As the European Commission is looking to come up with new laws next year to boost the prominence and independence of the bloc’s equality bodies and strengthen victims’ rights as part of EU treaties, it is time to take stock of the long-standing issues of racism and discrimination in Europe.

In this special report, EURACTIV explores whether European governments have learned the lessons from the initial waves of the pandemic and their disproportionate effects on minority communities, such as the Roma. Moreover, we take a look at what’s next for efforts to bolster Europe’s anti-racism and anti-discrimination protection.

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Europe’s Roma at risk amid COVID-19 fourth wave

French delegation calls for ‘emergency’ repatriation of children in Syria as winter nears

Next German government pledges to fight racism, ensure diversity

Grappling with Europe’s racist colonial past must go beyond history books

EU Parliament sets out two-year diversity roadmap
Europe’s Roma at risk amid COVID-19 fourth wave

By Silvia Ellena | EURACTIV.com

Europe’s Roma communities will be at increased risk unless European countries speed up vaccination and design targeted support as the fourth COVID-19 wave and new lockdowns take hold in Europe, experts say.

Zeljko Jovanovic, director of the Open Society Roma Initiatives Office, told EURACTIV that conditions for Roma are likely to deteriorate.

“I think they will be worse because the negative consequences of the first wave have accumulated,” he said.

In the first months of the pandemic, Roma faced increased institutional racism and discrimination. Hate speech and disinformation also targeted Romani people, who were often blamed for spreading the virus.

In some countries, like Romania, Slovakia, and Bulgaria, there were quarantines targeting Roma-majority areas, according to Jonathan Lee, a Romani activist working at the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC).

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that happened again, particularly if people would follow this example of lockdowns for the unvaccinated. It could be very easy to apply this on an ethnic basis to Roma communities,” he said.

On a more positive note, lessons were drawn from the first lockdown, said Gabriela Hrabanova, the executive director at European Roma Grassroots Organizations (ERGO) network.

She explained that social workers would now be able to design targeted support, while during the first wave, they were not allowed to reach Roma communities to deliver essential services.

The situation was already dire before the pandemic for these communities, with 80% living in overcrowded settlements and 30% lacking access to tap water.

Moreover, underlying medical conditions left them more vulnerable.

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to COVID, while lack of digital tools and skills cut most children off school.

“How can you access digital learning if you don’t have electricity, let alone wifi?” Lee said, adding that a whole generation of Romani children was unable to access classes.

As a result, many young Roma dropped out of school in several countries, including Italy.

“There has been one year and a half of isolation from school for many, many children,” said Carlo Stasolla, president of Associazione 21 Luglio, an Italian non-profit organisation helping marginalised groups.

Although classes resumed last September, “going back to school has been difficult and not all children who were attending before went back afterwards,” he said.

According to Stasolla, the prevention measures put in place, although necessary, have caused more damage than COVID itself.

“These groups of people are even more excluded, more marginalised from the city life than before.”

Another element of exclusion is the COVID certificate, as most Romani people have not been vaccinated so far.

Vaccine hesitancy among Roma was already widespread before COVID due to their general distrust of medical authorities. Then, a 2020 survey by the Fundamental Rights Agency, found that many Romani people reported being discriminated against when accessing healthcare.

“If your only experience with the state and the medical personnel is discrimination, terror, abuse, why would you suddenly trust them when they say you need a vaccine?” Lee said.

Although the European Commission’s guidelines on vaccines call on countries to prioritise vulnerable groups, only Slovakia has put in place a vaccination strategy for Roma communities.

On top of this, anti-vax propaganda discourages people from getting the jab, especially in Central and Eastern European countries, like Romania and Bulgaria, where most Roma live.

Fighting vaccine disinformation in these countries is not only crucial as a “collective defence against the virus”, but also for the economic recovery, Jovanovic told EURACTIV.

“If Europe wants to recover from the financial crisis, Roma are certainly part of the solution,” he said.

However, recovery plans fail to address the informal economy, a sector where most Romani people work.

In his view, securing equal opportunities, skills and jobs for Roma is not “a matter of charity” but a matter of investment in the labour force.

Szabolcs Schmidt, head of the non-discrimination and Roma coordination unit at the European Commission, believes investing in education and employment is critical.

Schmidt expressed concern about the growing number of young Roma who are not studying or working, a trend that COVID has uncovered and further exacerbated.

“It’s crystal clear we have to do something against it if we want to avoid problems in the long run,” he said.
French delegation calls for ‘emergency’ repatriation of children in Syria as winter nears

By Clara Bauer-Babef | EURACTIV.com

France and the EU should help organise “emergency” repatriation of French and other European women and children stuck in Syria before winter sets in, a French delegation said upon return from a mission to northeast Syria, where they met with Kurdish authorities.

“There are an estimated 200 children and 80 women of French nationality in the camps in north-east Syria”, Simon Foreman, chair of the emergency sub-committee at France’s National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH), told EURACTIV in an interview.

From 30 October to 3 November, Foreman took part in the mission to the Rojava region in Syria, conducted jointly with the Conseil National des Barreaux, the association Avocats Sans Frontières (ASF) France, and MP Hubert Julien-Laferrière.

The four members of the delegation could not visit the camps as they had hoped. But back in France, they called on the government to take action.

“Abandoning these children is contrary to French law. The best interests of the child must take precedence over all other considerations,” Foreman argued.

Since the fall of Baghouz, the last bastion of the Islamic State, two years ago, Paris has been pursuing a case-by-case repatriation policy. This policy is considered insufficient by the Kurdish authorities, who want a “clarification of the French position”.

Thirty-five children have been repatriated to France since 2019. Two-thirds of them were orphans and one
third were children whose mothers had agreed to separate.

While the French case-by-case strategy is not “easy to decipher”, these figures help “to guess the interpretation by the French authorities of the case-by-case approach,” Foreman said.

“RADICALISATION HOT SPOTS”

Living conditions in the camps are catastrophic, due to diseases and a lack of drinking water, very hot summers, very cold winters.

“Children die every day,” Foreman warned.

Beyond the deplorable sanitary situation, there is an even greater danger: In the Rojava camps, the Islamic State is reconstituting itself. “These children are in radicalisation hot spots, at the mercy of Daesh,” argued Foreman.

Because, even if the Kurdish authorities control the entrance to the camps, inside these veritable cities of several thousand people, it is the law of the strongest.

“Many security experts agree that any security risks can be better managed if the people in the camps are repatriated in a controlled manner,” Christophe Paulussen, an international law expert at the Asser Institute and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague, told EURACTIV.

“Nonetheless, there is currently not enough talk about the long-term security ramifications of European governments’ inaction.”

IN EUROPE, “GOVERNMENTS CONTINUE TO BE VERY RELUCTANT”

There are an estimated 645 European children and 231 women in Syrian camps. Last October, there was an increase in repatriation to Sweden, the UK, Denmark, and Germany.

“But generally speaking, governments continue to be very reluctant,” Paulussen warned.

At the EU level, there is no common policy, each country has its own strategy, mostly on a case-by-case basis. While in France repatriated mothers go directly to prison, in Belgium, they are tried but not imprisoned.

The three years spent in Syria in the camps constitute “a fairly heavy sentence” in the eyes of the Belgian government, said Foreman, while Paulussen explained that “the EU can only assist in coordination efforts, in sharing best practices, e.g. on repatriation or prosecution of returnees”.

In March 2021, the European Parliament called for the repatriation of children from Syrian camps but things did not really move.

Arguments are various: from national security and security of the repatriation mission itself, to challenges in prosecuting those brought home.

According to Paulussen, “it all boils down to a lack of political will and the inability of politicians to convey to one’s voters what is the only correct thing to do from an international legal, long-term security, humanitarian and moral perspective”.

Politicians know they have the backing of many of their constituents to take a tough stance in the fight against terrorism and no one wants to take the risk of bringing back a person who might later be involved in a terrorist attack, even if the security risks of inaction are even bigger, given that people are disappearing off the radar, he added.

At the start of 2020, the CNCDH held talks with the French government and the answer to the question about the repatriation of the women and children was: “We do not rule the camps. It is hard for us to go there and get the children”.

The CNCDH will soon launch a “desperate appeal to the French authorities”, while another delegation will go to the Rojava region again and try to access the camps.

“Not one more winter,” Foreman concluded.
Next German government pledges to fight racism, ensure diversity

By Oliver Noyan | EURACTIV.com

The coalition agreement of Germany’s Social Democrats, Greens and the liberal FDP puts a special emphasis on measures to guarantee the participation of sidelined and vulnerable groups and to fight racism on all fronts.

During the presentation of the coalition agreement on Wednesday (24 November), all parties declared their commitment to diversity in German society.

“We stand for a sociopolitical liberalisation. Diversity and individuality is what connects us,” FDP leader Christian Lindner told the press conference.

The Greens are particularly eager to make diversity a top priority.

Annalena Baerbock, the lead candidate of the Greens, emphasised that they stand for an approach that is “not looking at individual groups, but understands diversity in society as a strength and is making policies for the diversity in society”.

This stance is also reflected in the coalition paper itself, which announces that the “traffic light coalition” will push for more inclusion of Muslims and Jews, as well as LGBTQI.

Furthermore, the three parties announced they want to pass a federal participation law that will clearly say Germany is a “country of immigrants.”

The coalition also plans to fight racism, anti-Semitism and anti-gypsyism at a hitherto unseen scale, to ensure that Germany becomes a more inclusive society, based on the values of diversity.

**FEDERAL PARTICIPATION LAW**

The idea to adopt a law that will give the participation of vulnerable and marginalised groups a legal foundation is not new.

Ahead of the election, the Federal Conference of Migrant Organisations in Germany already called for the

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adoption of such a law and presented their very own legal proposal on what a federal participation law could look like in August.

So far, the conservative CDU has always blocked such a proposal, arguing that legal provisions to ensure participation would be an “ultima ratio [last resort]”.

However, with the coming traffic light coalition, this will likely change, as the three parties announced that they want to strengthen diversity by passing such a participation law.

Furthermore, they also want to pass a new “diversity strategy” to ensure that the minority groups are more represented in public administration.

A study by the think tank Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, which is close to the SPD, has shown that people with a migration background only hold seven percent of all jobs in public administration, while migrant communities constitute 25% of the overall German population.

The coalition will also push for a flexibilisation of the citizenship law, to boost participation of migrant communities. They want to enable people to have multiple passports and will facilitate the process of acquiring German citizenship.

**INTENSIFY THE FIGHT AGAINST RACISM**

The coalition agreement also emphasised that the new government would also continue to “fight right-wing extremism and racism” and to further develop measures to tackle the problem.

The coming government wants to develop a new strategy to ensure greater social cohesion and prevention of extremist or conspiratorial thinking – both online and offline.

Furthermore, the government is planning to strengthen governmental bodies to fight racism and will invest in research and monitoring.

For instance, the German Centre for Integration and Migration Studies will play a greater role in monitoring racism across Germany.

Furthermore, a commissioner for anti-racism and a commissioner for anti-gypsyism will be appointed – in addition to the already existing commissioner for anti-Semitism – and an independent counselling centre for antiziganism is to be established in the coming term.

Civil society groups welcomed the new approach.

“At first glance, the coalition agreement is encouraging,” Markus N. Beeko, secretary-general of Amnesty International Germany, said in a statement.

The Amadeu Antonio Foundation, one of Germany’s main civil society organisations on antisemitism and racism, was also pleased with the results of the coalition talks.

The coalition agreement gives the impression “that the new federal government takes the protection of democracy and the fight against right-wing extremism seriously,” the foundation said in a statement.

In a similar vein, the Central Council of Jews in Germany stated that
Grappling with Europe’s racist colonial past must go beyond history books

By Silvia Ellena | EURACTIV.com

Teaching colonialism is a first step to tackle structural racism in Europe, but inequality will not be eradicated unless addressed in education as a whole, according to experts.

“Colonialism, slavery and the Holocaust are embedded in our history and have profound consequences for society today,” reads the EU anti-racism action plan.

According to some, this is the first acknowledgement at EU level that structural racism exists in the continent and has its roots in Europe’s colonial past.

“The anti-racism action plan is in fact the first European policy document in which we go to the causes, where we are not only talking about that short period in history of Nazism,” said Ilke Adam, political science professor at Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

The plan, which sets out a number of measures to tackle racism on an individual and societal level, was adopted in September 2020, after the killing of George Floyd in the United States by a Minneapolis police officer.

Floyd’s death sparked a wave of protests that spread to several European capitals, denouncing racism in the continent.

Many also criticised the under-acknowledged colonial past of their own countries.

In Belgium, for example, protestors defaced statues of King Leopold II, who was culpable for violence, mass killings and other atrocities.

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committed in Congo, then a Belgian colony, in the 19th century.

“History teaches us what should be reproduced, but also what should not be duplicated.” Juliana Wahlgren, acting director at the European Network against Racism (ENAR), told EURACTIV.

“And I think education is the best platform to address that,” she added.

School curricula in Europe often omit crucial pages in the continent’s history. For example, a 2019 UN working group report showed that primary and secondary school programmes in Belgium did not “adequately reflect the history of colonization as well as history and contributions of people of African descent.”

The report found that one in four high-school graduates was unaware that Congo was a former Belgian colony and that it was often up to the teachers’ initiative to address colonialism in class.

Following last year’s protests, the European Parliament passed a resolution that called on member states to incorporate a “comprehensive perspective” on colonialism and slavery in school syllabus.

However, changing curricula should not be “only about bringing back the colonial past to history books, but also bringing more examples of authors, experts in all the areas of the curricula – being biology, being in math,” Wahlgren said.

Bringing in people who do not have a “eurocentric approach” is also critical, she added.

Research showed that diversity among schools’ staff is low in Europe. A European Commission report found that teachers with a migrant background account for only 2-4% in some member states, while around 8% of EU inhabitants are born outside the bloc and 10% of young people have at least one foreign born parent.

However, increasing diversity in classes is no guarantee that structural racism is effectively tackled.

“For example in Belgium, where you can still have a commitment to review some classes and bring more diversity to our curricula, and try to address that, but still celebrate Black Peter at the end of the year,” Wahlgren said.

She was referring to the controversial character accompanying Saint Nicolas and played by a white actor in blackface makeup and exaggerated red lips.

Moreover, schools themselves can reinforce existing stereotypes and discrimination. For example, children of African descent are more often directed towards vocational and technical training than university education.

“So we can do as much education as we want. If the structure also doesn’t change, it won’t help,” Adam told EURACTIV.

Although the EU anti-racism action plan shows political commitment against structural racism, denial within European society hinders progress.

“What is difficult in the European context is you can have the best of the law and policies, but the level of resistance is very strong, not only from institutions, but also from people in the society,” Wahlgren said.

Resistance to face colonialism and slavery in the continent is also due to Europeans’ reluctance to accept having “not such a beautiful history,” according to Adam.

Yet, change is happening and it was already underway before last year’s events.

“The minorities themselves are now citizens, second generation, highly educated, and start also to want to co-author the story of Europe,” she said.
The European Parliament’s leadership adopted on Monday (29 November) a two-year ‘roadmap’ through which it hopes to “intensify efforts to achieve a more inclusive administration”.

The blueprint endorsed by the Parliament’s Bureau, which includes its president and vice presidents, will cover disability, LGBTIQ+ matters, and racial and ethnic diversity, the EU assembly said in a statement, as part of plans to become “a fully inclusive and respectful working place.”

One of the objectives on anti-racism is to foster ethnic diversity among parliament’s staff. The Parliament says “the experience of in-house colleagues from diverse ethnic backgrounds must be listened to and their grievances assessed”.

Meanwhile, it also plans to “actively reach out to less represented groups and support talent programmes to increase parliament’s diversity”.

The Parliament’s administration will also carry out an anonymous staff survey regarding, adding that “the diversity of colleagues, their perceptions of Parliament’s inclusiveness as a workplace, and the effectiveness of its diversity actions will provide key data for further progress.”

The plan is the latest in a series of campaigns by the EU institutions to address diversity. The European Commission tabled an EU anti-racism action plan last September in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, and appointed Michaela Moua as the first EU anti-racism coordinator earlier this year.

EU Equality Commissioner Helena Dalli vowed last September that the Commission would take an “introspective look within the Commission’s services and we will be working to ensure that our staff is reflective of society in its diversity”.

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The Commission also launched its own diversity survey of its 33,000 staff.

“I am very pleased that we have been able to adopt unanimously a comprehensive roadmap that strives for equality while maintaining a close and productive dialogue with diversity groups within the Parliament, to ensure these measures are both legitimate and effective,” said Vice-President Dimitrios Papadimoulis, the chair of the Parliament’s high-level group on gender equality and diversity.

“This presents another opportunity to consolidate our position as a leading institution on diversity matters. It is also crucial to ensuring that Parliament’s administration is truly representative and accessible to all. Now, we have to work together to implement these measures in a timely and effective way,” Papadimoulis added.

However, despite its claims to leadership on diversity, the EU institutions have faced criticism that people from ethnic minorities are massively underrepresented both in political and administrative positions.

The EU is yet to have its first non-white Commissioner, and there are only 24 non-white EU lawmakers out of 705 in the current Parliament. There is a similar story within the Parliament’s bureaucracy.

Only 1% of staff employed directly by EU institutions have a minority background, and the institutions do not collect any data on the ethnicity or religion of EU officials.

In the past, the EU institutions have played down criticism of their record on diversity, insisting that the recruitment process to become an EU official – at the heart of which is the ‘concours’ examination – is open and accessible to all people.

In April, Parliament’s leadership adopted a roadmap to achieve gender equality in political processes and its administration.
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