

## RAN YOUNG

### CONCLUSION PAPER

#### *RAN YOUNG Platform*

*2-3 May 2024, Zagreb, Croatia*

# Tools for youth to navigate the impact of geopolitical developments

## Key outcomes

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On 2 and 3 May, RAN YOUNG convened a two-day meeting in Zagreb, Croatia to explore how young people in the EU are affected by global challenges, like war and international conflicts. The meeting gathered 19 young professionals who are working as practitioners, policymakers and academics in 10 EU Member States. Together, they explored this challenging topic, and considered the actions that could be taken around the EU, to mitigate the impacts of these conflicts within their communities. The current geopolitical developments impact individuals in many different ways. This meeting focused on four specific challenges that young people may face in dealing with the (indirect) impact of wars and international conflicts. These included:

- **Polarisation:** how do you engage in delicate and polarising topics without exacerbating harmful polarisation?
- **Hate speech:** what can young people do when they encounter hate speech online?
- **Hate crime:** what can young people do when they witness or experience hate crimes?
- **Mental health:** how can young people stay engaged and informed on international affairs and work to support causes they believe in, without becoming overwhelmed, burnt out or disheartened?

Participants worked in four groups, each focused on one of these topics. They explored how global crisis influences local issues across the EU and what young people can do to enhance their own resilience and help their peers traverse these challenging times. As part of their preparation, each group met with a practitioner from a relevant RAN working group. Then, each group presented their findings and worked closely with the others to develop guidance for young people who have witnessed the impacts of successive global crises and need support in navigating them. The following conclusion paper summarises the outcomes of the RAN YOUNG meeting as well as the subsequent guidance proposed.

## Context

International conflicts have taken a heavy toll on social cohesion in Europe and have been linked to a rise in hate crime, hate speech and polarisation. There has been a [significant increase](#) in both antisemitic and anti-Islamic hate crimes and hate speech – online and offline – throughout the EU since Hamas’ deadly attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel’s ongoing lethal assaults on Gaza in the months that followed. Similarly, anti-Russian hate crimes have been on the rise since the invasion of Ukraine, while anti-Ukrainian propaganda from Russia has fuelled hateful sentiments among some European far-right parties, like those in [Poland](#) and [Romania](#). Further fuelling polarisation is a greater influx of displaced people fleeing armed conflict since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The [UN Refugee Agency](#) predicts the refugee population in Europe will increase another 2%, (24.9 million people), in 2024. In addition to the logistical challenges posed by this increase, rising numbers of refugees have been a point of political and social contention across the EU, driving [polarisation](#) and fuelling extremist discourse. Moreover, the difference in treatment experienced between Ukrainian and Middle Eastern refugees has intensified an already polarising debate about the inequality in Europe’s response to different conflicts. This has been evident during a rash of (mass) demonstrations.

International conflicts have also taken a personal toll. The economic, political and social insecurities discussed so far have created a more insecure world, even for those who are not directly impacted by war or violence. The direct and indirect effects of conflict can lead to stress, anxiety, anger, depression, grievances or trauma. It could even cause collective trauma, a potential consequence of a social group being (or feeling) victimised. Even for the most passive observer, constant exposure to violence and war through the media – especially [social media](#) – [can negatively affect a person’s mental health](#).

To understand these four topics better, RAN YOUNG participants researched and demonstrated how global conflicts are exacerbating polarisation, hate speech, and hate crime while adversely affecting the mental health of young people in the EU. Then they worked in groups, to identify the steps and considerations young people can take to help make themselves and their communities more resilient during times of conflict.

## Polarisation

How do international conflicts exacerbate polarisation?

Strategies and considerations for engaging in polarising topics without exacerbating polarisation

**Background:** There are many definitions for polarisation, but they tend to align with the idea that portions of a population are drawn into opposing camps, typically clustered around extreme ideologies, ideas and attitudes. Polarisation is often ideological – based on ideas – though it can also be affective (along emotional lines and with hostility towards people from the ‘out-group’). This can cause sharp divisions between different groups, with members defining themselves by the traits of their own group, against those of another. Some degree of polarisation is normal, however, when it becomes too extreme it can fuel hate between groups, undermining social cohesion and hindering compromise. All this results in the disfunction of a democratic society.

**The challenge:** Conflicts have great potential to exacerbate polarisation as they place societies and individuals under serious strain and present a series of controversial decision points that can deepen the ideological opposition between groups. Differences are further sharpened within a group’s online and offline ideological echo chambers, where a person’s position within their own group is formed and the actions of others are interpreted. It can fuel mistrust and anger while intensifying the urgency to enforce one’s own position on the wider society. In some cases, this intensifying animosity can spur violence, bringing even the most distant conflicts to the fore.

On a societal level, divisions and distrust can have a lasting effect on social unity and deepen distrust between citizens and their governments, hampering democratic function. On an individual level, it can have devastating consequences for those who are already vulnerable to radicalisation. Conflicts cause strong emotions among groups as well, especially for those who are directly affected, and can trigger a stronger sense of belonging and need to

protect one's own group. This creates an opportunity for extremists to exploit the conflict and push vulnerable individuals to violence.

## Recommendations

### 1. Unravel your own beliefs.

Polarisation occurs when people become entrenched in their own groups and ideas, in opposition of others. To help prevent this, it is important to understand the internal and external influences that constitute your beliefs about an issue. To enhance your own resilience, take time to build awareness about the drivers that shape your way of thinking and influence your attitudes towards an issue. To better understand your position, it is helpful to identify the internal biases that colour your thinking. There are tools available online that can help identify implicit biases, such as [Project Implicit](#).

### 2. Explore external influences.

You are affected by a range of external influences. Therefore, it is important to have a clear view of the content you consume and to make an active effort to understand an issue from both sides. Improve your knowledge of how personal perspectives and biases are dispersed within different discourses and sources.

Again, there are online tools that can help navigate this. For example, [Ground News](#) is a news aggregator that makes it easy to consume news from multiple local and international sources across the ideological spectrum. It also provides "bias and factuality" ratings for each source "based on the average ratings from three third-party independent news publication monitoring organisations" that are updated regularly and open to input from readers.

### 3. Raise awareness about polarisation and curate safe spaces for dialogue.

Help others to avoid being pulled into polarising positions by raising awareness about the processes of polarisation and its consequences. Use your platforms online and offline to engage with your peers and encourage them to explore how they are influenced.

You can also encourage those around you to develop critical media skills, share reliable news sources and promote a healthy discussion about bias. Avoidance of challenging topics will not help manage polarisation; instead, there needs to be promotion of healthy, open dialogue. This will help young people navigate international conflicts and develop the skills to understand their own position and those of others, through empathy. Identify or curate safe spaces for young people to ask questions and initiate cross-spectral exchange that empowers them to take a more active role in setting the narrative and determining how it builds their position.

## Hate speech

How do international conflicts exacerbate hate speech?

Strategies and considerations for responding to hate speech online

**Background:** The Council of Europe [defines](#) hate speech as "all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred, or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or states such as race, colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation." This definition provides helpful guidance for exploring these issues; however, it is important to remember that hate speech is typically defined by each nation, which determines the legality of speech locally. While hate speech is a critical issue offline, RAN YOUNG focused primarily on hate speech online for this discussion. This is because online platforms – particularly social media – have become key arenas for propagating hate speech, where it can be shared widely and rapidly. It is also easier to study the scale of hate speech online through social media listening tools, compared to offline hate speech which often goes unreported.

Hate speech online presents a serious challenge for moderators. The large volume of content online makes moderation a Herculean task. Furthermore, concerns about maintaining free speech and the risks of feeding into censorship conspiracies, central to many extremist narratives, casts doubt on its efficacy. Additionally, much of the content in question is not illegal, but instead falls into the grey area of borderline content that offends and polarises without constituting clear hate speech. This does not mean online hate speech is beyond regulation; the [Digital Services Act](#) (DSA) and the regulation addressing Terrorist Content Online (TCO) are new tools aiming to increase accountability and pressure social media companies to better manage hate – but it does mean a greater variety of solutions are needed.

The nexus between dis- and misinformation and hate speech online makes the challenge more complex. Mischaracterised content, misleading captions and doctored or mis-used photos and videos are used to misrepresent conflict and provide a basis of “evidence” to ground hateful narratives and hate speech. This intersection is further complicated by the role of online influencers and the potential to buy legitimacy on Twitter through the purchase of blue checkmarks, which makes it easier for bad entities to impersonate news outlets and masquerade as journalists.

**The challenge:** International conflicts have been tied to sharp increases in hate speech, especially online. To understand this, RAN YOUNG took the example of the war between Israel and Hamas, which has spurred a sharp rise in Anti-Semitic and Islamophobic hate speech online. This includes a spike in dehumanising and genocidal language used to justify brutal aggression against Palestinians and rally Europeans against the acceptance of Muslim immigrants into European countries. There has also been a surge in anti-Jewish hate speech that draws on conspiracy theories such as Holocaust denial and blood libel, portraying Jews as a source of evil. Much of this hate has been shared through memes and images that are better able to circumvent content policies and tap into social trends that appeal to young people. In both cases, the war has provided an opportunity for violent right-wing extremist groups to exploit the conflict and further their ideologies and recruitment online, while Islamist extremist groups are tapping into anti-Jewish sentiments to spread their own narratives and encourage violence against Jewish and Western targets.

Hate speech online is particularly concerning for young people who are spending the most time online and are particularly susceptible to the impact of hate speech as they are in a critical phase of development and identity formation. Young people are victimised by online hate speech, with 20% of young adults [reportedly](#) having experienced victimisation through online hate speech and targeted by radicalising narratives from extremist groups capitalising on conflict.

## Recommendations

### 1. Enhance your – and others’ – understanding of hate speech and the tools that amplify it.

This requires an enhanced understanding about hate speech, social media and yourself.

First, begin building familiarity with hate speech laws in your country and in the EU to better understand what qualifies as hate speech and what is protected as free speech. To understand how these laws and regulations operate practically, it can be useful to review free speech/hate speech [rulings](#) from the European Court of Human Rights.

Second, work to build your understanding about how social media operates and the ways in which it promotes and monetises hate. Some platforms prioritise controversial content through algorithms, because it gets greater engagement and thus generates more revenue. This maximises the reach and influence of a small, but outspoken minority that can obscure a more nuanced position in the middle, skewing perceptions about an issue.

Furthermore, to help fight hate speech without fuelling hate speech, take steps to better understand yourself and the role your emotions may play in colouring the way you understand and respond to different situations online. Rather than letting emotions guide your interactions online, respond with empathy and compassion, recognising that everyone has unique experiences and perspectives that shape their worldview.

Lastly, you can help manage the impacts of hate speech even further by going beyond yourself and identifying opportunities to enhance public awareness and educate others. Consider ways to use your own platforms – both online and offline – to make these challenging topics more accessible, such as through the promotion of dialogue.

## 2. Learn how to respond to hate speech when you see it.

Illegal speech should always be reported using the tools available on a given platform. Reporting hate speech can result in accounts or content being taken down by moderators. For more guidance on reporting hate speech online, check this [guide](#) from the Council of Europe, or this [guidance](#) from Victim Support Europe.

However, as noted above, not all hate speech is illegal, and moderation may not be an option. In those cases, it is up to the viewer to decide how they will respond. Since hate speech works to erase a more nuanced perspective, it can be helpful to share a more moderate opinion, not to change the poster's mind (that is highly unlikely), but to show likeminded observers that they are not alone. Be careful not to get drawn into arguments, though. Trolls and online purveyors of hate often feed on conflict and long comment threads; even those that disagree with them, help boost their performance in an algorithm and can result in spreading their hate even further. Be mindful not to feed the trolls.

Young developers can also consider the role that technology can play in identifying and regulating hate speech. AI is being used to support content moderation, but there are gaps in what AI can recognise – especially when posts include images or utilise humour and irony.

## Hate crime

How do international conflicts exacerbate hate crime?

Strategies and considerations if you witness or experience a hate crime

**Background:** Like hate speech, hate crime is a legal definition that can vary from one country to the next. Generally speaking, though, it includes a criminal act that is directed toward an individual or group based on their characteristics, such as race, ethnicity nationality, religion, sexual orientation, gender, disability or other defining feature. Hate crimes include violence against individuals or property that are motivated by bias, discrimination and hate. Hate crimes affect the individual(s) directly targeted, as well as the entire community by contributing to collective trauma that transcends generations. In extreme cases, an uptick in hate crimes has been a precursor for mass violence and genocide.

Hate crime is a serious problem, but it is impossible to know the full extent, because [hate crimes are often not reported](#). A range of reasons may impact a person's likelihood to report a hate crime. Limited understanding about how to report a hate crime or if one has even occurred, the trauma of reliving the experience, and a general distrust in the system, including a belief that nothing will be done or that they may suffer more abuse as a result prevents people from making reports.

**The challenge:** Despite low reporting rates, there is a clear connection between hate crime and international crisis. For example, Europe has seen a sharp rise in hate crimes targeting both Jewish and Muslim communities since the start of the war between Israel and Hamas. Some of this is linked to a perceived increase in migration. This rise is also influenced by economic and social crisis that spur insecurity. It is bolstered by disinformation and conspiracy narratives targeting particular groups, blaming them for hardships and spreading fear about them. Dehumanising propaganda, hate speech and disinformation contribute to an intense "othering" of vulnerable groups and provoke violence.

## Recommendations

Young people are affected by hate crime both as victims and as spectators, therefore, it is important to know what to do in both situations to help mitigate the impacts.

### 1. Build your understanding of what a hate crime is and how to report it.

These laws and processes are determined by each country and may even vary between regions within a country. Therefore, it is important to begin by learning about how your country approaches hate crimes and what kinds of

resources are available locally. As a starting point, here are three valuable resources for understanding and responding to hate crime in Europe:

- [Victim Support Europe](#) offers a clear introduction to hate crime and provides valuable support, as well as guidance on how to find help locally.
- The [European Commission](#) also provides guidance on the legal and policy framework in the EU.
- OSCE offers a range of materials through the [EStAR](#) programme.

## 2. Learn what to do when you witness or experience a hate crime.

Spectators also have a critical role to play when they witness a hate crime, both by identifying and reporting it and by offering support and validation to victims. It can be helpful to interfere when you see a hate crime taking place, but this is risky and can lead to escalation. Before intervening, be sure it is possible to do so safely and focus on minimising harm. Once the victim is out of the situation, provide immediate support as needed. A bystander can also make a difference by encouraging victims to report hate crimes and connecting them with a means of support.

## 3. Work preventatively to break the cycle of hate.

Young people can play a critical role in breaking the cycle of hate and reducing the number and severity of hate crimes, before they escalate, through preventative measures. This can be achieved online by countering the hate speech, disinformation and dehumanisation that fuels hate crime, but offline interactions are equally important. Consider opportunities to bring different groups together in safe spaces for dialogue. Discussion of difficult issues or even fun interactions can encourage individuals to support one another, strengthening communities against conflict.

# Mental Health

How do international conflicts affect young people's mental health?

Strategies to stay engaged and informed on international affairs and supporting causes you believe in without becoming overwhelmed, burnt out or disheartened

**The challenge:** International crises impact mental health in a variety of ways, depending in large part on a person's proximity to the crisis. Those who are closest to the conflict will likely suffer the greatest and most direct impact. Refugees who have been displaced by the crisis and are seeking refuge in Europe have likely suffered acute trauma through direct exposure to violence and loss, a feeling of powerlessness when watching ongoing crisis in their homeland, as well as through the challenges of settling in a new place, even temporarily. Diaspora communities are also acutely affected, both through their direct connection to the ongoing conflict, as well as by the resulting polarisation or hate they face in their home. However, the rest of the population who have no direct connection with the conflict may also be affected.

The conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza have triggered an outpouring of support from a wide range of people throughout Europe and many have become personally invested in the conflicts regardless of their own direct connection. For these people, the conflicts can have a very real impact on their mental health. For others, the consecutive crises of the last several years have contributed to a sense of insecurity that weighs heavily on many, especially young people. Even for those far away, international conflicts can disrupt daily life, while polarisation fractures social cohesion and (social) media exposes users to a stream of shocking content and disinformation. Mental health is a widespread concern that goes far beyond the people personally impacted by conflicts.

Part of the challenge comes from the 24-hour news cycle and the role that social media plays in bringing the war closer through personal accounts and footage, published straight from the battlefield. There is little separation between the conflict and the viewer, and the news is seemingly unending. This has led many to either immerse themselves fully in the constant coverage, sometimes to their own detriment, or to disengage entirely. In both cases, the mental toll from this kind of reporting is affecting young people across Europe and preventing many from engaging with the conflicts in a productive, healthy fashion.

## Recommendations

It is critical that people protect their mental health during times of heightened crisis. Developing healthy boundaries and coping mechanisms is especially important for young people who actively follow or are engaged in content and movements related to international crises.

### 1. Establish healthy habits online.

Social media can be a great place to find and share information and connect with others; however, it is also a prime source for hate speech, disinformation, discouraging perspectives and just plain bad news. Imbibing too much of this kind of content too often can have a serious impact on mental health, especially considering the 24-hour news cycle that constantly generates vivid images of conflict on the battlefield. Rather than burning out and disengaging, take breaks from social media and do something you enjoy offline. If you like to stay online, follow accounts that are unrelated to the crisis and share content that makes you happy. For example, follow sports, cooking, travel or nature accounts. Take time to read positive news showing the brighter side of things; most news sites offer a “good news” section just for this purpose.

### 2. Support yourself and others.

Community is a huge source of strength and support that can help provide perspective and prevent isolation. Check-in regularly with others and make time to create happy moments and acts of solidarity in your personal life. Also, when discussing difficult issues with friends, decide together whether it is an appropriate time for a debate or if the moment requires listening support instead. Be mindful of when you or others may need professional help and seek extra support when it is necessary, encouraging others to do so as well.

### 3. Be kind, patient and forgiving to yourself.

You are doing your best and it is okay to take a break when you need it.

**For more information on youth participation, take a look at the [RAN YOUNG webpage](#).**