

Colloquium

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

Exploring and addressing the root causes

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Over the years, Europe has made important progress. We have stronger legal frameworks, better institutions, and a greater public understanding of different forms of discrimination than previous generations. Yet racism remains a daily reality for millions of people across our continent.

It does not always appear in the same form. Sometimes it is visible and violent. Sometimes it is subtle and normalized. Sometimes it is found in a hateful comment online, and sometimes in a recruitment process, a housing application, a border crossing, a classroom, or a political debate. It changes shape, but its consequences remain the same: exclusion, inequality, and the denial of human dignity.

What we have heard this morning reminds us that racism is not simply a problem of individual attitudes. If it were, then decades of awareness raising would have solved it already.

Racism is sustained by stories that societies tell about who belongs and who does not belong. It is reinforced by structures that distribute opportunities unequally. It is carried across generations through historical legacies that have never been fully confronted. And it is amplified when fear, uncertainty, or political opportunism find an easy target in those perceived as different.

As someone who came to Europe as a refugee and who has spent many years working with racialised communities, migrants, refugees, and human rights defenders across the continent, I have witnessed both the strengths and the contradictions of our societies.

I have seen and experienced extraordinary solidarity. I have lived and worked in communities opening their homes and standing up against injustice. But I have also seen how easily people can be reduced to stereotypes. How quickly entire communities can be spoken about instead of spoken with. How often policies are developed for people without those people being present at the table. And what consequences that have in reality.

This brings me to what I believe is one of the most important lessons for policymakers.

The people most affected by racism are not simply beneficiaries of anti-racism policies. They are experts in how structural racism operates in everyday life. They know how discrimination operates in housing, employment, education, border systems, healthcare, and public administration. They know where policies succeed, where they fail, and where harm is unintentionally reproduced.

Too often, racialised communities are invited to share experiences but not to shape decisions. They are consulted after priorities have already been established. After policies and legislation are developed. They are asked to react rather than to lead.

If we are serious about tackling racism, participation cannot be symbolic. It must be meaningful. Those who live with the consequences of racism must have a real role in designing the solutions.

Meaningful participation means involving affected communities throughout the entire policy cycle: in defining priorities, designing solutions, implementing measures, monitoring outcomes, and evaluating impact.

Because policies developed without the participation of those most affected by them often fail to understand the problem they are trying to solve.

And when people are excluded from decisions that shape their lives, the result is not only weaker policy. It is a weaker democracy.

There is another dimension that deserves attention when we speak about the root causes of racism today: the environment in which anti-racist civil society is expected to operate.

Across Europe, organisations working on racial justice, migration, equality, and human rights are facing increasing pressure. Many are experiencing shrinking civic space, growing hostility, attacks on their legitimacy, and in some cases the criminalisation of solidarity itself. Others face funding uncertainty or political narratives that portray them not as partners in democracy but as obstacles to it.

This reality matters because anti-racist organisations are not simply advocacy groups. They are part of democratic infrastructure. They document discrimination when others ignore it. They support affected communities. They generate evidence, challenge harmful narratives, and create spaces where marginalised voices can be heard.

From the perspective of civil society, one of the key challenges today is that organisations working to address racism are increasingly required to defend their own legitimacy and survival. Time and resources that should be spent on fighting discrimination are instead spent responding to attacks, navigating hostility, or struggling to secure the means to continue their work.

History is clear about what happens when civil society is weakened: racism does not disappear. It becomes harder to see, harder to challenge, and easier to ignore.

A healthy democracy requires more than laws and institutions. It requires an independent civil society that can hold power accountable, amplify the voices of affected communities, and contribute to public debate without fear.

Defending civic space is therefore not separate from the fight against racism. It is part of it.

There is another issue we cannot ignore when discussing racism in Europe today: the relationship between racism and migration.

Too often, these are treated as separate conversations.

Migration is discussed as a question of security, border management, labour markets, or integration. Racism is discussed elsewhere, through separate strategies, institutions, and policy frameworks.

Yet for many people living these realities, they cannot be separated.

One of the most persistent blind spots in European policymaking is the assumption that migration governance can be understood without examining race.

I say this not only as an anti-racism advocate, but also from personal experience. I came to Europe as a refugee. I am a journalist, a filmmaker, and a human rights advocate, and I regularly engage with European institutions and policy spaces. Yet even after receiving refugee status, I have experienced situations at European borders where these identities seem to disappear. What becomes visible instead is a racialised refugee woman whose presence is questioned more than her work is recognised.

What struck me is not that these experiences happened, but how familiar they are to so many others. Across Europe, racialised people, migrants, refugees, and minorities continue to describe similar patterns of being treated as less trustworthy, less legitimate, or less entitled to move freely. It's proven in many reports including ENAR's recent report, *Raceless in Name Only: Whiteness and the*

Racial Governance of Mobility in the European Union, which examined migration governance across European border regions and documented what it describes as a two-tier mobility system.

While freedom of movement is often presented as universal, access to mobility is experienced very differently depending on how a person is racialised. The report documents patterns of racial profiling, repeated identity checks, detention practices, and unequal treatment at borders that disproportionately affect people perceived as Black, Brown, Muslim, or otherwise racialised. One testimony captures this reality with painful clarity: “If one is Black, one is targeted.”

What these findings make clear is that racism is not only a matter of individual prejudice. It can be embedded in systems, procedures, and institutions that present themselves as neutral.

There is also an important intersectional dimension that is too often absent from policy discussions.

Policies that are presented as neutral can have profoundly different consequences depending on a person’s race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion, or migration status.

A woman on the move may face heightened risks of gender-based violence and exploitation. LGBTQI+ asylum seekers may encounter specific vulnerabilities in reception and asylum systems that do not protect them. Children, older people, and persons with disabilities often face additional barriers and are subjected to harms that remain invisible in policy design.

Yet these differences are frequently treated as exceptions rather than evidence that supposedly neutral systems produce unequal outcomes.

The lesson is clear.

If anti-racism strategies fail to address migration governance, they leave untouched one of the spaces where racialisation is actively produced and reproduced. And if migration policies are designed without examining their racial, gendered, and intersectional impacts, we risk reproducing inequality while claiming to promote equality.

Equality cannot be measured by the language of a policy. It must be measured by the reality people experience when it is implemented.

This is why anti-racism cannot be treated as a separate policy area. It must be understood as a democratic imperative.

Democracy depends on equal participation. Yet racism continues to limit who is heard, who is represented, and who is considered an expert in shaping policy.

When racialised communities are absent from decision-making spaces, public institutions lose knowledge. And democracy itself is weakened.

The question, therefore, is not only how we protect people from racism but how we build societies in which everyone can participate equally in shaping the decisions that affect their lives.

And finally, understanding the roots of racism should lead us to hope as much as to concern.

If racism were natural or inevitable, there would be little reason for us to be here today. But everything we know points to a different conclusion.

Racism is learned. It is reproduced through institutions, narratives, policies, and social practices. That means it can also be challenged, transformed, and dismantled through institutions, narratives, policies, and social practices.

The task ahead requires courage. It requires investment in education. Accountability. The protection of civic and democratic space. And it requires us to move beyond declarations and commitments towards measurable change.

Across Europe, activists, educators, community leaders, researchers, journalists, public servants, artists, and ordinary citizens are already doing this work every day. They are building more equal and inclusive societies, often under difficult circumstances and often without recognition.

Our responsibility, particularly as institutions and policymakers, is to ensure that our systems, our laws, and our political choices keep pace with that ambition.

Understanding the roots of racism is essential.

But understanding alone is not enough.

The real test is whether we are willing to act on what we know.

Thank you.