

Colloquium

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

Exploring and addressing the root causes

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Let me express, first of all, the gratitude to the Council of Europe colleagues especially Wolfram Bechtel and Cristina Milagre, for organising this amazing colloquium and inviting me. I feel truly humbled in the company of such distinguished speakers. After listening to the previous interventions, I almost feel that every statement I am about to make may be questioned – which is precisely what good academic debate is about. Thank you also for the reflection paper that well summarises some of the key perspectives on the matter and provides a rigorous and well referenced source that explores the root causes of racism in considerable depth while remaining clear focused and concise. I strongly recommend it to everyone who has not yet had the opportunity to read it.

Can we get rid of racism? Before I attempt to answer the question, let me begin with what I call an “un-joke” – something that is not really a joke and, certainly, not a funny one. It is rather tragic: A group of Roma boys walks into a football stadium in a medium-sized Czech city to support their local club. (I do not know if everybody can relate to what a medium-sized Czech city looks like). Or otherwise: They walk into a bar to watch the World Cup game together. Or even differently: They just walk into a random bar. Without fearing rejection, humiliation or verbal harassment. These are all illusions. They are very unlikely to happen. Many Roma boys and girls, men and women, love football, they would crave for being there seeing it. Cheering football, a game that now unites all the world, it has such a potential. Yet many of us, many big groups in our societies do not feel safe in a football environment in a stadium or a pub – a place traditionally considered by Czechs as a key meeting point. Place where everything happens. Very cultural yet very

exclusive environment, to relate to the reflection paper and to the preceding discussions, a place where some are more acceptable and welcome than others.

This looks like a very grim picture from the heart of Europe, my own country, which is known for Václav Havel and human rights ideals. Yet, this is not just about Czechia: the scenario illustrates something that many of you, coming from different countries and environments, could perhaps affiliate with, something that the reflection paper describes so well. Racism is deeply rooted in our societies, in our histories and cultures and, perhaps most challenging of all, in aspects of human psychology itself.¹

To respond to the key question, I tend to be rather sceptical, but straightforward. We will unlikely eradicate the prejudice based on fear of the “other” as such. Yet, the extent can be minimised, and its harmful manifestations can be prevented and effectively addressed. And we know that we need to fight it to preserve democracy. More importantly, on a realistic and forward-looking note, we know very well *how* to fight it and *how* to have tangible results.

What do we need then? Well, from my experience as someone who has worked at intergovernmental and national levels, I have two suggestions. First, we need to stay focused on concrete, practical and realistic measures. Having worked heavily in the law enforcement and criminal justice sectors, I say *yes we can*: through concrete technical measures, binding law and policies. We can create meaningful change. Some examples to note: By changing laws we provide ground for more effective investigation or prosecution. We may open door to protected characteristics which we have not yet protected. But even without legislation we can make a huge change through improved hate crime recording. With the help of upgraded recording forms, police guidance, improved IT structures, and bias motivation flagging systems, we begin to see hate crimes more clearly. We understand the scale and nature of the problem. Seeing the (then under-recorded) bias motivations and prevalent trends, we gain a more accurate picture of what is happening beneath the surface. This can of course inform the much needed policy-making.

And I'm getting to my second suggestion. And just to underscore, these are not novelties. However, I think that if we can choose two things, first, we need to be practical and result-oriented (first suggestion above) and, second, we must adopt comprehensive inter-agency policies. Having been responsible for equality policymaking at the national level, to address the phenomenon of racism effectively, we must implement comprehensive policies and do so with genuine political commitment from the highest levels of government.

On the last note, I tend to be again less optimistic. But we must not give up. The leadership must understand that fighting racism and other forms of intolerance improves democratic governance, overall climate and, if I may palay devil's advocate, perhaps also contribute to greater public trust in the political leadership of a given country. As experts we must persevere and provide evidence-based advice. Comprehensive equality, anti-racist, anti-hate speech and anti-hate crime policies must be adopted and implemented if we want to address such a complex phenomenon. There are no simple solutions to it. In addition, it is key that this interagency environment is inclusive of civil society and that the affected groups are part of the process from the beginning till the end. If there shall be any end of racism, and I'm suggesting that there is no end in fact, little can be done without genuine partnership with the civil society organizations. By civil society organizations I mean also community-based organizations representing the affected groups.

¹ See the relevant Reflection paper section and references.

Finally, I would like to underscore the importance of international policies and soft law instruments, such as the two Council of Europe recommendations on hate speech and hate crime, but also earlier commitments within the OSCE or the technical and policy guidance provided by the same organization. They represent key supplements to hard laws such as the European Court of Human Rights case law which, by its nature, cannot dwell that much into practical solutions. They provide both model comprehensive policy structure to be replicated at the national level – as we have done it in Czechia – as well as myriad concrete solutions to various practical challenges. Such as the one of under-recording or under-reporting. Equality mainstreaming also needs to be applied throughout all policies, be them on education, on health care, not necessarily only on equality focused policies. The ones on racism, antisemitism, anti-LGBTI intolerance or hate crime/hate speech specific.

So, these are my two suggestions and let me add a third one underlining the importance of this colloquium. Fighting racism cannot succeed without understanding its roots. To effectively fight racism in its different forms, we must know what we are doing, understand the type of problem we are dealing with. It may be less of an issue at an international level, at international organizations, but namely at the national level. For sure, policymakers and decision-makers need to understand that anti-racism is not merely about application of anti-discrimination legislation, enforcing criminal law, or laying wraths at ceremonies. It is about something that is so much embedded in human nature. Here I refer to the biological aspects, psychological aspects of othering in the human society. Policymakers need to understand that we are dealing with a complex problem and thus we need complex, comprehensive solutions. We need not only criminal-law responses but also long-term preventive measures, including anti-racist education from early childhood. If we have not done so yet we must do it through the lens of a victim, in a victim centred approach, as opposed to fighting extremism, like in my own country. The phenomenon of extremism is not the same thing, whatever the intersections sometimes may be, like with terrorism, for instance.

We as policy makers, and I refer to the CDADI colleagues, may need anti-bias training ourselves. So many times, during my career, I have noticed that as professionals working within the executive branch, we must understand that, first, prejudice is a normal and natural part of human behaviour and that, second, we must never let it go unaddressed, let it become bias in our professional behaviour. Now, this may sound self-evident but if there is only one type of training, and I refer to Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka's point, if there is one training that every civil servant in the executive branch should receive, it is the anti-bias training. Such training needs to explain, among others, intersectionality. You cannot really eradicate intolerance through tackling different types of bias or discrimination or even by working in silos: on persons with disabilities, on LGBTI, on Roma. The underlying phenomenon of prejudice is shared, while the groups affected by it are never homogenous: some Roma are of course also LGBTI or handicapped or both. Most importantly, there are prejudices prevalent within these groups too.

Returning to the un-joke with which I began, I cannot help but hold on to the hope that, one day, Roma people in my country and elsewhere will be able to enter a football stadium and support their favourite football team without fear. Although this may sound idealistic, our societies do evolve and I remain optimistic. We already know what measures work. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. Looking around this room and at the expertise gathered here today, I remain hopeful.

Thank you.