

Keynote Speech of Special Adviser Adama Dieng
6th Meeting of the EU High Level Group on combating racism,
xenophobia and other forms of intolerance
16 October 2018 in Vienna

Your keynote speech (10 minutes long, scheduled for 10:30AM) will follow remarks by Michael O'Flaherty, Director of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, who you will have met right before the opening remarks at 9:40AM.

Excellencies,
Distinguished colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Firstly, I thank the Austrian Government for hosting us in beautiful Vienna. I would also like to congratulate Austria for assuming the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the third time, after 1998 and 2006. The motto of the Presidency is “A Europe that protects”. This is a great starting point for my keynote speech, because I agree with our Austrian hosts that Europe could do more to protect vulnerable populations.

Just three weeks ago, I had the opportunity of presenting my most pressing concerns in an interactive dialogue at the 39th Session of the Human Rights Council. I was encouraged by the positive reaction of many Member States and remain optimistic at how much we can achieve if we work together. But I cannot hide my frustration that we are not doing all we could do to protect human rights. The glass is half full at best.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me be clear about what we are discussing here today: combating racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance. In many places around the world, people are being persecuted because of who they are – their ethnicity, the religion they practice, the culture in which they were raised or simply because of distinctive physical characteristics. The motivations for this persecution, and the cruelty and inhumane acts that result from it, are linked to a thirst for political power, competition for resources, distorted views of identity supremacy, extremist ideologies, and intolerance. We must confront, disrupt and actively counter these tendencies.

This is not alien to the European continent. On the contrary, many concerning tendencies are arising from within the borders of Europe. We are seeing cynical politicians encouraging xenophobia and discrimination against those who look different to gain political power. The victims have primarily been migrants and refugees.

I am concerned at the acceleration of these worrying trends. Europe is facing the challenge of promoting and maintaining harmonious coexistence between citizens of their States and those who cross borders to seek sanctuary on the continent. Migrants and refugees continue to test the capability of European countries to uphold fundamental rights and freedoms for all.

However, from the streets of Palermo to Budapest, reports of physical and verbal attacks towards migrants and refugees are no longer isolated incidents. These groups of people continue to suffer humiliation and dehumanization, not as a result of sporadic reactions to specific circumstances, which would be negative enough, but as part of calculated strategies to gain and maintain power.

However, the demonization of migrants by politicians, and by some members of society, has neither attracted widespread outrage nor condemnation.

On the contrary, politicians seem to exacerbate such attacks with hateful rhetoric and with little resistance. All over Europe, ultranationalist resurgence is legitimizing hatred, racism and violence.

While extremists spread inflammatory language in mainstream political discourse under the disguise of ‘populism’, hate crimes and hate speech continue to rise. Hate crimes constitute one of the clearest early-warning signs for atrocity crimes. Therefore, they must not remain unchallenged.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dehumanization of migrants and refugees, as we are seeing throughout Europe, takes away the humanity that justifies universal protection of their rights.

Ultranationalist leaders legitimize the violence of their supporters by framing migrants as a threat to their culture and identity.

What is presented as rational, pro-national sovereignty policy, centered on the protection of ‘borders’, deliberately disguises its racist and nationalist connotations. In fact, these leaders deny the problem: according to them, the racism they project is nothing but an ‘invention’ by their critics. In the real world, these attacks are manifestations of racist violence.

Their words and deeds have consequences. The new Italian government’s anti-migrants drive has been linked to a significant increase in violence towards migrants, including shootings, attacks on minors and murders.

After calls for a census of Roma people in Italy, newspapers resurfaced footage of a senior government official calling for a ‘mass cleansing’ of migrants, street by street, with force, if necessary.

In Germany, gangs of neo-Nazis vengefully hunted down migrants during a demonstration in Chemnitz last August. The co-leader of a prominent far-right party justified the attacks, arguing that “when such a killing occurs, it’s normal for people to snap”.

The former-United Kingdom Foreign Secretary’s decision to compare women in a burqa to letterboxes, was followed by a documented rise in hate crimes towards Muslim women, with perpetrators directly referencing his words.

The Hungarian Prime Minister also notoriously continues to foster ethnic and racial hatred. The United Nations Human Rights Committee recently called on Hungary to crack down on hate speech by politicians against minorities, including Roma and Muslims.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ultranationalist leaders are promoting a so-called ‘illiberal democracy’ built on supposed ‘Christian values’. Yet, no religion upholds political intolerance against minorities. Religious leaders should play an influential role in preventing incitement to discrimination and violence, as highlighted in the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, developed by my Office. Many of them do, and they must be supported and accompanied.

Ultrnationalist leaders in Europe have conducted strong defamation campaigns against civil society organizations in their anti-migration agenda. State obligations under international refugee law are actively rejected. The attacks on the rule of law through constitutional reforms and the attempts to suppress the independence of the judiciary, are deeply disconcerting.

The overt targeting of migrants, in parallel with efforts to weaken human rights and democratic structures, constitute enabling circumstances for authoritarianism.

When the State actively discriminates against a minority group, it advocates for them to be treated as second-class citizens. It promotes the supremacy of one group and prioritizes their rights and interests at the expense of others. It was once coined as the ‘tyranny of the majority’.

We need bold leadership to challenge the narrative that collectivizes the fault on migrants whilst framing them as a national security threat. This creates a climate where it is justifiable to commit acts of violence against migrants as ‘self-defense’.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

European States have a responsibility to protect their populations – including their migrant populations – from atrocity crimes. This responsibility also entails preventing incitement of such crimes.

The EU Fundamental Rights Agency can play a critical role in improving hate crime monitoring. Please allow me to thank my colleague Michael O’Flaherty, Director of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, who is here with us today,

for his excellent work on this front. This Agency has made a very compelling case on the need for accurate and timely data on hate crime trends. Without it, appropriate protective responses are further in the horizon, because we simply cannot know how bad the situation is.

It is crucial to counteract the narrative of blaming migrants for a country's internal problems. To comprehensively combat the effects of hate speech and hate crime, European democracies need to address their root causes – racism and discrimination.

To prevent the further harming of innocent people, we need a resilient Europe that defends civil society, the rule of law and stands up for the universality of human rights. These values are at the core of Europe. They need to come up to the surface as a matter of urgency.

Thank you very much.