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EU Anti-Racism Policy Framework: Conceptual Transformation and Key Debates

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Berrin OSMANOĞLU

Association for Monitoring Equal Rights (AMER/ Türkiye)

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EU Anti-Racism Policy Framework: Conceptual Transformation and Key Debates

Berrin Osmanoglu (Association for Monitoring Equal Rights, Türkiye)

Summary

- EU anti-racism policy has progressively expanded from a focus on individual discrimination to a broader recognition of institutional, followed by structural inequalities.
- The EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020–2025) and the EU Anti-Racism Strategy (2026–2030) strengthen this approach by introducing structural racism as a policy concept. They promote a more comprehensive policy, cross-sector coordination, monitoring and improved enforcement. However, implementation remains largely based on pre-existing legal and institutional tools addressing individual and institutional discrimination.
- The report identifies three key policy challenges. First, the concept of structural racism is increasingly used in EU policy discourse but lacks a commonly agreed operational definition. This limits its translation into concrete policy instruments and contributes to a gap between policy objectives and implementation tools.
- Second, the collection of disaggregated ethno-racial data remains limited in many Member States due to legal, historical, and political constraints. While increasingly recognized as necessary for monitoring inequalities and supporting evidence-based policymaking, its systematic use remains uneven, leading to continued reliance on indirect indicators.
- Third, intersectionality as a concept, is increasingly integrated into EU equality policy and monitoring frameworks. It is used to better capture overlapping forms of discrimination and inequality. However, its conceptual scope and operational implications remain subject to ongoing debate, particularly in relation to established equality frameworks.
- Persistent inequalities continue to affect Roma populations, people of African descent, and other racialized groups across Member States. Recent developments, including increased migration, demographic change, and the rise of far-right political actors, have increased the salience of racism and discrimination in public debate.
- Within this context, the European Union continues to function as a key normative power in the field of anti-racism and equality. It plays an important role in setting common standards, shaping policy language, and consolidating shared principles on non-discrimination across Member States. At the same time, on the one hand, policy implementation remains uneven across Member States, on the other, EU's enforcement capacity is increasingly constrained by processes of national reassertion, including stronger emphasis on sovereignty and divergent political priorities.
- In line with the scope of this first deliverable, the report is primarily diagnostic and analytical in nature. It focuses on mapping and examining ongoing conceptual and policy transformations in EU anti-racism governance, rather than formulating policy recommendations. A second report will build on these analytical foundations and integrate the empirical findings of the RAISE project in order to contribute to these debates based on how structural inequalities and intersectional disadvantages operate in practice across sectors and countries included in RAISE.

Introduction

The final objective of Work Package 8 of the RAISE project is to develop policy recommendations based on the research findings produced throughout the project. While the research is still ongoing, this first report aims to provide the policy context for this work. Rather than providing a general overview of all existing policies, the report focuses on some of the key issues at the center of contemporary anti-racism policy debates, where important disagreements and unresolved questions remain. These issues have been identified through the work of European and international institutions engaged in combating racism, including the very recent European Anti-Racism Conference 2026 and through the Policy Dialogue Meetings organized within the scope of the RAISE Project. These meetings brought together policy experts, analysts, equality bodies, civil society actors, and institutional representatives working in the field of anti-racism and discrimination.

Racism is not a new phenomenon, and anti-racism is not a new policy field. Studies consistently demonstrate persistent structural inequalities affecting long-established minority groups, people of African descent, and Roma populations. For example, recent EU data show that Roma communities continue to face severe socio-economic disadvantages and substantially lower life expectancy than the general population, while nearly half of people of African descent are overqualified for the jobs they occupy. Despite the scale of the problem, progress in the policy field has been uneven. However, recent political and social developments have made tackling racism more urgent. Wars, refugee movements, global inequalities, advances in transport and communication technologies, and the labor demand created by Europe's ageing population have contributed to large-scale migration towards Europe. As a result, migration has moved to the center of political debates across Europe and has fueled racism. Anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobic political discourse have become increasingly visible in many European countries. This development is reflected not only in the growing electoral success of right-wing populist parties, but also in the broader influence these actors exert on governments and governing coalitions, shaping mainstream political agendas and public debates on migration, citizenship, and belonging.

At the European level, before the 1990s, the European Community (EC) had very limited competence on racial discrimination, almost no harmonized equality data collection, and no dedicated anti-racism institutions to do systematic monitoring in the field of racism. The question was treated as national constitutional issues, labor law questions or human rights concerns under the Council of Europe. With European Union (EU) enlargement, anti-racism policies developed through a combination of anti-discrimination legislation, particularly the Racial Equality Directive, and the broader fundamental rights framework established by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. This legal framework was complemented by the establishment of institutional monitoring and support mechanisms that strengthened the EU's capacity to collect comparative data and monitor discrimination and racism across member states, while equality bodies received greater recognition and support as key actors in the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation. Alongside the development of equality and anti-discrimination policies, EU anti-racism governance also encompasses criminal-law responses to racism, including measures addressing racist hate crime and hate speech (the latter increasingly governed through a combination of criminal-law provisions and digital platform regulation, notably under the Digital Services Act framework).

More recently, the creation of the EU Anti-Racism Coordinator position, the adoption of the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020–2025), and its subsequent consolidation through the EU Anti-Racism Strategy (2026–2030) have signaled a stronger political commitment to addressing racism across different sectors through a more comprehensive approach. The EU has also adopted the Strategy on Combating

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Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life and the Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation, while seeking greater coordination between these policy frameworks. The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum also forms part of this broader policy landscape. Overall, the EU framework now combines legal norms, institutional monitoring, and equality data infrastructures in addressing racism and discrimination.

Throughout this process, steps have also been taken to strengthen the enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation by Member States. The EU has encouraged Member States to develop national anti-racism strategies, improve data collection practices, and strengthen coordination between public institutions and civil society organizations. The first EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020–2025) resulted in 14 Member States adopting national or regional action plans against racism. The new Strategy announces that the Commission plan to analyze the application of anti-discrimination legislation by Member States and consider ways to strengthen national sanction regimes.

However, important challenges remain. On the one hand, implementation remains uneven across Member States. On the other, despite these progressivist developments in the field of anti-racism policy, there is a possibility of backlash, both at Member State level and at EU level; especially because several issues remain controversial despite adopted policy frameworks. The expansion of EU anti-discrimination and equality frameworks has taken place in a broader political context marked by growing contestation of liberal and progressive policy agendas. This has also reflected as a shift toward national reassertion in several policy domains, including migration governance and social and cultural policy. Compared to earlier periods of deeper European integration and stronger confidence in supranational governance, current political dynamics are more strongly shaped by demands for sovereignty, border control, and administrative closure. Even if this does not necessarily imply a reversal of legal and institutional commitments at the EU level, it does indicate a more fragmented environment in which equality policies are increasingly subject to political polarization and competing normative frameworks and consequently challenge their effectiveness.

Against this backdrop, this report identifies three central policy issues that lie at the heart of contemporary anti-racism debates yet remain politically and conceptually contested. The first concerns the absence of a widely accepted working definition of structural racism. The second concerns the collection and use of ethno-racially disaggregated data. The third concerns the role of intersectionality in both research and policymaking. Within the framework of WP8 of the RAISE project, this first report identifies these issues and reviews the main academic and policy debates surrounding them. Once the fieldwork will be completed, a second report will build on the findings of the RAISE project to contribute to these ongoing discussions and inform policy recommendations.

Regarding the first debate; by combining qualitative and quantitative methods across multiple sectors, RAISE adopts a sociological approach that examines how ethno-racial inequalities are produced and reproduced through the interaction of individual experiences, institutional practices, public narratives, and broader social structures. Rather than treating racism as a series of isolated discriminatory acts, the project approaches racism as a structural phenomenon. However, as it will be discussed in this report, the concept itself is still controversial and its policy translation is incomplete. So, the project will contribute to ongoing efforts to strengthen the conceptual and empirical foundations of structural racism as an analytical category capable of capturing interconnected forms of disadvantage and unequal access to resources, opportunities, participation, recognition, and social belonging.

At the same time, RAISE will also contribute to ongoing discussions on equality data and the measurement of ethno-racial inequalities in Europe. Through its survey design and mixed-methods approach, the RAISE project engages with questions surrounding the collection and operationalization of ethno-racial categories

while highlighting the importance of disaggregated data for monitoring inequalities. In this way, RAISE seeks to advance anti-racism debates by providing empirical evidence on the mechanisms through which structural racism and intersecting inequalities are produced and reproduced across European societies.

The concept of intersectionality, the third issue examined in this report, is also a central component of the RAISE project. RAISE examines how ethnicity interacts with other dimensions of inequality, including gender, religion, migration status, and socio-economic position, and how these overlapping forms of disadvantage are experienced across different social spheres. By investigating how inequalities emerge, accumulate, and reinforce one another, the project contributes to current academic and policy debates on the value of intersectionality as both an analytical framework and an empirical research strategy.

Anti-discrimination legal frameworks in RAISE countries

Country	Key legislation	Adoption / entry into force	Key features	Implementation according to ECRI reports
Belgium	Anti-discrimination laws (federal and regional frameworks)	Early 2000s	Comprehensive legal framework across multiple domains; multiple equality bodies at different governance levels	ECRI reports highlight relatively strong legal architecture but continuing issues with underreporting of discrimination and uneven access to remedies in practice.
Germany	General Equal Treatment Act	2006	Comprehensive anti-discrimination framework implementing EU equality directives; supported by the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency.	ECRI reports acknowledge a well-developed legal framework but note persistent challenges regarding effective enforcement, underreporting of discrimination, limited awareness of available remedies, and gaps in protection against structural and institutional discrimination.
Hungary	Equal Treatment and Promotion of Equal Opportunities Act	2003	Broad equality framework aligned with EU requirements; formal equality body in place	ECRI notes a gap between legal provisions and effective enforcement, with concerns about institutional independence and limited impact in practice.
Netherlands	General Equal Treatment Act	1994 (amended post-2000)	Established equality framework with a long institutional tradition and complaints mechanisms	ECRI highlights generally strong institutional design, while also noting persistent discrimination in labor and housing markets despite formal protections.
Poland	Act on Equal Treatment	2010	Relatively recent framework with limited scope in some areas	ECRI reports challenges in enforcement capacity, awareness, and limited use of legal remedies in practice.

Türkiye	Human Rights and Equality Institution Law (and constitutional provisions)	2016	National equality framework with anti-discrimination provisions; partial alignment with EU acquis	ECRI assessments emphasize gaps in implementation and enforcement capacity compared to European standards, despite formal legal provisions.
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Sources: EU Council Directive, ECRI Country monitoring reports

1. Defining Structural Racism: Academic Debates and Policy Challenges

One of the enduring challenges in anti-racism policy-making concerns the absence of a widely accepted working definition of structural racism. Although this concept is used in academic literature and there is a growing policy recognition of racism as a structural phenomenon within EU and international frameworks, this has not yet translated into a stable or legally consolidated definition. More precisely, this remains an evolving but contested process. While the use of the term structural racism remains politically sensitive in some contexts, the absence of a shared definition also makes policy frameworks less effective and more vulnerable in periods of political backlash. Organizations such as the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) advocate for the development and adoption of such a definition at the European level.

This section first examines how the concept of structural racism emerged and developed in academic literature. It then explores how the concept entered the European Union policy arena and the forms through which it has been incorporated into policy frameworks.

1.1. Structural Racism in Academic Debates

The difficulty of defining structural racism stems largely from a more fundamental question: where is racism located? Is racism primarily rooted in individual prejudice, discriminatory intentions, and hostile attitudes toward racialized groups, or is it embedded within broader social structures and institutions that reproduce inequality regardless of individual intent? Within liberal legal thought and dominant understandings of equality, racism has traditionally been conceptualized as personal prejudice, intentional discrimination, or overt hostility. Consequently, proposed solutions have focused mainly on education, anti-discrimination legislation, and changing individual attitudes and behaviors. Critics of this approach, however, argue that it does not adequately explain why racial inequalities persist even after explicitly racist laws have been abolished and formal equality has been established.

From the late 1960s onward, scholars increasingly argued that racism should not be understood solely as a matter of individual prejudice, but also as a feature of how societies themselves are organized. Over time, different theoretical traditions introduced concepts such as institutional, systemic, and structural racism in order to capture the broader mechanisms through which racial inequalities are reproduced. In public debates, these concepts are often used interchangeably. In academic literature, however, they reflect different analytical emphases and levels of analysis.

Among the first formulations of this shift, the concept of institutional racism was introduced, distinguishing between individual racism, understood as overt discriminatory acts committed by individuals, and institutional racism, which operates through the policies, practices, procedures, and organizational cultures

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of institutions (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967). From this perspective, racial inequality is reproduced within institutions such as schools, policing systems, labor markets, housing, and healthcare, even in the absence of openly racist individuals or intentional discrimination. The concept therefore shifted attention from personal attitudes to the routine functioning of institutions and the unequal outcomes they systematically produce.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, Critical Race Theory further expanded this argument by claiming that racism is not an exception within liberal democracies, but deeply embedded in their legal, political, and social structures; this development paved the way for the emergence of the concept of structural racism. Scholars argued that racial inequality persists because institutions, laws, and dominant norms continue to reproduce historically rooted hierarchies (Crenshaw 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Within this framework, structural racism broadened the analysis beyond single institutions and referred instead to the interaction between multiple institutions, historical legacies, public policies, social structures, and cultural hierarchies that together generate unequal racial outcomes. Housing systems, labor markets, policing practices, education systems, citizenship regimes, and inherited patterns of exclusion are therefore understood not as isolated phenomena, but as interconnected dimensions of a broader structure of inequality.

Among sociological approaches to racism, scholars who emphasize its structural character have also moved away from explanations centered on individual prejudice and formal equality. In particular, some scholars have contributed to the core problematic of CRT by sociologically explaining how racism persists even after formal legal equality has been established. In this vein, contemporary societies have been described as characterized by “color-blind racism,” in which racial inequalities persist despite the decline of explicitly racist language and formal segregation (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). This literature focuses on the indirect and subtle mechanisms through which racial inequality is reproduced in contemporary societies, such as apparently neutral norms, practices, and discourses. It has shown that appeals to meritocracy, individual responsibility, and cultural difference can obscure the structural dimensions of inequality while simultaneously legitimizing unequal outcomes.

Another strand of sociology, drawing on a Bourdieusian tradition, adopts a different approach. Rather than focusing primarily on legal norms, this literature examines how racism is reproduced through symbolic boundaries, class relations, spatial segregation, state institutions, and everyday interactions. From this standpoint, racism is understood not only as exclusion or unequal treatment, but also as a historically embedded and relational process that organizes social life itself (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015). Liberal approaches are criticized for treating racism as exceptional and morally deviant rather than as an ordinary dimension of modern societies. Racism is conceptualized as a dynamic social order reproduced through institutions, interactions, perceptions, and everyday practices, while continuously shaping social hierarchies, identities, and forms of belonging.

A further body of scholarship drawing on Bourdieusian tradition, links structural racism more directly to transformations of the state, urban marginality, territorial stigmatization, and punitive governance. These studies examine the relationship between race, class, urban segregation, and the expansion of penal institutions in neoliberal societies (Wacquant, 2008; 2009). Although not focused exclusively on racism, this body of work shows how racialized groups are disproportionately subjected to surveillance, policing, incarceration, and socio-spatial exclusion. This perspective situates racism within broader systems of economic inequality, symbolic domination, and state management of marginalized populations. While the Bourdieusian sociological tradition differs substantially from CRT in basic theoretical assumptions and analytical focus, both share a rejection of explanations that reduce racism to individual prejudice alone.

These debates have also intersected with broader critiques of universalism, coloniality, and the production of knowledge. Certain strands of postcolonial and decolonial thought argue that universalist frameworks historically functioned as vehicles for the domination of Western epistemologies over other forms of knowledge and social organization (Quijano, 2000).

However, while these structural approaches to racism move beyond an individualistic understanding of racism, they have also generated significant criticism. One line of critique comes mainly from scholars defending liberal understandings of equality and individual responsibility (Taguieff, 2001; Lilla, 2017). From this perspective, critics argue that structural approaches excessively broaden the concept of racism by extending it beyond intentional discrimination or explicit prejudice. They claim that framing racism as embedded within institutions, social structures, or historical legacies risks reducing individual agency and moral responsibility, while also making racism difficult to empirically falsify. Liberal critics therefore tend to defend narrower definitions centered on individual rights, equal treatment before the law, and demonstrable discriminatory intent.

A second line of critique focuses more on the political implications of some contemporary antiracist and decolonial approaches. These critiques are often articulated in defense of universalism and shared civic values (Benhabib, 2002; Roy, 2019). They argue that when universal categories and common political frameworks are rejected entirely as instruments of domination, political life may become increasingly organized around mutually closed identities and incompatible historical narratives. In its more radical forms, this critique suggests, antiracist discourse may unintentionally reinforce fragmentation and encourage groups to retreat into self-enclosed identities defined in opposition to others.

As a response, defenders of structural and decolonial approaches argue that such criticisms underestimate the historical depth of colonial domination and racial exclusion (Quijano, 2000). They contend that questioning dominant universalist frameworks does not necessarily imply rejecting all forms of universality or shared political values, but rather interrogating whose experiences and forms of knowledge have historically been recognized as universal in the first place.

Having outlined the main academic debates on structural racism, the next section focuses on how the concept of structural racism has evolved within European and international policy frameworks.

1.2. Structural Racism in European Policy Framework

The use of the concept and perspective of structural racism is relatively recent in European and international policy discourse. For a long time, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965) remained the key global legal reference for this field. Racism was mainly understood as individual prejudice or discriminatory acts, and policy responses focused on legal equality and the prohibition of direct discrimination.

At EU level, the legal foundation of anti-discrimination policy can be understood through a legal framing, which has been established gradually through the Treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and subsequent equality directives. Within this legal framing, successive Treaty reforms, including the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) and the Lisbon Treaty (2007), progressively expanded the EU's competence in the field of anti-discrimination. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (1992) establishes equality and non-discrimination as fundamental EU values, while Articles 10 and 19 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (2009) provide the legal basis for EU action against discrimination. These principles

were further reinforced by Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000, legally binding since 2009), which prohibits discrimination on grounds including race and ethnic origin.

These framings refer respectively to the legal-institutional architecture, the normative principles of equality, and the policy instruments through which discrimination is operationalized. This legal framing is closely connected to a normative framing, in which equality and non-discrimination are established as foundational EU values and rights. Building on this, the Racial Equality Directive (2000/43/EC) prohibited discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin, while the Employment Equality Directive (2000/78/EC) extended protection to other grounds. Together, these instruments form the core of the EU equality framework. However, their primary focus is the protection of individual rights and equal treatment rather than the structural causes of inequality. The legal cornerstone of the EU anti-racism framework therefore remains the Racial Equality Directive (2000/43/EC), even though more recent policy initiatives have increasingly adopted the language of structural racism.

From the 2000s onwards, the EU anti-racism framework was further developed through the establishment of monitoring institutions and data collection mechanisms. The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), later transformed into the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in 2007 with a broader mandate, expanded the collection of evidence on structural racism and inequality across Member States. At the same time, equality bodies, reporting mechanisms, and monitoring tools became increasingly institutionalized within the EU anti-discrimination framework, enhancing comparability and enabling EU-level benchmarking of inequality.

These developments also highlighted the limits of the existing policy framing, which was primarily oriented towards individual discrimination. ECRI introduced institutional and structural dimensions of structural racism in its General Policy Recommendation No. 7, while FRA reports documented persistent inequalities in employment, housing, education, policing, and access to services. As these patterns proved persistent across time and policy domains, they contributed to a gradual shift from understanding racism as a matter of individual prejudice towards viewing it as a phenomenon embedded in institutions, policies, and long-term social processes.

Building on these developments, a more comprehensive approach began to emerge. However, the key shift towards adopting structural racism as a core analytical concept came with the first EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020–2025). With the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020–2025, for the first time, the European Commission explicitly referred to structural racism. The Plan established anti-racism as a distinct EU policy priority and linked structural racism to a broad range of policy areas, including employment, education, housing, healthcare, and law enforcement. It also promoted a coordinated approach based on equality data collection, monitoring, stakeholder participation, and cooperation with civil society organizations. This shift was further reflected in EU governance tools, such as the European Commission’s High Level Group on Non-discrimination, Equality and Diversity, which promoted more coordinated policy approaches. While the Action Plan primarily functioned as an agenda-setting instrument, the Strategy aims at institutional consolidation of these priorities.

The EU Anti-Racism Strategy 2026–2030 largely continues this approach while seeking to strengthen some of its institutional foundations. It foresees further work on equality data collection and on the development of a definition of structural racism. New directives establish binding standards for the independence and effectiveness of equality bodies across Member States, while the Commission plans to monitor their functioning through common indicators. By referring to all other Union of Equality strategies, including EU strategies on Roma inclusion, antisemitism, and others, the Strategy reflects an increasingly comprehensive and coordinated policy framing. In addition, it places greater emphasis on civil society

participation through the renewal of the Anti-Racism Civil Society Forum and continued support for anti-racist organizations.

However, looking more closely, we can see some gaps. First, the plans themselves reveal a number of limitations. While structural racism as a concept is increasingly referenced, institutional and individual discrimination remain the main operational categories in EU policy practice. Existing instruments necessarily continue to rely on legal sanctions, equality bodies, and FRA monitoring frameworks. This shift represents a transition from intent-based to outcome-based understandings of structural racism.

Second, this transition requires a widely accepted working definition of structural racism. Despite the growing recognition of structural racism, the Action Plan did not provide a legal or technical definition of structural racism, and the same ambiguity remains visible in the Anti-Racism Strategy 2026–2030. For example, in this latest Strategy, structural racism is defined as embedded in social structures, but its manifestations are still largely perceived as occurring at individual and institutional levels as a repetitive phenomenon. As a result, rather than developing mechanisms and policies that can address structural racism at a structural level, existing instruments continue to be used.

However, there are political and conceptual challenges in defining and operationalizing structural racism, as discussed in the academic debate section. In order to address structural racism in a way that corresponds to its definition, it is necessary to integrate power relations, participation mechanisms, and corrective instruments capable of producing enforceable outcomes. Structural racism has become part of the policy vocabulary, but it has not yet been translated into a coherent and enforceable policy framework.

The EU framework reflects a partial institutional translation of structural racism, where a structurally defined problem is still primarily addressed through individual- and institution-based policy tools, resulting in a persistent gap between normative recognition and enforceable policy design.

Evolution of EU anti-discrimination and anti-racism policy framework

Period	Key instrument development /	Year	Notes
Pre-1997	Limited treaty basis	–	No explicit EU competence on racial/ethnic discrimination.
Amsterdam Treaty	Legal basis for anti-discrimination	1997	Introduced Article 13 (EC Treaty), enabling EU legislation on discrimination on multiple grounds, including race and ethnicity.
EUMC establishment	Creation of a dedicated EU monitoring body on racism and xenophobia	1997	Mandated to analyze and disseminate comparable information on racism, xenophobia and related intolerance across Member States, laying the foundations for EU-level evidence-based anti-racism policy.
Charter of Fundamental Rights	Fundamental rights framework (normative)	2000 (proclaimed)	Establishes EU fundamental rights standards. Article 21 prohibits discrimination on grounds including race, ethnic origin, religion, language and membership of a national minority.
Racial Equality Directive	Core legal framework	2000	Prohibits discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin in employment, education, housing, social protection, and access to goods and services.
Employment Equality Directive	Complementary legal framework	2000	Extends protection in employment to religion or belief, disability, age, and sexual orientation.
Institutionalization phase	Equality governance tools	2000s	Expansion of equality mainstreaming, reporting obligations, and strengthening of national equality bodies.
FRA establishment	Fundamental rights monitoring	2007	Creation of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, responsible for direct data collection, surveys, and comparative monitoring.
Lisbon Treaty	Legal binding force of fundamental rights	2009	Makes the Charter of Fundamental Rights legally binding and strengthens EU commitment to fundamental rights enforcement.
Structural racism turn	EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020–2025)	2020	First EU-wide comprehensive policy framework explicitly recognizing structural racism and introducing coordinated actions across employment, education, policing, and participation domains.
Current phase	EU Anti-Racism Strategy (2026–2030)	2026	Claims stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination law, improved equality data systems, intersectional policy design, and enhanced participation of affected communities in policymaking.

Sources: Amsterdam Treaty (1997); EU Racial Equality Directive (2000/43/EC); Employment Equality Directive (2000/78/EC); European Commission policy documents; Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000); Lisbon Treaty (2009); FRA reports; EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020–2025), EU Anti-Racism Strategy (2026–2030)

2. Collecting disaggregated ethno-racial data

Another major policy debate in the field of anti-discrimination and anti-racism concerns the collection of disaggregated ethno-racial data. Although there has been a growing international trend toward collecting such data, the issue remains highly contentious in Europe. This hesitation is closely linked to the post-1945 European political and legal order, which largely sought to remove race and ethnicity from official legal texts, administrative categories, and collective representations. The historical legacy of colonialism, racism and antisemitism produced a strong reluctance toward institutionalizing ethno-racial categories within public administration. States often justify their reluctance by referring to privacy protection, data protection regimes such as GDPR, fears of misuse for discriminatory purposes, and the administrative difficulty of defining and standardizing categories across populations. As a result, in many continental European contexts, the collection of ethno-racial statistics continues to be perceived as politically sensitive and potentially dangerous.

2.1. The issue of collecting ethno-racial data in the academic debate

This concern is particularly strong within the French republican tradition, where the state is expected to recognize citizens as formally equal individuals rather than as members of ethnic or racial groups. Within this perspective, collecting racial or ethnic statistics is often criticized for potentially reifying identities, reinforcing group boundaries, and contributing to stigmatization. Sociologists have drawn attention to the classificatory power of the state and the ways administrative categories may contribute to the symbolic stabilization of social differences (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It has been emphasized that counting ethnicity and race raises important methodological and political difficulties because such categories are socially constructed, historically contingent, and potentially open to essentialization (Wieviorka, 1996).

However, from the perspective of Critical Race Theory, the absence of data contributes directly to the invisibility of discrimination. According to this approach, racial inequality is often reproduced through formally neutral institutional arrangements that obscure unequal outcomes across groups (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Within this framework, “not counting” is not a neutral position; rather, the absence of race and ethnicity data contributes to the statistical invisibility of discrimination, particularly in contexts where migration-based proxies fail to capture the experiences of racialized citizens and later-generation populations. It is highlighted that proxies present important limitations; they do not capture self-identification and often fail to identify racialized inequalities affecting second or third-generation populations who hold national citizenship and may no longer appear within migration-based categories. According to this view, without disaggregated data, it is difficult to systematically identify, measure or address structural inequalities (Simon, 2017).

In addition, more and more European institutions and actors have started to frame disaggregated data as necessary for evaluating whether formally universal equality policies produce substantively equal outcomes across different groups. Yet, the theoretical justification of this shift differs in important ways; disaggregated data is increasingly perceived as an infrastructure of accountability. According to this logic, governments can only be held accountable for unequal outcomes if inequalities are empirically observable, measurable, and comparable across groups. Without such indicators, states may formally uphold principles of equality and non-discrimination while lacking the empirical capacity to assess whether different populations experience unequal access to employment, education, housing, healthcare, or justice. As several international organizations increasingly argue, this creates a structural gap between legal commitments and measurable outcomes.

However, this issue is not only a matter of political controversy but also involves practical challenges. At the global level, there has been a broader trend toward the collection of ethno-racial data. Patrick Simon notes that Europe as a whole has remained relatively outside this global trend toward ethno-racial statistics because most continental European states are not only reluctant due to historical reasons (fear of misuse) but also because they lack both the institutional tradition and the administrative experience necessary to construct such categories. In practice, European countries continue to adopt divergent approaches. While some use direct ethnicity questions in censuses or surveys, others rely on migration-related proxies such as citizenship, country of birth, or parental origin. For example, the United Kingdom introduced ethno-racial questions into official statistics in 1991, but ethnicity and race had already occupied a more visible place in public and policy discourse there than in continental Europe, including in approaches to migrant integration. In countries such as the United States, these categories have long been institutionalized within official statistics as part of broader traditions of classification and equality monitoring.

Ethno-racial data collection across Europe: a fragmented landscape

Country	Official collection of ethnicity/race data	Main approach
Belgium	No direct ethnicity or race data	Proxy-based indicators: citizenship, country of birth, parents' country of birth
Germany	No direct ethnicity or race data	Proxy-based indicators: citizenship, country of birth, parents' country of birth
Netherlands	No direct ethnicity or race data	Migration background categories based on country of birth of individuals and parents
Hungary	Yes – ethnicity through self-identification	Nationality/ethnicity and mother tongue
Poland	Yes – ethnicity through self-identification	Nationality/ethnicity and mother tongue
Türkiye	No direct ethnicity or race data	Mainly citizenship and country of birth; limited language-related indicators in some contexts

Sources: FRA country reports.

Due to the lack of tradition and experience, constructing ethno-racial categories remains a major political and methodological challenge in Europe. There are substantial disagreements regarding how such data should be collected and operationalized. Many European institutions now support voluntary self-identification as a safeguard against externally imposed racial classification. However, critics also point to the practical and conceptual challenges of self-identification: identities may be multiple, situational, fluid, or strategically negotiated; respondents may refuse categorization altogether; and the number of possible categories can become theoretically unlimited.

2.2. The issue of collecting ethno-racial data in the European and International policy framework

At the EU level, the collection of ethno-racial data remains one of the most contested issues in contemporary equality governance. Over the past two decades, international and European institutions have increasingly acknowledged that without reliable equality data, inequalities and discrimination cannot be adequately measured, monitored, or addressed. In this context, significant efforts have emerged at the EU level to improve the production of reliable equality data, including initiatives aimed at statistical harmonization through Eurostat, the establishment of institutions such as the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) to generate comparative survey data, and the use of Eurobarometer surveys by the European Commission. However, the possibility of collecting ethno-racially disaggregated data at the EU level has only recently become the subject of more explicit policy debate, particularly following the adoption of the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan and the subsequent Strategy.

Examining the issue through the evolution of the EU equality data regime reveals a gradual shift in institutional approaches. Since the 1970s, Eurobarometer surveys commissioned by the European Commission have increasingly incorporated questions relating to equality, ethnic discrimination, racism, and social attitudes toward diversity. However, more systematic efforts to collect and monitor equality data emerged through the creation of specialized institutions. The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), established in 1997 amid growing EU concern about racism and in the context of developments surrounding the Amsterdam Treaty, represented the first EU-level attempt to systematically document racism and xenophobia. Rather than directly collecting large-scale primary data itself (with the exception of some survey activities during its final years), the EUMC primarily compiled and analyzed existing data sources, including Eurostat and Eurobarometer datasets, while coordinating information networks such as the Racism and Xenophobia Network (RAXEN), which served as a system of national focal points for data collection and reporting.

In 2007, the EUMC was replaced by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). This institutional transformation reflected a broader shift toward a comprehensive EU fundamental rights framework. At the same time, FRA has played a particularly important methodological role in the development of equality data within Europe. Through large-scale comparative surveys, FRA has produced policy-relevant evidence on discrimination, exclusion, and inequalities experienced by racialized and minority populations. Unlike many official statistical systems, FRA surveys explicitly ask respondents about ethnic origin, racialization, migration background, and related identity markers, combining institutionally defined categories with principles of self-identification. In doing so, FRA has attempted to reconcile anti-discrimination monitoring with longstanding European sensitivities surrounding racial classification. This development marks an important shift in European governance debates: from the earlier assumption that universalist and ostensibly race-neutral approaches were sufficient, toward a growing recognition that inequalities that remain unmeasured are also less likely to be acknowledged, monitored, or effectively addressed through public policy.

However, the central point of contention regarding ethno-racial data concerns official statistics rather than survey-based research. While survey instruments allow for greater flexibility in the use of self-identification measures, debates become significantly more contentious when questions of ethnicity or race are considered within administrative data systems. Administrative data refers to information routinely collected by public institutions and organizations in the course of their activities, such as education records, employment statistics, labor market outcomes, health data, housing records, social protection databases, and criminal justice statistics. When disaggregated by ethno-racial background, migration status, or other relevant characteristics, such data makes it possible to identify persistent disparities in outcomes across groups and

institutions. (Dedicated equality surveys, victimization surveys, attitude surveys, and perception-based surveys also provide valuable information that cannot be obtained through administrative records alone.)

At the EU level, the primary institutional response to handle equality data at administrative level, has been to focus on statistical harmonization. This process is centered on Eurostat, which is responsible for coordinating and harmonizing statistical outputs produced by Member States. Eurostat primarily compiles, harmonizes, and disseminates comparable statistics based on data produced by national statistical authorities. It also coordinates selected EU-wide survey modules implemented through national statistical systems. However, due to the constraints imposed by data protection regulations, particularly the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as well as diverse national legal frameworks, official statistical systems generally rely on indirect indicators such as citizenship, country of birth, nationality, or parental origin rather than explicit ethno-racial categories. As a result, these systems often provide only a limited picture of ethno-racial inequalities. Compared to FRA which adopts a more explicit rights-based perspective that emphasizes self-identification Eurostat, remains constrained by legal sensitivities surrounding the collection of special-category personal data.

The current phase of EU equality governance is characterized by a growing emphasis on disaggregated equality data. Recent policy initiatives, including the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020–2025 and the subsequent Anti-Racism Strategy 2026-2030, have suggested the need for improved data collection, greater harmonization, and the more systematic use of disaggregated indicators in order to strengthen evidence-based policymaking and accountability mechanisms. The latest Strategy 2026-2030 also includes the Commission's plans to prepare recommendations aimed at improving the collection, analysis, and use of disaggregated equality data within national legal frameworks and with due consideration for administrative burdens. Additional initiatives include the organization of a high-level European Round Table on Equality Data, new Eurobarometer surveys on discrimination, and further FRA surveys targeting immigrants, descendants of immigrants, and Roma populations. Nonetheless, this shift remains cautious and uneven. Member States continue to express legal, political, and historical reservations regarding the collection of sensitive data, while EU institutions differ in the strength and scope of their commitments.

Within the broader international policy arena, institutions also differ in their approaches to ethno-racial data collection. Organizations operating primarily within a human rights and anti-discrimination framework have generally adopted more explicit positions in favor of collecting such data. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), for example, stated in its first General Policy Recommendation in 1996 that “it is difficult to develop and effectively implement policies [...] without good data.” Since then, ECRI has repeatedly argued in its country monitoring reports that the absence of ethnic and racial data contributes to the invisibility of discrimination. It supports the collection of self-identified information relating to ethnic origin, religion, language, and related grounds, provided that participation remains voluntary and is

Similarly, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), particularly within the frameworks of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Sustainable Development Goals, increasingly frames disaggregated data as a prerequisite for evidence-based compliance with equality and non-discrimination obligations. From this perspective, the absence of reliable data weakens not only policy evaluation but also the capacity of courts, equality bodies, and monitoring institutions to hold states accountable for persistent inequalities and discriminatory outcomes.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), by contrast, occupies a more intermediary position. While strongly supporting the use of disaggregated data to measure inequalities and

assess integration outcomes, the OECD generally avoids the use of race and ethnicity as primary statistical categories. Instead, it tends to rely on migration-related indicators such as country of birth, parental origin, or nationality as proxies for measuring disparities.

Overall, international and European institutions increasingly recognize that the absence of reliable equality data weakens both anti-discrimination policies and institutional accountability mechanisms. At the same time, the production of ethno-racial data remains politically, legally, and ethically sensitive. Significant differences persist regarding appropriate classification systems, operational definitions, and safeguards for data collection.

3. Intersectionality: concept, debates and critiques

The last point this report will focus on is the growing use of the concept of intersectionality and the critiques it generates. It will focus first on its appearance in academic studies. Then will follow its use in the European policy framework.

3.1. Academic debate on intersectionality

Originating in the United States, the concept first emerged within Black feminist legal theory. Crenshaw introduced the concept as an analytical framework to show that different axes of inequality are not separate, but mutually constitutive and interacting (Crenshaw 1989). Over time, the concept expanded beyond legal theory and became influential in academic research, activism, and policy-making, especially in equality and anti-discrimination fields. As the concept has become widely used, it has also generated increasing criticism. Methodologically, some argue that the concept's flexibility, which is also a source of its strength, produces ambiguity regarding its boundaries (Davis, 2008). However, the main debates around the concept emerged in a context characterized by the rise of identity politics, the relative decline of class-based political agendas, and the emergence of populist movements in many Western democracies. As a result, intersectionality has been discussed not only as an analytical tool, but also as part of broader political and cultural debates on multiculturalism, identity, and social cohesion.

At its core, intersectionality means that forms of inequality such as race, gender, class, migration status, religion, sexuality, and disability interact rather than operate independently. These categories do not simply add up; they shape each other in specific social and institutional contexts. Intersectionality therefore shifts attention from single categories to how inequalities are produced and experienced in practice. Intersectionality challenged single-axis approaches to discrimination, such as race or gender alone, and argued that inequality is produced through overlapping structures of power and exclusion.

Importantly, intersectionality also means that social categories are not equally salient in all contexts. It is argued that their relevance depends on broader structures of stratification and historical context (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Intersectional analysis therefore requires attention both to categories and to the power relations that give them meaning. In this sense, adopting an intersectional approach in research requires not only identifying disadvantage, but also understanding differentiated forms of positioning and agency within unequal structures. Rather than viewing individuals as uniformly disadvantaged, this approach highlights that people occupy multiple and sometimes contradictory positions of privilege and disadvantage. Individuals may experience exclusion in one domain while benefiting from relative advantage in another. This perspective helps explain how people develop situated strategies of action, negotiation, and identity management across different social contexts.

Early critiques of the concept emerged within feminist theory itself. Some scholars argued that intersectionality as an analytical framework has been crucial for challenging essentialist understandings of “womanhood” and for making visible differences among women, but that it also creates tensions in terms of political solidarity. Over time, as the concept became institutionalized in European academic and policy frameworks, it also generated criticism from different theoretical and political positions.

On the one hand, criticism comes from approaches that can be described as liberal-universalist, which emphasize individual rights, equal citizenship, and legal clarity. From this perspective, the concept of intersectionality risks shifting attention from individuals to group-based identities defined by race, gender, religion, or sexuality, which may weaken the universal character of equality law. Olivier Roy, for example, argues that contemporary identity dynamics can detach cultural and religious identities from shared civic frameworks, contributing to fragmentation in democratic societies (Roy, 2019). This perspective argues that multiple identity-based claims make it difficult to maintain shared political and cultural frameworks. Related critiques also question whether structural explanations of inequality may undermine merit-based principles and individual responsibility (Lilla, 2017).

On the other hand, there are also critiques of the concept of intersectionality from left-critical approaches. These critiques argue that the concept of intersectionality may shift attention away from economic inequality and class relations. Nancy Fraser is a central reference in this debate. She does not reject intersectionality, but argues that progressive politics has increasingly privileged recognition over redistribution. Similarly, scholars in this tradition warn that the institutionalization of intersectionality as an analytical tool within governance frameworks may depoliticize its critical potential by transforming it into a technical language of diversity management (Bilge, 2013).

As response, defenders of intersectionality argue that intersectionality does not replace universal equality principles, but aims to improve their empirical accuracy; because single-axis approaches often fail to capture how discrimination is actually experienced at the intersection of multiple social positions (Fredman, 2016).

3.2. Intersectionality in European Policy Framework

At the EU level, intersectionality as an analytical framework has been gradually adapted to reflect specific patterns of inequality and exclusion. While the concept originates in US Black feminist theory, European debates have focused more on the interaction between migration status, religion (particularly Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism), citizenship, socio-economic background, gender, and ethnicity. This reflects the specific institutional and historical trajectory of European societies, where migration, integration, secularism, and national identity play a central role in equality debates.

Within EU equality governance, intersectionality has increasingly been used as a tool to improve policy design, monitoring, and coordination. It is generally not presented as a replacement for universal rights, but as a way to better capture complex and overlapping forms of disadvantage. The underlying assumption is that discrimination is often experienced through multiple and interacting social positions that cannot be fully understood through single-category approaches.

In the earlier phase of European integration, equality and non-discrimination were addressed only in a fragmented and sector-specific manner, with primary competence remaining at the level of Member States.

EU-level action was largely limited to specific areas such as gender equality and issues linked to labor market integration. The Amsterdam Treaty (1997) marked a significant turning point by introducing Article 13, which granted the European Community explicit competence to combat discrimination on multiple grounds, including racial and ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, and sexual orientation. Although the Treaty did not explicitly introduce the concept of intersectionality, it established a legal and institutional basis for recognizing that discrimination can occur across multiple grounds simultaneously, contributing to the later emergence of the concept of “multiple discrimination” in the 2000s. However, this approach initially remained additive rather than fully intersectional. A more explicit institutionalization of the concept took place in the 2010s, particularly through policy research and expert reports. A key milestone was Sandra Fredman’s report *Intersectional discrimination in EU gender equality and non-discrimination law* (2016), which explicitly integrated Crenshaw’s framework into EU equality policy debates and distinguished intersectional discrimination from additive forms of multiple discrimination.

Since the launch of the “Union of Equality” framework, intersectionality as an analytical tool has become more visible in EU anti-racism and equality policy. The EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020–2025 explicitly recognizes that racism may intersect with other forms of discrimination, including gender, religion, disability, age, and sexual orientation. More recent policy discussions on the EU anti-racism strategy (2026–2030) further strengthen this approach by emphasizing cross-sectoral monitoring, coordinated governance, and equality data systems capable of identifying overlapping inequalities.

Within this framework, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) plays a key operational role. FRA has incorporated intersectional perspectives in parts of its work on discrimination, hate crime, gender-based violence, Roma inclusion, antisemitism, anti-Muslim racism, migration, and LGBTIQ rights. Across these areas, some FRA studies show that discrimination often results from the interaction of multiple social positions rather than from isolated categories. The agency also highlights the importance of disaggregated equality data for identifying these patterns and supporting policy evaluation.

Beyond the EU, intersectionality as a tool is increasingly present in broader European and international human rights frameworks. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has incorporated intersectional perspectives into its monitoring reports, particularly in relation to the interaction between racism, gender, religion, migration status, and socio-economic vulnerability. Similarly, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) increasingly refer to intersectionality in their work on racial discrimination, policing, migration, and gender inequality. In these frameworks, intersectionality is used to capture overlapping and mutually reinforcing forms of inequality.

Overall, intersectionality as an analytical framework has become progressively embedded in European and international equality governance. Despite ongoing conceptual debates, it is now widely used in policy monitoring, equality data collection, and anti-discrimination frameworks. However, similarly to structural discrimination, intersectionality has also become increasingly exposed to political and ideological criticism, particularly in the context of broader backlash against diversity, inclusion, and identity-based policy frameworks. In some contexts, the concept is perceived less as an analytical or methodological tool and more as an ideological framework associated with progressive identity politics. As a result, intersectionality remains politically vulnerable and subject to growing contestation within public and policy debates.

Conclusion

Existing research consistently demonstrates that ethno-racial discrimination remains a persistent feature of European societies. Since the emergence of anti-racism as a policy field, important progress has been made, and the European Union today displays a stronger and more comprehensive commitment to combating racism than in previous decades. Structural racism and intersectionality as concept, have become increasingly embedded within both academic and policy debates, while there is also a growing trend toward the collection of ethno-racially disaggregated data. However, in parallel, the EU's capacity to steer policy developments has become more limited as Member States have increasingly reasserted national sovereignty in key policy areas.

In light of the strengthening of xenophobic and exclusionary movements and their potential to generate a backlash against the EU's progressive agenda, it is important to consider the broader functions that the EU performs. In the face of the rise of xenophobic and exclusionary political forces, the EU, although somewhat diminished in its capacity as a supranational governance actor, continues to play an important deliberative role. Norms, concepts, and policy priorities related to anti-racism are articulated, debated, and sustained across Member States. Even where implementation remains uneven and dependent on national political will, the EU continues to provide a shared institutional and normative space that helps maintain anti-racism as a legitimate field of public policy and reaffirms the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and fundamental rights.

Taken together, these developments suggest that anti-racism policy cannot be reduced to a narrow set of legal instruments or administrative interventions. It is embedded within broader processes of social transformation, political contestation, and multi-level governance. Addressing racism therefore requires not only legal protections, but also a broader vision capable of fostering social cohesion, democratic participation, and equal belonging within increasingly diverse European societies. Combating racism should not be understood only as a matter of protecting minority rights, but also as a central component of building sustainable forms of coexistence in increasingly diverse societies.

This report has engaged with three interrelated issues that currently shape the European anti-racism policy landscape. While analytically distinct, these three areas reveal strong conceptual and empirical interconnections. Together, they reflect broader questions about how racism is documented, governed, and ultimately addressed within contemporary European societies. The second report of WP8 will further scrutinize these themes based on the RAISE project's empirical findings.

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