

Intervention by Bertil Cottier
Chair
European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)
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(28 May 2026)

Monsieur le Président,

Monsieur le Secrétaire Général du Conseil de l'Europe,

Monsieur le Secrétaire Général Adjoint,

Mesdames et Messieurs les Délégués des Ministres,

Il y a des moments dans l'histoire où nos sociétés européennes se sont retrouvées à la croisée des chemins. Beaucoup estiment que nous connaissons l'un de ces moments à présent et que plusieurs voies s'offrent à nous.

La première voie est droite et large. C'est une voie qui nie la réalité de la diversité de nos sociétés. Un déni, régulièrement et délibérément alimenté par la stigmatisation, par la marginalisation, voire par l'exclusion de toutes celles et ceux qui ne correspondent pas à l'image souhaitée de nos sociétés. Il n'y aurait par exemple qu'une seule origine nationale ou ethnique qui compte, qu'une seule couleur de peau qui vaille, qu'une seule orientation sexuelle que l'on puisse accepter. Cette voie mène trop souvent au rejet de la différence et à la haine de l'autre.

Il existe une deuxième voie. Elle va dans le sens inverse. Elle se construit le plus souvent autour d'une majorité oppressante et de minorités ethniques, religieuses ou sexuelles opprimées. Chaque membre de la majorité serait présumé coupable d'oppression, et chaque personne appartenant à une minorité serait présumée victime d'oppression. Cette voie est construite sur une colère parfois légitime, une colère face à des injustices réelles. Reste que lorsque la colère devient la seule boussole, lorsqu'elle chasse la nuance et la complexité, elle peut elle aussi mener vers la haine. Même au nom de la justice, la haine demeure de la haine.

Et puis il y a une troisième voie. Sinueuse et étroite, car elle n'offre pas le confort des discours simplistes. Cette voie est doublement exigeante. Il faut d'une part reconnaître la diversité comme une richesse, une richesse authentique, irremplaçable. Mais il faut d'autre part aussi reconnaître les difficultés que cette diversité peut parfois engendrer.

Ce troisième chemin, c'est celui que l'ECRI, la Commission européenne contre le racisme et l'intolérance, cherche à parcourir aux côtés des États membres du Conseil de l'Europe. Non pas pour dire quoi penser, mais pour écouter, pour rassembler, pour dialoguer. Et pour proposer des outils pour affronter les difficultés et insuffler le courage permettant de les surmonter.

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This is precisely why resolute action against hate speech, all forms of hate speech, is imperative for our democratic societies. It is, in many ways, the test of whether we are truly committed to that third road I have just described, the demanding one, but the rewarding one.

It often begins in politics. We have observed at ECRI how hate speech flourishes, most visibly during election periods, and how it has targeted Roma, migrants, people of African descent, Muslims or transgender persons, wrapped in the language of security, of cultural protection, of common sense. Politicians who use such rhetoric usually know what they are doing. They are not simply expressing opinions. They are giving permission. Every time a hateful remark goes unchallenged in a parliament, in a debate, the threshold drops a little further.

That is why we have repeatedly called on political leaders – all political leaders – to understand that they are standard-bearers. And if standards are lowered, they are extremely difficult to raise again. That is also why we at ECRI have welcomed those political figures who have championed counter-speech and positive narratives, who have understood that their voice carries weight precisely when it would be easier to stay silent.

Then there is the digital world. Online hate speech spreads with a speed and reach that perhaps no previous generation of legislators had to confront. Anonymous profiles, coordinated bots, algorithmic amplification: these are not neutral technical features. They can form an infrastructure for hatred. The balance between action against hate speech and the right to free speech must be struck with care. Because not all disturbing or shocking speech is hate speech. This is clearly not a straightforward matter.

But cooperation helps. When cooperation between authorities, internet intermediaries and civil society is genuine, when it is sustained, and when accountability is real, it can improve reporting, detection, moderation and, whenever required, sanctioning. Artificial intelligence tools, when combined with proper human oversight and safeguards, are showing real promise.

We also know that policies and legislation matter. Where there are no legal and regulatory frameworks, no dissuasive sanctions, no effective remedies, hate speech remains widespread and largely unpunished. Comprehensive legislation, going beyond criminal law alone, is not an attack on freedom. It is a condition for freedom. For the freedom of those who are targeted, who are silenced, who withdraw from public life because participation has become too risky. For the freedom of those who also speak out against hate speech or deal with those issues, be they members of parliament, representatives of equality bodies or other independent institutions, civil society actors or even judges.

And then there are youngsters and children.

This is perhaps where the urgency is most acute. Youngsters and children can be exposed to racist and other forms of hate speech at an age when they are still forming their understanding of the world. Schools, which should be spaces of encounter and mutual understanding, can instead become spaces where divisive narratives spread unchallenged. Teachers sometimes respond by simply shutting down difficult conversations in classrooms rather than navigating them.

Human rights education, media literacy, the capacity to recognise misinformation or manipulation and resist them, these are what enable young people and schoolchildren to encounter hatred online and name it for what it is.

Because here is what we must never lose sight of: hate speech is not simply offensive. It can be seriously harmful. It can precede physical violence. And beyond the immediate harm to those targeted, it corrodes something broader: trust. Trust in institutions, trust in the ability of all members of our democratic societies to live together. When that trust breaks down, people withdraw. They disengage. And democracy, which requires the active participation of all to work, begins to hollow out from within.

Action against hate speech is, therefore, action in defence of democracy itself.

I would now like to leave you with the words of a famous Hungarian national who knew, from lived experience, what happens when hatred is left unchallenged. Imre Kertész, a Holocaust survivor, deported to Auschwitz at the age of fourteen, spent his life bearing witness so that others would not have to.

In an interview, almost 20 years ago, he predicted that the *“real fight will not be between nations, but a struggle between fanaticism and democracy”*. *“Fanatical hatred”, he said, “has taken over the world and this phenomenon conflicts with rational politics that is accustomed to negotiation and compromise.”*

In an increasingly unpredictable world, we at ECRI will continue to help member states to keep choosing the road that leads towards one another rather than away, the road that protects democracy and the most vulnerable against “fanatical”, racist and other forms of hatred.

Thank you.