-Nazi party enter the parliament of an EU Member State. All over the EU, populist parties are gaining ground using rhetoric which is harmful to minorities. At the same time, mainstream political parties often fail to counter this populist shift. Politicians are no longer so willing to speak about the positive roles played by immigrants in European society. The benefits of diversity are clear. The fact that Europe needs migration to address its demographic challenge is equally clear.

I am concerned by the lack of political courage and leadership on these issues. Rather than defend the contributions made by migrants and minorities in the EU, politicians too often join populist parties in blaming minorities for strains on their social security systems, for problems in their healthcare systems or for high unemployment. Some leading politicians have been more directly xenophobic. Before he left office, Silvio Berlusconi told his country that 'a reduction in foreigners in Italy means fewer people to swell the ranks of criminals.' And when a far-right MP in the Hungarian parliament called for a register of Jews to be drawn up, that country's leadership took quite some time to jump in to condemn the remarks.

Hate crimes are a growing problem. It is time for the EU and its Member States to act firmly against it. Many members of the European Parliament are with us here tonight. The European Parliament has long been a strong voice in the struggle against intolerance and prejudice. It has stressed the need for more work to promote respect for fundamental rights, to make hate crime visible, and to condemn those who stand by while hate crimes are committed. The examples of hate crimes I have mentioned already are drawn from all over Europe.

The problem of hate crime is not limited to a few EU Member States. It is one that affects us all, no matter where we are from or where we live and work. The EU therefore has an important role to play in addressing it. This EU involvement has to start with clear, strong political leadership. Hate crime is an issue which deserves political involvement at the highest level to bring home the message that it is not acceptable, anywhere in the EU. But political statements and declarations are of course not enough. They have to be translated into concrete actions with a real impact.

Let me give you just a few examples of what the EU is already doing, and where I believe that more can be done. The action has to start by prevention: the EU and Member States must act to prevent intolerance turning into violent hate crime. This is why the Commission set up the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network in 2011.

The Network of more than 700 experts from across Europe supports the Member States in countering violent extremism. It has done work for example on the use of the internet to prevent violent intolerance and on how to encourage young people to think critically about bigoted

material. The Network is closely engaged with civil society, which has a crucial role to play in this area.

The Commission will continue to support civil society and support member states to build up capacity to address those issues. In parallel with this work preventive work, the Commission supports activities to raise awareness on the rights and obligations of citizens, and we provide assistance for the capacity-building to national equality bodies. We also fund activities which seek to preserve the memory of the mass violations of human rights during the period of Nazism and Stalinism.

The Commission will increase its financial support for such remembrance projects in the years to come. We also have important EU legislation in place to counter some hate crimes. The Framework Decision on racism and xenophobia adopted from 2008 obliges Member States to criminalise offenses based on race, colour, descent, religion or ethnic or national origin. It is for Member States to investigate individual allegations of hate crimes. And it is for their national courts to determine whether offences are in fact hate crimes. We are living in a time of austerity, and budgets are squeezed. But all Member States have a responsibility to ensure that this legislation is transposed, and that their authorities and courts have sufficient means to follow up reports of hate crimes.

The Commission will come back to this later in the year, when it will present a report on how the Member States implement the Framework Decision. That said, EU agencies – like Europol and Eurojust – can assist Member States when they investigate and prosecute hate crime. This is particularly important in the field of cyber-hate. The European Cybercrime Centre at Europol is working closely with Member States to assess how to counter hate crimes committed using or facilitated by online tools.

The Centre will report early next year on the results of its work in this and related areas of cybercrime. One big problem is that many victims do not report the crimes against them to the police because they do not feel anything will happen as a result. Others keep silent for fear of a negative reaction from law enforcement agencies. This points to a lack of trust in police forces by minority groups who are victims of hate crimes. The EU can and should assist Member States in building that trust. To start with, I hope that Member States will implement the new EU Victims' Rights Directive without delay.

The training of officials and access to victim support that the Directive calls for will hopefully result in more victims to come forward and report hate crimes. Now, let me conclude. The concrete steps I have just mentioned will help us prevent and fight hate crime, to some extent, in the short to medium term. But in the longer term, they will not be sufficient. We need to ask how we can reverse the trends towards intolerance in the EU. We must think about how to protect our founding values in the face of hardship, demographic change, and pressure on resources resulting from climate change. Addressing these issues now will help us to prevent hate crimes in the future. But basically, it all boils down to leadership. That has to be shown at all levels, from grassroots organisations all the way up to heads of state.

The upcoming EP elections are likely to put focus on many of the values we cherish in the European Union. Strong political forces will put the values of an open and tolerant Europe into question. I hope we all will have the strength to stand up and take that debate. Thank you for your attention.