

## Short reflection on hate speech

Today in the era of new media we witness outburst of hate speech. Social media and various other forms of online interaction and communication provided opportunity for people to connect more easily, to share their messages and thoughts, basically to become media themselves and from pure media consumers, become media producers. News and information now “travel” much easier and faster. So online space obviously can be used for hatred and hateful messages, but it also can be used to spread positive messages and that is why we need to learn and be able to recognize and react properly to hate speech and then think of the ways how to create an alternative to it.

There is no universal definition of hate speech, but there are several definitions that can help us to understand this phenomenon in more depth. When I facilitate workshops with young people on topic of hate speech and how to counter it effectively, I always give them several definitions and discuss with them what “rings a bell” to them in each of the given definitions. I mostly use these two definitions: “The term hate speech is understood 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” (*United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, 2019: 2*); “The term ‘hate speech’ shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin”(*Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, Recommendation No. (97) 20*).

I really like to dissect these two with my participants in discussions through examples that clearly present hate speech, those that carry hidden hate speech messages and messages that are actually classified as freedom of speech even though they might sound offensive to someone (such as criticizing religious practices).

Besides that, I always like to emphasize two things to my participants:

1. While all hate speech is potentially dangerous, not all hate speech is equally dangerous. It is important to recognise its diverse forms and degrees, as well as to consider its broader societal context. For example, a hateful comment posted by a user in a small, closed group will not have the same impact as a comment shared by a politician with thousands of followers. Understanding the different degrees of hate speech is critical for identifying the strategy that will work best in a given situation. In some cases, education and awareness raising are key. In others, reporting to social media platforms or even the police may be in order.
2. While not all instances of hate speech lead to hate crimes, all hate crimes involve previous instances of hate speech. In the worst scenarios, when hate speech and hate crimes are left unchecked, situations can degenerate still further and lead to crimes against humanity and genocide. That was the case in Nazi Germany, in the former Yugoslavia, and in Rwanda: in these places, the target groups were first vilified, denigrated, and then dehumanised in the press, by politicians, and by the broader society.

This information I have found in very well written guide called *“Breaking Down the Social Media Divides”*, published by WACC Europe. You can find this guide on their website and download it for free.

All in all, I think hate speech is extremely dangerous if left unaddressed and there are so many different initiatives aimed at countering it and creating an alternative to it. I think we just need to be persistent, more connected, and definitely louder than those spreading hatred. If online spaces can be used to spread hate messages, then definitely they can be used to raise awareness about it, but also to spread messages of hope, understanding and empathy. The space is there, and we just need to “occupy” it.