



EUROPEAN CITIZENS' PANEL
Tackling Hatred in Society



European Citizens' Panel on **Tackling Hatred in Society**

Summary of Session 1

[5-7 April 2024]

In a few words...

A moving and promising first session

How can we explain the increase of hatred in society? What are its drivers and causes? And how can we collectively tackle it? Over three weekends, 150 randomly-selected EU citizens, brought together by the European Commission, will aim to answer these tough questions. The citizens will ultimately submit a set of recommendations that will inform the work of the European Commission in developing strategies to combat hatred.

The first session of this new Citizens' Panel took place from April 5 to 7 in Brussels. Experts and members of civil society came to share their experiences and knowledge of the topic over the three days. The objective of this first weekend was to build a better understanding of hatred and of its impact on people and on our society. Participants from the 27 EU Member States brought their different national and cultural contexts to the discussion, as well as their personal experiences. These moving and honest accounts were among the elements that made this first session of this Panel unlike any other.

What can we learn from this first session?

Day 1: Understanding the manifestations of hatred

“We aim to involve you in the political debate from the outset,” said **Dana Spinant**, Director-General of the Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM), welcoming the citizens on Friday.



“You will be amazed by the diversity of the responses but also by the difficulty of the questions that arise” continued **Colin Scicluna**, Head of Cabinet for Vice President Dubravka Šuica. Indeed, for **Ana Gallego Torres**, Director-General of the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, the challenges of hatred can be addressed with citizen input. *“We need your opinions so that we can think about things from different angles. The EU is a Union that values respect for human rights and for individuals belonging to minorities. We want to respect everyone’s opinion, that’s our social contract and*

that’s what makes us European”.

The Panel proceeded to explore various dimensions of hatred - psychological, sociological, and legal with members of the Knowledge Committee.

Hatred is not merely a thought...

For **Manos Tsakiris**, Professor of Psychology at the University of London, one of the challenges lies in uncovering 'why' we can feel hatred, notably through emotional awareness. **Arun Mansukhani**, a clinical psychologist specializing in psychological trauma, noted that we define ourselves through our relationships with other groups, by differentiating ourselves. This differentiation, which builds on various biases. can pave the way toward discrimination.

Hatred is systemic

Jelena Jovanovic, coordinator of the anti-racism and diversity intergroup at the European Parliament, shared the stigmatization she has endured as a Roma individual. **Federico Faloppa**, a Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of Reading, highlighted the critical role language plays in framing our worldview. Our daily language is full of expressions that propagate hatred: from outright racist slurs to dehumanizing metaphors, and seemingly innocent yet insidious phrases: these can reinforce the divisive notions of "us" versus "them".

What are the legal responses?

Nesrine Slaoui, an independent journalist and author with a focus on social media, addressed the expression of hate as a global phenomenon transcending social classes. She highlighted internet culture, specifically cyberbullying, and the issue of algorithmic biases mirroring societal discriminations. From a legal standpoint, **Daris Lewis-Recio**, a Legal and Policy Officer at EQUINET (the European Network of Equality Bodies) examined hate crimes and their frequent underreporting. This alarming trend poses a significant threat to democratic integrity.

Day 2: Defining the drivers of hatred



On Saturday, citizens were divided into 12 smaller groups to delve into the primary drivers and causes of hate in contemporary society. While the contents of each discussion remain confidential, the following summary reflects certain key and recurrent factors that arose across the groups.

The Need to Belong, and The Fear of The Unknown

A fundamental aspect of human nature is the innate desire to belong to a social group. Isolation, driven by loneliness, traumatic childhood events, upbringing, and general life experiences, fosters a profound sense of alienation. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored how fear of the unknown and isolation can amplify feelings of detachment, pushing individuals towards extreme ideologies and the risk of radicalization, thereby fostering animosity towards others. Additionally, a fragile socio-economic status not only underscores vulnerability but also amplifies fears, notably of migrants and minorities, contributing to a cycle of exclusion and hate.

The Role of Politicians and Political Discourses

Politicians play a significant role in fostering hatred, often failing to address the needs of minorities appropriately and crystallizing animosity against them. Nationalist and populist discourses pose a complex challenge across numerous countries, even if its presence may not be as important in every EU Member State. Hate speech serves as a convenient tool for politicians to further their aims, including electoral ambitions, leading to the oversimplification of political discourse. This trend towards mainstreaming hate speech builds upon the ignorance and fear of the unknown felt by many European citizens, further dividing societies and increasing polarisation.

Cyberbullying, Anonymity and Misinformation on Social Media

The anonymity provided by social platforms plays a crucial role in the propagation of hateful speech. These networks serve dual roles: as conduits for mis- and disinformation, and the diffusion of stereotypes, particularly against women, who face significant harassment online. Youth, seeking a sense of belonging, are likely to be both participants in, and primary victims of hate speech and harassment online. The challenge of addressing false and unverified information is compounded by algorithmic biases that create echo chambers, or bubbles, which echo our own views back to us, reducing exposure to diverse perspectives.

Economic and Social Inequalities as a Catalyst for Hatred

The economic downturn and socio-economic inequalities act as a significant catalyst for the escalation of hatred, instigating feelings of disenfranchisement. General dissatisfaction, coupled with the perception that the middle classes bear an undue portion of the crisis's burden, while also facing excessive taxation, fuels resentment. This resentment can evolve into hatred directed at various groups, including politicians perceived as ineffective, big business, and migrants.

Cultural and Historical Legacy and its Transmission

Mistrust towards one another isn't just an external issue; it also weaves through the fabric of European societies, fostering divisions. Rather than cultivating an appreciation for our diverse backgrounds, there's a tendency to pass down our distrust for one another across generations. This inclination towards distrust is often easier than embracing the 'other': the layers of our heritage, rich with historical narratives including conflicts like wars, are imparted to us through various means: formal education, familial storytelling, and political rhetoric. These narratives can shape perceptions and attitudes, sometimes reinforcing divisions rather than bridging them. There's still today a noticeable lack of engagement in defining what binds European citizens together.

Day 3: Sharing and testifying



On Sunday, five speakers came to testify before the 150 citizens about their stories of being victims of discrimination due to their origin, gender, skin colour, religion, or physical disability.

Here are a few verbatims: *“Adopting a subjective perspective on hatred is crucial for uncovering the underlying violence it manifests. This approach not only deepens our understanding but also guides us in devising effective solutions to eradicate it.”* **Nesrine Slaoui**, Journalist and author

“People with disabilities often face a wall of misunderstanding, where competent authorities do not always take them seriously. [...] It is crucial to change how we view and talk about disability to promote a more inclusive and respectful society,” **Kamil Goungor**, Policy and Movement Support Officer at European Network on Independent Living.

“Antisemitism encompasses not only aggression and murder but also a spectrum of gradations including stereotypes, prejudices, and derogatory discourse. It breeds profound loneliness, leading to a withdrawal into oneself and trapping one in a vicious cycle.” **Sacha Guttmann**, former president of the Union of Jewish Students in Belgium (UEJB) (2019-2023).



“This form of racism stems from a distant past, from a colonial era that enriched Europe, the USA, and the Middle East. Mentalities change far too slowly. (...) Despite all this, I hold onto hope because you are here, and you will be allies in action.” **Mireille Tsheusi-Robert**, Belgian author, trainer and “associative” researcher.

“Though we may not succeed in creating an ideal world free of hate, we can build a world where exclusion and hatred are not dominant, where exclusion can be eliminated.”, **Fabian Wichmann**, gives exit support as a member of the EXIT Germany team, for people who want to leave the far-right.

“Let’s question what we don’t know that we don’t know”, called out **Robin Sclafani**, executive director of CEJI. At the conclusion of an emotionally charged morning, **Tommaso Chiamparino**, Policy Officer, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST) remarked, *“We have made progress: from a state of cacophony, it feels as though we’ve transitioned to something more harmonious... let’s keep nurturing this music!”*.

Click [here](#) to watch the recording of Sunday’s plenary!

Q&A with Petra (19), from Hungary

Why participate in this Panel?

“I hesitated at first to come, I was very sceptical, but I realised it was a great opportunity to express myself and my opinions. I am Jewish and in Hungary there is a lot of antisemitism, some people are openly racist and anti-LGBTQI+, I wanted to speak about the situation in Budapest, where I come from.”

How did the exchanges go?

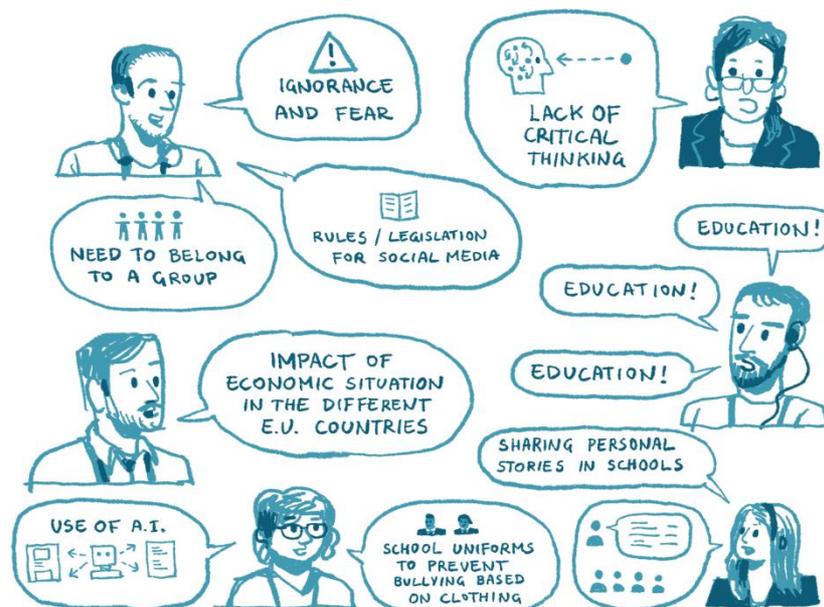
“In my working group, there were people from Hungary, Ireland, France and Poland. We talked about the situation in Hungary, and about threats for women on social media, amongst others. On social media, women are portrayed in such a way that does not fit with reality, but rather confronted with what society imagines women to be like, or how they should be like, which is very difficult.”

What’s the highlight of your weekend?

“Sunday’ testimonies were very powerful, the testimonies of Mireille and Sacha about racism and antisemitism were very moving and really touched me. This Panel is an international space with all EU nationalities represented to understand and learn from different views and opinions. It is very important to learn from one another, and to keep bringing in more opinions, to keep hearing and discussing more viewpoints on the topic of hatred”.

The weekend through Sylvain’s perspective

Sylvain is a graphic facilitator, who captures the evolution of the Panel’s discussions visually. Below is a glimpse of his impressions of the Sunday plenary:



Reminder: Objectives of all 3 sessions

- **Session 1, 5-7 April:** Develop a common understanding of hatred and the scope of the Citizens' Panel. Unpacking emotions and perceptions of hate, including by sharing with and listen to external speakers, testimonies and experts. Identify different causes and drivers of hate as well as potential fields of action in which hatred in society can be tackled.
- **Session 2, 26-28 April:** Building up on the work of session 1, citizens will develop ideas on how to tackle the problem of hatred in society. These ideas can be considered as draft recommendations.
- **Session 3, 17-19 May:** Citizens will refine these ideas and recommendations with the support of experienced facilitators, resource persons from civil society and content experts. Eventually, these ideas become the final recommendations on how to tackle hatred in Europe.