



HOW TO RECOGNISE AND CONFRONT HATE GRAFFITI

This leaflet gives organisations, activists and committed individuals a guideline how to recognize and confront graffiti containing racist messages, xenophobic discrimination and right-wing extremist symbols and codes.

Walls, trains, bridges. No matter where to find it - graffiti is an international phenomenon and often a creative expression of values or political beliefs. But what about slogans like „Foreigners out“? Sprayed swastikas and Nazi symbols? Or smearings showing the Star of David on the gallows? Are these simply expressions of „political beliefs“? Free speech to be tolerated?¹

Many of us have already witnessed graffiti containing racist and antisemitic slogans or neo-Nazi symbols. They all have one thing in common – they are insulting, discriminating, humiliating. Often they are liable to prosecution. Always they cause fear among the ones addressed by the graffiti.

Hate graffiti is a threat. It is a pre-stage to violence. Ignoring the problem means that hate can grow in the middle of society without being confronted. The limit of tolerance is reached not only when the graffiti contains elements of a criminal offence, but when it violates the dignity of any human being. It is a matter of civil courage and our shared responsibility to show that any expressions of racist hate in public can never be tolerated.²

REMOVING OR NOT! The danger of Fear zones

In scientific and public discourse, it is often discussed whether or not hate graffiti should be tracked and removed. Opponents of removing activities like the Vienna based Institute for Graffiti Research³ consider graffiti as a political barometer showing socially repressed positions which should remain as a medium of intercultural communication. Besides, right-wing extremist graffiti is seen an „adolescent play with provoking symbols and messages“.⁴

Unfortunately reality shows that this perception is downplaying the problem. Most organisations active in the field of fighting racism and right-wing extremism agree that hate graffiti is not just an expression of an urban culture but promotes an inhuman ideology which cannot be seen as an opinion like any other. Such graffiti reflects both the mainstream racism anchored in the middle of society and the attempts of right-wing extremists to gain the discourse hegemony in the public space. Through their appearance and actions, right-wing extremists create public spheres in which people that do not fit into their world view have to fear harassment and violence. Such fear zones can be market places, train stations, supermarkets – any public places where right-wing extremists influence the everyday life by showing constant presence and intimidating and threatening people. Hate graffiti is one form of claiming extreme right dominance and marking own territory, e.g. in public transportation, around youth clubs and in pedestrian’s tunnels.

Fear zones are a latent or open threat for people and limit their free movement. This restriction of fundamental rights is not acceptable in a democratic society. Public space must be accessible to everyone without fear. Against this background, hate graffiti can not be seen as a harmless expression of free speech.

Defamation and discrimination by hate graffiti may NOT remain unopposed and must be removed as soon as possible!

¹ See also UNITED Leaflet - How to Understand and Confront Hate Speech, by Rafal Pankowski

² In this leaflet, the term graffiti refers to all images and writings which are brought up on property. Hate graffiti are images and writings that contain racist, xenophobic, antisemitic, right-wing extremist or any other content which humiliates the dignity of a human being. Being an expression of right-wing extremist ideology, the terms hate graffiti and smearings are used synonymously here. As this leaflet is intended to be a practical guideline for NGOs, the academic question whether graffiti should be regarded as art or damage, vandalism or culture, cannot be discussed here.

³ www.graffitieuropa.org

⁴ Dieter Schrage; Norbert Siegl (2007): Rechtsextreme Symbole und Parolen. Graffiti und Sticker als Medium interkultureller Kommunikation. Institut für Graffiti Forschung, Wien

HIDE AND SEEK

Right-wing extremist codes and symbols used in graffiti

While racist, antisemitic and homophobic slogans can mostly be identified unambiguously, it might be difficult at times to detect the use of right-wing extremist codes in graffiti. Symbols, runes, numbers – there are many ways how members and sympathizers of the extreme right movement express their ideology in public. Extreme right codes contain open and hidden messages. While open symbols mostly refer to national socialist ideology which leaves few space for interpretation, hidden symbols are used to cover a political affiliation to the outside and clearly express an identifying feature to an inside group. Only insiders – members and sympathizers of the right-wing extremist movement – know the meaning of these codes the use of which creates a right-wing group identity.

HANDS ON!

Good practices in confronting hate graffiti

No matter what you come up with, the most important thing is to address the problem and to take action – against the aggression of the perpetrators and against the ignorance of the silent majority which walks by the graffiti day by day without noticing. There are many different ways of confronting hate graffiti, from creative one-time actions up to complex, long-term strategies. The following examples might give you some inspiration.

EYES OPEN!

Track and report hate graffiti

Wherever you see it, take pictures of the graffiti with your camera or mobile phone and pass it on to the authorities and the police. Make sure that you photograph the graffiti along with the surrounding area and write down the date and the concrete place where you have seen it. Local authorities might be reluctant to acknowledge the existence of the hate graffiti, so every report raises the awareness for the problem and urges the authorities to take action. Even if little chances to find the perpetrator are to be expected, the property owner should report an offence against unknown at the police. Often the graffiti are considered as criminal property damage or contain right-wing extremist symbols like swastikas or runes which are relevant under criminal law aspects. The following example from Russia shows how the reporting of hate graffiti brought about a vivid positive change in the city.

These are some common motives used in right-wing extremist graffiti in Europe. Depending on the legal situation in different countries, some of them are banned under the respective national criminal law.

SYMBOLS REFERRING TO NATIONAL SOCIALISM



Swastika: Official symbol of German National Socialism and the NSDAP



Iron Cross: Introduced as a military decoration by Prussia during the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century, it became the most famous military decoration in Nazi Germany. As a symbol of militarism and masculinity, it is often used within the extreme right heavy metal and rocker music scene



Black Sun: Similar to a twelve-armed swastika or a sun wheel consisting of 12 Sig runes, the Black Sun was artificially created by the Nazis as an occult symbol for a “Nordic” culture. As a huge mosaic, the symbol was set into the floor of the SS castle Wewelsburg.



Triskele: Celtic symbol which is frequently misused by right-wing extremists for its similarity to a swastika. Used as official symbol by the neo-Nazi network Blood and Honour and the South African racist white supremacist organisation Afrikaaner Weerstandsbeweging.

SYMBOLS REFERRING TO “GERMANIC PAGANISM”



Celtic Cross: Used by neo-Nazi organisations to symbolize an alleged supremacy of the “white race”. Symbol of the White Power movement. In the 1930s, it was also the symbol of the fascist Parti populaire français.



Man rune, Yr rune: Rune of life and rune of death, frequently used by right-wing extremists to refer to their *Volks* ideology.



Sig rune: Commonly used in pairs to represent the SS emblem.



Odal rune: Sign of the “Hitler Youth”. After World War II it was used by extreme right youth organisations such as the Viking Youth.



Gibor rune, Wolfsangel (Wolf’s hook): In Nazi Germany, the symbol was used by the SS and the Hitler Youth and was later adapted by neo-Nazi organisations. It is also legally used in German coats of arms.

NUMBER CODES



18: Refers to the first and eighth letters of the alphabet: AH – Adolf Hitler. The code is frequently used by bands and organisations, e.g. Combat 18, Sturm 18.



28: Refers to the second and eighth letter of the alphabet: BH - Blood and Honour.



88: Refers to the eighth letter of the alphabet: HH – Heil Hitler. The number is frequently found on shirts and stickers distributed by extreme right labels.



14: Refers to a quotation of the American neo-Nazi David Lane consisting of 14 words: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children.” Murderer and member of a terrorist organisation, Lane was sentenced for life imprisonment and died in 2007.



168:1: Refers to a bombing attack in Oklahoma City in 1995 which claimed 168 lives. The right-wing extremist Timothy McVeigh was sentenced to death and executed in 2001. The code cynically reflects the result of this antisemitic terrorist crime.

Photo package for the City Mayor*An initiative by the Youth Group for Tolerance ETHnICS from Krasnodar, Russia*

In 2007, ETHnICS started an action which helped not only to white wash the overwhelming majority of hate symbols in Krasnodar at a short period of time but also raised awareness about the necessity to act against neo-fascism among city-dwellers. Within the action week “Europe without Racism”, the activists combed the city making pictures of all hate symbols. The photos, each captioned with the exact address and an explanation of the hate message, were sent as a package to the City Mayor, along with an appeal to white wash the hate symbols before the 9th of May, the great Victory Day. The most influential media in the region received the photos as well. The effect was very positive: All the mentioned hate symbols were white washed by the city administration within a month, several administrative cases were filed in order to prosecute the perpetrators, and the media widely reported about the action which conducted to an information campaign for tolerance in Krasnodar krai, a multiethnic region in the Northern Caucasus. The action has already been repeated in Voronezh (by YNRI) and Sochi (by local activists) and can easily be realized in other cities as well.

*More information: www.russiantolerance.org***WHITE WASHING! Remove hate graffiti yourself**

The answer what to do with hate graffiti is very easy: Remove it! Once you tracked and reported the smearings, invest your efforts in having the graffiti removed as soon as possible. The longer the graffiti stays visible in public, the longer it humiliates the targets of the aggression. Get in touch with the property owner about the white washing action. Especially at big building complexes the graffiti often stays unremoved for a long time because the tenants lack responsibility or do not know what to do. For your white washing action, you only need a few things: a brush, a solvent and a bucket of colour. It is easy and effective and supports those the graffiti meant to discriminate and threaten – especially when slogans and symbols were sprayed directly at their houses or shops. Although racist stickers or posters are more difficult to remove, it is still important to at least try to scrape them off. What counts is the sign that such expressions are not tolerated! Bring your camera to document the cleaning session and invite the media to raise public attention. Sometimes it is argued that an explicit permission of the property owner might be needed to remove graffiti independently. The following example of the German activist Irmela Mensah-Schramm shows that civil courage does not always wait for approved permission.

Hate Destroys*A hate graffiti exhibition by Irmela Mensah-Schramm, Germany*

Irmela Mensah-Schramm, a German pedagogue and human rights activist, has been photographing and eradicating neo-Nazi and xenophobic graffiti for more than 20 years, first in Berlin, later all over Germany. She paints over right-wing extremist graffiti, stickers and slogans wherever she comes across them - on walls, street lights, even seats in public transport: “In my view, such smearings are mental violence which I don’t want to tolerate on our streets, therefore I remove them.” The photo exhibition “Hate Destroys” shows a selection of around 6.000 hate graffiti she documented during the past years. It was presented in city halls, theatres, memorial sites, schools and churches and raised an enormous public interest. The hope that the visitors of the exhibition will become aware of the hate graffiti and start removing it themselves is a source of motivation for the activist who is working voluntarily and unpaid. Despite several charges because of “damage of property”, Irmela Mensah-Schramm did not lose her courage. In 1996, she was awarded the Federal Medal for Merit.

*More information: www.graffitieuropa.org/berlin/mensahschramm.htm***CONNECT! Build alliances with your city council**

The best strategy to confront hate graffiti sustainably is to assist and work with the authorities of your city or region. The responsibility of the City Council must be to ensure that hate graffiti is removed from public buildings within a short time after it has been reported. The Council can also undertake the commitment to put pressure on owners of private and commercial buildings to have hate graffiti removed from their properties. Antiracist NGOs and networks can serve as registration points where citizens can announce the hate graffiti they observed. A fruitful cooperation between NGOs and authorities can also include workshops to train public service staff, e.g. caretakers, security guards or bus and tram drivers, in recognizing and reporting hate graffiti. The following example shows which efforts were made in Britain to include the commitment of hate graffiti removal in the official protocol of City Councils.

Grffiti removal crews*A directive of the Newcastle City Council and Charnwood Borough Council, United Kingdom*

In the United Kingdom, valuable experiences have been made to have hate graffiti removed or covered on public buildings by the City Council within a few days. In Newcastle, for example, this commitment is stated in the official protocol of the City Council: “We will remove all offensive, racist and sexist graffiti within 2 working days from council structures; where this is not possible it will be obscured. Graffiti on private buildings will be obscured.” Citizens observing graffiti as mentioned above are asked to fill in an on-line reporting and tracking form or call a special hotline to report the incidents to the department of the “Grffiti Enforcement Officer” who then takes care about all necessary steps to remove the graffiti. “Instant removal crews” also operate in Charnwood. According to its graffiti removal protocol, the Charnwood Borough Council undertakes to “clean off all racist, political, sexist, homophobic, defamatory or offensive graffiti off Council property within 24 hours of it being reported.” Similar to Newcastle, the Council does not restrict its activities on public buildings. Owners of commercial properties are requested to remove hate graffiti from their properties. If this is not done after repeated requests, Charnwood removes the graffiti itself and charges the owner of the property.

More information: www.charnwood.gov.uk, www.newcastle.gov.uk

WIN-WIN! Cooperate with construction companies

Another successful approach of confronting xenophobic graffiti is to establish cooperation with engaged painting or construction companies from your city which can remove the smearings from house walls quickly and professionally. Activating the civil courage of those who perceive swastikas and insulting slogans on buildings as unacceptable can be the starting point for a cooperation between an antiracist organisation and a company. Offering help and doing what the company does at its daily profession - painting walls and cleaning facades - creates an important effect by small, easy steps. This strategy has been applied successfully many times. By removing racist graffiti for a symbolic or even free of charge, the company not only rejects intolerance and racism, but also promotes a good image of the company and thus invests in its own marketing. The following example shows how this win-win situation works in Austria.

Graffiti Ambulance

In 2006, the Vienna based NGO ZARA, Counselling Centre for Victims and Witnesses of racism, started a project called "Graffiti Ambulance" - a cooperation with the construction company "derbaumann" from Vienna in order to remove racist smearings as soon as possible. The idea behind it is as smart as simple: whenever property owners or managers discover racist graffiti on their buildings, they can contact ZARA and the company which comes to remove the graffiti free of charge. The project has positive effects for both sides – for ZARA by helping to counteract public expressions of racism, and for the company as it might acquire paid future orders. This initiative shows that civil courage and business sense can go hand in hand – as a first-aid measure against xenophobic graffiti.

A cooperation between ZARA and derbaumann, Austria

More information: www.beschmierungambulanz.at

GET CREATIVE! Organise activities against hate graffiti

Hate graffiti has nothing in common with art but means a violation of human dignity and should be treated as such. There are many ways of opposing the misuse of graffiti art for racist purposes. Your creative activity does not necessarily have to be difficult or expensive. The most important thing is to raise awareness for the fact that such smearings should not be allowed in public spheres and that only a little creativity is needed to show civil courage. The following example from Poland shows how this creativity can be expressed in a joint local campaign.

Let's paint the walls!

In Krakow, the antiracist organisation Never Again has realized a bunch of local activities against hate graffiti under one campaign motto: Let's paint the Krakowian walls! Throughout the year, Never Again and its local partner organisations such as the Polish Humanitarian Organisation used their local contacts to involve as many activists and citizens as possible. Young people gathered to remove and paint over racist stickers and smearings. House owners were asked for permission and invited to engage in white washing actions. Together with students and teachers, antiracist graffiti was sprayed inside schools. Journalists were invited to report about the campaign and published articles in local newspapers and magazines. Thus, many single activities merged into one big action, spreading a powerful message: Make Krakow free of hate graffiti. This campaign is a successful example how the creative ideas and resources of different organisations can be combined. Outwards, the many diverse activities bring public attention which attracts the media and highlight the problem of hate graffiti. Inwards, it connects local initiatives and encourages for common actions.

A graffiti campaign by Never Again, Poland

More information: www.nigdywiecej.org

GET INFORMED! Internet resources

Graffiti and Street Art Gallery

Documentation centre on graffiti and art in Europe
www.graffitieuropa.org/graffitigalerie.htm

Hide and seek

Database on symbols and codes of right-wing extremist groups
www.dasversteckspiel.de

DASH - Building networks against discrimination

Online platform to share skills and resources street against racism and xenophobia
www.d-a-s-h.org

Written by Maria Grjasnow, Kulturbüro Sachsen - Mobile Counselling Team against right-wing extremism, Germany, maria.grjasnow@kulturbuero-sachsen.de

UNITED for Intercultural Action

European network against nationalism, racism, fascism and in support of migrants and refugees
Postbus 413 • NL-1000 AK Amsterdam • Netherlands
phone +31-20-6834778 • fax +31-20-6834582
info@unitedagainstracism.org • www.unitedagainstracism.org

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