

## **Street by Street: Systematic Dehumanization in Europe**

*Op-Ed by Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide Adama Dieng*

Europe is facing a challenge of promoting and maintaining harmonious coexistence among its citizens, and those who cross borders to seek sanctuary on the continent. Immigrants 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 immigrants and refugees are no longer isolated incidences. These groups of people continue to suffer humiliation and dehumanization.

The demonization of immigrants by politicians, and some sections of the public, has neither attracted widespread outrage nor condemnation.

Instead, politicians seem to exacerbate such attacks with sanctimoniousness and hateful rhetoric. All over Europe, ultranationalist resurgence is legitimizing hatred, racism and violence.

While extremists spread inflammatory language in mainstream political discourse under the guise 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.

Dehumanization of immigrants 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 immigrants as a threat to their culture and identity.

What is presented as rational sovereignist policy, centered on the protection of ‘borders’, deliberately disguises its racist and nationalist connotations. In fact, these leaders deny the problem: their racism is an ‘invention’ by its critics. In the real world, these attacks are manifestations of racist violence.

The new Italian government's anti-immigration drive has been linked to a significant increase in violence towards immigrants, 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 immigrants, street by street, with force, if necessary.

In Germany, gangs of neo-Nazis vengefully hunted down immigrants 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.

The decision by the EU Parliament to trigger Article 7 sanctions procedure against Hungary, due to a breach of various core EU values, is a positive step. It is only the second time in its history, with the first being earlier this year against Poland.

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.

Ultrnationalist leaders in Europe have conducted strong defamation campaigns against civil society organizations in their anti-immigration 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.

These events demonstrate a wider political ambition to drag Europe back to the far-right. The overt targeting of immigrants, in parallel with efforts to weaken human rights and democratic structures, are 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.

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

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

The EU Fundamental Rights Agency can play a critical role in improving hate crime monitoring. Accurate and timely data on hate crime trends should trigger appropriate protective responses.

It is crucial to counteract the narrative of blaming immigrants for a country’s internal problems. To comprehensively combat the effects of hate speech and hate crime, European democracies need to address its 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.

*(798 words)*