

**European Regional Forum on Hate Speech, Social Media and Minorities**

**Opening Statement**

**by H.E. Mr. Alexander Schallenberg**

**Federal Minister for European and International Affairs of Austria**

**21 September 2020**

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mr. Special Rapporteur,

75 years ago the world cautiously rose from the horrors and the destruction of the Second World War. Humanity had experienced the darkest abyss of racial hate and discrimination. One might hope that we have learned from history. But, it seems we haven’t done so enough.

Discrimination and hatred against minorities of all kinds continue to poison our societies. What is more – modern media have made it even easier to spread hate speech. What was mumbled in a dark corner yesterday, is today presented without hesitation to a broad public via Facebook, Twitter or other social media.

Around the world, we are witnessing a disturbing rise of xenophobia, racism and intolerance – including rising antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred and persecution of Christians. Recent surveys of the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency prove that fear and resentment of ethnic minorities are also rising on our continent.

“If we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.”

We therefore cannot simply stand by and remain silent. We have to actively defend our values and our open societies against this onslaught. Thus, Austria has placed the promotion and protection of rights of minorities at the centre of its human rights agenda.

The vast majority of defamation, hate speech, including even instigation of violence, are generated online. That is what we have to address. We must act more decisively against this misuse of social media for spreading hatred and inciting violence.

In Austria, the fight against online hate speech is an essential part of our government programme: A legislative proposal is currently being prepared and is in the phase of public consultation. Its aim is to place more responsibility on social media providers to monitor and quickly erase hateful content. It will extend the application of the criminal offence "incitement to hatred" also to individuals and it will reduce the legal costs of lawsuits – a burden that in practice has often kept victims of online hate speech from going to court to defend themselves.

Our clear objective is to better protect victims of online hate speech and hate crimes, and to strengthen measures against cyber-bullying.

However, new laws are necessary, but not sufficient.

Non-legislative measures are equally essential in supporting social cohesion, integration and understanding:

* We have implemented awareness-raising campaigns in Austria including the Council of Europe’s initiative “No Hate Speech”.
* The centre GegenHassimNetz (Against online hate) offers free counselling for victims and witnesses of online hate.
* And we have developed a nationwide Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism and Deradicalisation that contains a number concrete measures to address phenomena leading to violence within our society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mr. Special Rapporteur,

All our societies are facing the same challenge. Therefore, it is all the more important to communicate and share our approaches and best practices.

One thing has to be crystal clear: The protecting and the respect the human rights of minorities is non-negotiable. We have to prove that we have learned from history – otherwise history might repeat itself.

In the hope that we will again be able to meet in person at the European Regional Forum on Minorities in Vienna next year, I thank you for your attention.