

Trade Unions against Discrimination Project 2nd Learning Seminar on Racism

Event held in Dublin (Ireland) on 23 & 24 April 2024

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- **Welcome words & Opening panel**

- Esther Lynch (ETUC General Secretary) welcomed the [participants](#) through [a video message](#) and thanked ICTU to host the 2nd learning seminar of a series of 5 that will emphasise the best practices (and challenges) in terms of detecting and tackling discrimination at the workplace by trade unions.
- Joe O'Brien (Minister for Integration of Ireland) opened the seminar by welcoming all attendees to the ICTU and expressing his gratitude to the organizers. He emphasized the significance of addressing racism and migrant immigration issues in Ireland. In his presentation, Joe O'Brien outlined his roles and responsibilities as a Junior Minister, particularly focusing on community development and immigration issues. He highlighted the launch of the National Action Plan against Racism in Ireland, underscoring the importance of establishing infrastructure for its implementation. O'Brien stressed the need to address intersectionality between racism and other forms of oppression and discussed the challenges of recognizing and combating personal prejudices and institutional racism. He commended the role of unions in reclaiming public spaces and combating racism, especially in the aftermath of the Dublin riots. O'Brien expressed interest in learning about hate speech legislation from other jurisdictions.
- Phil Ní Sheaghda (ICTU Vice-President) highlighted the significance of input from participants given Ireland's position as a small outpost of the European community. She acknowledged recent riots and emphasized the quick response of the trade union movement, which organized a rally to counter narratives claiming "Ireland is full." She also stressed the importance of welcoming diverse communities and noted the substantial reliance on workers from other countries in Ireland's health service, with over 50 different nationalities currently employed as nurses and midwives. Despite this diversity, she pointed out the absence of an integration policy for foreign workers, highlighting the need for an integration post announced by the Minister for Health in November 2023. In addition, she underscored the importance of union involvement in addressing racism as a worker issue and emphasized the need for appropriate language and training for union stewards. She advocated for mandatory workforce surveys by employers to assess integration and address issues like bullying and highlighted the challenges faced by non-EU workers, including exploitation and the need for state protection. Finally, she concluded by expressing interest in learning from other countries' approaches to combatting exploitation in the international visa system.
- Giulio Romani (ETUC Confederal Secretary) informed the participants about the main objective of this 2nd learning seminar which is addressing the issue of racism in the workplace. He highlighted the prevalence of different forms of discrimination, attributing them to human weaknesses and collective political manipulation. Two primary causes of discrimination were discussed: fear of diversity and selfishness, as well as the exploitation of these fears by certain groups for political gain. The role of trade unions was emphasized as one of promoting solidarity and combating discrimination, particularly by opposing far-right ideologies. Solidarity was underscored as essential for creating a better society and ensuring the protection of human rights, especially in times of conflict. Participants were urged to deepen their understanding of the root causes of discrimination and to improve their capacity to negotiate and fight against it in their respective countries (*the aim of the seminar being to exchange views on how best to foster a solidarity that goes beyond mere goodwill and forms the basis of a more equitable society*). Finally, the essential role of peace in allowing human rights to flourish was discussed, highlighting the need for solidarity to achieve lasting peace.



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He concluded his opening speech with a call to action for participants to work collectively to combat discrimination and promote solidarity in their own communities.

- **Panel 1 : Combatting racism and promoting workers' rights: policies and strategies at EU and national levels**
 - Lina Mechbal (ENAR Policy Advisor) expressed gratitude for the invitation to participate in the seminar, highlighting the importance of discussing topics related to social justice and equal rights. She emphasized the need to understand the concept of racism comprehensively, acknowledging its historical embeddedness in labour practices stemming from colonialism, particularly through the racial division of labour. She then underscored the interconnectedness of capitalism and racism, which has resulted in systemic inequalities that persist today and pointed out the over-representation of racialized groups in low-paid and precarious jobs, perpetuating cycles of discrimination and marginalization. Her presentation then shifted to structural racism in the workplace, distinguishing it from individual prejudices or actions as structural racism encompasses various aspects, including access to education, biased hiring practices, unequal pay, and discriminatory retirement policies. While international and EU legislative frameworks exist, such as the Racial Equity Directive and Employment Equity Directive, it was underlined that gaps need to be addressed, notably the absence of explicit mention of discrimination on the grounds of race in the Employment Equity Directive. Intersectionality was highlighted as a crucial approach to understanding how various systems of oppression intersect and contribute to discrimination and oppression. She emphasized the need for robust implementation mechanisms to address intersectional discrimination effectively. Trade unions were recognized for their essential role in advocating for workers' rights and combating racism. Embracing intersectionality was identified as a key step, both as a methodology and a practice. Data collection, legal assistance, and advocacy were emphasized as essential tools for protecting workers' rights and combating racism. In addition, the importance of collective bargaining in negotiating anti-discrimination clauses and establishing frameworks for addressing racism in the workplace was emphasized (*social dialogue was identified as a powerful means to raise awareness and inform affected communities of their rights, with a call for representation of racialized groups at every level of decision-making*). In conclusion, she reiterated the long journey ahead in combating racism in the workplace, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses historical roots, recognizes structural racism, and applies intersectional frameworks but also the unique role of trade unions in advocating for workers and fostering collaborations with other stakeholders to create equitable and inclusive workplaces.
 - Riz Hussain (TUC Anti-Racism Officer) delivered a comprehensive speech addressing the role of trade unions in combatting racial discrimination. He began by highlighting the Anti-Racism Taskforce initiated by the TUC and its affiliates in 2020. This two-year program aimed to review the progress of trade unions on racial justice and equality, resulting in a renewed commitment to addressing racism for black workers over the next five years. He then emphasized the structured approach of the taskforce, which outlined four priority areas: collective bargaining, organizing, public policy, and unions as employers. These dimensions were deemed crucial for effectively addressing issues concerning black workers.



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In terms of representation, particularly in racial discrimination cases, a concerning trend was revealed by research: despite significant instances of racism experienced by black frontline workers, only 8% of those who were union members approached their unions regarding race discrimination cases. This gap in representation underscores the need for trade unions to address barriers preventing black members from seeking support when facing discrimination in the workplace. Furthermore, research identified a lack of understanding of racism among some trade union representatives, particularly regarding building strong evidence for race cases, including indirect discrimination, bullying, and harassment. Positive steps taken by some unions were identified such as : establishing separate structures to review race discrimination cases or demonstrating support for their black members even if legal thresholds are not met. In addition, he stressed the importance of a collective response from trade unions when working with employers. While ethnic pay gaps and monitoring systems in the workplace are important considerations, the need for unions to work with employers to collect data and implement action plans to address racial disparities effectively seems crucial. Trade unions must also examine their own structures and develop race action plans to address racism and harassment within their organizations. Ultimately, he concluded by urging trade unions to continuously strive to create anti-racist spaces and confront institutional racism and racial discrimination: while progress may have been slow, trade unions remain decisive in the struggle against exploitation, discrimination, and violence perpetrated by racist individuals and groups.

- Dr Salome Mbugua (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission – Commissioner) provided an overview of IHREC's role and responsibilities, highlighting practical examples of combating racism and discrimination. As one of the 15 commissioners appointed by the President of Ireland, Dr. Mbugua emphasized the commission's mandate to protect and promote human rights for individuals residing in Ireland, irrespective of their backgrounds. IHREC was established as an independent public body by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act of 2014. Dr. Mbugua outlined IHREC's functions, which include handling legal cases of human rights and equality importance, making recommendations to the Irish Parliament, and developing guidance documents and codes for organizations to promote equality and human rights. She discussed IHREC's collaboration with various stakeholders, including civil society organizations and trade unions, in addressing issues such as economic inequalities, housing, employment, and eradicating racism, ageism, and sexism. She also highlighted IHREC's campaigns aimed at raising awareness and encouraging compliance with public duty obligations among public bodies in Ireland. IHREC's engagement with the Workers Employers Advisory Committee was also mentioned, focusing on issues related to employment, equality, integration of asylum seekers, and the challenges faced by minority groups in the workplace. Dr. Mbugua cited examples of IHREC's interventions, including advocating for asylum seekers' rights to open bank accounts and representing individuals experiencing discrimination and racism. In addition, she emphasized IHREC's efforts in organizing conferences to address employment-related issues and promote socioeconomic equality and underscored the importance of collaboration between IHREC, trade unions, and civil society organizations in advancing the agenda of equality and human rights in Ireland. Finally, Dr. Mbugua highlighted the significance of the national action plan against racism and IHREC's recommendations for its implementation.

She stressed the need for detailed practices to promote anti-racism across all political and public institutions, as well as the importance of employer policies, training, and review processes to address discrimination in the workplace.



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• **Workshop 1: Racial discrimination at the workplace and Trade Union action**

Beppe De Sario (Giuseppe Di Vittorio Foundation) referred to the main content of the reference document. The issue of racial discrimination is at the root of post-war international relations, as evidenced by the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1965 UN Convention, but also by the Durban Conference, which integrated this vision in the context of new migratory processes, particularly from South to North, as well as an intersectional approach that reflects the complexity of contemporary racism, between individual and structural/systemic dimensions.

Rudolf Simonic, from the Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, gave evidence and explained how the Centre was set up and operates.

Good practice 1: Maeve McCafferty (Irish National Teachers' Organization, Ireland) described her organization's experience of anti-racist activities. She highlighted different ways of combating racism in education: teaching (multiculturalism and inclusion), training (raising teachers' awareness of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity in schools), programs to include minorities in the profession to overcome visible and invisible barriers to teaching. An Equality Committee has been set up to work with other national organizations and monitor legislative guidelines.

Discussion among participants:

- Data on the spread of racism (national surveys, union initiatives, academic research) are important for an understanding of the phenomenon. As well as providing an overview, they can be useful in the workplace for recognizing discrimination. Data collection should not be separated from the analysis of prevailing narratives in individual work contexts.
- Racist dynamics are present throughout society, but they flourish in specific, concrete contexts, including the workplace. A "toxic environment" in the workplace is difficult to detect and combat, and can actually be an obstacle to employment. The denunciation of racism by workers themselves can be hampered by the context; it is therefore important to ensure the presence of well-prepared workers' representatives.

Good practice 2: Romain Lasserre (Force Ouvrière, France) illustrated the universalist approach of French immigration legislation, which is also reflected in the trade union approach. He described the recent creation of a youth union structure based on a mix of organizational and participatory models which, based on the French experience, also takes into account other approaches (for example the Anglophone approach to diversity issues).

• **Workshop 2: Intersectional discrimination (racism and gender)**

Francesca Carrera (Giuseppe Di Vittorio Foundation) referred to the main contents of the background document. Historically, gender is the main discriminatory factor in society as a whole, as it is in the labour market. It is recognised both at the individual level (violence, harassment, etc.) and structurally.



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It is the subject of study, research and legislation, and has repercussions in welfare terms (e.g., employment segregation, gender pay gap, conciliation, care services). This scenario is aggravated by forms of racism against minorities and migrants who are not recognised in the same way at a structural level. The question of the link between gender and racism as an instrument for union initiatives to link individual protection to a systemic vision was raised.

Good practice 1: Diana Agostinello (CGIL Rome and Lazio) shared the experience of the trade union's "Ufficio nuovi diritti" (New Rights Office), describing the reality of the intersection between gender, sexual orientation, racism and socio-economic status. Support (legal, and in terms of access to social services and/or psychological support) is offered by trade union services and helpdesks, in collaboration with the network of local associations and institutions.

Good practice 2: Irene Hemelaar (FNV) describes the experience of collective bargaining with public institutions and private companies. Specific measures presented include inclusive and flexible management of bank holidays (also on the basis of religious practices); parental leave (extended to all adults who provide help and have significant ties with the child) and transition leave (for transgender people). Osama Idries (FNV) describes an experience of community organising to tackle racism, through a campaign for a minimum wage and against wealth inequality, which was taken up by various parties. The union decided not to work to support the campaign in workplaces but in ten cities, in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods with a large migrant population. See PPT [here](#).

The Mentimeter application was used to ask the question: "*Which workers are victims of multiple discrimination?*" in order to flesh out the intersectional approach from the participants' point of view and experience. With regard to racism-gender intersectionality, the responses were as follows:

- *Beside well-known discriminated categories (women, racialized groups, LGBTQI+, disabled persons, migrants with no or precarious legal status) I believe the type of work/contract is key.*
- *Migrant women working in low paid precarious non-unionised work (hospitality, cleaning, home care, etc.).*
- *Inclusive trade unions who give them a collective voice to bargain with their employer.*
- *Black asylum seeker looks very Muslim can not find a decent job. He is an engineer.*
- *A black lesbian with Afro hair, who does not look feminine suffers from triple exclusion.*
- *Female migrant worker, with children to take care of but can't get access to childcare.*
- *Black women working in the care sector which is already underpaid/undervalued/feminised.*
- *Low paid, precarious workers, often involved in the care giving sector.*
- *A Muslim black woman wearing the hijab (race, gender & religion). She applies to jobs but barely gets interviews and if yes is not retained. If she gets it she will be the target of misogynoir + islamophobia.*
- *Women with migration background in essential services, particularly low paid and hard working conditions, or in atypical/undeclared work.*
- *A nurse from Philippines working in Belgium informally without any social protection as a domestic worker.*
- *Migrant women coming with their children alone to the host country.*
- *Black, migrant, lesbian, young/old women.*
- *Working class woman, from an ethnic background, if from a particular faith, such as being Muslim might experience multiple areas of discrimination. If visibly Muslim because of name and wearing hijab.*
- *Migrants who are trans/LGBTQI+, older or disabled. They need assistance, education, community support groups.*
- *Lesbian Woman afro ascendant cleaner.*
- *The most common intersection between racism and other forms of discrimination occurs with sex workers discriminated against because they are migrants, because they are sex workers and, in some cases, because they are women and trans people.*



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Discussion among the participants:

-The importance of considering the social and class dimension as well in the intersection of gender and racism was emphasised. Intersectionality is a topic that is still being worked on in the trade union approach; how it can be applied in the structure and organisation of trade unions was discussed. Several actions should be considered: raising awareness, training, seminars and workshops, information material, research and surveys on members' experiences. Another important aspect is inclusive decision-making within union structures, such as "quotas" to ensure gender equality, though this is more complex with other elements of intersectionality.

-A balance has to be struck between a universalistic approach and specific subjectivities. One solution might be a "permanent consultation" with underrepresented communities/groups, to seek to involve them in participation and bargaining. The impact of racism on the condition of workers can also be nuanced, e.g., burnout as a result of discriminatory acts. Collective agreements can help prevent this through training, corporate and management social responsibility. More serious cases, e.g., sexual harassment – more frequent in the case of women subjected to racial discrimination – ought to be addressed by providing a safe space where women can speak freely and safely.

• **Workshop 3: Intersectional discrimination (racism and LGBTQIA+)**

Beppe De Sario (Giuseppe Di Vittorio Foundation) referred to the main contents of the background document. LGBTQIA+ issues have been included and considered in recent times in anti-discrimination policies and legislation, at European and Italian level. In a similar way to the fight against racism, in the field of employment, the protection of LGBTQIA+ people tends to be marginal in contractual regulations and labour legislation at national level. Discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people is often associated with the risk of violence and mistreatment, hate speech and harassment; aspects that are known to be accentuated at the intersection with other dimensions of fragility (gender, background of migration, cultural and religious affiliations). The status of different minority groups and/or those characterised by the experience of migration makes the recognition of the rights of LGBTQIA+ people more complex, as they are exposed to discrimination from the hegemonic culture of the context in which they live and work and, at the same time, to those present in their own context of origin/background.

Good practice 1 : David Carroll (ICTU) presented a training experience for young LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers in Ireland. The aim of the courses was to empower the participants by providing them with support and knowledge of the context and queer relations in the host society. The project is promoted by a civil society organisation; the trade union supported the initiative, but was not involved in the activities. See PPT [here](#).

Good practice 2: Vera Egenberger (DGB) was not able to do her presentation online due to unforeseen circumstances. She shared important elements with the participants through this note [here](#).

Through the Mentimeter app, the question "*Which workers suffer multiple discrimination?*" was asked regarding the racism-LGBTQIA+ intersection. The answers were as follows:

- *Migrant lesbian women.*
- *Migrant Transgender.*



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- *Lower paid workers.*
- *Self employed queer young workers. Queer Union initiative in Amsterdam Netherlands: huge need. They don't know the ways to funding, stipendia et cetera.*
- *From my experience all LGBTQI+ workers can be vulnerable on the workforce. Depends on culture on the workforce.*
- *I believe the main problem for many LGBTQIA+ migrants lies in suffering discrimination not only from the country where they are now but also from their original community on coming out.*
- *Young LGBTQI+ refugees or migrants, old-age LGBTQI+ people with a migrant background or ethnic minority, LGBTQI+ in suburbs or poor neighbourhoods or in outermost regions.*
- *Lower paid workers, workers before retirement, young workers.*
- *A transgender woman asylum seeker terminated from her job at a restaurant: "They said they only wanted women working there. I tried to explain that I am also a woman but they didn't understand"*
- *Members of Roma community who are LGBTQIA+.*
- *A homosexual Muslim man from Pakistan living in a direct provision centre in Ireland and working in a low paid zero hour contract role.*
- *Lesbian or gay migrant coming from countries where there is the death for them.*
- *Workers who need access to information. We experience refugees and migrants who find it difficult to access information because of language barriers. Seeking help in this area, can lead to frustration.*
- *Muslim woman who seeks asylum could be discriminated against on the basis of race, faith and gender. Through the immigration system itself, and then through access to work and housing, etc.*

Discussion among the participants:

The ICTU project presented aroused the interest of the participants, with comments made and clarifications sought. Starting with reflections on the course outcomes, impact and spillover into the community, the centrality of networking between the different players, including trade unions, was highlighted. This requires a multidimensional trade union approach, integrated with the local community, civil society, and anti-racist and LGBTQI+ rights organisations. In this regard, an Italian experience was described involving trade unions, social work and legal professional associations for the training of those working with LGBTQI+ migrant minors and their families. The sharing of an intersectional approach resulted in the signing of national and local agreements between trade unions, institutions and civil society for the inclusive care of LGBTQI+ migrant minors as ultimate targets of the project.

• **Panel 2 : Tackling the far-right: actions and strategies in view of the next EU Elections**

- **Ethel Buckley** (SIPTU Deputy General Secretary), representing the largest union in Ireland, introduced her union SIPTU which organizes in both the public and private sectors across two jurisdictions. She highlighted the union's deep commitment to anti-racism and anti-sectarianism, emphasizing a zero-tolerance policy towards racism in the workplace. She provided a historical context, discussing the long-standing tradition of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) as the only confederation in Ireland. She emphasized the union's ability to remain united through difficult periods, such as the Troubles. The union's current strategy of not platforming far-right individuals or events was also outlined as a policy that remains under constant review. She stressed the importance of organizing all workers, including migrant and agency workers, to combat racism and strengthen the union. Addressing racism and workplace harassment, she detailed the union's efforts to organize workers collectively and confront issues of racism directly, whether these issues arise from workers, employers, or managers and provided examples, such as the increase in aggression towards public transport workers during COVID-19, particularly targeting workers of colour.



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Finally, she described the union's strategic campaign to take cases of racial harassment to the Workplace Relations Commission and publicize successful outcomes to raise awareness but also mentioned the importance of union's focus on education and training to support anti-racism efforts.

- Thomas Shannon (ETUC Advisor) presented an overview of the European Parliament's composition and the rise of far-right groups. He highlighted the potential impact of far-right coalitions with regular conservatives on legislative processes and stressed the importance of youth engagement and voter turnout, noting a significant difference in far-right support between young men and women in Poland. Data from the Eurobarometer survey were shared during his presentation showing Europeans' primary concerns, which include poverty, climate change, war, and public health. He noted that Irish voters particularly focus on migration issues. He also explained how far-right parties link social issues to migration in their political advertising, influencing public perception and voting behaviour. Introducing the [ETUC manifesto for the European Elections 2024](#), he detailed its focus on various socio-economic issues, which have been incorporated into the platforms of multiple political parties. He also described the union's efforts to mobilize members, engage with political parties, and highlight far-right voting patterns on key issues such as the minimum wage and gender equality. In conclusion, Thomas Shannon summarized the union's actions against austerity and their ongoing high-level events to promote workers' rights and encouraged continued vigilance and adaptation of strategies to counteract the influence of far-right politics. See PPT [here](#).
- Niamh McDonald (Hope & Courage Collective Director) discussed the efforts of Hope and Courage Collective to combat far-right hate in Ireland over the past three years and outlined their election strategy. Their approach involves developing a race, class, and gender inclusive narrative, tested against far-right and other political messages. This narrative aims to persuade the 67% of society open to both far-right and inclusive messages. The Collective's strategy includes creating persuasive evidence-based narratives, supporting organizations and communities in responding to far-right challenges, and building a broad-based ecosystem to counteract far-right influences. They also focus on analysing far-right participation in elections and providing rapid response actions to support communities. She also highlighted the shifting Overton window in Ireland, noting the increasing acceptability of far-right rhetoric since the November 2023 riots. She criticized the EU's Migration Pact as appeasing the far-right and emphasized the need for a strong progressive opposition. Research conducted in March 2024 surveyed 3,000 people and found that the hard opposition to progressive views was 1.1%, with an additional 11% in opposition. Key findings indicated broad support for migration, affordable housing, transgender rights, inclusive sex education, and recognition of structural barriers faced by minority ethnic groups. Finally, she emphasized that inclusive and hopeful messages are more persuasive than opposition messages. However, the far-right base is more motivated than the progressive base, which needs strong leadership and a clear cause, such as housing, to inspire confidence and energy. She concluded with a call to action for politicians and trade unions to focus on mobilizing their base effectively against rising far-right influence. See PPT [here](#).
- Sinéad Gibney (European Elections candidate - Social Democrats Party) expressed a keen interest in discussing intersectionality, a topic close to her heart. She identified herself as the Dublin MEP candidate for the Social Democrats in Ireland and outlined key approaches, including addressing root causes behind communities gravitating towards far-right positions, countering far-right narratives, and strengthening democracy and civil society.



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Drawing from their experience as Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the candidate emphasized the importance of strengthening systemic approaches to tackle societal forces. She cited examples such as safeguarding judicial independence and addressing gaps in legislation, such as the Judicial Appointments Council Bill. The candidate stressed the need to anticipate challenges posed by potential far-right governments and implement systemic measures to safeguard against dismantling of democratic institutions, citing examples from Poland and the United States. Another systemic issue highlighted was the lack of collective bargaining rights in Ireland, which could provide a foundation for countering future challenges. She finally underscored the importance of addressing immigration issues, noting the broken asylum system and the failure of political leadership to confront these challenges head-on.

- Aodhán Ó Ríordáin (European Elections candidate - Labour Party) began by stating his reason for running in the European elections, referencing the events of November 23rd and the resurgence of anti-immigration sentiments reminiscent of past campaigns. He lamented the mainstreaming of anti-immigrant rhetoric and highlighted incidents such as arson attacks on accommodation centers and violence against minority groups. He criticized mainstream political parties for pandering to this agenda and emphasized the need to focus on issues such as housing, inequality, and pay to counteract the far-right narrative. He urged for better engagement with social media platforms and called for a collective effort to combat the growing threat to democracy.
- Lynn Boylan (European Elections candidate - Sinn Féin Party) addressed concerns regarding the rise of the far-right in Ireland, attributing its growth partly to the housing crisis. She emphasized the importance of engaging with communities in a calm and respectful manner to address concerns and dispel misinformation. She shared examples of successful community engagement efforts and stressed the need to counter fear-mongering tactics employed by the far-right. Additionally, she called for greater scrutiny of media coverage and emphasized the role of civic society in holding media accountable. She also highlighted the need for effective policing of far-right protests and called for collective action by unions and law enforcement agencies.

Overall, all speakers underscored the importance of proactive engagement, addressing root causes, and fostering collaboration among various stakeholders to combat the rise of the far-right and protect democratic values.

