

REPORT

UNITED Conference

Wipe Out Hate! UNITED in Solidarity

25-30 October 2013

near Prague, Czech Republic



UNITED for Intercultural Action

European network against nationalism, racism, fascism and in support of migrants and refugees

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Wipe Out Hate!

Today's Europe is facing many forms of racism, hate speech, xenophobia, anti-migrant attitudes and a growth in right-wing populism. These phenomena go straight against the very essence and central idea of what Europe was all about when it was built after WW II: cooperation, solidarity, diversity and peace. Europe is in the midst of crisis: economically, socially and politically. Unemployment and erosion of social structures are widespread, especially in the eastern and southern member states. Thousands of migrants from impoverished regions and war zones try to enter Europe. In their effort to cross the border hundreds die, mostly at sea. When they do succeed, many of them find themselves locked up in overcrowded detention and reception centres, or they go underground in society living undocumented out on the streets or in poor shelters. At the same time migration is taking place within Europe, mostly from the East European countries to the richer countries in the north and west of Europe.

A joint European effort to find sustainable solutions is missing. European leaders act in their own, national interests. The combination of economic crisis and migration is creating fear and resentment and social unrest within communities. The results are that minorities are targeted, neonazis grow in numbers, right-wing populists play on the fears and insecurities of local communities and mainstream liberal and conservative parties shift further to the right.

The 2014 EU Parliamentary Elections are an opportunity to change these disconcerting developments. The moment is not to be missed to spread the message of solidarity and win over would-be populist votes. At the UNITED network conference antiracist activists from 35 countries across Europe come together to discuss the situation, to define the need for action, to share experiences and good practices in activism, to set out strategies and campaigns to combat nationalism, xenophobia and right-wing populism and reclaim solidarity. With Europe showing a growing tendency towards populism, the central question is: what kind of Europe do we want and what message do we have for Europe in the run-up to the 2014 elections. The motto of the conference: Wipe out hate!

Quo Vadis - Where will Europe go?

It is clear: action should be taken on all levels within Europe. The *Council of Europe* launched a campaign to fight racism and right-wing populism. At the opening of the Wipe Out Hate Conference **Anne-Mari Virolainen, Finnish MP and Chair of the Committee on Migration, Refugees & Displaced Persons of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe** called upon politicians not to talk the populist talk. "Parliamentarians need to be brave in standing up for positions that may not be popular, especially when it comes to dealing with migrant issues in a time of economic crisis," she said. "Parliamentarians have a duty to lead and not just follow."

On the subject of parliamentarians taking responsibility: we were happy to have **Czech member of European Parliament Jaromír Kohlíček** at the conference. During his visit, he signed the Charter of European Political Parties for a Non-Racist Society. At the same time it is sad to see, he is the only one of 22 Czech Members of the European Parliament who responded to this request to sign the charter.

Participants emphasised the importance of parliamentarians listening to the grievances of citizens across Europe. Since at the core of the European crisis is the frustration of common citizens who don't feel their voices are being heard, nor that they are being represented, by European parliamentarians.

Consequently, it is important to explain to the citizens of Europe's member states what Europe is for? Citizens may agree on its answers, e.g. Europe is for freedom, democracy, independence, and, of course, for the people. The central questions are however: freedom for who, what kind of democracy, independence from what, which people? Speaker **Jonathan Even-Zohar (Euroclio, Netherlands)** emphasised the multiple perspectives available in the study of history. It is important to be aware of this, especially since populists base their messages on the misuse history and don't leave space for other historical narratives. "Populist mostly don't have a clear idea of the future, hence their references to the past, - even if it is a very distant past. Move on from the past, rather than relive the past," was his message.

Not welcome: Guests with African backgrounds

While we were opening the conference and meeting each other, we were missing two of our guests. They are European citizens with African backgrounds. They were not granted Schengen visa by the Czech consulate in Donetsk (Ukraine) and in Nicosia (Cyprus), even though they had all the proper resident permits. The procedure was put on hold. Is it really true in today's Europe that colour limits the right of movement?

Get to know your populists

In order to address populism, we focused on the question of what populism is. Populists use people's fears. They create a common enemy, often a minority such as Roma, Muslims or Jews. They portray these minorities as a threat to society and its values, often referring to urban myths about them ("Roma are thieves, Roma don't work, Roma steal our children, etcetera." You can freely replace Roma with other minorities).

Multiculturalism, immigration and the EU are main issues populists base their campaigns on. They argue that mainstream parties don't represent the people. Populists present themselves as part of "the people" and claim that therefore they act in the people's interest.

The EU Parliament can easily be used by populists to gather protest votes, which contain a serious danger, since they will undermine the democratic process, - as did the nazis in the thirties, who came to power through citizens exercising a protest vote.

The politics of populists are so powerful since they are entirely based on emotions and defy logic, which makes them difficult to reason against. That is also the reason why the media give them so much attention, because the media know very well that they will reach a wider audience when they present emotional issues from the political and social discourse. They report on minority and refugee issues without reservation, often using stereotypes. The victims of racism are presented as the problem, not racism itself.

OSCE speaker Peter Wittschorek stated: the media are the mirror of the people - and consequently politics are also the mirror of the people. They reflect the fears and concerns of the people and they present issues in the way the people want to see it presented. This is clearly the way the majority of people want to carry on the discourse. We have to deal with the questions: what is the responsibility of the media here? And how do we approach the media to change the tone of this discourse?

The question is: What can we as antiracist activists do?

Graeme Atkinson (*Hope not Hate, England*) called for political interventions in those places where populists and fascists are campaigning to get support. His message was: "Distant campaigning doesn't do anything". "Shouting from a distance to a group of people is useless. You have to go out on the streets, into local communities...be there and talk with them."

From Populism to Hate

Let's have a closer look at the mechanism of racism. Prejudices towards minorities and racist thinking are deeply rooted within countries across Europe. Populists built their image of the enemy on these prejudices, thus creating hostility, racism, hate, and, consequently, a cycle of violence.

Matilde Fruncilo (expert on refugee issues, Italy) offered an example from Italy on the second day of the conference: In Turin a girl accused two Roma of raping her. La Stampa and other national and local newspapers reported this

immediately on their websites. Local people marched to the nearby Roma camp and burnt down several container houses. Afterwards, it turned out the girl wasn't raped at all: the girl invented the whole story, to cover up for her first intercourse with her boyfriend. La Stampa published apologies, not to the Roma who were wrongly accused and then attacked, but to the readers, who were wrongly informed. The apologies also didn't put an end to all anti-Roma hostilities.

The question in this case is to what extent did the newspapers report racism, and was racism a key feature in the representation of the Roma? How did the newspapers contribute to shaping hostility towards the Roma and perpetuate racist discourses and practises?

OSCE-ODIHR representative Peter Wittschorek presented an example of fierce antisemitism in France: Last year in Villeurbanne, close to Lyon, Jewish teenagers wearing kippahs were attacked with iron bars in full daylight, while the attackers were shouting the words 'you dirty Jews'. This happened only three months after a gun-man ran into a Jewish school in Toulouse and killed a teacher and three children, two of them being the teacher's children. This incident shocked the nation. You would think this would serve as a warning sign and the French would reunite and spread a message to never let this happen again. Strangely the year 2012 showed two more attacks on Jews according to a survey by the Jewish community, 64 altogether. At the same time, in the media, a debate was constantly recurring around a political issue clearly directed against both Jewish and Muslim communities: the law against ritual slaughtering. Marine Le Pen, leader of France populist party Front National, proposed a law to ban both headscarves and kippahs from the public realm.

The term dirty Jew is widely used in daily French speak, especially in social media. Is this language at the root of antisemitism in France?

Speaker **Marcell Lorincz (Foundation of Subjective Values, Hungary)** presented the case of homophobia in Russia. 72% of the Russian population is homophobic according to last year's survey. Extremists are beating up and even killing homosexuals, while putting photos and videos of their action on the Internet, without even masking their own faces on some occasions. The Russian parliament recently accepted a law against non-traditional sexual relations, thus stimulating the homophobic attitude.

Since the summer of 2013, neonazis have been organising marches almost every week, in different towns in the conference host country, the Czech Republic, with the intention of attacking Roma communities. The marches in the industrial town Ostrava are especially big, involving 300 up to 1000 people. The hardcore nazis are regularly joined by local bystanders. Blokujeme.cz is an initiative of the Roma and non-Roma activist organisation **KONEXE**. **KONEXE** organises demonstrations in order to protect local Roma and stop neonazi marches. The government is not taking the necessary measures against all aggression towards Roma.

The issue here is that these examples are not isolated cases and must be seen as events in a wider sequence of populist and violent acts that build widespread popular animosity and hatred towards minorities.



Talking about good practices: Putting words into action

The presentation by Roma activist **Ivanka Conkova (KONEXE, Czech Republic)** on neonazi marches against Roma communities in different Czech towns acted as a wake-up call to the participants of the Conference. Hate and racism are suddenly very close and very present. Participants learned that neonazis had announced a new march in Ostrava taking place the following day. “We can go together to Ostrava and rally against the neonazis,” the Roma activist proposed. We all felt the urge to put words into action and to do a joint rally against Romaphobia in the Czech Republic. But what was the best way to do it?

We decided the following: Participants of the UNITED Conference organised an action at the Old Town Square in the centre of Prague in support of the Roma community of Ostrava, who were threatened on the same day by a nazi march.

“What we face in Ostrava and many other towns in Czechia is a result of social and economic despair leading to a racist mechanism. This increase of populist discourse and clearly nazi actions is symptomatic of the danger Roma communities and the rest of Czech society and all European countries are facing nowadays” was the message from our press release.

We made it clear that:

- We do not accept the normalisation of a situation where a significant part of the population is put in danger and denounced as the main party responsible for all problems faced by the population!
- We will not accept, anywhere, anytime, anyhow, the nazi parades and the right-wing populist stances surfing on the fear and fantasies of people left alone and without clear hope of a future.
- Stigmatisation of Roma, other marginalised communities, and also refugees and migrants, by states and by societies, are not solving a situation which is first of all political, economic, and social.
- The Czech Republic and other members of the EU are avoiding their responsibilities by not solving this situation and are betraying the spirit of the charters they have all signed. By that, they also deny democratic values which we consider as core values of the European Union.

Journalists attended the Old Town Square in the centre of Prague and the counter-demonstration was televised on the national news. At the same time, two of the conference participants took part in a blockade in Ostrava itself. The blocking turned out to be a huge success. For the first time Roma themselves show up in large numbers and join in the blockade. Now the numbers of people blocking exceed the numbers of nazis marching. Neonazis are running away.

Intercultural learning

We, antiracist activists at the UNITED Conference, gave a clear sign. We continue to share our actions and experiences in the field as a form of intercultural learning. Much of this happened outside the official program, e.g. during the coffee breaks or in the ‘political cafés’ in the evening. The coffee breaks are the added value to all UNITED Conferences: here we meet on a person to person level, share our experiences and ideas, learn from and inspire each other in order to go back home to our daily practices empowered. One great example of good practice heard during the conference comes from **Britain**. East London’s borough Dagenham was known as the ‘race hate capital of Britain’, with 12 members of the British National Party (BNP), England’s true fascist party, in the local council. *Hope not Hate* started a campaign before the local elections of May 2010. More than 500 volunteers went onto the streets of Dagenham and handed out over 180 thousand antifascist leaflets and newspapers, talked with the people and discussed their grievances with them. The BNP was wiped out completely at the local elections and lost its 12 seats. “Distant campaigning doesn’t do anything,” was the message from *Hope not Hate*. “Shouting from a distance to a group of people is useless. You have to be there and talk with them.”

Another example of very good practice came from **Cyprus**: Going to the local asylum seeker centre. Look at how refugees with or without refugee status live in buildings designed and constructed with EU money. Witness how the refugees are restricted in their freedom of movement and are denied their right to receive visitors. Break into the asylum seeker centre when the guard’s attention is at its lowest, e.g. during the night. Film the conditions in which the refugees live, e.g. a family of 6 in a room of 12 m2. Put it on YouTube and share it with the world. *KISA Action for Equality, Support, Antiracism* from Cyprus did it before you.

Another example came from Jajce, **Bosnia**. In the Bosnian town of Jajce Croat and Bosnian children go to the so-called 'two schools under one roof'. Within one school the Croats and Bosnians go to separate classrooms and follow two completely different education programmes - Croats have Catholic education, Bosnians have Muslim education. The politicians are to blame for this separation, and the parents accept the policy without a word of complaint even though the children lead completely separate lives. *Youth Work Jajce* decided to act. It organised a project to build a sports field next to the school where children can play sports together before, in between and after school. Now *Youth Work Jajce* is offering funding for a laboratory in the building of the 'two schools under one roof'. The school has complied with the condition that both Croat and Muslim children work together at the same time in the laboratory. These good practices are what antiracist work is all about.

Joint action: The launch of a campaign

Now it is time to launch a campaign and work on strategies. The main objective is to have as many citizens out voting and also have them know what they are voting for in the EU elections of 2014. The participants came together in different working groups to make an action plan: define a message, decide on the target group and set up a campaign scenario. Workshops were organised on the fourth and final day, to give the participants more input. The workshops deal with how to monitor far-right groups during the 2014 EU election, lobbying in campaigns, building alliances to campaign and mobilising people to vote. The last workshop dealt with the use of social media in an antifascist campaign. **Thomas Macholz (Leftvision, Germany)** explained the methodology: Make a newsreel on an antifascist action against nazi marches. Be clear about your position within the antifascist movement. The mass media report from different sides, e.g. neonazis, antifa-activists, politicians, and present themselves as neutral. By doing so they polarise society. Your message must have a different, a more modern and entertaining character. This way you'll engage new people for your cause. Post it on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and share it with the world. It certainly contributed in 2011 in Dresden when antifa groups succeeded in mobilising citizens in large numbers against nazi marches.

After the sessions the different working groups presented their slogans:

- "What kind of Europe do you want to live in...?"
- "I choose to choose."
- "I want opportunities, I vote for Europe."
- "Unity through diversity" and "EU4U/U4EU"
- "Your vote can divide, your vote can unite. You Choose!"
- "Europe could be your teacher!"
- "Europe for all"
- "Open your mind. Vote for solidarity."



The ideas also inspired guest **Jean-Paul Makengo, Deputy-Mayor of Toulouse and President of the *European Coalition of Cities Against Racism***: “We are going to use the ideas for strategies and campaigns against racism in my own city,” he said, “It is really encouraging to see so many young people at the conference, from so many different European countries all sharing their visions and experiences. We are going to bring the ideas also to our partner cities to have them implemented. I know Potsdam has plans for a campaign against racism and hate speech.”

Last but not least: by the end of the conference **UNITED, ENAR (*European Network Against Racism*) and Hope not Hate** decide on a partnership to carry on a campaign in the run-up to the 2014 EU Parliament Elections. The main question still to be discussed was where we should focus on shaming the populists or should we have a message towards the voters? Altogether the mission of the conference was accomplished as the slogan “Your vote can divide, your vote can unite” was selected to be used in the campaign against populism leading up to the EU elections 2014. That will be undertaken by NGOs all across Europe including those present at the conference.

How to reclaim solidarity

“Let’s go back in time” These were the final words to the conference by **Graeme Atkinson (*Hope Not Hate, England*)** who reminded us of Europeans showing fellow Europeans solidarity in the darkest moments of the 20th century, even sacrificing their lives to help those in need. There are many such examples, not least in the Spanish Civil War when Europeans from many countries joined the International Brigades in Spain to fight against Franco’s fascism. Graeme also described an episode in the history of his own county of Durham in north-eastern England. When, in 1942, 340 citizens of the Czech town Lidice, very close to the location of the conference, were murdered as a reprisal by the nazis after the assassination of SS leader Reinhard Heydrich, the 110,000 miners of Durham, started with other miners in the UK – at the height of WWII – ,the ‘Lidice Shall Live Campaign’ and collected a million pounds for the town’s reconstruction. Lidice and Durham had one thing in common: they were mining areas. That fact alone was enough for such a tremendous expression of solidarity. It is exactly this solidarity that is very much needed in our struggle against hate. Then, we can have the pride in saying afterwards: *we resisted, we reclaimed solidarity... together we fought and together we won.*

Author: Paul Alexander



Last but not least: Thank you

This conference was made possible only through the dedication and combined efforts of many NGOs, individuals and sponsors. It was made such a success due to the knowledge and enthusiasm of all participating NGOs. We value the contribution of each and every one.

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- DUHA - U (Czech Republic)
- OPU - Organisation for Aid to Refugees (Czech Republic)
- No Borders Project - Social Action Center (Ukraine)
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- Movimiento Contra la Intolerancia (Spain)
- Foundation of Subjective Values (Hungary)
- UNITED for Intercultural Action

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