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# Diversity and power in the European Union

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The European Union is striving to be a serious and respected actor on the global stage. Yet, as the responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have shown, many countries in the Global South are not as supportive of the stance that the EU and its member states have taken on Russia. In this paper, the authors argue that the reasons for this lie largely in our colonial history which has yet to be atoned for by many, if any, member states. Not only have there been no formal apologies or reparations, but persistent and systemic negative attitudes continue to prevail towards people of colour living in Europe or those who need to seek refuge in Europe, including in the heart of the EU: in Brussels itself.

This paper argues that the persistence of Eurocentric attitudes and discrimination racialises people who are not white, creating social tensions by setting people apart from each other and perpetuating old colonial mindsets of otherness and difference. The lack of representation of people of colour and the ensuing absence of diverse perspectives in many organisations in Brussels - from think tanks to trade associations to the European institutions themselves - has led to the *#BrusselsSoWhite* campaign, which highlights the need for an end to colonial and Eurocentric mindsets and policies and the importance of recruiting more Europeans of colour in the "Brussels bubble" in order to make good on the EU's commitments for a 'Union of Equality'.<sup>1</sup>

## The European Policy Centre turns 25



For the past 25 years, the EPC has advised European, as well as national decision-makers and delivered high-quality, independent analysis and actionable, evidence-based recommendations.

EPC analysts have helped journalists, civil society, businesses, and the broader public to make sense of the complex world of EU policymaking. The EPC has brought together people from different backgrounds, industries and research fields to be able to view problems from every possible angle and transcend the silo approach.

## Diversity in Europe

The European Union makes no secret of its global ambitions. The war in Ukraine has injected additional urgency into discussions on the EU's regional and international role, specifically on its strategic autonomy and new strategic compass to ramp up EU security and defence. But make no mistake: Europe's quest for power depends not only on a beefed-up security footprint but also on attracting global allies who may be more willing to work with a more equal, cohesive and ethnically inclusive Europe.

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The EU's halting efforts to create a true 'Union of Equality' where Europeans of all races, ethnicities, religions, cultures and LGBTQ feel safe and at home is not only a moral and legal problem given the Union's commitment to combating discrimination, it is also essential to ensure internal societal cohesion. In a world marked by increasingly fierce geopolitical competition, it is also increasingly damaging the EU's global standing, reputation and influence.

Europe's treatment of European citizens of colour, ethnic minorities and migrants and refugees in many member states is intimately linked to its image abroad and, therefore, its ability to influence and shape global events and policies.<sup>2</sup>

Racial and ethnic minorities make up about 10% of the EU population.<sup>3</sup> Yet reports by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) have underlined that 45% of people of North African descent living in Europe, 41% of Roma and 39% of people of Sub-Saharan African descent face discrimination in the EU. 11% of Jews feel discriminated against.<sup>4</sup> FRA states that "Muslims living in the EU face discrimination in a broad range of settings – and particularly when looking for work, on the job, and when trying to access public or private services."<sup>5</sup>

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In fact, given the nationalities of many of those migrating to or seeking asylum in Europe, the securitisation of EU migration policies for dealing with illegal migrants or those seeking asylum is also hurting the EU's relations with not only Africa but also South Asia and the Middle East.

Additionally, Europe's global reputation is muddied by evidence that racism, bias and discrimination are being spread by not just bigots, populists and far-right groups but also many of the EU's liberal democratic leaders. For example, the French presidential election campaign in the first half of 2022 was marked by an uptick in Islamophobic comments by mainstream parties, including from members of President Emmanuel Macron's political movement. Racist anti-migrant policies have become part of the landscape in most EU states as parties of the left and right try to attract far-right voters.

## #BrusselsSoWhite

The authors of this paper are both Belgian women, one of South Asian descent who specialises in EU affairs and the other of European descent with a professional background in Southeast Asia and Brussels. In our long and expansive Brussels-based careers, we have tried to increase the diversity of the organisations that we work with and to encourage EU institutions to become 'less white', both in terms of representation as well as replacing Eurocentric attitudes with more inclusive approaches at home and abroad.

Both of these challenges can and should be met. We are convinced that a more racially diverse and inclusive Europe – which lives up to its ideals and values – would be a more powerful, innovative and influential global actor who can punch its full weight in an increasingly challenging global environment.

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### **It's not only Viktor Orbán**

Across Europe, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is quickly identified as the most openly racist European politician. His recent comments that countries “are no longer nations” if different races mix are certainly the most blatant example of a particularly toxic blend of xenophobia, antisemitism and ethnonationalism.<sup>6</sup> The rant, expressing the confrontational ideology of the leader of one of the Union’s geographically largest countries, should have provoked an immediate pushback from other EU politicians and policymakers. It did not. The European Parliament took six days to denounce Orbán’s statements as “unacceptable” and a breach of the values enshrined in the EU treaties.<sup>7</sup> European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen also broke her silence a week later to warn that all EU member states, including Hungary, had signed up to common global values and that, “discriminating on the basis of race is to trample on those values. The European Union is built on equality, tolerance, justice and fair play.”<sup>8</sup>

The belated reactions of the European Parliament and President von der Leyen are no surprise. EU institutions and policymakers have tirelessly—and rightly—championed gender diversity both within and outside Europe. Efforts at higher inclusivity have been remarkably successful when it comes to gender, even if key challenges like equal pay, adequate parental leave, affordable childcare and limited regulations about working hours and outdated patriarchal

attitudes remain. A recent important achievement is that von der Leyen’s College of Commissioners consists of 13 women, the highest ever in the institution’s history. The Commission’s 2022 proposal for a Women on Boards Directive also presents a major step towards regulating the balance of women across corporate structures in Europe, even if many companies and civil society organisations have already taken such initiatives.

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It is striking but not surprising that EU institutions are still unable to truly grasp and implement a more inclusive definition of diversity which goes beyond gender. This was clear when at the start of her tenure in Brussels, the Commission President commended her team for its diversity but seemed blissfully unaware that her team had no member who was Black or Brown or had a (visible) disability.<sup>9</sup>

It is easy to fixate on Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and others like him who make no secret of their bigoted worldviews. But they are only part of the problem. Racism is thriving across Europe because racist discourses and dog whistles to populists and far-right extremists have become deeply embedded in Europe’s mainstream politics and policies. Nowhere was this more evident than in the EU Foreign Policy Chief, Josep Borrell’s recent speech where he compared Europe to a garden (and therefore civilised) and the rest of the world to a jungle (therefore wild and untamed) that could invade the garden at any moment.<sup>10</sup> These analogies starkly highlight the inherently neo-colonial mindset of powerful European politicians, and were quick to be criticised both internally by some academics and anti-racist groups and globally, even by allies such as Canada and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>11</sup>

### **#BlackLivesMatter**

Nevertheless, even the Brussels bubble is not isolated from the winds of change sweeping across many parts of the world. After Black Lives Matter protests

erupted in Europe in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, an African American man, by the US police, several European Commissioners fumbled in their responses, with some insisting that racism was an ‘American problem’.<sup>12</sup> Very quickly, however, von der Leyen promised to create an “anti-racist Europe” and admitted the importance of countering institutionalised racism and the need for more diversity in EU institutions.<sup>13</sup> She also steered an unprecedented EU Anti-racism Action Plan through the EU executive and appointed the first-ever Anti-racism Coordinator.

These initiatives build on Article 2 of the EU’s founding treaty, which states, “the [...] EU is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the EU Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”<sup>14</sup>

Since 2000, the EU’s Racial Equality Directive 2000/43/EC prohibits all discrimination on the grounds of ethnic or racial origin when accessing education, employment, public services, including housing, and social protection, including healthcare. In the Anti-racism Action Plan, the European Commission “strongly encourages all Member States to develop and adopt national action plans against racism and racial discrimination” in close involvement with civil society and equality bodies.<sup>15</sup> The document also encourages an encompassing approach that addresses all forms of racism at national, European and international levels.

Working in Brussels, however, one can be forgiven for wondering what the last two decades of attention to racism and discrimination have achieved for Europeans of colour and racialised Europeans.<sup>16</sup>

The city is vibrantly diverse, as are most EU urban centres. But Brussels’ racial diversity is absent in and around the streets of the European quarter; meetings in the European Parliament, Commission and Council; and the adjacent think tanks, media organisations, trade associations and civil society networks. This prompted the hashtag *#BrusselsSoWhite* originally used by Politico and now used by activists, commentators and experts to designate the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in EU institutions and other organisations working on EU issues.<sup>17</sup>

## **Actions and words**

There are several paradoxes at the heart of the EU’s anti-racism policies. An important one is that the Anti-racism Action Plan urges member states to adopt more inclusive recruitment tactics. However, unless institutionalised racism and discrimination are systematically addressed at the European level, such encouragement is meaningless at best and a reflection of outdated and complacent neocolonial and Eurocentric mindsets at worst.

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In order to create a more racially diverse and inclusive community of people working in European policymaking, there must be deep systematic changes in recruitment attitudes and policies and internship opportunities. There must also be a deeper understanding and recognition of the barriers to mid- and senior-level positions.

Too often, the same remonstrations and stock answers are heard from those working across many different types of organisations: Brussels is too expensive for Europeans of colour to live in as unpaid or lowly paid interns. Board members can only be recruited if existing members propose them. Senior advisors need special qualifications, which tend to be missing from the CVs of racialised minorities. Very few people of colour or with disabilities apply for positions in the Brussels bubble in the first place. And so on.

None of these challenges is insurmountable and, in some cases, they reflect existing biases, both conscious and unconscious. Many can be eliminated through scholarships, adapting job requirements, seeking candidates outside the traditional feeder universities and creating compulsory criteria for governing board selections. The lack of specific measures to attract students of African or Asian descent to European studies courses is a definite barrier to recruiting talented graduates of colour to many Brussels-based organisations. Luckily, it can

be corrected through developing partnerships with universities within Europe that encourage people from minority backgrounds, or building relationships with universities in the Global South, for example. Additionally, scholarship schemes dedicated to promoting racial and ethnic diversity can and should be launched at institutions like the College of Europe whose students often go on to join EU bodies.

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Worth noting, of course, is that the internship conditions in many organisations in Brussels also discount young professionals of all ethnicities from less wealthy backgrounds from getting a foothold in one of Europe's most expensive cities. The system creates an additional barrier to the inclusion of those who belong to less affluent, minority groups. Young, white graduates from families who can afford to subsidise two years in Brussels are far more likely to be recruited as interns before establishing themselves in their chosen career paths in EU policymaking, influencing or 'think tanking'. The European Policy Centre (EPC) itself faces this challenge each time we advertise for programme assistants to join our organisation.

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In addition, without more diverse people across all our teams and structures, we can in all honesty say that the EPC may not look like an attractive place to work for anyone who is not white and able-bodied. Another point the EU institutions must keep in mind is that many Europeans of colour feel no affinity or connection to the European agenda and may not be automatically attracted to job offers in Brussels. This

not only means a loss of talent for the EU but is also symptomatic of the wider problem of homogeneous organisations' inability to provide representative models or inspiration to racialised minorities. It is, therefore, not enough to post inclusive job vacancies and then wait for applications to come in. EU recruiters need to seek out and engage with minority groups actively. In some cases, affirmative action programmes may also be necessary. Also worth noting is that many Europeans of colour are being recruited by institutions and companies in the Gulf, Canada and the US.

There is also the important question of how to retain those who do make it into the Brussels bubble. This means eradicating tokenism and workplace discrimination and harassment. A recent European Commission staff survey reveals that a large majority of the 7.3% of officials with an ethnic minority background have either experienced or observed discrimination in their professional lives.<sup>18</sup>

### **Deep dives and uncomfortable conversations**

Tackling the real obstacles standing in the way of building a truly inclusive Europe – and more ethnically diverse EU institutions – requires a deeper dive into uncomfortable questions, including Europe's legacy of colonialism and participation in the Atlantic slave trade.

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From the crusades to colonialism, Europe's wealth is rooted in its history of invasion and exploitation of resources belonging to other nations. For centuries, the Belgians in the Congo, the British in India and Africa, the Germans in Africa and the Dutch in Indonesia, to name but a few, treated people from non-white races and non-Christian religions as inferior. Their corporate proxies, such as the Dutch East India Company and the British East India Company,

oversaw the extraction of precious resources, creating trade dependency relationships which are still traceable in Europe's contemporary trade agreements with Asia, Africa and South America.

Although the great European wars and the Holocaust are often commemorated, a strange silence has reigned over the ugly reality of Europe's imperial and colonial history. Many European states arguably see the EU's establishment in 1957 as a 'virgin birth' which erased any collective responsibility for EU states' colonial past.

Europe's former colonies unsurprisingly see things differently, prompting some EU leaders to attempt to apologise for the past slavery and colonialism.<sup>19</sup> European museums still show (often stolen) artefacts from the colonial era, although some are beginning to return them to their countries of origin.

Additionally, as historian Shane Weller shows in *The Idea of Europe: A Critical History*, a persistent belief in European superiority runs throughout European history.<sup>20</sup> For as long as Europeans have thought of themselves as such, they have also considered themselves better than the rest of the world. Additionally, Europe's search for unity — or identity — has been constructed in opposition to an external Other.

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Orbán's comments point to something even more pernicious: too many EU politicians, including Valérie Pécresse, the 2022 French centre-right presidential candidate, have embraced the racist and unscientific 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory.<sup>21</sup> Emerging from the French far right's ideological obsession with racial purity — which Europe fought wars to eliminate —, this 'theory' argues that 'replacist elites' are in a conspiracy to ensure that non-whites demographically and culturally replace European populations. Of course, history has shown us that

this is simply not true. Difficulties from migration arise only when the new arrivals are themselves marginalised and discriminated against.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the greatest efforts of adaptation have already been made by migrants themselves, who built their homes, developed roots, set up enterprises and contributed to economic growth in EU Member States which have not always given them a warm welcome.

## The way forward

Changing the culture of #BrusselsSoWhite is not proving easy. One way forward is to take a cue from the writer and activist Terri E. Givens, who argues that we should ensure more equality and practice radical empathy.<sup>23</sup> This means moving beyond an understanding of others' lives and pain to understanding the origins of biases, including internalised oppression.

For Europeans, creating systemic change would mean that policymakers and politicians finally learn to communicate and truly reach out to and engage with *all* European citizens and involve them in discussions, such as those on the future of Europe. It also means acknowledging Europe's historical role in creating inequalities between nations, races and within society, atoning for those at the political level and finding ways to move on together.

The EU must get serious about walking its talk on fighting racism and building a more racially diverse and inclusive work culture. At no point in time has this been more important, both to try and ensure that Europe is not left without allies in the Global South but also to tackle the rise of extremism within our own borders.

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In order to tackle the permacrisis<sup>24</sup> the EU is facing, European policymakers and decision-takers need to take complex and strategic decisions, come up with new ideas and bring different perspectives to the table. As journalist Matthew Syed argues in *Rebel Ideas: The Power of Diverse Thinking*, that means optimising cognitive diversity: the different insights, perspectives and information which people from different backgrounds can bring to the table.<sup>25</sup>

European politicians also must become more proactive and vigilant in condemning and fighting the xenophobic and racist discourse of populists and far-right groups as well as mainstream political parties, regardless of whether they are in government or opposition.

In the end, it is a simple matter of self-interest and achieving EU ambitions. EU institutions which often chide and sanction other states for their failure to respect human rights, democracy and the rule of law, must not leave themselves open to allegations of double standards and hypocrisy.

Recent examples of the EU's Eurocentric policy responses to humanitarian crises, such as those provoked by the war in Ukraine, include incidents of racial discrimination at EU borders and references by politicians and the media to welcome "intelligent and educated" Ukrainian refugees over those with "unclear pasts".<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, these cases reinforce perceptions of Europe as inherently wedded to neo-colonial and narratives that create 'others'.<sup>27</sup> Case in point, Frontex, the EU's border agency, is routinely accused of engaging in illegal and violent pushbacks against refugees seeking to enter via Greece and Italy.<sup>28</sup>

These and other incidents weaken the EU's power and geopolitical influence. Europe's history of colonialism and lack of contrition since losing its former colonies is also partly why many states, especially India and in Africa, have not aligned with the EU to join its condemnation of Russia's neo-colonial invasion of Ukraine.<sup>29</sup>

## Practice what you preach

The inconvenient truth is that Europeans of colour are still largely treated as 'forever foreigners' and that for all the EU's talk of 'unity in diversity', the difficult yet urgent conversation on European identity and whether Europeans can be non-white and non-Christian is yet to take place. And take place it must, not only within the

institutions but also in other parts of the Brussels bubble. The EU is currently missing out on the talents of many of its non-white citizens at a time when a racially diverse workforce with a variety of experiences and views could help the EU become a stronger and more empathetic global player.

The recent electoral success of far-right parties in Italy and Sweden illustrates just how effectively core EU values are being undermined across the bloc. With racist attitudes traditionally showing an increase in times of crisis, EU policymakers should be working more urgently to implement the anti-racist guidelines they agreed to in the action plan agreed in 2020.

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An EU that talks endlessly of diversity and inclusion and calls out the discrimination of ethnic minorities abroad must be able to concretely showcase its achievements in building a more inclusive Europe. In so many other ways, the EU's values of democracy and respecting the rule of law are outstanding if implemented. However, its power to shape, influence and co-generate much-needed new global governance will remain limited until it practices what it preaches abroad at home.

## About the authors

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- <sup>1</sup> Note: While this paper means diversity in all its forms: gender, race, ethnicity, disability although the main focus of the authors is on racial and ethnic diversity in order to clarify many of the arguments put forward in the #BrusselsSoWhite campaign.
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- <sup>15</sup> European Commission (2020), "[Communication on A Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025](#)", COM(2020) 565 final, Brussels, pp.16-17.
- <sup>16</sup> See European Commission against Racism and Intolerance/Council of Europe (2021), "[ECRI's opinion on the concept of 'racialisation' \(adopted at ECRI's 87th plenary meeting on 8 December 2021\)](#)".
- <sup>17</sup> Heath, Ryan, "[Brussels is blind to diversity](#)", *POLITICO Europe*, 11 December 2017.
- <sup>18</sup> Islam, Shada, "[Working at EU institutions not easy for ethnic minority staff](#)", *EUobserver*, 04 May 2022.
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- <sup>25</sup> See Rock, Matthew (2020), "[Cognitive diversity: Matthew Syed on why 'No one brain is enough'](#)", *CMI Magazine*, Issue 3.
- <sup>26</sup> Brito, Renata, "Europe welcomes Ukrainian refugees - others less so", *Associated Press*, 28 November 2022.
- <sup>27</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, c1978 xi, 368 p.; 25 cm 23
- <sup>28</sup> Rankin, Jennifer, "[Head of EU border agency Frontex resigns amid criticisms](#)", *The Guardian*, 29 April 2022.
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