

The Problem of Identity-Based Violence

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A groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance, violent misogyny, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia is rising around the world. Europe is not immune to this challenge. Reports of physical and verbal attacks towards migrants and refugees are no longer isolated incidences, instead they are becoming frequent.

Europe is facing a challenge of promoting and maintaining harmonious coexistence both within and at its borders. Immigrants and refugees continue to test the capability of European countries to uphold fundamental rights and freedoms for all. These groups of people continue to suffer humiliation and dehumanisation.

At the same time, Europe's historical contributions to overseas development and human rights are being questioned, threatening not just the post-1945 hard won progress towards a more equal, multilateral world, but also its citizens, and those who cross borders to seek sanctuary on the continent.

The demonisation of immigrants by many of Europe's political leaders and commentators, and some sections of the public, has neither attracted widespread outrage nor condemnation.

Instead, politicians seem to exacerbate such attacks with hateful rhetoric. In many countries in Europe, an ultranationalist resurgence is legitimising hatred, racism and violence, threatening the safety of groups in Europe, those seeking sanctuary within its borders, and around the world.

What is presented as rational sovereigntist policy, centred on the protection of 'borders', deliberately disguises its racist and nationalist connotations. In fact, these leaders deny the problem: their racism is an 'invention' by its critics. In the real world, these attacks are manifestations of racist violence.

In one country, the government's anti-immigration drive has been linked to a significant increase in violence towards immigrants, including threats, attacks on minors and murder. For example, a senior government official was quoted in the media calling for a 'mass cleansing' of immigrants, street by street, with force, if necessary.

While its manifestations may look different, identity-based violence is a challenge from which no country is immune.

To prevent the further harming of innocent people, we need a resilient Europe that defends civil society, the rule of law and stands up for the universality of human rights.

The actions of those in power matter; but civil society is also crucial in the prevention of atrocity crimes. Vibrant civil societies with authority to create civic spaces for the resolution of disputes, combined with civil society actors aligned with peace, stability and economic well-being are crucial – yet often overlooked – sources of resilience. The building of societies resilient to atrocity crimes involves paying attention to the roles of non-State actors. These actors push back when politicians go too far.

More moderate politicians need to be “speaking out” but so too does Europe’s civil society.

We need to bring an end to this cynical discourse. Identity-based violence, from hate crime to violent extremism, starts always with small actions and language.

The Holocaust did not start with the gas chambers. It started with hate speech. Hate is not innate. It is not something we are born with, but something we learn. Something we are taught.

The UN Charter was drafted after the world had witnessed genocide on an industrial scale, when hate speech against Jews, Roma, LGBT groups, political dissidents, disabled people, culminated into the Holocaust. Almost 75 years on, we are in danger of forgetting these lessons. Recognizing the risks associated with hate speech, the United Nations Secretary-General has launched the ‘UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech’ in June 2019 to identify, prevent and counter hate speech.

Europe should be proud of its robust and varied civil society that at its best nurtures a plurality of different views and defends the right of groups to hold and express alternative perspectives while protecting the population from hate speech and incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence.

Europe can and should be a global leader in protecting populations from the threats of identity-based violence, including atrocity crimes. This responsibility to protect people from these crimes begins at national level, including at state borders, and extends around the world. This responsibility is first and foremost a responsibility to prevent. It’s time for Europe’s politicians and people to take that responsibility.