

Joining forces to Communicate the Equality and Diversity Message

ECRI annual Seminar with Equality Bodies

Summary and Conclusions from Seminar September 2020¹

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It was a happy coincidence that the 2020 Seminar of ECRI and Equality Bodies on Communicating the Equality and Diversity Message began on World News Day. But it was no coincidence that the Seminar was being held at that time because this period has seen the growth of racist, xenophobic and LGBTI-phobic hate speech, exacerbated by the decline of traditional media and the explosion of new social media and digital communication. And this has been intensified by the worldwide, deadly Coronavirus (COVID-19), which has given rise to a plethora of conspiracy theories linked to racist attitudes.

ECRI's Seminar was particularly well timed as all the organisations involved, although they may speak to somewhat different audiences, are acutely aware of the need to combat hate speech and divisive populist myths. That shared feeling was demonstrated by the high level of participation in the Seminar by senior representatives from the Council of Europe, the Commission of the European Union, and the Fundamental Rights Agency, as well as Equinet, and national Equality Bodies, and the exceptionally high number of people logging in, even allowing for the fact that it is easier to attend 'virtually' than to travel to Strasbourg.

Introduction

The quality of the contributions to the seminar confirmed the sense of urgency about this issue which was felt by all the participants. In opening the seminar ECRI Chairperson **Maria Marouda** stressed the need for all agencies that promote equality and diversity to communicate more effectively and that to do so they need to cooperate more closely and ally with other bodies working in the same area. She also stressed the need for the message that the participants wished to convey to be expressed in a more attractive and accessible way, for example, using the technique of storytelling to demonstrate the reality and impact of discrimination.

Snežana Samardžić-Marković, Director General of Democracy of the Council of Europe, stressed the dangers from hate speech. Speaking about how to combat it, she said: "*We can go far beyond the current measures and improve the impact of our communication through exchange of good practices and through increased cooperation*". And **Helena Dalli**, European Union Commissioner for Equality, referred to the EU's new Anti-Racism Action Plan, which

¹ This summary and conclusions of the seminar represent the opinion of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ECRI.

will aim to bring together a number of organisations involved in opposing racism and supporting diversity and equality. She mentioned in particular the work of ECRI and Equinet and national Equality Bodies.

The First Session

The first formal session of the Seminar dealt with “*Why and How to communicate the Equality and Diversity Message*”. The first speaker, **Nils Muiznieks**, former Chair of ECRI, former Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner, and now Amnesty International Regional Director for Europe, had actually proposed a seminar like this one at a meeting in Paris in 2019 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the establishment of ECRI. He gave examples of how particular statements by ECRI and interventions by him in his role as Human Rights Commissioner had been effective in achieving change. He then spoke about how Amnesty was trying to convey positive messages and images so that the audience they were reaching would not feel depressed and despairing but would believe that they could bring about change through their actions.

Michael O’Flaherty, Director of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), spoke about how FRA already worked closely with ECRI and Equinet. He noted that FRA concentrated a lot on surveys and research so as to produce accurate figures to support their arguments and he outlined a nine point guide to the best way to present arguments for change to varying audiences. He also stressed the importance of being positive and conveying the message that change can be achieved.

Tena Šimonović Einwalter, Chairperson of Equinet, member of ECRI and Deputy Ombudsman of Croatia, spoke about the role of storytelling, illustrating it with her own story of how she became involved with equality issues. She stressed the importance of proactive and positive communications as opposed to always being in the position of responding to hate speech or examples of discrimination. She said that in order to communicate effectively organisations should identify the audience they wished to reach and appeal to them in a way they could relate to and point to solutions that could be achieved. She argued strongly for practical cooperation such as Equality Bodies helping to publicise ECRI country reports or policy recommendations and ECRI strongly supporting independence and adequate resources for Equality Bodies during its country visits.

Tatiana Baeva from the Council of Europe’s Directorate of Communications gave very practical advice about how to communicate effectively. She talked about how to structure press releases, target messages at particular audiences and build relationships with media outlets.

The Second Session

The second session of the Seminar dealt with Communication Strategies. **Claire Hédon**, France’s Defender of Rights, spoke about methods for getting their message across to a wider audience and especially to younger people. She noted that her office had partnered with a TV company to produce a regular slot dealing with their work and this had attracted a significant

audience of mainly young people. They also contributed a regular column to a French regional paper, which also extended their audience.

Els Keytsman, Co-Director of the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities in Belgium (UNIA), described a campaign against racism run by UNIA and aimed at young people. Called '*DonneMoi1minute*', it consists of very short video clips and she remarked that they quickly learned to rely on young people to design the videos so that they caught the attention of a younger cohort. This has been very successful and has developed to the point where they now have an annual competition for the best videos on equality or anti-racism issues with over 100 schools participating. They are now preparing to launch another campaign dealing with sexual orientation.

Ana Tretnjak, Communications Officer of the Croatian Ombudsman's Office, who was previously a journalist, described how their Office had adopted a new communications strategy. Previously they had used legalistic language and arguments and had relied on the traditional media, but now they used more popular language and arguments and sought to be more attractive to a younger audience in particular. They also began to take the initiative in issuing press releases and not just responding to problems as they arose, and they built up connections with the media, which was very useful when the government rejected their report in 2019 and the media supported them. They are now reaching a younger audience and their communications are more effective.

The Third Session

The third session dealt mainly with communicating through social media and trying to reclaim it from the dominance of racist and LGBTI-phobic groups. **Mats Lindberg** from the ECRI Secretariat, who chaired the session, noted that the youth section of the Council of Europe had run the very successful '*No Hate Speech*' campaign for several years and it had led to the establishment of a '*No Hate Network*' which has attracted a lot of young people.

Niklas Hofmann of the German Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency (FADA) raised an interesting issue when he said that they had decided to reach out to younger people using social media but chose to use Instagram rather than Facebook. They had noted that items put up on Facebook attracted much more hostile responses and abuse than Instagram. Then they found that because Instagram had originally been used mainly for sharing photographs, they had to use more pictures in their posts and that in turn made them more attractive to a younger audience. Though he also noted that even using Instagram did not reach many young people under 18, but they had found it to be very effective with a slightly older group.

And having discussed ways of reaching out to younger people, the next speaker was **Emmerson Sutton**, who is 13 years old and is a youth advisor to the local Council in Lewisham, a borough of the city of London. He had been involved with the Council for several years already and is also involved in other anti-racism initiatives. It is part of a really interesting initiative by the

Council to give young people a voice at an early stage about issues that involve them and it had certainly encouraged Emmerson to aim high as he went on to say that his ambition in life was to become the President of FIFA, the world soccer association.

The Lewisham Council was also represented at the Seminar by **Councillor Kevin Bonavia**, who spoke at the fourth session and described some of the other initiatives being taken by it. Lewisham is apparently the most diverse area in the UK and it has described itself as a Sanctuary area and operates a refugee settlement programme where it welcomes and finds accommodation for refugee and immigrant families. It then encourages them to become involved in its work. It also campaigns for the UK to take in unaccompanied refugee children.

Returning to the third session, the final speaker was **Maria Swanljung** from the Office of Finland's Non-Discrimination Ombudsman. She returned to the problem where, when they posted something on social media, it was met by an organised campaign of hate speech and abuse. They had recently tried to counter this by alerting allies in the human rights and equality sector when they intended to publish a report or recommendation, so that the other organisations and individuals would post messages welcoming and supporting their publication. That way they outnumbered the trolls and hostile commentators who then left them alone.

The Fourth Session

The fourth session dealt with examples of good practice and **Brian Dawson**, Communications Manager of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, described a disability rights campaign called '*All Human, All Equal*' which they had carried out using short videos shown in cinemas and on TV channels. The video clips featured people with disabilities who described their experiences and the problems they faced, but they were good humoured and positive and the initiative got a very sympathetic response, increasing the support for disability rights and putting the government under some pressure about its obligation to provide reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities.

Robert Gajda, the Albanian Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, told his own story about overcoming homophobic prejudices he had acquired in his youth due to his upbringing in a very homophobic society. He said that hate speech, including by politicians, was a major problem in Albania and that many people who were opposed to it had been afraid to speak out about. However, a number of bodies had come together to form a '*No Hate Alliance*' to campaign against hate speech before recent elections. It had been quite successful and there was very little hate speech during the election. He mentioned that there was strong support in Albania for joining the European Union and that was helping to spread more tolerant attitudes.

Councillor Bonavia also spoke in the fourth session and the final speaker was **Ekaterine Skhiladze**, the Deputy Public Defender of Georgia. She said their office made a lot of use of the media to influence government policy and had been successful in a number of areas. In 2018 they had persuaded the authorities to investigate and take account of hate motivation in crimes.

In the following year, after they had publicised accounts of cases of sexual harassment, they had succeeded in getting the government and parliament to penalise such harassment. And recently, after addressing the parliament about the rights of persons with disabilities, they got the government to agree that failure to provide reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities should be regarded as a breach of the anti-discrimination law.

The Fifth Session

The fifth session of the Seminar was a general discussion on how the participating groups could join forces and improve their communications policies. It was moderated by **Wolfram Bechtel** from the ECRI Secretariat and **Sarah Cooke O’Dowd**, Communications Officer of Equinet.

There was overwhelming agreement on the need for all involved to work more closely together and share their resources and experience. Sarah Cooke O’Dowd noted that the communications staff of Equinet and a number of other bodies already held periodic meetings to discuss their work and share experiences and new developments. She suggested that other groups might be interested in joining in this initiative. Another speaker suggested that the groups should learn from the experience of the Coronavirus crisis which had led to the widespread use of video conferencing. They should use more frequent online meetings to exchange information and experiences and to discuss how to respond to new developments like the *Black Lives Matter* campaign recently.

Some speakers noted the different mandates of some of the organisations involved but said that this should not prevent them working as closely together as possible. There were calls for closer coordination around the launching of important reports or campaigns so that they would not clash with each other and suggestions for joint or related events on key dates such as International Human Rights Day on 10th December, Anti-Racism Day on 21st March and Zero Discrimination Day on 1st March. And it was noted that campaigning against institutional racism would be a major theme for 2021 and that all could take part in that.

Conclusions

This Seminar took place under the shadow of the growth of hate speech and intolerance across Europe, accentuated by the Coronavirus crisis, which has left many people confused, angry and frustrated and susceptible to believing in conspiracy myths and seeking culprits to blame for the spread of the virus. Social media has provided a convenient platform for populist and far-right groups to spread racist, homophobic and intolerant views, sometimes openly and sometimes under the cloak of anonymity on social media.

The Seminar, organised by ECRI with the support of Equinet and the Equality Bodies, brought together representatives of international organisations and bodies such as the Council of Europe and the European Union, including its Fundamental Rights Agency, together with national Equality Bodies and was followed on line by a record audience, all seeking ways to combat the

flood of hate speech and unsubstantiated myths and spread instead their message of inclusivity, diversity and equality.

There was clearly frustration by a number of the participants that in an era when social media and digital platforms are taking over from the traditional media as the main source of information for many people, the purveyors of hate speech and intolerance appear to have acquired a disproportionate influence in this arena.

The Seminar made a significant contribution to the debate about how to combat this influence. Experienced advocates and communications specialists from some of the organisations involved stressed the need to revise the way of presenting messages, so that the audience that is being addressed can identify and sympathise with what is being communicated. They stressed that messages should not be uniformly negative. They should convey that there can be, and is, a solution to the problem that is being highlighted.

So, when showing the plight of refugees fleeing from war or persecution for instance, it is important to show as well refugees who have been integrated in their host states and are playing an active and constructive role there. Messages should not always be gloomy and depressing. They should be uplifting as well.

There was a lot of focus on the fact that social media has become the main source of information for many people, and particularly for young people, and about the amount of racist and LGBTI-phobic material available on these sites. There was also concern that when material supportive of asylum seekers, migrants, LGBTI persons, or members of ethnic or other minorities is posted or shared on social media, it may be met by a torrent of abuse or even threats that could upset and distress the people involved.

How can this be dealt with, apart from the obvious need for stronger and more effective anti-hate speech legal and other instruments? Representatives of some Equality Bodies described how they had dealt with coordinated hate speech and abuse that followed media presentations by them. They worked together with other equality and human rights bodies to ensure strong support for each other whenever any of them appeared on the media and, as a result, when faced with a coordinated and effective counter offensive, the trolls and purveyors of hate speech gave up and ceased interfering with them.

Other speakers described how their organisations had consciously reached out to a younger audience on social media with considerable success. One Equality Body commissioned a series of short anti-racist video clips designed by young activists, which proved very effective and has also led to an annual competition between over 100 schools to design the best videos.

Some speakers, while fully acknowledging the importance of communicating with younger people, said they should not abandon tradition outlets such as newspapers. Though their

readership had dwindled, they still influenced opinion formers, politicians and policy makers and local newspapers reached an audience outside the cities.

But how to implement all these suggestions? A number of speakers pointed out that their organisations had limited budgets and resources. Some could not afford to have full-time dedicated communications staff or to plan a comprehensive media strategy. Others could not carry out their own research into complex issues. There was a very general call for more cooperation in this area and for organisations to share information, statistics, policy details, media know-how and contacts.

There was also a need to support each other's activities, publicising and attending each other's events, defending each other against abuse and attacks in the media and against budget cuts and hostility from governments.

Immediate and practical suggestions were made, including, for example, that national Equality Bodies should attend the launch of ECRI's country reports and that ECRI should continue to raise issues during its country monitoring visits about the independence and resources of Equality Bodies and whether they conform to the standards set by ECRI's General Policy Recommendation No. 2 on Equality Bodies.

Suggestions were also made that ECRI, Equinet and national Equality Bodies should come together to publicly celebrate important days like the International Human Rights Day in December and Anti-Racism and Anti-Discrimination days in March. And, very practically, it was suggested that ECRI, Equinet and individual Equality and Human Rights bodies could hold workshops on practical measures to combat racism and intolerance

And, finally, it was mentioned that the Commission of the European Union had just adopted a new Anti-Racism Action Plan for 2020 to 2025 and the Council of Europe had recently established a new Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI). These initiatives should also provide an opportunity for ECRI, Equinet, the national Equality Bodies and all the participants in the Seminar to work together with the EU and the Council of Europe to combat Racism, Xenophobia, LGBTI-phobia and all other forms of Intolerance in the coming period.

The Seminar played an important part in laying the basis for closer collaboration in this area. Its basic message was that united together we can turn back the tide of hatred and intolerance and build a society based on justice, tolerance and equality for all.