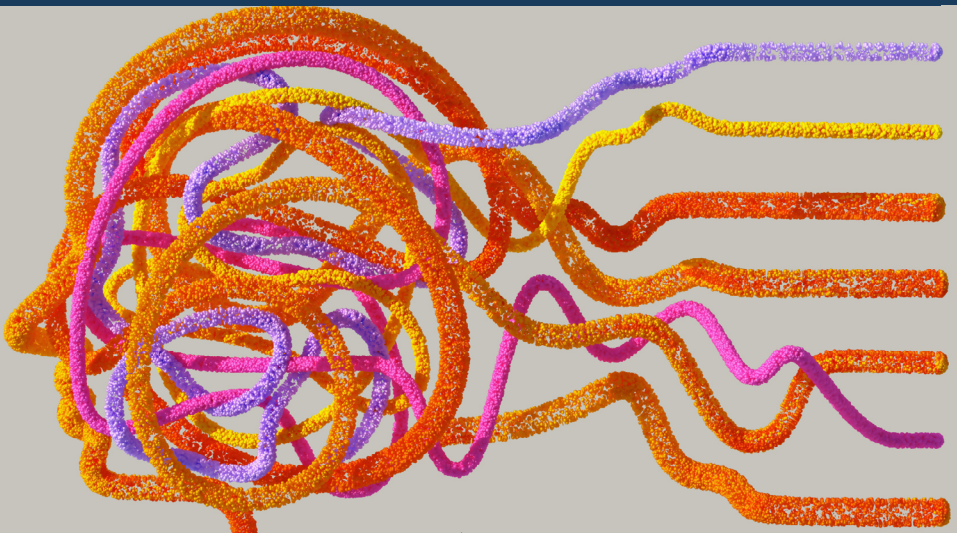


ECRI Annual Seminar with Equality Bodies

ADVANCING EQUALITY IN AN ERA OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Concept note



Strasbourg

23-24 October 2025

European Commission
against Racism and Intolerance

ECRI
Commission européenne
contre le racisme et l'intolérance

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Introduction

Europe is confronted with a multifaceted democratic backsliding, characterised by the ongoing erosion of basic human rights and equality principles, the undermining of democratic institutions, regular attacks on independent actors and increasing polarisation within societies. This phenomenon has been driven by various interrelated factors, including growing insecurity and uncertainty stemming from conflicts in or outside Europe, misuse of rapid technological advancements, significant socio-economic disparities, environmental crises, and the exploitation of public frustrations through hate speech, in particular in social media.

Amidst these profound challenges, national, European and international bodies and networks, such as national equality bodies, the [European Network of Equality Bodies \(EQUINET\)](#), the [European Commission against Racism and Intolerance \(ECRI\)](#) and the United Nations Committee on the [Elimination of Racial Discrimination \(CERD\)](#), are playing pivotal roles in upholding democracy, human rights and the rule of law in matters falling within their respective mandates. Their efforts have become indispensable in the face of policies and practices increasingly affecting or targeting marginalised and vulnerable communities

Democratic backsliding and inequalities

Democratic backsliding across Europe manifests itself in particular by rising inequalities affecting various groups of people on the basis of grounds such as “race”, national or ethnic background, skin colour, citizenship, religion, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics, the undermining of independent oversight bodies, such as equality bodies and national human rights institutions, a legal and administrative shrinking space for civil society actors, as well as increasing attacks on the judiciary when upholding equal rights for all. These developments jeopardise the checks and balances essential for vibrant and resilient democracies.

Moreover, political divides are exacerbated by disinformation and hate, including through algorithm-driven echo chambers, thereby limiting meaningful engagement in various areas of social life for many people belonging to groups of concern to ECRI, such as Roma and Travellers, Black persons and people of African descent, non-nationals (in particular refugees, other persons benefitting from international protection and migrants), nationals with a migration background, Jews, Muslims, and LGBTI persons. The erosion of trust in democratic institutions and public authorities is further intensified by perceived inequalities and growing disillusionment among young people and civil society actors working in support of such groups.

The imperative role of national equality bodies, EQUINET, ECRI and CERD

In the face of these challenges, national equality bodies, EQUINET, ECRI and CERD remain essential in promoting equality and developing inclusive societies. Their work extends beyond the adoption of recommendations to active engagement with civil society, legal advocacy, and awareness-raising initiatives. They provide critical oversight by monitoring racism, intolerance and all forms of related discrimination, while pushing for any necessary legal and institutional reforms. They help identify emerging or existing patterns of inequality and, where appropriate, develop evidence-based solutions.

The structure of the annual seminar

The 2025 annual seminar with equality bodies of Council of Europe member states organised by ECRI, in cooperation with EQUINET and CERD, will focus on the pressing theme of advancing equality amid growing concerns over democratic backsliding. This focus responds directly to the current political climate, marked by racism and intolerance gaining further ground and increasing attacks on independent bodies and institutions taking action against these phenomena.

Building on insights from the **2024 Looking Ahead survey** conducted with equality bodies of Council of Europe member states, the seminar underscores the urgent need to address both longstanding and emerging challenges through collaborative, innovative, and solution-oriented approaches.

The programme blends plenary discussions with dedicated working group sessions, thereby creating different spaces for exchanges of diverse views and interaction.

The seminar will open with addresses from high-level representatives of European and international bodies and institutions, setting an informed and motivating tone for the discussions ahead.

A key plenary session, entitled “**State of Racism, Intolerance and Related Forms of Discrimination in Europe – Trends & Challenges**”, will launch the conversation. Short and impactful contributions from a diverse panel of speakers will stimulate a dynamic and inclusive exchange among participants, focusing on current developments and intersecting forms of discrimination across Europe.

Participants will then take part in **two parallel LABs** that will be co-designed and co-facilitated by several equality bodies, who will define the thematic focus and speaker inputs based on their specific priorities and national experiences.

The first LAB will address how to safeguard the independence and effectiveness of equality bodies in highly polarised political environments, while the second will explore ways to strengthen cooperation between equality bodies, ECRI and CERD for greater national impact. The insights generated will be brought together in a plenary session titled “From Challenges to Commitments”, providing space for reflection, shared learning, and the identification of potential coordinated actions moving forward.

The second day of the seminar will feature high-level panel discussions on legal standards and strategic action in the context of democratic backsliding, and on algorithmic bias and racial profiling, ensuring the seminar closes with a strong focus on both institutional resilience and future-oriented equality strategies.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) is a unique human rights monitoring body which specialises in questions relating to the fight against racism, intolerance and related discrimination on grounds of “race”, colour, language, religion, citizenship, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics.

ECRI was set up by the first Summit of Heads of State and Government of the member states of the Council of Europe in 1993 and became operational in 1994.

ECRI is composed of 46 members appointed on the basis of their independence, impartiality, moral authority and expertise in dealing with issues of racism and intolerance. Each Council of Europe member state appoints one person to serve as a member of ECRI.

Secretariat of ECRI

Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity

Council of Europe

F - 67075 STRASBOURG Cedex

Tel.: +33 (0) 3 90 21 46 62

E-mail: ecri@coe.int

X: @ECRI_CoE

www.coe.int/ecri

www.coe.int

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE