

Migrants Shaping the EU Future



EU Anti-Racism and Action-Plan POLICY REFLECTION

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Special webinar guest:
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Disclaimer

This document has been prepared by Kudwa and collaborators as part of the webinar series “Migrants Shaping the EU Future”: A Kudwa Association program 2025, implemented in collaboration with New Women Connectors.

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This policy reflection blends our research and interpretation of the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020–2025) with insights from a conversational webinar in which migrants, refugees, and special guest Sandra Alloush shared experiences of racism and policy recommendations.

The session transcript was extracted and summarized using AI tools, then curated for accuracy.

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Introduction



In 2020, against a backdrop of rising global awareness around racial injustice, specifically, the conversations around the murder of George Floyd in the United States, the European Commission introduced the **EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (ARAP) 2020–2025**. The Plan was designed to be more than words on paper. It set out to recognise racism as not only interpersonal but **structural and systemic**, with roots that run deep through European institutions, societies, and histories.

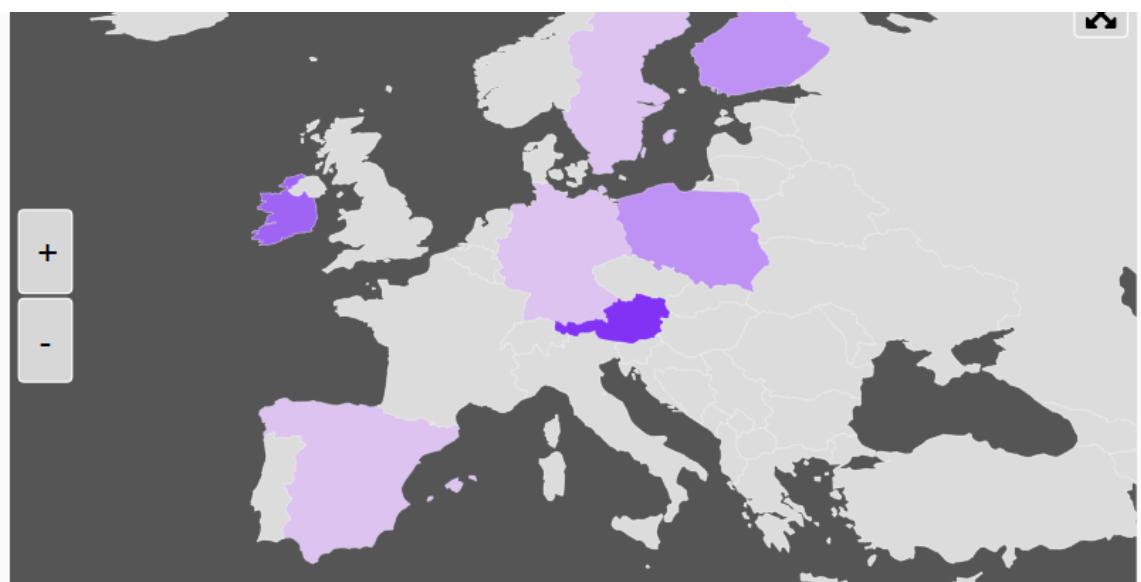
The ARAP aimed to push EU member states towards stronger national action plans, encourage the formation of equality bodies, and lay the groundwork for monitoring and accountability. It promised support for civil society, and even addressed newer forms of racism, online hate, algorithmic bias, and racial profiling in policing.

But years later, the question lingers: **how far have we actually come?** And more importantly, **what does anti-racism look like not in policy language, but in everyday life?**

Discussion

The discussion opened with a look at the EU's existing legal instruments aimed at tackling racism such as the **Racial Equality Directive**, first adopted in 2000 and later revised, and the **Framework Decision on Racism and Xenophobia**, which criminalises hate speech. Participants reflected on how little-known many of these measures are, even among those who are most affected by them. The realisation sparked a wider reflection: *if these frameworks are in place, why is awareness of them so limited?* And crucially, **why do they so often fail to protect the people they were meant for?**

Attention then turned to the **ENAR NAPAR interactive map**, which outlines national anti-racism action plans across EU countries. Several participants explored their own countries' positions. Some appeared to score highly in policy indicators. But lived experience told a different story. It became clear that official ratings don't always reflect day-to-day reality. There was a strong sense that in some countries, policies look good on paper but fail to deliver meaningful protection.



Discussion

The conversation was rooted in lived experiences that policy often fails to capture. One example shared was the **repeated failure of migrants in driving exams**, believed by some to be influenced by unconscious bias. Others spoke about **teachers funnelling racialised students into vocational education**, regardless of academic performance, or **job centre staff suggesting low-skilled roles** to highly qualified migrants. These examples echoed a shared experience: systemic discrimination in access to education, employment, and training—areas often considered outside the scope of explicit racism.

A link shared during the discussion highlighted **racism in elite sport***, referring to a high-profile incident within the Dutch fencing team. It served as a reminder that racism persists in all corners of public life, from street level to Olympic podiums.

A particularly poignant contribution came when a participant shared a documentary they had created '**In Your Eyes**' produced in partnership with New Women Connectors and ENAR. The film brings together stories of racialized people in Europe, showing how structural racism operates through housing, schooling, bureaucracy, and labour markets. It echoed much of what was being discussed: **despite formal protections, institutions continue to reinforce exclusion through attitudes, gatekeeping, and indifference**.

Discussion

The group also touched on legal protections for vulnerable groups. It was noted that in countries like Spain and France, **survivors of gender-based violence may be able to access independent residency**, offering some protection to migrant women in abusive situations. Yet others pointed out that these protections are not well publicised, and often **require survivors to relive trauma and navigate complex bureaucracy** to access support.

Throughout the dialogue, one theme emerged consistently: **racism is rarely overt, but always present**. It manifests in quiet barriers—an apartment not offered, a job interview that never comes, a language course withheld. These are not “loud” acts, yet they **accumulate into deep exclusion**. And the silence around them is fuelled by a **system that places the burden of proof on individuals, rather than holding institutions accountable**.

Many participants shared that they often **choose not to report racism**, not because they are unaffected, but because **the process is daunting, the outcomes uncertain, and the systems unwelcoming**. It became clear that for many, justice feels out of reach not just legally, but emotionally and practically.

This discussion underscored a critical point: **laws alone are not enough**. Without access, awareness, accountability, and trust, policies remain distant from the realities they claim to change.

Where we are now

Five years into the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan, there is recognition that some institutional groundwork has been laid. A number of member states have introduced national action plans, and the EU has begun to address racism as a systemic issue rather than a series of isolated incidents. Yet, despite these developments, the implementation landscape remains fragmented and largely inconsistent.

One of the clearest structural limitations is the **non-binding nature of the EU's framework**. While guidance and encouragement are offered, there is **no legal requirement** for member states to adopt or enforce national anti-racism strategies. This has resulted in **varied levels of engagement**, with some governments taking clear steps forward, and others either stalling or resisting altogether. In the absence of binding commitments, **political will becomes the deciding factor**, leaving progress vulnerable to shifts in national agendas.

Where national action plans do exist, concerns persist around **institutional capacity and follow-through**. Equality bodies, while present in many countries, often lack the independence, resources, or authority to effectively monitor and challenge discriminatory practices across sectors. The role of civil society has become even more vital in this context—yet their contributions are frequently undervalued, underfunded, and excluded from formal policy-making processes.

Where we are now

Another gap lies in the **accessibility and application of protection mechanisms**. While some legislative tools—such as those criminalising hate speech—are in place, enforcement is patchy and procedures are often not designed with the needs of vulnerable groups in mind. Those without secure status or legal literacy struggle to access remedies or defend their rights, and often encounter additional barriers in doing so, such as administrative complexity, lack of interpretation, or fear of reprisal.

Beyond legal structures, the **broader institutional culture** remains a key obstacle. Many public-facing services—particularly in areas like education, employment, and housing—still operate without robust anti-racism training or safeguards against bias. In the absence of standardised guidance or monitoring, **discretionary decision-making** by frontline workers can reinforce inequalities. This can result in exclusion that is difficult to prove, challenge, or even name.

Importantly, the current climate is also shaped by **growing tolerance for racialized political narratives**. In many member states, public discourse has shifted towards securitisation and restriction. Migration and diversity are frequently framed as challenges rather than opportunities, contributing to a broader social environment in which racism becomes increasingly normalised - even within policymaking itself.

Where we are now

While the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan created a necessary foundation, its impact remains limited by **weak enforcement, inconsistent implementation, and a lack of coordination across governance levels**. Without systemic alignment and political accountability, the gap between legal commitment and lived experience risks becoming a permanent one.



Critical questions raised

The discussion brought to light several urgent and unresolved questions - questions that existing EU and national frameworks have yet to fully answer. These are not only theoretical but deeply practical, and they sit at the core of whether anti-racism policies can function as intended.

1. Why is the implementation of anti-racism policy still optional across the EU?

Despite a shared framework at the EU level, there is no binding obligation for member states to develop or enforce national action plans. Without legal enforcement or meaningful consequences for inaction, how can consistency or accountability be ensured?

2. Why are certain forms of discrimination still excluded from legal protection?

Many national laws and EU directives continue to omit critical grounds such as migration status, nationality, and religion. Given that these intersect heavily with racialised experiences in Europe, how can policy claim to address structural racism while overlooking key aspects of identity?

3. How can victims be expected to report and prove discrimination within systems they do not trust?

Current enforcement mechanisms often rely on individual complaints and legal processes that are difficult to access especially for those with language barriers, insecure legal status, or limited institutional knowledge. What mechanisms exist to address systemic discrimination without relying solely on individual reporting?

Critical questions raised

4. How are anti-racism commitments embedded in public service delivery?

While national frameworks may exist on paper, they are rarely translated into standardised practices across schools, job centres, healthcare, and housing services. What role do states play in ensuring that frontline public institutions are trained, monitored, and held accountable?

5. What role do civil society and affected communities play in shaping and monitoring anti-racism efforts?

Although grassroots and migrant-led organisations are often the first to identify policy gaps, their expertise is not always recognised or integrated. How can affected communities be given genuine agency not just consultation roles in the creation, evaluation, and revision of national plans?

6. How do we counter the rise of racialised narratives in mainstream politics and media?

The growing presence of anti-migrant and xenophobic rhetoric in public discourse undermines anti-racism efforts and feeds societal polarisation. What tools exist to challenge harmful narratives while safeguarding freedom of expression? And what responsibility do institutions bear in setting a different tone?

Reflections and recommendations

The conversation underscored a fundamental disconnect between policy ambition and practical implementation. While frameworks like the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan represent a milestone in recognising systemic racism, their success ultimately depends on how they are translated into action—and who is entrusted with that task.

What emerged from the dialogue is that **laws alone are not transformative**. Without visibility, access, training, funding, and political will, even well-crafted policy becomes symbolic. Structural racism cannot be addressed through legislation alone—it must be dismantled through institutional reform and societal change.

In this context, the following recommendations aim to move from passive recognition to proactive enforcement, from individual burden to institutional responsibility.

1. Make national anti-racism plans legally binding

Voluntary frameworks have proven insufficient. The European Commission should introduce mechanisms to **mandate the adoption, implementation, and evaluation of national action plans**, with clear timelines, minimum standards, and consequences for non-compliance.

2. Expand protected grounds within anti-discrimination law

EU and national legislation must **explicitly include migration status, religion, and nationality** as protected categories—especially where these intersect with race and ethnicity. This is essential for addressing discrimination experienced by migrants, refugees, and stateless individuals.

Reflections and recommendations

3. Establish independent, well-resourced enforcement bodies

National equality bodies should be **fully independent**, with legal authority and adequate funding to conduct investigations, issue sanctions, and monitor progress. Their mandates must cover both **individual cases and systemic patterns of discrimination**.

4. Standardise anti-racism training across public institutions

Public-facing professionals—particularly those in education, employment services, healthcare, and housing—should undergo **mandatory, ongoing anti-racism and bias training**, integrated into professional standards and monitored regularly.

5. Simplify and support reporting mechanisms

Procedures for reporting racism must be made **accessible, anonymous where needed, and culturally and linguistically inclusive**. Legal aid and psychosocial support should be made available to those who come forward, particularly individuals with insecure status or trauma backgrounds.

6. Fund and empower community-led monitoring

Grassroots and migrant-led organisations should receive **core funding and long-term partnerships**, not short-term project grants. These groups offer frontline knowledge of how racism manifests and should be structurally involved in **policy design, data collection, and monitoring**.

Reflections and recommendations

7. Promote anonymised and equitable access to services

Best practices such as **anonymous recruitment processes, transparent admissions systems, and standardized testing criteria** should be mainstreamed to mitigate bias across employment, education, and vocational pathways.

8. Counter toxic narratives through institutional leadership

Public institutions must lead by example in **countering racialized political rhetoric**. This includes investing in public campaigns that promote inclusion, fact-based migration narratives, and historical awareness around colonialism and structural inequality.

9. Embed anti-racism in formal education

Anti-racism should be part of **national curricula**, not confined to optional workshops. From early education through to secondary school, young people should be equipped to recognise, question, and challenge inequality in their societies.

Conclusion

The European Union's Anti-Racism Action Plan represents a crucial acknowledgment that racism in Europe is not only individual but deeply systemic. It offers a framework for change but frameworks alone do not create justice. As this reflection has shown, the distance between institutional ambition and everyday experience remains vast.

Across the discussion, it became clear that while policies exist, they often lack enforcement, visibility, and accessibility. Many communities remain unprotected—not because protections do not exist, but because they are not meaningfully implemented or resourced. In this space between paper and practice, structural racism continues to thrive.

To close this gap, we must move beyond voluntary measures toward binding obligations and institutional accountability.

We must recognise that anti-racism is not a one-time commitment but an ongoing process that requires structural reform, political courage, and deep listening to those who are too often excluded from decision-making spaces.

This is not about adding more layers of policy. It is about ensuring that existing commitments are real, actionable, and measured by impact, not intent. It is about making sure that those who live at the margins are no longer expected to carry the weight of proving or solving the very inequalities that marginalise them.

Conclusion

For anti-racism to be more than rhetoric, it must be built into the systems that shape daily life across housing, education, employment, migration, and justice. And most importantly, it must be co-created and monitored by those whose rights it claims to protect.

The tools are there. The evidence is clear. The next step is action.

