A Historical Introduction

Prepared for ECRI's 25th Anniversary

ECRI Secretariat

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) is an independent human rights monitoring body of the Council of Europe charged with the task of combating racism, xenophobia, antisemitism and intolerance in the Council of Europe's 47 member states. ECRI was set up by a political decision at the First Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, which was held in Vienna in October 1993. ECRI became operational in 1994.

Established in 1949, the role of the Council of Europe is to strengthen human rights, democracy and the rule of law in its member states. Ever since its founding declaration of "Never Again", the Council of Europe has been continually active in the fight against all forms of racism and intolerance.

After the Second World War, the horror of the persecution of and genocide against Europe's Jews and other groups was a forceful motivation to ensure that such atrocities could not occur again in the future. However, the roots of racism and racist violence go back much further in history. Colonial conquests, including genocidal warfare, and the slave trade were deeply intertwined with notions of racial superiority. In the 19th century, the growing trend to categorise and typologise natural phenomena was also increasingly applied to human beings and their societies and cultures. Such research unfortunately promoted a pseudo-scientific school of racism, which tried to "biologise" existing cultural differences and postulated them to be hereditary and unchangeable characteristics of distinct and different groups of people.

Such groups, in accordance with the various attributes ascribed to them by others, were then placed in hierarchical relationships by race theorists. The idea of "racial superiority" was thereby used to justify political and social domination, including economic exploitation and denial of rights. In conjunction with social Darwinism - the misleading application of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to the area of human society - terrifying ideologies of genocidal racism ("survival of the fittest") emerged. Groups based on "race", skin colour and national or ethnic origin became constructed as communities whose members were portrayed, stigmatised and treated as inferior and unequal. Identification with a group was thereby usually imposed, rather than based on self-identification. Equality of all humans was thus prevented by institutionalising inequality among constructed groups.

Racism did not emerge in a political vacuum. It did not develop by accident or as the result of unintended scientific mistakes. It was developed, promoted and sustained as an ideological justification to maintain, expand and secure unequal power relationships.

The beginning of the 20th century saw racism applied in various shapes and forms. This was the case in the context of colonial oppression, as well as through racial segregation and discrimination against Black people in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery in the Americas. In Europe, age-old exclusion and abuse of Roma communities (who in some parts of Eastern Europe had been subjected to forms of slavery until the 19th century) and growing antisemitism (now no longer limited to hatred of the Jewish religion, but extended by means of an invented "semitic race") was widespread. So was persecution of other national and historical ethnic minorities across many parts of the continent, in some cases resulting in forced deportations and "ethnic cleansing". Racism was entrenched, both in institutions as well as in mindsets.

The horrors of the Holocaust highlighted for the whole world the inhumane and cruel consequences that racism was able to bring about. However, racism did not disappear after the Second World War. In 1948, South Africa introduced its infamous policy of *apartheid,* formal racial segregation across all areas of society and daily life, which was eventually condemned by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966 as a *crime against humanity*. Racial segregation also persisted in the southern United States. Resistance against racist oppression grew as well and was symbolised by such iconic figures as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King. Their work inspired movements across the globe, including in Europe, to fight racism.

However, racism was also still prevalent in Europe. While old prejudices had never fully disappeared, post-war Western Europe saw them merging with new ones in the context of growing labour migration, including from former colonial territories. At the same time, communist ideology in Central and Eastern Europe was merely a thin veneer under which, for example, antisemitism and anti-Black racism continued to exist in spite of officially proclaimed anti-racist policies.

At the time of ECRI's creation, hatred of and violence against minorities, including foreigners, asylum seekers and people with a migration background, occurred and became a growing problem. Roma and Travellers also continued to face widespread discrimination and the Nazi-genocide against the Roma (Porajmos) had remained largely uncommemorated in the public sphere, just as the Nazi persecution of homosexual persons went unacknowledged for many years. Moreover, after the end of the Cold War the disintegration of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia resulted in violent expressions of ethno-nationalism that were thought to have been overcome. The Srebrenica genocide was a tragic reminder that Europe, even nearly half a century after the liberation of Auschwitz, was in no way immune to the most extreme and violent forms of racism.

In an expanding Council of Europe, which in the 1990s integrated new member states from Central and Eastern Europe, racism was not only seen as a problem for members of the vulnerable groups concerned, but as an overall threat to democracy and political stability, and thus to peace and security, on the continent. During its 25 years of work, ECRI has continued to remind all Council of Europe member states of this danger and the resulting necessity to fight racism and intolerance. ECRI considers that the concept of racism covers not only grounds such as "race"[1], colour and national or ethnic origin - grounds that are already contained in the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) - but also other grounds such as language, religion and nationality. In addition, ECRI now includes sexual orientation and gender identity (LGBTI) as relevant grounds for its work as well.

Since 1994, ECRI has completed five country monitoring cycles and has adopted and published some 200 country monitoring reports. Furthermore, it has adopted and published 16 General Policy Recommendations (GPRs), which are addressed to all member states and provide guidelines which policy makers are invited to use when drawing up national strategies and policies in various areas.

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[1] Since all human beings belong to the same species, ECRI rejects theories based on the existence of different "races". However, ECRI uses this term in order to ensure that those persons who are generally and erroneously perceived as belonging to "another race" are not excluded from the necessary protection.

ECRI is a human rights monitoring body of the Council of Europe, composed of independent experts, which specializes in the fight against racism, discrimination (on grounds of "race", ethnic/national origin, colour, citizenship, religion, language, sexual orientation and gender identity), xenophobia, antisemitism and intolerance; it prepares reports and issues recommendations to member states.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organization. It comprises 47 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.

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