

Colloquium

How can we better combat discrimination based on "race" or ethnic origin?

Exploring and addressing the root causes

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Thank you for inviting me to address you today on behalf of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).

I want to begin by briefly engaging with Professor Geulen's thought-provoking statement¹, as I think it offers a useful entry point into what ECRI's work tells us every day.

Geulen argues that anti-racism has so far **succeeded mainly in eradicating the term "race" rather than the phenomenon itself**. Racism, he suggests, has historically adapted itself: **it survives by reinventing its vocabulary, moving from biological race to culture, identity, heritage, and more recently to the language of civilisational incompatibility and "great replacement."** This is the type of diagnosis that ECRI's monitoring work confirms, year after year, across all 46 Council of Europe member states.

ECRI's Annual Report for 2025², which was published a couple of weeks ago on 28 May 2026, **documents an alarming and growing trivialisation of racist and xenophobic public discourse across Europe**. Hate speech that would have been considered extreme a decade ago is **now often part of mainstream political and other public debates**. And when it is left unchallenged, it does not stay in the realm of words: **it can fuel exclusion, violence, and the withdrawal of**

¹ Statement "How to Eradicate Racism?" by C. Geulen available at the [colloquium webpage](#).

² [ANNUAL REPORT ON ECRI's ACTIVITIES covering the period from 1 January to 31 December 2025](#)

targeted groups from public life. As our ECRI Chair Bertil Cottier put it, *“hate speech harms not only its victims but democracy itself”*.

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Turning to the historical framing that the reflection paper invites us to consider: the paper rightly shows that **racism in Europe was never a single, static phenomenon**. It has manifested itself through **slavery and colonial expansion** and **pseudo-scientific forms of racism** in the 19th century, the **Holocaust and genocides** in the 20th century and the perception in some circles today that **cultural differences** are insurmountable.

What ECRI's monitoring makes clear is that these **historical sediments do not simply disappear. They accumulate. Antigypsyism**, to take one example, is not a recent phenomenon: the stigmatisation of Roma communities can be traced directly to their arrival in Europe, and the representations formed centuries ago continue to legitimise anti-Roma discourse and discrimination today. **Anti-Muslim racism** draws on centuries of framing Islam as a civilisational "Other" and on narratives that were reinforced by colonialism and orientalism, and that now find new energy in the context of wars in the Middle East and in political debates around immigration from non-European, Muslim-majority, countries. **Antisemitism**, which the Nazis sought to industrialise, has not been eradicated; our annual report points to the fact that it remains prominent across European countries at levels that have intensified since 7 October 2023. All these are not separate phenomena. **They are threads of the same historical fabric.**

THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSIONS

Understanding the history, however, is necessary but not sufficient. The reflection paper also asks us **how systemic racism operates through institutions, laws, and social norms, not just through individual prejudice.**

This is where **ECRI's mandate becomes most concrete**. What our country reports **repeatedly reveal is a structural gap: laws against hate speech, hate crime and discrimination exist in most European countries, but they are unevenly applied, inconsistently enforced, and often do not reach the communities most at risk**. Muslims, to give one of the most striking examples, are in ECRI's experience often left out of policy responses.

THE SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

On the social and psychological side, our recent annual report finds that **schools are increasingly spaces where divisive narratives spread easily, and that teachers are insufficiently prepared to address them**. Human rights education and media literacy are not to be seen as merely soft additions to the curriculum; they are structural interventions in how the next generation learns to see the world.

CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN BE DONE?

So, can racism be eradicated? Geulen is honest about the fact that modern anti-racism has not yet succeeded. **ECRI's position is that such a failure is not inevitable.**

It means legislating effectively and enforcing the law equally. It means taking counter-narratives seriously, and not leaving Roma, Muslims, Jews, LGBTI and other targeted communities unprotected. It means engaging honestly with history, *including colonial legacy, the history of antisemitism, and the long record of institutional forms of antigypsyism*, not as an exercise in guilt, but as the only way to understand why racism and racial discrimination persist so stubbornly in present times.

And it means, as our annual report underlines, **that political leaders must recognise realities and challenges and take their responsibility.** The building of equal and inclusive democracies requires political leaders who choose, actively, to reject hateful discourse and who understand that when they fail to do so, they do not merely tolerate racism. They reproduce it.

Thank you.