Mapping anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe

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NGOs and activists are warning of rising anti-Muslim hatred and islamophobia across EU member states.

In this special report, EURACTIV dives deeper into anti-Muslim sentiment in France and Germany, the two EU countries hosting the majority of European Muslims, and looks at the measures the EU is preparing or has already put in place to tackle islamophobia.
EU Commission ‘fully committed’ to fight anti-Muslim hatred but lacks coordinator

Islamophobia often overlooked in Germany

Zemmour v France: ECHR ruling points to normalisation of anti-Islam hate speech

Germany not ready for anti-discrimination reform, despite Muslim bias

New plans coming to fight ‘overwhelming’ racism in France

Contents
EU Commission ‘fully committed’
to fight anti-Muslim hatred but
lacks coordinator

By Silvia Ellena | euractiv.com

EU lawmkaers called on the Commission to appoint the EU coordinator to fight anti-Muslim hatred. [EPA-EFE/STEPHANIE LECOCQ]

While Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment keeps growing across the EU, lawmakers have called on the European Commission to quickly appoint the EU coordinator to fight anti-Muslim hatred and step up efforts to tackle discrimination across the Union.

Islamophobia continued to grow in 2021, according to a report by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). In the EU, most anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobic incidents were recorded in France, which, together with Germany, hosts the highest number of European Muslims.

This growing trend was recently pointed out by the Council of Europe, the pan-European human rights organisation. In a resolution adopted in October, it stressed the need to “address this phenomenon as a matter of priority” and condemned the “use of Islamophobic rhetoric in public and political discourse, particularly by populist and far-right movements”.

Islamophobia and the far-right

“Unfortunately, on a national level, very few member states are taking actions that go hand in hand with
far-right parties gaining power," Swedish MEP Evin Incir told EURACTIV, pointing to the cases of Sweden and Italy.

The Swedish MEP, rapporteur of an EU Parliament resolution on anti-racism, expressed concern over the growing anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe and its normalisation "within the political establishment of some countries".

"When hatred against Muslims becomes normalised by words, then the distance between words and actions becomes smaller and we see that all across our member states."

Asked by EURACTIV, the Commission did not say whether it was concerned about the impact of far-right governments in these countries on anti-Muslim rhetoric, but stressed that it was "fully committed to fighting all forms of discrimination, including anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination".

**Open vacancy**

In 2015, the Commission created the position of anti-Muslim hatred coordinator, together with the anti-Semitism coordinator, to tackle discrimination across member states and coordinate integration efforts with civil society organisations.

Yet, the anti-Muslim hatred coordinator post has been vacant since July 2021 and the EU executive is still in the process of finding "the right candidate," a Commission official told EURACTIV.

In the anti-racism resolution adopted in November, the European Parliament called on the Commission to "swiftly appoint" the coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred.

"It is very serious that the coordinator hasn’t been appointed," Incir told EURACTIV.

In her view, the slow progress on this post compared to the others is "part of a signal that is sent to Muslim people in our Union, that combating other forms of racism seems for our institutions to be more important than combating this kind of racism".

"This is unacceptable," she said, adding that all these forms of racism "are rooted in the same kind of hatred" and should be addressed equally.

Asked why the coordinator post has not yet been assigned, the Commission official said the executive “has launched the respective internal procedures, which are now ongoing," but it did not provide an indication of the expected timeline.

In the meantime, the tasks are carried out within the Commission’s DG Justice and Consumers, the official said, adding that combating anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination is also part of the 2020-2025 EU anti-racism action plan.

**Other measures**

EU member states are expected to present their national plans to implement the anti-racism action plan by the end of 2022. However, not all governments have submitted their national plans.

According to Incir, although the action plan is “an important step, it is not enough”.

“We need real actions," she said, adding that “one thing is to adopt [national plans], but the most important thing is to go from words to actions on the implementation.”

The Commission said it would report on the implementation of the national plans by the end of 2023.

Meanwhile, EU institutions are expected to continue working on the proposal to extend the current list of EU crimes to include hate crimes and hate speech. Once the proposal is approved by all EU institutions, the Commission will be able to propose EU laws to criminalise hate speech and hate crimes.
Many Germans do not consider instances of discrimination against Muslims or those perceived to be Muslim as such, with experts cautioning that more public awareness is needed and yawning data gaps must be closed to tackle the problem.

Muslims in Germany face discrimination in many areas including the job and housing markets, education, and healthcare, according to a range of studies.

However, instances of discrimination against Muslims – and those perceived to be Muslim – often go unnoticed, research by the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM) shows.

According to a report published by the centre this year, a given situation is less likely to be judged as racist if the affected person is Muslim: Presented with different hypothetical scenarios, respondents were more likely to detect racism if the text referred to black or Jewish people, rather than Muslims.

“This could be due to the strong public condemnation of antisemitism and racism against black people, but first and foremost due to the historic awareness regarding the holocaust, colonialism, and slavery,” the report concludes.

For Rima Hanano, head of CLAIM, an NGO working to fight anti-Muslim sentiments, such results show that there is still a lack of awareness of the racism and discrimination (perceived) Muslims face in German society.

“There is a need for sensitisation, for more information at all levels, because
there is simply a lack of awareness of the problem throughout society," she told EURACTIV.

A historical legacy

This is despite Germany being among the EU countries with the largest Muslim population, second only to France. According to government data, between 5.3 and 5.6 million Muslims were living in the country in 2019, making up a share of 6-7% of the population.

The country looks back on a historical legacy of "Gastarbeiter" foreign workers recruited to Western Germany during the economic boom in the decades after the Second World War. The biggest group of these "guest workers" came from Turkey thanks to an agreement signed by the two governments in 1961.

While the Bonn government initially planned for the workers to stay for a limited amount of time and then return to their country of origin, this proved impractical, and many settled permanently. Today, regions like the Ruhr are shaped by Turkish immigrants and their descendants, many of whom hold German passports.

Disadvantages in education, professional life

According to the DeZIM report, discrimination against Muslims in Germany today is often rooted in already existing stereotypes against guest workers, which are now reinterpreted to link to religion rather than nationality.

Meanwhile, examples for how racism, discrimination and stereotypes affect the lives of Muslims and those perceived as such are wide-ranging. "Anti-Muslim prejudice can manifest as structural barriers, as legal discrimination, but also as generalised rejection, hostility, violence, and more," Hanano stressed.

Regarding the job market, for instance, a 2018 study found those perceived as Muslims by recruiters face "significant" disadvantages during application procedures and receive fewer callbacks following an application than those thought to be Christian.

In a 2021 study on discrimination in Berlin schools, 78% of Muslim students said they experienced unequal treatment compared to their peers, while especially girls wearing headscarves reported negative reactions and derogatory remarks even from teaching staff.

Tackling the roots of the problem

While there are specific policy actions that could help alleviate each of these problems – for example, anonymous application procedures to limit discrimination in the job market – Hanano stressed that the problem of anti-Muslim discrimination runs deeper and needs to be tackled at the roots.

As a first step, more and better data on the issue is needed to improve public awareness and enable informed policy choices, according to the expert. "In general, sadly, there is no meaningful or comprehensive data on the discrimination of Muslims and perceived Muslims in Germany," she stressed.

At the same time, Hanano said, the provision of advice and support for those affected and their legal rights will need to be improved. Currently, Muslims tend to ignore instances of discrimination and not take action against it more often than other groups, another DeZIM analysis showed.

"We need advisory structures so that people can get help when they face discrimination or assault, but this is not enough. In parallel, strengthening those affected through better legislation against racism and discrimination is key," she explained.

A helpful step in this direction could be the government’s planned reform of Germany’s anti-discrimination law, Hanano added, which – if done well – could make it easier for those affected to report instances of discrimination and enforce their rights.

While the timeline for the reform is still unclear, the government’s coalition agreement states that the overhaul should “close gaps, improve legal protection, and extend the scope” of the law.

Civil society organisations are hoping for ambitious new rules that will allow holding those responsible for discrimination accountable.

“This aspect is key,” Hanano stressed.
Zemmour v France: ECHR ruling points to normalisation of anti-Islam hate speech

By Théo Bourgery-Gonse | euractiv.com

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) confirmed that pundit-turned-presidential-candidate Eric Zemmour’s conviction of inciting religious hatred in France was fair and that French courts did not infringe upon his freedom of speech.

In a TV debate in September 2016, Zemmour made the claim that Muslims ought to choose between Islam or France. He warned against the ‘Islamisation’ of entire neighbourhoods, and stated that Islam and jihad were one and the same.

In its ruling on 20 December, the ECHR confirmed there had been no violation of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which focuses on freedom of speech.

In a TV debate in September 2016, Zemmour claimed that Muslims ought to choose between Islam or France. He warned against the ‘Islamisation’ of entire neighbourhoods and stated that Islam and jihad were one and the same.

French courts later convicted him of “inciting discrimination, hatred or
violence against a group of people because of their origin or religious identity” – a decision upheld by the Cour de Cassation, France’s highest judicial body. Zemmour appealed to the ECHR in December 2019.

“The Court held that the interference with the applicant’s right to freedom of expression had been necessary in a democratic society to protect the rights of others which had been at stake in the case,” the ECHR press release reads, upholding the decision of the French courts.

The Court also emphasised Zemmour was not free of his “duties” as a journalist at the time, and his claims, made on live, prime-time television, were made with the intent to discriminate.

**Anti-Muslim hate speech: the new normal**

This ECHR ruling points to a broader issue in French society today, the French Foundation of Islam’s Bencheikh said, adding that it shines a light on the growing trivialisation of hate speech against the French Muslim community.

This dates back years, Bencheikh said, attributing the growth of anti-Islam sentiment to three factors: the underrepresentation of experts of Islam culture in the French media landscape, the failure to resolve the “colonial question” after the end of the Algerian War in 1962, and the “dark decade” of terrorist attacks in France between 2012 and 2022, which has instilled fear in the minds of French citizens.

“The Muslim component of French society feels discriminated, and, almost as a psychological reflex, they can tend to withdraw from mainstream society,” he said, adding such separation can fuel yet more suspicion.

The number of violent acts against Muslims in France increased by 38% between 2019 and 2021, according to a parliamentary report, at 213 acts in 2021. The report emphasises that this number is likely to be a gross understatement, as many victims do not file police complaints in the first place.

**Zemmour’s ‘own’ freedom of expression**

Bencheikh welcomed the ECHR ruling. “The cursor between freedom of speech and censorship must always side with freedom,” Bencheikh said – but added that it comes with limits, which the European judicial decision clearly outlined.

Asif Arif, lawyer and author of a book on Zemmour and Islam, shared the same view. “We must not question the fundamental principle of freedom of expression, that has lasted for centuries,” he told EURACTIV.

But that doesn’t mean all can be said, Arif added, explaining that the far-right politician wants his “own” kind of freedom of expression, in which attacks against Muslims are tolerated, insofar as they threaten “republican values” and cannot be turned down by courts.

The lawyer underlined the responsibility of a number of media sources who have welcomed Zemmour with open arms, giving him the necessary space to make anti-Islam claims with no counterarguments or fact-checking.

“The trivialisation of hate speech is not the work of one man: It grew more and more tolerated on some TV channels and publications before it reached the political spheres”, Arif told EURACTIV.

Bencheikh agreed, accusing specific media channels, such as the French CNews outlet, of supporting Zemmour’s narrative “at an ‘industrial’ scale”.

Courts have proven resilient against the change in political narratives, and the focus now ought to be on bringing a positive view of Islam back into the French political sphere, Bencheikh said, through media depiction, but also education: “enough is enough!”
Muslim women who wear headscarves are particularly affected by discrimination and exclusion in Germany, a report found, though not everyone in the governing coalition is in favour of reforming anti-discrimination laws.

After Sinti and Roma, Muslims are the least accepted minorities in Germany, the latest situation report of the government’s Anti-Racism Commissioner, Reem Alabali-Radovan concluded.

Since headscarves stand out as a religious symbol, Muslim women in particular experience discrimination – be it in everyday life, when looking for a place to live or on the labour market.

To counteract this, the coalition of Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s Social Democratic SPD, the Greens and the liberal FDP strengthened the country’s Anti-Discrimination Agency by appointing Ferda Ataman as the first Independent Federal Commissioner for Anti-Discrimination.

According to Ataman, however, the governing parties also promised an amendment simplifying the very complicated General Equal Treatment Act known as AGG in Germany to make it easier for those affected to defend themselves against discrimination.

“The deadlines victims have to take legal action against discrimination are way too short at eight weeks,” Ataman told EURACTIV. Moreover, those affected would bear the risk of litigation alone.
“Yet it is they themselves who have experienced discrimination and now often have to take action against their own employer,” Ataman added.

In 2016, an expert evaluation called for the AGG to be amended.

**Associations’ right to sue**

Like Ataman, social-democratic Bundestag member Josephine Ortleb believes associations should have the right to sue on such matters.

“Unfortunately, we could not agree on this in the coalition negotiations at the federal level,” she told EURACTIV. The right of associations to sue would enable anti-discrimination associations to take legal action against violations of the equal treatment law.

On the side of the Greens, Misbah Khan, a member of the Bundestag’s Committee on Internal Affairs, also believes that reform and the right for associations to sue in particular are long overdue.

“Discrimination and racism are a structural and societal problem,” she told EURACTIV.

But introducing this into law has so far failed due to the FDP being sceptical about the idea.

“We are fundamentally sceptical about collective action instruments. We want to empower and support people to stand up for their own rights,” Katrin Helling-Plahr, MEP and legal policy spokesperson of the FDP parliamentary group, told EURACTIV.

“We, as a coalition, have undertaken to evaluate the AGG in this legislative period,” she continued.

**Headscarves make the job search difficult**

Muslim women wearing headscarves are finding it particularly difficult to gain access to the labour market, a study from 2016 for which 1,500 fictitious job applications were sent out, shows.

According to its results, women with headscarves and Turkish names had to apply four times as often as equally qualified women with typical German names without headscarves to be invited for an interview. For jobs requiring higher qualifications, they had to apply up to eight times more often.

Dr Asmaa El Idrissi, PhD, the city of Bochum’s anti-discrimination and diversity officer, experienced something similar before she found her current job.

“Out of 120 applications, I was invited to a maximum of 10 interviews, even though I fit the jobs like a glove,” she told EURACTIV.

“The higher the position you apply for, the higher the discrimination,” she added.

El Idrissi used to head the anti-discrimination network in Hesse, where she experienced “an unbelievable number” of cases where Muslim women were not even invited to view flats. “There, the foreign-sounding name is already decisive,” she said.

According to Ataman, women should seek advice in this case and not tolerate discrimination. “Wearing a headscarf represents a personal, religious commitment – and we should accept that,” she stressed.

**Need for reform**

To reinforce safeguards against discrimination, El Idrissi, like Alabali-Radovan in her situation report, say that federal states must also step in to pass laws in areas in which the federal government has no competence.

Berlin is the first state to have introduced a state anti-discrimination law in 2020.

“Germany is in the opening phase, but I have the impression that it has regressed again in recent years,” she said, referring to the Halle and Hanau shootings in 2019 and 2020 respectively, which were fuelled by racial hatred.

**UK leading the pack**

Looking at other countries, El Idrissi cited the UK as a positive example, where the understanding of minorities is “completely different” than in Germany.

“There, even in the highest positions, there are women who wear headscarves and have a chance,” she said about the country from which she says Germany “can learn a lot from”.

Indeed, in May 2020, Raffia Arshad became the first headscarf-wearing female judge in the UK, while female police officers from North Yorkshire worked on a headscarf design that can be worn as part of the police uniform.

According to El Idrissi, both open discourse and representation are very important to change the social perception of Muslim women with headscarves in Germany – which, according to the 2020 Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) report, does not provide long-term security for non-EU migrants and has one of the weakest anti-discrimination protections among the states surveyed.

“External features – just as they serve to convey negative images – can also contribute to changing perceptions of women wearing headscarves once they are seen in any position,” she added.
New plans coming to fight ‘overwhelming’ racism in France

By Théo Bourgery-Gonse | EURACTIV.fr | translated by Arthur Riffaud

In France in 2021, some 12,500 offences of a ‘racist, xenophobic or anti-religious nature’ were officially recorded, according to the most recent figures from the French Ministry of the Interior. This is an increase of 13% in crimes and offences, and 26% in fines compared to 2019.

According to the ministry, only 25% of victims of racist threats and physical violence and 5% of victims of verbal abuse filed a complaint between 2013 and 2018. Overall, it is estimated that more than 1.2 million people actually experienced acts of racial abuse or violence each year during this period.

The violent killing of three Kurds in the heart of Paris on 23 December, for which the racist motive was proven – although some further questions remain

The French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH) described the situation as “alarming”. While French society appears to be increasingly tolerant, based on CNCDH’s historical data, “certain racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic biases remain strong and, above all, their manifestation is renewed, diversified and even intensified”.

The violent killing of three Kurds in the heart of Paris on 23 December, for which the racist motive was proven – although some further questions remain
regarding the political nature of the act – serves as a reminder of how urgent the matter is and that strong measures are expected.

**A new National Plan**

“What is being reported from the ground is the exacerbation of unabashed behaviour,” said Sophie Elizéon, head of the inter-ministerial delegation for the fight against racism, anti-Semitism and anti-LGBT hate (DILCRAH).

Although French society is moving towards greater equality and respect, some people – mostly white men in their fifties, data shows – are becoming increasingly defensive in the face of this new reality and are resorting to violence, she told EURACTIV.

As racism is rife on social networks, fuelled by a few politicians, it is also gaining traction in ‘real’ life, she added.

In tackling the crisis, the DILCRAH delegation is betting on education and financial support to on-the-ground NGOs – with over 900 of them throughout the country.

On Monday (30 January), French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne is expected to present a new action plan to fight racism and anti-Semitism, led by the DILCRAH.

The plan will focus on three main aspects: helping to put words on the problem, measuring the extent of the issue, and providing better education and training to counter stereotypes, according to Elizéon.

The plan is expected to extend training on these issues to the entire civil service to better recognise and tackle discrimination based on ethnicity, as well as anti-Romani sentiment. New penalties are also expected to be introduced, in collaboration with the Ministries of the Interior and Justice.

The previous National Plan (2018-2020) already identified the issues of online hate content, training of educational staff and better consideration of victims as key priorities.

**Social and economic crises strengthening the far right**

France’s political response in recent years has been promising overall, despite some “serious concerns”, according to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), an independent body of the Council of Europe.

In its report published in September 2022, the ECRI expressed concern about the “trivialisation of hate speech” in France, “particularly in the political sphere, as well as in the audiovisual media and on social networks”.

“The rise of the social crisis, coupled with an economic crisis, reinforces the discourse of the extreme right. Intolerant speech is becoming normalised and those most convinced find it easier to act,” said Marie-Christine Vergiat, former MEP and vice-president of the League of Human Rights (LDH).

Meanwhile, stereotypes remain the same over time, with the association between foreigners and criminals still persisting, according to Vergiat, who condemned that this “misleading” association has become commonplace in the French political sphere, blaming former president Nicolas Sarkozy for seizing on these “far-right ideas” during his 2007 electoral campaign.

The issue of racism is equally present at the European level. In 2021, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency estimated that 90% of hate crimes go unreported, either due to fear of reprisal or because psychological and administrative support is lacking.
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