

Press Release

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Desecrations of cemeteries are hate crimes that exacerbate intolerance

Strasbourg, 30.11.2010 - Every second day a cemetery is desecrated in France. Acts of profanation, such as the destructions of tombs and sprayed hate messages on religious and other symbolic places, are on the rise in Europe, says the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, in his latest Human Rights [Comment](#) published today. This is not just an issue of serious concern for the respect of religious freedom – these are unacceptable hate crimes that increase intolerance and suspicion.

In recent months, desecrations of Muslim, Jewish, Christian Orthodox and Catholic cemeteries have occurred in a number of European countries, including the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Poland, Russia and Turkey.

In July 2010 the tomb of Irena Sendlerowa in a cemetery in Warsaw was desecrated and anti-Semitic words sprayed on it. Irena Sendlerowa was a Polish heroine who rescued around 2 500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. In August 10 gravestones were smashed in a Muslim cemetery at Komotini in north-eastern Greece, where an ethnic Turk minority lives. And last October 76 graves in the Greek Orthodox cemetery of Panagia on the Turkish island of Gökçeada were vandalised.

These are just a few examples. In France alone 485 cemeteries and other religious places were desecrated between January and September 2010. Such acts of disrespect occur in almost all Council of Europe member states. These hate crimes are urgent human rights issues.

Risk of reprisals if impunity is allowed

The European Convention on Human Rights protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right encompasses the protection of religious buildings and sites from unlawful damage. However, some national authorities see these acts as "low social harms" that need not receive priority in terms of investigation and prosecution. This is a wrong choice.

Although the offenders might be difficult to identify and apprehend, they should not be allowed to gain a feeling of impunity. Without proper investigation and judicial repercussions, the risk of tension, fear and reprisals among communities is high.

Desecrations are often accompanied by racist messages, which aim a heavy blow at tolerance and pluralism in Europe. Such offences are not just criminal – they are expressions of utmost intolerance.

Prevention of hate crimes is a political priority

The best way to combat ignorance and fear is to inform and educate, from a very early age. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has developed a number of very useful *General Policy Recommendations*, including those on [the fight against Anti-Semitism](#) and [discrimination against Muslims](#).

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Democratic leaders have a vital role to play in promoting tolerance and open-mindedness and by always firmly and publicly denouncing hate crimes and hate language.

The French Minister of Interior Brice Hortefeux informed me in an exchange of [letters](#) that he had made a special demand that the police investigate such crimes. He has also recommended that video surveillance cameras should be installed in places that risk being attacked. These are commendable actions.

Also, both the Greek and the Turkish governments swiftly condemned the desecrations of the cemeteries in their respective countries. Another inspiring example is the Mayor of Strasbourg who, following a number of desecrations of cemeteries and other hate crimes in Alsace, launched a [public appeal](#) to stop racism, intolerance and xenophobia.

Politicians who lead by example make a great difference.

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