

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE REPORT

# LIVING TOGETHER ONLINE: POSITIVE MESSENGERS PROMOTING TOLERANCE

**21 - 22 June 2018, Sofia**

” *Fighting Hate Speech We Are Fighting for the Souls of Young People.* “

The poignant words of the Vice-President of Bulgaria, Ms Iliyana Yotova, from her speech to the participants in the international conference *Living Together Online: Positive Messengers Promoting Tolerance*, best capture the spirit of the 2-day event held in Sofia on June 21-22.

The concluding event of the project *Coalitions for Positive Messengers to Counter Online Hate Speech* drew over a hundred participants and speakers from 10 countries - Bulgaria, Great Britain, Greece, Georgia, Italy, Romania, Rwanda, Croatia and Czech Republic - who engaged in lively debates, workshops and many fun activities. The panel discussions and conference presentations offered new and important insights on many issues and questions related to online hate speech, ranging from the changes needed in the regulatory framework (although most participants agreed with the vice-president's words that the focus on legal documents is not enough) to the use of innovative forms of awareness-raising and education activities to prevent hate speech.

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The conference began with a video address by MEP Eva Maydel, who reconfirmed the importance of the topic to the European institutions and pledged her and her colleagues' support to further actions to prevent, monitor, and stop online hate speech. Conference participants were greeted also by the Mayor of Sofia, Ms Yordanka Fandakova. In her video statement she expressed the commitment of Sofia Municipality to support initiatives in the field of media literacy and civic education in order to foster an atmosphere of tolerance and respect in the city.



The first conference panel discussed public attitudes to hate speech and the impact of public policies and campaigns on cubing the levels of xenophobia in society. During the moderated debate, participants heard statistics about hate speech in Bulgaria from a most recent study conducted by Open Society Institute in Sofia; debated various approaches to counteracting online hate speech and the role of traditional and new social media in the process and listened to the moving story of one of the panelists, Mr Eric Murangwa Eugene, from Football for Hope, Peace and Unity (F.H.P.U) and Survivors Tribune Founder.

In the afternoon participants had a chance to engage in three thematic workshops: one led by Jaroslav Valush, Press Start and Factzech.cz project leader, on creating and running social media and awareness raising campaigns in combating online hate speech; a second panel on working with victims of hate speech, and a third panel led by Mr Murangwa Eugene on using storytelling to create counter-narratives to hate speech.



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The second day started with a speech by the Vice-President of Bulgaria, Ms Iliyana Yotova. She had strong words to say about the need for long-term vision and political responsibility to build a society based on moral principles, respect and tolerance for human beings. "In the refugee and migration crisis aggression, hatred and denial flourished," said Iliyana Yotova and called for a united response against xenophobia led by political leaders, media, public bodies and civil society.



Speakers in the second day panels included the deputy-minister of education in Bulgaria, Ms Denitza Sacheva; she spoke about the most recent programs and initiatives of the Ministry aimed to cultivate young minds and hearts with "strong values and empathy" for the other. Digital and media literacy skills cannot replace the fundamental moral tenets of human society, she argued, and therefore, institutions and individuals all need to work together in tackling hard issues such as intolerance, hatred, and discrimination. Deputy-mayor of Sofia Municipality, Dr Todor Chobanov, echoed these insights citing an historical document that stands at the foundation of modern society, the Edict of Toleration proclaimed in 311 in Sofia (then Serdica).

Ms Monika Panayotova, deputy-minister of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, provided a broader policy and political perspective to the issues of hate speech. She presented the priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency in the context of the EU agenda for advancing digital skills and global connectivity, warning, however, that in the age of digital identities the anonymity of the internet may be the root case for new forms of social exclusion and intolerance.



The conference participants heard also the opinion of leading Bulgarian journalists on the duties and responsibilities of the media to prevent and control the spreading of hate speech online. Ms Nadya Obretenova from Bulgarian National TV, thanked the project team for inviting her to be a positive messenger; she also voiced concerns that society is becoming less sensitive to hate speech and thus more concerted efforts are needed to ensure that future generations of digital natives have full respect for human rights. Ms Irina Nedeva, chairperson of the Association of European Journalists, drew the audience's attention to alarming trends in online and traditional

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media. According to her, we are witnesses of an “acceleration effect” produced by digital media, which leaves little room for self-reflection and rational argumentation, but plays on the most immediate emotional reactions of the readers and followers which often result in verbal insults and even open calls for violence against certain groups in society. Ms Nedeva emphasized the need for responsible political leadership in setting a tone of tolerance in political debate but also urged media for implementing stronger and stricter self-regulations.

Besides the high-level experts, a very important part of the conference was the opportunity to interact and learn from people who have been victims of hate speech. The story of Eric Murangwa Eugene, a survivor of the Rwanda genocide, was a powerful account of personal suffering but also an inspiring call for empathy and action to stop hate speech and hate crime. Conference participants heard also about the initiatives of the Bulgarian LGBT organization Action, whose efforts are directed to changing the Penal Code provisions to include hate crimes based on sexual orientation.



In the final panel, which gathered representatives of Sofia Municipal Council (Ms Malina Edreva, chairperson of the Education, culture, science and cultural diversity Committee of the Council), Mr Anton Kutev, Member of Parliament, youth leaders (Raycho Raychev, National Youth Forum), the key recommendations and conclusions from the project activities were discussed. Panel members expressed their support and reconfirmed their commitment to be positive messengers in their communities and leaders for change.



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## Conference policy recommendations for improving the prevention and counteraction of online hate speech:

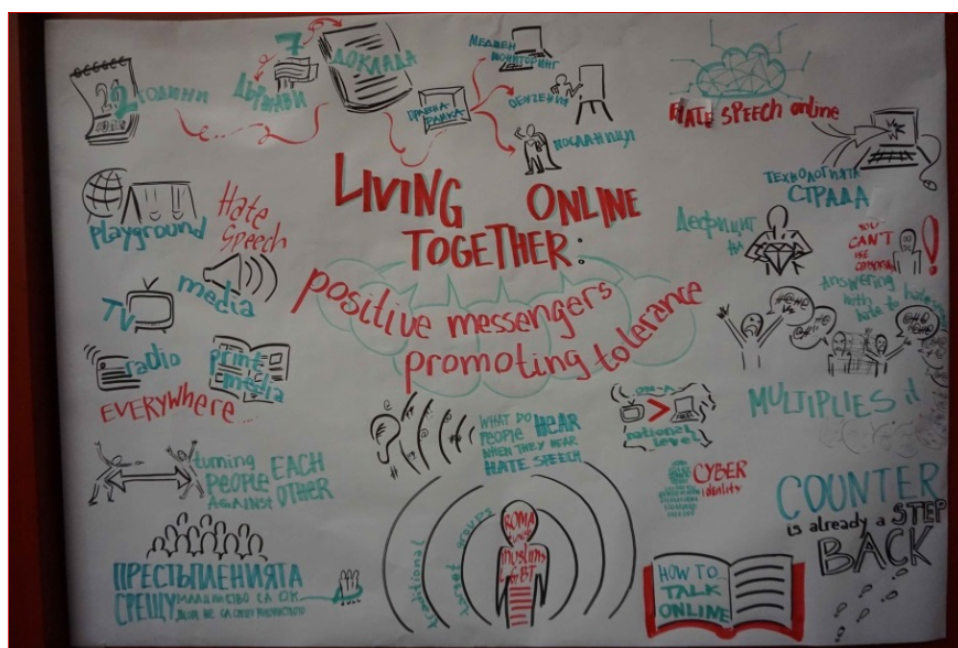
- ❖ **Improving the legislative and regulatory framework.** The legal provisions regarding online hate speech need to be further refined in order to address more effectively the challenge of new technologies that allow anonymity and make more difficult the identification and prosecution of the offenders who create, publish, and disseminate such content.
- ❖ More rigorous work is needed by **the prosecution and the courts** in order to ensure effective sanctions for organizations and individuals who post hateful or illegal content online. This includes making easier the procedures for reporting cases of hate speech to the responsible authorities.
- ❖ **Media, regulations and self-regulations.** Actions in this direction should encourage more critical news coverage as well as bigger scrutiny when it comes to those organizations and politicians who use media to spread hate and intolerance towards certain groups of people.
- ❖ **Greater accountability and responsibility for the big players: Facebook, Google, Twitter.** Further efforts could be made to identify online hate speech, in particular by the major social media companies and to close fake accounts and remove hateful or illegal postings. Improving the cooperation between the media and IT companies will ensure more effective use of the mechanisms for reporting and removal of hateful content.
- ❖ **Engineering technological solutions.** Although creating technological solutions to counter online hate speech is difficult and their implementation is challenging, auto-blockers and machine learning tools, improving platform designs, easier reporting through apps, etc. need to be encouraged.
- ❖ **Civil society support.** CSOs have been champions of combating (online) hate speech. They need to receive adequate local and national support, and not rely solely on foreign donors.



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- ❖ **Formal and informal education and training**
  - ✓ There is a need for large-scale information and awareness-raising campaigns to inform the public about the issue and to mobilize civic energy to counter the spreading of hate speech on the Internet;
  - ✓ Improving the media literacy of students, young people and the wider public is particularly important;
  - ✓ The introduction of media literacy training and critical thinking skills in schools, starting with elementary school, will enhance young people's ability to recognize and denounce all forms of propaganda and ideologies whose extreme forms could lead not only to the use of hate speech, but to hate crimes and to the radicalization of intolerance and violence.
  
- ❖ **National authorities need to bring the issue to the core of policy debate.** National governments may need to develop comprehensive strategies to combat racism and intolerance, and be proactive in initiating, implementing, monitoring and funding actions for the prevention and counteraction of (online) hate speech.



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