

Briefing
Hate in the Information Age
The Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin
Co-Chairman, U.S. Helsinki Commission
May 15, 2008

Welcome. This year is certainly a time of recognition and remembrance for some of the world's most prominent struggles. This year marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, the 60th anniversaries of both Israel and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 40th anniversary of the tragic assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Despite the many achievements associated with these struggles, we are still grappling with the very real problems of bigotry and discrimination in North America and Europe, sometimes manifested in violence, other crimes, or violations of civil rights.

In the United States, we have seen the resurgence of the noose and swastika, the unfair equation of all Muslims and other migrants with terrorism, and violent attacks on gays. Across the OSCE region, support has grown for extremist political parties that openly espouse xenophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic views under the guise of preserving national identity and security. Two weeks ago, British journalist for the Guardian newspaper, Gary Younge testified before our Commission that in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France and Italy, hard-right nationalist and anti-immigrant parties regularly receive more than 10 percent of the vote and 20-30 percent of the vote in Norway and Switzerland.

And these trends are not limited to political rhetoric. Our own government cited in its most recent report an 8 percent increase in hate crimes. The European Union Federal Rights Agency reported more than 80,000 racist incidents and over 17,000 crimes linked to hate groups in the European Union last year. Hate crimes have also been on the rise in Russia and Ukraine. Discrimination in other sectors is also being reported.

Letting the perpetrators of hate know that their actions are neither condoned, nor will go unpunished is a must if we are to win this fight. It is for this reason that I introduced legislation in the Senate calling for the full investigation and criminal prosecution of the hanging of nooses in this country.

Winning also includes finding ways to fight old hatreds expressed in new ways. Cyberspace is increasingly becoming a new platform for the purveyors of hate to swell their ranks and plan their assaults on the innocent. Let me cite just a few examples of how the internet has been used to propagate intolerance: last year, a Russian website posted the putative beheading of two men under a Nazi flag; in the United States, white supremacists posted the names and addresses of individuals, along with an exhortation to harass them; Dutch politician Geert Wilder's anti-Muslim film eventually found a home on the web, even after several sites rejected it; and in Hungary just last month, extremists used a blogsite to organize rallies by neo-Nazis.

Today I am pleased to have our panel of distinguished guests to provide an overview of hate propaganda, its role in hate crimes, and how best to combat this phenomenon throughout the OSCE region, while preserving freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

I would especially like to thank Rabbi Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center for keeping this issue on my radar and making the long flight from California. I look forward to hearing from our panellists what more we can all be doing to promote diversity and understanding while combating hate in all of our societies.

Thank you.