



OPEN DIALOGUE

Open Dialogue Foundation
155 Rue de la Loi, Box 27
1040, Brussels
Belgium

Open Dialogue Foundation
11 a Szucha Avenue, office 21
00-580 Warsaw
Poland

Warsaw, May 26, 2020

Statement of the Open Dialogue Foundation on the working SESSION III: From Early Warning to Early Action: Prevention of Discrimination from Escalation into Tensions or Conflict

Incidents of state-sponsored hatred in the times of the pandemic

A state of disorientation and angst introduced by the ongoing pandemic alarmingly reinforces the spread of xenophobia and conspiracy theories. As diligently documented by the “Never Again” Association in its [report](#) “The virus of hatred” from May 2020, since the outbreak of the pandemic Poland saw an unprecedented wave of hate towards people of Asian descent, but also a rise in anti-Semitic stereotypes, as well as in hostility towards various other groups like Roma, Ukrainians, Muslims, refugees, LGBT people or even vegans.

Many examples of discrimination and intolerance come from the top, with discriminatory proclamations being made by public figures: celebrities, clergy and politicians; and disseminated by some media outlets. Worst still, and this is what I want to focus on, there are cases of the public broadcaster inciting prejudice and discrimination. To provide but a few examples:

- On April 2nd, “Wiadomości”, the main news programme of Poland's national broadcaster, TVP1, showed a material in which it accused refugees in camps in Greece of spreading the coronavirus. The material was a response to the EU Court of Justice ruling that Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic broke the law by not complying with the EU relocation mechanism. In the TVP material, full of manipulation, the judgment of the CJEU was utilised to present refugees as an epidemiological threat and also to once again link them to the "Muslim terrorists" responsible for the attacks in Europe (since 2015 this has been a recurring motif in state media). The material failed to mention, however, the high risk of an epidemic in overcrowded and poorly equipped refugee camps.
- On another occasion, on April 16th, in a material broadcasted by TVP Info – the state 24-hour news channel – the host Rafał Ziemkiewicz reiterated some of his previous xenophobic comments, inciting hatred to migrants. Asking his guest about how Sweden copes with the novel coronavirus crisis, Ziemkiewicz insinuated that – in contrast to disciplined Swedes – migrants in Sweden are known for disregarding rules and procedures.

In August 2019, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination [reviewed](#) the Polish authorities’ actions aimed at fulfilling the country’s obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. One of the key recommendations, highly unusual for the Committee, was for public figures to take clear positions on hate speech. It further asked the Polish delegation to provide specific examples of statements by representatives of the authorities opposing the use of hate

speech in public debate. Despite the assurances that counteracting prejudice is important to the government, the delegation could not [point](#) to such statements.

The above-mentioned examples illustrate that **we currently see worrisome incidents of state-sponsored hatred with the use of the government-controlled public media**. In these cases, the pandemic was utilized to reiterate previously prevalent anti-immigrant rhetoric. **This provides yet another justification for the urgent need to depoliticise the Polish public media**. Yet, it is also up to us, citizens and NGOs, to monitor such incidents and the subsequent reaction on the authorities' side.

.