

May 2026

Reflection paper on the root causes of discrimination based on grounds such as “race”¹ and ethnic origin²

European societies constitute a rich cultural tapestry, consisting of diverse ethnic, religious, historical and philosophical backgrounds. Nevertheless, discrimination on the grounds of “race” or ethnic origin persists and continues to challenge democratic values and human rights principles across Europe. Racialised groups³ still face daily and continuous discrimination.⁴

Racism⁵ and related forms of intolerance manifest themselves in diverse forms at individual, institutional and structural levels, from daily microaggressions⁶ and hate speech, whether online or offline, to cycles of disadvantage and discrimination and hate crime. Like all dynamics of exclusion, racism and related forms of intolerance are strongly context-dependent, and can vary over time and across space. As such, there is not one racism or one specific form of intolerance but different context-specific racisms and forms of intolerance, which lead to stark disparities that disproportionately impact some racial or ethnic groups.⁷ This has profound psychological and health impacts on individuals and communities⁸ and often acts in an intersectional way, interacting with other grounds of discrimination.

¹ Since all human beings belong to the same species, the Committee of Ministers rejects, as does ECRI, theories based on the existence of different “races”. However, in this document, the term “race” is used in order to ensure that those persons who are generally and erroneously perceived as “belonging to another race” are not excluded.

² This paper was prepared by the CDADI Secretariat as a starting point for a reflection and discussion on the root causes of racism and open for further development and finetuning as an outcome of this process.

³ ECRI understands “racialisation” as the process of ascribing characteristics and attributes that are presented as innate to a group of concern to it and of constructing false social hierarchies in racial terms and associated exclusion and hostility ([ECRI Glossary - European Commission against Racism and Intolerance](#); [ECRI's opinion on the concept of “racialisation”](#), adopted at ECRI's 87th plenary meeting on 8 December 2021).

⁴ Around a third of black people in the European Union experience racial harassment (FRA, 2019, [Fundamental Rights Report 2019 - Racism infographic](#)). Every fourth Roma feels discriminated against because of being Roma when looking for work or at work, in education, in health, in housing, in public services or in other services, such as restaurant, hotel, shop or public transport (FRA, 2025, [Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European countries - Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024](#)). The perception of a widespread discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin and skin colour and against Roma is highly shared (EC, 2019, [Discrimination in the EU - Special Eurobarometer 493](#)).

⁵ Racism is the belief that a ground such as “race”, colour, language, religion, nationality or national or ethnic origin justifies contempt for a person or a group of persons, or the notion of superiority of a person or a group of persons ([ECRI Glossary - European Commission against Racism and Intolerance](#)).

⁶ *Microaggressions* are “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” ([Sue, 2010](#)).

⁷ FRA, 2023, [Being Black in the EU – Experiences of people of African descent](#) and FRA, 2022, [Roma in 10 European countries — main results](#).

⁸ Lewsly, J.; Slater, R. (2023) [What are the effects of racism on health and mental health?](#)

Racism and related forms of intolerance are a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can be looked at from various angles. The present document seeks to present a summarised discussion of the root causes of racism and related forms of intolerance from three complementary perspectives: social psychology, sociology and history.

The root causes of racism and related forms of intolerance

Social psychological perspective

Social Psychology theories on intergroup conflict rely on the assumption that there is a natural 'intergroup discrimination', i.e. individuals tend to favour their ingroup over their outgroup. Social identification with the ingroup is associated with the emotional and evaluative meaning of belonging to social groups.⁹ People tend to derive part of their self-esteem from their group's membership, and, to boost self-esteem, they may both favour their ingroup (ingroup favouritism) and discriminate against outgroups (outgroup discrimination). A sense of fear of 'otherness' (of 'strangers') is seen as deeply ingrained in humans due to evolution, a fear crucial for survival, leading people to protect themselves from outsiders competing for resources.¹⁰

The identification with the ingroup is affected by its social status. Given that every individual seeks for a positive identification (self-esteem protection), certain negative situations can result on people wanting to change to another group. Yet, some group affiliations, including skin colour or ethnic origin, are hardly changeable. When there is a perception of inferiority of the ingroup and no possibility of changing group, people tend to look for social change. The perceived legitimacy or illegitimacy of their group's social position is what predicts the type of individual/collective strategies that group members will develop to change their situation. This results in three possible attitudes towards intergroup relation: one that favours the pursuit of social equality; another according to which we should favour the group to which we belong regardless of its situation; a third that recommends accepting the *status quo*, favouring not the ingroup but the group with power in a given relation.¹¹

The concept of 'relative deprivation' refers to the feeling of injustice when individuals believe they lack resources (power, prestige, assets) when comparing to another group.¹² Relative deprivation is based on an evaluation that is not made in absolute terms, but in comparison to others. This perceived gap between what one has and what one expects is a major driver of feelings of social injustice, hence relative deprivation can trigger conflicts between different groups when deprived groups act to increase power or social status of the ingroup. Privileged groups may also react to perceived threats to their dominance by reinforcing their status over others. In the case of racism, the discrimination it inspires does not stem from the motivation to glorify the ingroup, but from the perception that maintaining its dominant position implies discrimination against the racialised other or, in extreme

⁹ Tajfel, H. (1972, 1978), cit. by Amâncio, L. (1997) Identidade social e relações intergrupais [Social identity and intergroup relations]. J. Vala & M. B. Monteiro (Coord.) *Psicologia Social [Social Psychology]*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.

¹⁰ Dorn, J. (2018) [Angstforscher über Chemnitz: „Fremdenangst steckt in jedem von uns“ \[Anxiety researcher on Chemnitz: "Xenophobia is in all of us" – interview with Borwin Bandelow\]](#).

¹¹ Vala, J. (2021) *Racismo, Hoje; Portugal em Contexto Europeu [Racism Today; Portugal in the European context]*. Lisboa: Fundação Francisco Manuel dos Santos.

¹² Stouffer et al. (1949); Merton (1957); Gurr (1970), cit. by Monteiro (1997) Conflito e cooperação nas relações intergrupais [Conflict and co-operation in intergroup relations]. J. Vala & M. B. Monteiro (Coord.) *Psicologia Social [Social Psychology]*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.

cases, their exploitation or extermination.¹³ Racism may be used to increase ones' self-esteem¹⁴ or to justify, restore or stabilise privileges of the dominant group.¹⁵

Every culture has its own sources of social tension (e.g. between sexes, generations or ethnic groups), often based on experiencing relative deprivation, from which conflicts arise and which in turn drive cultural change. If the cultural change takes place too quickly, it can lead to fear, disorientation, a loss of meaning, insecurity and powerlessness. As a result of this fear, negative aspects of one's own personality are split off and transferred to the "other" (projected).¹⁶ Racism and related forms of intolerance can be an expression of fear of accelerated social change and compensation for the feeling of helplessness and insignificance. This fear is not a human natural constant, but rather socially produced.

Racism can be seen as a psychological defence mechanism that manifests itself to varying degrees of severity towards the outgroup¹⁷: i. group affiliation: when individuals feel insecure or lack identity, they may seek to affiliate with a group to strengthen their sense of identity and belonging; ii. Hostility: group identity can lead to hostility towards other groups to further reinforce one's own identity; iii. withdrawal of empathy: members of a group limit their empathy and concern to their own group and withdraw it from others; iv. Homogenization: individuals from other groups are perceived based on generalized prejudices rather than their individual personalities or behaviours; and v. projection and scapegoating: people may project their own flaws onto another group, using them as scapegoats to avoid responsibility, which can lead to punishment or violence against the scapegoated group.

'Prejudice', a central concept when studying racism and related forms of intolerance, is a negative pre-judgment of individuals belonging to another group (in terms of "race", religion, or other), persisting even when facts disprove it, and it is defined as "an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization" that is either "felt or expressed" and "directed toward a group as a whole" or "an individual ... of that group".¹⁸ It is acquired within the current social environment and influenced by past experiences and social representations. Prejudice arises from two typical human tendencies: generalization (categorization) and hostility (from negative judgement to extermination).¹⁹

Categorization is strongly influenced by perceptual experiences and the resulting judgments. Human cognition always involves a dual process of 'fast thinking' (System 1), involuntary, automatic and very fast in delivering information, and 'slow thinking' (System 2), attention-intensive and voluntary.²⁰ All cognitive decisions result from the combined influence of System 1 and System 2 processes and are instructed by history and social conditioning, i. e., by social and past experiences. Research has consistently shown that there is a conflict between System 1 and System 2 in racial perception.²¹ For example, it is common that though the person self-reports as not having any racial biases or racialized

¹³ Vala, op. cit..

¹⁴ Hirschfeld, 1938, cit. By Fredrickson, G. M. (2015) *Racism. A short history*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

¹⁵ Geulen, C. (2007) *Breve historia del racismo. [A brief history of racism]* Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

¹⁶ Erdheim, 1993, cit. by Hentges (2004) *Rassismus - Streit um die Ursachen [Racism - dispute about the causes]*. Baustein zur nicht-rassistischen Bildungsarbeit · DGB-Bildungswerk Thüringen e.V.

¹⁷ Taylor, S. (2018) [The Psychology of Racism](#). *Psychology Today*.

¹⁸ Allport, (1954, 9), cit. by Hazama, Y. (2011) [Determinants of Political Tolerance: A Literature Review](#). IDE Discussion Paper No. 288. Chiba: Institute of Developing Economies (p. 2).

¹⁹ Allport (1954), cit by Monteiro, 1997.

²⁰ Stanovich & West (2000) and Kahneman (2003, 2011), cit. by Yim, D. (2016) [Hidden in Plain Sight: Cognitive Bias and Thinking Fast & Slow About Implicit Racial Bias](#). Biola University Center for Christian Thought/The Table.

²¹ Banaji and Greenwald, cit. by Yim, op. cit..

beliefs (System 2), unconscious and automatic racialized preferences (System 1) can invisibly guide one's social cognition and behaviour in daily life situations. Even when we critically analyse ourselves, cognitive flaws stay hidden, making them hard to eliminate.²²

Social perceptions and conditioning are acquired early in life. Extensive research shows that children begin to recognize racial differences at a very early age and often develop racial biases between the ages of three and five, biases that may even differ from the attitudes held by the adults around them²³, though numerous studies have consistently shown a correlation between the ethnic prejudices of parents and those of their children.²⁴

Discrimination is a result of prejudices; while prejudice is an idea, discrimination is a practice. Discrimination results in unequal treatment based on the perceived value of different groups in specific situations.²⁵

Sociological perspective

By the mid-20th century, social science increasingly highlighted a shift in perspective, moving away from viewing racism and related forms of intolerance as merely a product of individual attitudes; emphasizing only individual actors and their isolated actions was seen as overlooking the systemic influence of public policies and state and private organizations in perpetuating racial hierarchies.²⁶ Systemic racism and related forms of systemic intolerance involve the ingrained processes of racism and related forms of intolerance within laws, policies and societal practices that favour groups considered superior, while oppressing, disadvantaging, or neglecting those seen as inferior.²⁷ Systemic racism is considered primarily in social processes, social forces, and institutions in its rules, regulations, norms, laws, discourses, and procedures.²⁸ Social organizations are the principal and most effective vehicles for social norms and social action.²⁹ Research on the construction of racial meaning in social systems has revealed core processes and mechanisms that sustain systemic racial inequalities, from the cognitive patterns through which individuals identify and classify others, to the institutional practices of nation-states, such as censuses and standardized education, that define, categorize, and allocate resources to social groups on a macro scale.³⁰

The (nation-)state continues to be the central framework for organising societies and it is a particular form of bureaucratic and centralized social organization, where the principal source of legitimacy is derived from nationalist principles of sovereignty, cultural homogeneity and the equal moral worth of all citizens. (Nation-)States are large, bureaucratic units composed of highly disparate individuals and

²² This applies to many cognitive flaws, not just those related to racial stereotypes and biases (Yim, op. cit.).

²³ Winkler, E. N. (2009) Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race. *PACE*, Vol. 3-No. 3, pp. 1-8.

²⁴ Veen, D. van; Emmen, R.A.G.; Mesman, J. (2024) [Who's to blame? How subtle negative messages about outgroups contribute to ethnic prejudice development in middle to late childhood](#), *Applied Developmental Science*.

²⁵ Monteiro, op. cit..

²⁶ Atrey, S. (2021) Structural Racism and Race Discrimination, *Current Legal Problems*, Volume 74, Issue 1, 2021, Pages 1–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/clp/cuab009>.

²⁷ William, Lawrence & Davis, 2019, p. 107, cit. by Dean, L. T.; Thorpe, R. (2022) What Structural Racism Is (or Is Not) and How to Measure It: Clarity for Public Health and Medical Researchers, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, Volume 191, Issue 9, September 2022, Pages 1521–1526, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwac112>.

²⁸ Malešević, S. (2013) *Nation-States and Nationalisms*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

²⁹ Malešević, op.cit..

³⁰ Clair, M.; Denis, J. (2015) Sociology of Racism. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Second Edition), pp. 857-863. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.32122-5>.

groups with different interests and values, but cultural and political unity is ensured through an educational system that is developed to inculcate the values, principles and contents of the standardized “high (national) culture”.³¹

The rise of modern nation-states often involved the establishment of collective identities tied to race and ethnicity. Racism, related forms of intolerance and nation states are therefore historically interlinked. In fact, state, nation, nationalism and ethnic identity often become intertwined in a complex and potentially combustible mixture. Although in reality ethnic identity is *socially* acquired, the idea that nationhood describes a community of *biologically* shared descent is an very powerful (and politically consequential) one. Citizenship, a central dimension of nation-states, may seem to be universal, but only to those who are admitted to it.³² The State uses culture, language, and housing as tools to render citizens legible, allowing them to be identified, observed, counted, and monitored.³³

Historical perspective

Throughout human history, racism and related forms of intolerance can be observed in many different eras and places. Among the most noticeable expressions of racism and related forms of intolerance in Europe are the religious intolerance of the Middle Ages and the nascent racism of the Age of Discovery and the Renaissance. These two historical processes resulted in a clear victimization of two groups of people because of their physical characteristics, ancestry, and alleged spiritual insufficiencies: Jews and racialised people (especially people of African descent).³⁴ These two manifestations of racial discrimination, antisemitism and white supremacist racism,³⁵ strongly shaped the European worldview and its relationship with other peoples³⁶, inside and outside borders.

The “racial antisemitism” is an ancestral hatred developed into the medieval tendency to see Jews beyond redemption and outside the circle of Christianity.³⁷ In the 12th and 13th centuries the attitudes of European Christians toward Jews became more hostile in ways that laid a foundation for the racism that later developed. The term “anti-Semitism” was coined between 1870-1880 to describe a new ideology that viewed cultural development as a struggle between ‘Aryan’ and ‘Semitic’ peoples, and antisemitism moved from hatred of the Jewish religion, as previously in the Middle Age, to be broadened through the

³¹ Malešević, op. cit., p. 59.

³² Pierson, C. (2011) *The Modern State*. London: Routledge.

³³ McGarry A. (2017) *Romaphobia: the last acceptable form of racism*. London: Zed Books.

³⁴ Fredrickson, op. cit., p. xv. According to Fredrickson, “the varieties of racism that developed in the West had greater impact on world history than any functional equivalent that we might detect in another era or part of the world” (p. 11). Outside the West, anti-black racism in the Maghreb, whose origins date back to the 7th century, can be mentioned as an example (cf. Sadai, C. (2021) Racisme anti-Noirs au Maghreb : dévoilement(s) d’un tabou. *Hérodote*, 2021/1 n. 180, p. 131-148).

³⁵ Both racism and anti-Semitism represent mechanisms of rejection and exclusion, but they are distinct ideological constructs that diverge in terms of underlying motivations and justificatory frameworks. While racism targets perceived physical or moral differences to construct hierarchies of inferiority, antisemitism is driven by fear and envy, portraying Jews as an invisible, dominant threat, it relies on stereotypical traits, and embeds a conspiratorial worldview, imagining Jews as a unified group acting with malicious intent. The idea of a global, clandestine plot is central to antisemitic discourse and distinguishing it from other racist ideologies in Western contexts (Conseil des sages de la laïcité (2020) [Pourquoi parle-t-on de racisme et d'antisémitisme?](#)).

³⁶ Geulen, op. cit..

³⁷ Fredrickson, op. cit., p. 23.

fabrication of a so-called “semitic race”.³⁸ By the late 19th century, anti-Semitism had become a widespread ideology, influencing political, social, and natural doctrines.³⁹

The “color-coded, white-over-black variety” of racism⁴⁰ began with the European Expansion and was affected by religious traditions, slavery, and encounters between European colonizers and indigenous peoples of the African and American continents. Before the European Expansion, enslavement was more commonly associated to the capture of a defeated enemy than to a specific feature (ethnic or physical).⁴¹ In an early stage of the European expansion, skin colour played a minor role, mainly serving as a means of identification. The early justification for the African slave trade was based on religious and legal grounds rather than explicit racism. However, this led to the development of attitudes that labelled racialised people as inferior.⁴² European colonial expansion contributed to the emergence of modern racism, with slavery and the slave trade being the first forms of fully developed racist system in the European modern age. Also, the development of the capitalist production mode is interconnected with the emergence of racial ideology⁴³: as the transatlantic slave trade was established to cope with a shortage of labour in “the new world”, it became necessary to “explain” why enslaved people were degraded to economic goods. This racism has persisted for four centuries and continues to influence Europe's relationship with the world.⁴⁴

The evolution of the scientific thinking also influenced the rise of racism. In the 15th and 16th centuries, 'race' referred to several collective internal qualities and traits of a particular group, such as linguistic, regional, ethnic, political or religious affiliation. In the 18th century, the concept of race started to be used to classify humans based on physical characteristics like skin colour, laying the ground for a racism based on physical features. The Enlightenment heightened the significance and influence of the concept of race, while also allowing it as a fair and reasonable basis for social hierarchy and privilege.⁴⁵

³⁸ Antisemitism can be both religious and racial, but modern antisemitism is often racialized, portraying Jews not just as a religious group but as an ethnic or racial threat. There is a common understanding that religious intolerance and racism are distinct phenomena. They both rely on stereotyping, are both forms of intolerance that lead to marginalization, discrimination and violence, and can be used for a political instrumentalization. Nonetheless, racial discrimination is based in the perceived biological, ethnic, or cultural traits, often tied to skin colour or physical features, typically seen as immutable, while religious intolerance targets beliefs and practices (doctrinal, theological, or cultural) and religion is seen as a chosen identity, hence changeable (Marcus, K. L. (2015) 'Race and Religion', *The Definition of Anti-Semitism* (New York, 2015; online ed, Oxford Academic, 20 Aug. 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199375646.003.0003>). The present document mainly focuses on racism.

³⁹ Geulen, op. cit..

⁴⁰ Fredrickson, op. cit., p. 26.

⁴¹ Geulen, op. cit..

⁴² The dehumanization of minorities and indigenous peoples during and after European expansion was a systematic process that served to justify colonization, exploitation, and domination. This often involved portraying these groups as “less than human” or lacking qualities that Europeans considered essential, such as rationality, morality, or even a soul. For example, during the Spanish and Portuguese colonization of the Americas, there was a heated debate discussing around whether indigenous peoples of the Americas had souls and could be converted to Christianity (see Danchevskaya, 2012, [Concept of Soul among North American Indians](#), or Jefferson, 2011, [Reincarnation Beliefs of North American Indians: Soul Journeys, Metamorphoses, and Near-Death Experiences](#)).

⁴³ Hentges, op. Cit..

⁴⁴ Geulen, op. cit..

⁴⁵ Geulen, op. cit..

In the 18th century, the concept of race was mainly scientific and only secondarily political-ideological. However, in the 19th century, during the era of great imperialism, racism became a justification for violent practices and the subjugation of non-European peoples.

Evolution theories played an important role in the rise of racist conceptions. Social Darwinism incorrectly applied the idea of natural selection to society, suggesting that certain racial or social groups are more successful than others due to inherent superiority.⁴⁶ The natural history of humanity was understood as a process of gradual evolution, in which Europeans had progressed enormously, while non-European cultures were still on the bottom rungs (the 'savage cannibal').

Racism, initially based on biological traits, has evolved more recently into a form of deterministic cultural particularism, often described as "cultural racism"⁴⁷, a form of intolerance which is related to racism. This variant evokes perceived cultural differences to justify hostility and discrimination. It arises when ethnocultural distinctions are treated as inherent and unalterable – effectively essentialising culture and equating it to race.⁴⁸ Such narratives frequently portray certain communities as fundamentally incompatible with core European values, including human rights and democracy, and suggest that differences between groups are so profound that coexistence is impossible. However, history replete to prove that ideologies based on the alleged incompatibility between national/ethnic or religious groups pose a threat to social cohesion comparable to those founded on notions on "racial" superiority.⁴⁹

Antigypsyism must also be highlighted as a specific form of racism and intolerance. It is rooted in ideologies of racial superiority, dehumanization, and institutional discrimination, remaining one of the most entrenched, recurrent, and pervasive forms of racism and intolerance across European societies.⁵⁰ The root causes of antigypsyism can be traced back to the arrival of the Roma in Europe,⁵¹ and the representations of Roma formed during their early arrival persist to this day.⁵² To understanding the marginalization of Roma across Europe, it is necessary to examine the prevailing notions of territory and space, alongside the processes through which identities are constructed and sustained. As a people without a defined territorial (nation-)state, Roma challenge the common model, which links national identity to sovereign territorial boundaries.⁵³ National authorities have used these representations to legitimise anti-Roma measures, from assimilation policies under the absolutist Habsburg rule to genocide under Nazism.⁵⁴

Another manifestation of a persistent racial discrimination in Europe is anti-Muslim hatred, that should be understood not only as an expression of religious intolerance, but also through the lens of racialisation. Islam and Muslims are often subject to hostile stereotypes that portray them as a threat, leading to widespread false accusations against entire communities. From the 7th to 16th centuries,

⁴⁶ Clair & Denis, op. cit..

⁴⁷ Fredrickson, op. cit.; Vala, op. cit..

⁴⁸ Geulen, op. cit..

⁴⁹ See [ECRI Annual Report \(2010\)](#): §12.

⁵⁰ [ECRI General Policy Recommendation No.13 on combating antigypsyism and discrimination against Roma](#) (2021).

⁵¹ Rostas (2021) [Antigypsyism: Causes, prevalence, consequences](#), possible responses. Committee of experts on Roma and Traveller issues (ADI-ROM).

⁵² Kenrik, 2004, cit. by Rostas, op. cit..

⁵³ McGarry, op. cit..

⁵⁴ Willems, 1997, cit. by Rostas, op. cit..

Muslims and Islam were framed in Western nations as the “Other” or “Enemy,” especially during the Crusades and *Reconquista*. Later, colonial and orientalist narratives reinforced notions of Muslim inferiority and a unified identity. These enduring depictions, shaped by colonial legacies, continue to influence negative perceptions of Muslims in recent decades. Many European countries have witnessed a marked rise in anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination, increasingly expressed through contemporary forms shaped by events such as the September 11 attacks in the USA, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, and rising migration from Muslim-majority countries into Europe. Digital tools are being used with growing frequency to propagate anti-Muslim bias and hostility.⁵⁵

A form of racism and intolerance directed at migrants has also recently emerged in Europe, driven by narratives framing immigration as a threat, in particular reinforced by the “great replacement theory”⁵⁶, and by perceptions that descendants of earlier immigrants have not integrated into European societies, despite these being their only homes.⁵⁷ This dynamic fuels broader patterns of anti-Muslim racism and discrimination, xenophobia, and anti-Black racism.

In most of the aforementioned dimensions of racism and intolerance, there is a clear and pronounced form of racism and intolerance targeting non-white, non-national, and non-Christian individuals within Europe’s public spheres.⁵⁸

Human dignity, equality and non-discrimination are rather recent in law. The widespread recognition that racism and related forms of intolerance are incompatible with human rights and democracy emerged in response to the horrors of the genocide during World War II, which targeted Jews, Roma people, people with African descent, LGBTI people and other minorities. Decolonisation processes and liberation movements in former European colonies also played an important role in challenging and combating racism and intolerance in European societies.⁵⁹

But racism and intolerance have not fully disappeared; they are not hegemonic, but they are alive and active. In several European countries, the rise of parties with racist and xenophobic narratives is becoming increasingly prominent.⁶⁰ The use of inflammatory language by politicians is likely to increase and legitimise existing polarisation.⁶¹ The increase in hate speech⁶² and racist narratives⁶³, especially amplified by social media and AI, is resulting in more visible and normalised racism and

⁵⁵ [ECRI revised General Policy Recommendation No. 5 on preventing and combating anti-Muslim racism and discrimination.](#)

⁵⁶ The “Great Replacement” theory, established in the late 19th century, claims that Jewish communities and certain Western elites are allegedly conspiring to supplant white populations in Europe and America with individuals of non-European descent, particularly those from Asian and African backgrounds ([What is the ‘great replacement theory’? A scholar of race relations explains](#). The Conversation, Édition France).

⁵⁷ Lentin, A. (2005) *Racism and Anti-racism in Europe*. London: Pluto Press.

⁵⁸ Idem.

⁵⁹ Geulen, op. cit.; Lentin, op. cit..

⁶⁰ [ECRI Annual Report \(2019\)](#).

⁶¹ [Study on effectiveness risks and potentials of using counter and alternative narratives in combating hate speech.](#)

⁶² *Hate speech* “is understood as all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as “race”, colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation” ([Recommendation CM/Rec\(2022\)16 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on combating hate speech and Explanatory Memorandum](#)).

⁶³ A *narrative* is “a synonym of a story with a plot and characters that often indulges in ideas and values of how society is deemed to function. Adding multiple narratives together makes one general narrative. This general narrative becomes dangerous when it transmits hateful or discriminatory ideals against certain minorities, and undermines democratic and human rights values. Narratives can be particularly dangerous because of their persuasive effects” ([Study on effectiveness risks and potentials of using counter and alternative narratives in combating hate speech](#), p. 67).

related intolerance in the political discourse and in social perceptions of European societies. As it was in the past, some employ hate speech deliberately to incite divisions within societies, to fuel violent escalation and trigger acts of hate crime against specific groups, namely racialised ones.

Are racism and related forms of intolerance unavoidable? Can they be completely overcome?

Racism and related forms of intolerance have been so deeply embedded within societies that the possibility of eradicating it is often questioned. It has a long-term resistance as a “virus” which has evolved and adapted to different environments, even in democratic societies.⁶⁴ But if Europe was a birthplace of nationalisms and modern racism, imperialism and the *Shoah*, it was also the intellectual space in which ideas of equality, interculturalism and liberty flourished with the aim to overcome racism and related forms of intolerance.⁶⁵

Recognising the root causes of racism and related forms of intolerance gives us the tools to acknowledge that discrimination on the grounds of “race” or ethnic origin is neither natural nor unchangeable, but is instead rooted, among other factors, in human psychological mechanisms, sociological phenomena and historical developments. Research and empirical evidence show that social and cultural norms can evolve through processes of selection and adaptation, particularly if measures are implemented to speed up these processes. That is our mission.

But how to develop and implement new and more effective policies to prevent and combat racism and related forms of intolerance in today’s Europe?

The following questions regarding the three perspectives are intended to stimulate the interventions and discussions during the colloquium, which CDADI is hosting on 17 June 2026 on this topic. The answers to those questions will come in time to inspire the development of CDADI’s new terms of reference.

Social psychological perspective

How can we advance collective identities in European societies, like state and European identities, and also the universal identity of human beings as equal by nature, while addressing diversity on different grounds within the same societies and without fostering antagonistic and conflictual divisions between different social groups?

How to protect and promote minority cultures, languages or religions while simultaneously strengthening national, European and universal identities and the values associated with them? How to reconceal specific identities and shared, overarching identities as assets that enrich societies and make them strong and cohesive?

How to address systems 1 and 2 of thinking when managing first impressions and categorization in interindividual and intergroup interaction, in policymaking and in institutional management?

⁶⁴ Vala, op. cit..

⁶⁵ Lentin, op. cit..

Policies and practices to prevent and combat racism and related forms of intolerance normally address system 2 (rational thinking), but how to address system 1, the automatic thinking that often trigger everyday racism and intolerance and daily racist and intolerant microaggressions?

How to address feelings of injustice, whether in majority or minority groups, that commonly heighten intergroup tension or prejudice and activate exclusionary attitudes toward other groups?

Sociological perspective

How to positively shape the development of children and young people for becoming inclusive and not racist individuals?

Can the education sector do more in this regard? Is it through new forms of civic education and new approaches to history teaching?

And beyond education, how can we introduce changes in societies and in shared narratives to promote inclusive environments for positive socialisation of children and young people?

How can we manage the use of social media and artificial intelligence tools to challenge prejudice and hate through the dissemination of inclusive discourse and alternative and counter narratives rather than reinforcing it?

Historical perspective

If our present is shaped by our past, how can we use the knowledge of historical processes and contexts to identify the origins of common biased social perceptions and prejudices and prevent them?

How can we overcome the legacy of historical developments, such as slavery and the rise of antisemitism and antigypsyism, which continue to nourish racism, related forms of intolerance and feelings of superiority even today and can lead to the dehumanisation of members of specific groups?

Can apologies, reparations and public recognition of human rights violations and atrocity crime and the prosecution of perpetrators contribute to dismantling biased historical perceptions?

How can we foster dialogue and overcome inter-religious conflicts, including between religious groups that build on common sacred texts and traditions that have mutually influenced each other and European civilisation for centuries, while recognising the contribution of all religions to social cohesion?

How can we put a stop to the massive and blatant attack on equality, human dignity and non-discrimination that we witness today, 80 years after these rights were legally and universally recognised, in the wake of the horrors of World War II, as the cornerstones of peaceful societies and the principle of 'Never Again'?