WHERE IS DISCRIMINATION IN EUROPE?

SPECIAL REPORT | MARCH - APRIL 2021

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According to available data from the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) and other organisations, encroachments on fundamental rights are widespread in European countries.

Furthermore, lack of equalities data across the EU contributes to structural and institutional inequalities, stakeholders say.

The European Commission has promised to pursue better data collection on race and ethnicity to better tackle discrimination.

This Special Report looks into five country-specific cases and debates across Europe.
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A lack of equalities data across the EU contributes to structural and institutional inequalities, stakeholders say. The European Commission has promised to pursue better data collection on race and ethnicity to better tackle discrimination.

“Over the past few years, we have witnessed the normalization of the far-right discourse and this has influenced how the electorate votes in different countries – this toxic narrative against racialised minorities has also influenced the way policies are made and has banalised abusive practices and behaviours at all levels,” Juliana Santos Wahlgren, Senior Advocacy Officer for the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) told EURACTIV.

According to ENAR, when looking at specific forms of racism, there is an “alarming spike” of cases of Islamophobia in France, the UK, Belgium, Spain, and the Netherlands.

And while people of African descent face systemic discrimination in terms of access to housing and labour market, and are over-policed and under-protected across the EU, migrants are constant victims of violence and brutality from the pushback operations at borders, the NGO stated.

At the same time, Roma communities are still disproportionately affected in housing and education policies in Belgium, Portugal, France, Germany and Eastern European countries.

A recent report by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) laid bare the widespread encroachments to the fundamental rights of Romani people in Western European countries, providing the latest evidence of discrimination against Europe’s largest ethnic minority.

“Additionally, the COVID-19 has had one clear consequence in the lives of racialised groups: it has exacerbated existing and historical systemic inequalities in society, and is having a particular impact on racialised groups,” Wahlgren said.

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According to Wahlgren, the pandemic has been a “catalyst” of many pre-existing societal problems, particularly violence by law enforcement officers.

“It is very challenging to label geographic specificities related to racialised communities across Europe,” she added.

She emphasised that “racism and discrimination have multiple layers which bring the reflection about racism beyond interpersonal relations, racism and discrimination should also be explored through structural and institutional lenses”.

“The data available to date do not cover these structural and institutional dimensions, therefore an analysis on the specific manifestations per country or per regions will be always very limited,” Wahlgren said.

At the same time, there is a lack of equalities data across the EU.

“Most data collected for racial and ethnic discrimination studies are not disaggregated by race, ethnicity, religion, migrant background, for example. The results contain some biases as they are interpreted with other proxies close to the indicator race,” she added.

EU ANTI-DISCRIMINATION PUSH

The European Commission proposed an EU Anti-Racism Action Plan last September, which laid out policies to address structural racism and provide financial support for national positive-action policies.

“For the first time, the EU explicitly acknowledges the existence of structural, institutional and historical dimensions of racism in Europe and the need to address them through wide-ranging policies,” Wahlgren said.

In response to the data gap, the EU executive has also called for the collection of sound data on race and ethnicity, which in many cases is incomplete, to better tackle discrimination.

Last week, at the first European Summit Against Racism, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that the plan recognises that structural racism exists in all areas and it would be member states’ responsibility to act.

“For the EU to become a truly anti-racist Union, we need to make the most of the outcomes of the Anti-Racism Summit to further this discussion within the highest political arenas of the EU and the member states,” Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli told EURACTIV.

Dalli confirmed a European anti-racism coordinator will be appointed “in the coming days”, while every member state will be asked to nominate an expert to participate in a Commission-led group.

“The coordinator will liaise closely with people with a minority racial or ethnic background and relay their concerns to the Commission, as well as interact with member states, the European Parliament, civil society and academia to strengthen policy responses in the field of anti-racism,” the Commissioner said.

“Furthering the fight against racism in the EU is a shared responsibility and the EU anti-racism action plan creates the framework to bring together actors at all levels for a more effective response,” Dalli said, adding that this would also include “not only global and national actors but also regional and local ones, which are the closest to the ground”.

Member states would be “essential” to ensure that EU law is properly applied so that individual rights and obligations are respected in practice, she said.

In February, the EU executive told five EU countries — Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Poland and Sweden — to quickly put a 2008 EU law against racism into their statutes, which they have not done so far. Similar letters were sent on the same matter to Estonia and Romania.

If they do not transpose the law, the commission can start legal proceedings against the offending countries.

Asked where she sees more need for member states to act, Dalli said that they “should ensure national equality bodies to be independent and have enough funds to function properly, or that victims are aware of their rights, can easily defend them and receive adequate compensation when their rights are violated”.

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A week on from the massacre of eight people, most of them women of Asian descent, at three massage parlours in the United States, a researcher has told EURACTIV the pandemic has also seen a surge in racism faced by people of Asian descent in France.

Anti-Asian racism is not just an American issue, as demonstrated by the upcoming trial in Paris this week of five Twitter users accused of inciting hate against “the Chinese”.

EURACTIV France spoke to post-doctoral fellow at the Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) Yahan Chuang about the growing conversation surrounding France’s Asian community.

The first thing to get straight about the community is that it is diverse, Yahan Chuang said, pointing out that the group includes people whose roots trace back to around 40 countries.

Secondly, the researcher stressed that Asian immigration to France took a different track historically than in the United States or the United Kingdom, where the majority of the community have roots in South Asia, in Pakistan or Sri Lanka.

In France, the community mostly hails from East and South-East Asia, from China, the countries that once made up the French territory of Indochina – Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam – as well as Japan and Korea.

Indochinese elites began arriving in France at the end of the 19th century, as did Chinese entrepreneurs from the province of Wenzhou, a region known for trading precious stones such as jade.

However, the integration of
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Chinese migrants into French society has proven more difficult than that of the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian arrivals, according to Ya-han Chuang.

“The people who fled Cambodia or Vietnam came as refugees and were given status to settle legally in the 1950s and 1960s. The catastrophic situation in their countries cut off any possibility of leaving, so they invested in their lives here,” she said.

Chinese immigrants who obtained worker status and arrived in the 1980s after the opening of borders or through family reunification, “remained in an irregular situation” for a long time and “were granted a different political attitude,” Ya-han Chuang said.

However, with China’s growth in the 2000s, young French people of Chinese origin have developed a sense of dual belonging.

RACISM, STEREOTYPES PERPETUATED

France’s Asian community remains highly localised, with around 90% of its members residing in Paris and the inner suburbs, particularly in the north-east. The north-eastern Parisian suburb of La Courneuve has even been dubbed “little Asia”. There are further communities in Lyon and Marseille.

Ya-han Chuang said that racism against people of Asian descent is based on racialised stereotypes that are expressed in “so-called ‘micro-aggressions’ in everyday life,” she said.

Among the damaging stereotypes are perceived ties to the mafia and the hypersexualisation of Asian women, many of which are all-too-often repeated in the media and by elected officials, she added.

According to her, the health crisis has highlighted and reactivated overlapping “fantasies” related to poor hygiene, eating habits and accusations of conspiracy.

‘LESS VIOLENT THAN THE US’

However, “France is less violent than the US with its white supremacists ... We are not there yet,” she said.

The researcher said that while she deplored the many incidents of anti-Asian racism still prevalent in schools and on social media, the growing online discussion surrounding the issue was to be welcomed.

“Since 2016, we have started to talk about it. Before that, we thought it was less serious because North Africans for example suffer systemic racism from police violence,” said Ya-han Chuang.

“My feeling is that young Chinese feel fully French, they watch French TV, go to French school, speak French. They integrate well and their denunciation of racism shows that they adhere to the republican model,” she added.
German school system still holds back children of migrants, experts say

By Sarah Lawton | EURACTIV.de

In Germany, how well a child does in school is closely linked to their parental background, with immigrants and their children particularly affected by structural inequalities. Opposition politicians are calling for reforms, but experts fear there is a lack of political will for the necessary overhaul.

Inequality in Germany’s educational system is a well-documented problem. For decades, studies have confirmed that students from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds consistently outperform their peers even when displaying the same cognitive abilities. These children are more likely to be recommended for the highest tracks in the country’s education system and more likely to attend university.

Published in January, the government’s latest Education Report for 2020 stated that “social background not only shapes the transition to secondary school, but also plays an important role in the subsequent school career.”

Earlier this month, during a debate on the report in the German parliament, opposition politicians from the Greens, the far-left Die Linke and the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) demanded reforms to address structural inequality in the country’s education system.

However, experts say the political will is lacking for the kind of overhaul necessary to make real change.

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FOCUS ON MIGRATION

The problems are especially apparent among students with a so-called “migration background,” a statistical category indicating those with at least one parent not born with German citizenship. According to the report, children with a migration background are four times more likely to be simultaneously impacted by social, financial, and education-related risk factors.

This makes for a uniquely challenging situation.

“It gets difficult when risk situations accumulate and when discrimination and racism are added to the mix,” the migrant umbrella organisation BV-NeMO told EURACTIV.

In the 30 to 35 age bracket, just 18.7% of those with a migration background born in Germany have attained a university degree. Among those with two German born parents, that figure rises to 29.6%.

Structural inequalities vary depending upon where a student’s family is from, the report notes. Those from the western and northern EU countries were far more likely to have a university degree than those with backgrounds rooted in Eastern Europe or Turkey.

STRUCTURAL DISADVANTAGES

“Social disadvantages and migration have historically been closely coupled in Germany,” Albert Scherr, director of Freiburg University’s Institute for Sociology, told EURACTIV.

Scherr said the disadvantages were also compounded by the way the German education system is structured. “The question is whether schools compensate more or less” for possible disadvantages, Scherr said, pointing to two elements of the German system that make compensation less likely than elsewhere.

Firstly, Germany separates students by educational ability, a process often referred to as tracking. While other countries typically start tracking students between their sixth and tenth years in school, many states in Germany begin this process after fourth grade.

“Education research shows four years [in school] is way too early,” Scherr said.

Klaus Kohlmeyer, Managing Director of BQN Berlin, an association that works to encourage the societal participation of people with a migration background, agrees.

“Language support is underdeveloped in Germany,” Scherr said, adding that the system is not designed for students who do not speak German as their first language.

Teachers also have a role to play, he added. “There is still a strong attitude among German teachers that it’s all down to the families … but it is not attributable to me. It’s a question of fate, because I can’t fight the family,” Scherr said.

‘WON’T WIN AN ELECTION’

Education policy is a matter left to Germany’s 16 federal states, resulting in a patchwork education system across the country.

Some states, such as Berlin, have made changes to these traditional structures, for example tracking students into separate schools only after sixth grade. The city also has an expansive system of integrated comprehensive schools, which keep all students together regardless of academic ability.

Scherr would prefer tracking to come even later than that, after the 10th grade, while Kohlmeyer wants schools to do away with selecting students for different career paths entirely.

However, Scherr fears that there is little political will to make the kind of drastic reforms needed.

“Every politician knows that if they were to seek substantial change in the education system now, a large number of … middle-class parents would turn against them. No one seriously touches that because everyone knows it won’t win an election,” he said.
Rise of nationalist parties threatens to stall progress on race discrimination in Belgium

By Alexandra Brzozowski | EURACTIV.com

In 2021, Belgium will mark 40 years since the national Anti-Racism Act was passed. However, despite efforts to combat racism and ethnic discrimination, complaints of racism rose by almost 50% in 2020.

After the 2019 general elections, the rise of Flemish anti-immigrant Vlaams Belang rang alarm bells as it emerged as the second-largest political force in Flanders, behind another far-right separatist party known as the N-VA.

Belgium’s political parties have in general adopted a policy of non-cooperation with Vlaams Belang.

The party has called for the expulsion of “foreigners who will not adapt to what it sees as Flemish cultural norms, considering as “foreign” anyone who has two nationalities, a category that includes the vast majority of descendants of immigrants.

But although they are shut out of the current federal government, many analysts think it likely that these parties could achieve an election victory in 2024.

‘STRUCTURAL CHARACTER’

According to Unia, an independent public institution that fights discrimination and promotes equal opportunities, it received a record number of complaints relating to racism and discrimination in 2020, 49% more than in 2019.

“All figures and examples of individual situations illustrate the structural character of the racial
discrimination that occurs in our society. These are not examples that stand-alone,” Els Keytsman, director of Unia, said in a statement on the World Day against Racism.

In 2020, at the initiative of former Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès, Belgium established an inter-ministerial conference on the fight against racism and anti-Semitism to better coordinate the actions of the country’s various authorities.

“It is hopeful that Belgian politicians are finally working on a national action plan to combat racism,” Keytsman said, adding that Unia will participate in the inter-ministerial conference.

“We are confident that after hesitation and no real commitment, the goal is to adopt a national action plan this year,” Unia co-director Patrick Charlier, told EURACTIV.

“The key question at the political level is to admit and recognise the fact that there is a problem of structural discrimination in our society,” Charlier said.

FLANDERS IN TRANSITION

In 2008, Flanders introduced its own ambitious anti-discrimination legislation. However, according to De Standaard, only fourteen cases have been brought to court.

“The Flemish legal framework converts the EU directives on equal treatment, and goes even further,” Tom De Bruyn, from the Department Equal Opportunities, Integration and Civic Integration for the Government of Flanders, told EURACTIV.

In September 2019, the new Flemish government announced its intentions to stop subsidising Unia from 2023 and to create a Flemish-led Center for Human Rights.

Some observers believe that this is one of the traces of the influence of Vlaams Belang on the new Flemish government, De Morgen reported.

“The Flemish coalition agreement of October 2019 states that the cooperation with Unia will be discontinued at the end of the current agreement,” De Bruyn said.

He confirmed that the current cooperation agreement will run until March 2023.

“Flanders will then set up an equal opportunities centre, which will work on the basis of the Flemish anti-discrimination legislation and will integrate the tasks of Unia and the Gender Chamber of the Flemish Ombudsperson’s Service,” De Bruyn said.

According to Charlier, the decision was also due to the fact that the Flemish government has been “reluctant” to recognise structural discrimination, which caused tensions with his organisation.

“As we are promoting, speaking and communicating on the issue of structural discrimination, a nationalistic party like Vlaams Belang and N-VA are not keen to participate in an inter-federal process like with Unia, but instead want a Flemish body having the competences,” he added.

One area where Flanders, but also Belgium, are lagging behind, according to Unia, is tackling discrimination on the labour market.

Last summer, Flemish lawmakers approved a resolution to “map” racism by monitoring biased or discriminatory incidents across different activity sectors, led by an independent and academic monitoring system.

This, however, fell short of the left-wing opposition’s aim to introduce a legal framework for so-called ‘field tests’ in Flanders, whereby inspection services specifically check whether there is discrimination or racism without making themselves known, in areas such as on the labour market or in the rental of homes.
Nordic countries set up Sámi reconciliation commissions to investigate indigenous injustices

By Alexandra Brzozowski | EURACTIV.com

Colonial era policies in northern Scandinavia continue to affect Sámi life, culture and land use. Meanwhile, truth commissions are being set up and aim to investigate injustices against Indigenous people carried out by the states.

There are an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 Sámi in the Arctic regions, whose traditional homeland, an area collectively referred to as Šápmi, spans the Arctic regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia’s western Arctic.

From at least the 19th century, governments in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia pursued aggressive policies of assimilation, involving the education system and church discouraging or actively suppressing Sami languages and culture and forcibly assimilating Sámi children into the dominant culture.

The process, Sámi representatives told EURACTIV, has negatively affected Sami languages, education and way of life until today.

But while the persecution of rights to culture and language have gradually ceased, climate change and land exploitation pose new threats to the existence of Sámi communities.

‘TRUTH COMMISSIONS’

Sámi parliaments across Northern Europe have suggested the set-up of so-called truth commissions as

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one means of addressing systemic discrimination.

Inspired by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which completed its work in 2015, they are meant to include methods such as public hearings and “psychosocial support” for those who testify.

The Norwegian body was established in 2018, while the Finnish government agreed to the formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2019 and the Sámi in Sweden started their work on a similar structure in 2020.

Russia, however, is lagging behind with attempts being made to silence critical indigenous voices in the country.

Most of the truth commissions are expected to take several years.

As the EU works on updating its Arctic policy, which is due to be published by the end of this year, youth representatives from the European Arctic have called on policymakers to ensure that Arctic youth and Indigenous peoples are included in the actions that will directly affect their futures.

"Sámi are threatened with losing their land due to renewable energy production such as windmill parks, mines and new infrastructure. Reindeer herding and industrial projects in traditional lands cannot coexist," Enni Similä, chair of the Finnish Sámi Youth Association, said.

"We have been watching with interest the various lawsuits that have been going on in the Northern countries aimed at safeguarding these traditional lands and ways of life and in our policymaking," the EU's Arctic envoy said.

Michael Mann, EU Special Envoy for Arctic Matters, told EURACTIV during a recent event.

Arctic stakeholders stressed that identity is of major importance to the young generation, who have “preserved Sámi language, culture and traditions, despite strong assimilation politics”.

"That’s why we arrived at the need for the reconciliation commission – to recognise that there have been wrongdoings with dishonest colonial practices that are still impacting Sami people heavily," he added.

One issue is a general lack of trust by Sámi people that the process will end with tangible improvements for their daily life.

“The majority population has been taught that they are an inferior, lower class of people,” a 2018 report prepared for the Finnish prime minister on the feasibility of a truth commission stated.

“They suspect that ... the Finnish government is trying to improve its reputation internationally as a country that respects human rights ... at the same time [as] it is further weakening the rights of the Sámi people,” the report added.

Getting a chance to understand the situation and educate the population of the home countries could contribute to “moving away from discrimination attitudes”, Juuso stressed.

“It’s important that governments show a willingness to commit to those rights, which have been promised and which they are obliged to fulfil,” Juuso told EURACTIV.

EUROPE’S CLOSER LOOK

As the EU works on updating its Arctic policy, which is due to be published by the end of this year, youth representatives from the European Arctic have called on policymakers to ensure that Arctic youth and Indigenous peoples are included in the actions that will directly affect their futures.

“Perhaps in the past, authorities, in general, have been guilty of paying lip service to the views of people who live in the Arctic, to indigenous peoples and also to young people,” Michael Mann, EU Special Envoy for Arctic Matters, told EURACTIV during a recent event.

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