**Europe must strongly combat the spread of hate speech and hate crime**

**The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) strongly supports the European Commission in its initiative to extend the list of EU crimes to all forms of hate crime and hate speech in an opinion adopted in its May plenary, and encourages the Council take on this important proposal.**

Over the last decade, civil society organisations have witnessed the rise of hate speech and hate crime first-hand, both as targets of hatred and when assisting individuals and communities affected by these attacks. As a result, the Committee recognises the critical need to safeguard human dignity, fundamental rights and equality. "Democracy, and the EU itself, are not possible if people are living in fear and shame," says EESC rapporteur **Cristian Pîrvulescu**.

Through the advance of social media and thanks to freedom of movement, the EU public sphere has become more integrated. For this reason, a common basis is now indispensable to effectively combat hate crime and hate speech.

The EESC therefore encourages the Council to adopt the Decision proposed by the European Commission, which would allow the European legislators to act in the area, and to propose minimum rules concerning the definition of criminal offences and penalties in the area of hate speech and hate crime. The EESC believes that clear definitions of hate speech and hate crime should be established as the next step to ensure legal certainty and the protection of fundamental rights. The definitions should include any type of action or expression, whether oral or written, regardless of where the expression or action occurs, covering both online and offline expression.

Awareness-raising and education are necessary tools to identify the impact of these actions and prevent them. In this regard, the Committee recommends that special consideration be given to occupations that play an important role in combating hate speech and hate crime, such as teachers, journalists and law enforcement personnel.

Some politicians are also seen using dangerous electoral mobilisation tactics by spreading fear and targeting minorities to gain support. The Committee calls on political leaders and parties to act responsibly, in the spirit of inclusive democracy and the rule of law, and to respect journalists and media organisations.

The Committee also highlights the critical role that social partners and other civil society organisations play at grassroots level in preventing and combating hate crimes. "Social partners and other civil society organisations are our societal watchdogs against hatred and, at the same time, they are promoters of value-based action through their own activities," says co-rapporteur **Milena Angelova**. They are close to communities and, as such, they should be supported in keeping places, communities, groups, organisations and the media safe from hate and discrimination. Therefore, it is necessary to promote their voluntary codes of conduct and the sharing of good practices, and provide more financing to make the most of their capacities and expertise in this area.

**Background**

The European Commission initiative consists of a [Communication](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=COM:2021:777:FIN) and a proposed [Council Decision](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/1_4_178545_annex_eu_crimes_en.pdf) which would extend the list of "EU crimes" set out in [Article 83(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12008E083) to all forms of hate crime and hate speech. In its opinion, the EESC considers that the criteria for such an extension – significant developments in the area, a cross-border dimension, the need to act on a common basis (as provided for in the above-mentioned Article) – have been met. The EESC opinion therefore encourages the Council to adopt the proposed Decision in order to allow the European Commission to set minimum rules concerning the definition of criminal offences and penalties in this area of crime.