



## **Breakout session: Examination of the past - Restitution and decolonisation of public spaces**

### **Background Paper**

#### **UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENT – THE HISTORICAL LEGACY OF STRUCTURAL RACISM**

Racism is deeply embedded in our societies' history, intertwined with its cultural roots and norms. It can be reflected in the way society functions, how power is distributed and how citizens interact with the state and public services. It can be unconscious and is often felt through a failure to reflect the interests of people affected by racism, even if not necessarily a direct intention to exclude. As the impact of structural racism can be as profound and harmful as individual racism, its existence needs to be acknowledged and it must be addressed through proactive policies.

Stereotypes can be centuries-old, with a tenacious hold on attitudes and a tendency to be self-perpetuating. Prejudices and stereotypes can be addressed firstly by acknowledging the historical roots of racism. Colonialism, slavery and the Holocaust are embedded in our history and have profound consequences for society today. History and the way history is taught are important tools to understand these legacies and to fight persistent stereotypes today.<sup>1</sup>

#### **LOOKING AT THE PAST - COLONIALISM, SLAVERY & THE HOLOCAUST**

To understand racism today we have to look back at Europe's past. The [EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025](#) acknowledges this, directly referencing colonialism, slavery and the Holocaust and stating the importance of raising awareness of the history of racism and antisemitism.

The historical legacy of racism and antisemitism comes in different forms. What they all have in common is the creation of the "other" and the projection of undesirable characteristics onto the group of others which are then used as a justification for political oppression, economic exploitation, cultural and even total human annihilation.

<sup>1</sup> See also ECRI's 2021 annual report <https://rm.coe.int/annual-report-on-ecri-s-activities-for-2020/1680a1cd59>.

Since the beginning of the 16th century African people were declared subhuman as a justification for their sale in the lucrative transatlantic slave trade in which many western European countries were involved. At the end of the 19th century, during the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) European Powers divided the African continent among themselves, declaring these people cultureless in order to exploit the richness of their lands.

Slavery also happened in the Eastern part of Europe. In the beginning of the 19th Century, the code of law of what would be today's Romania stated: "Gypsies shall be born only slaves; anyone born of a slave mother shall also become a slave(...)". This legally transformed the Romani people of Wallachia into a property of the prince, monasteries and private individuals. In other European countries Roma have been persecuted, systematically oppressed and victims of genocide for hundreds of years. Many policies have been articulated on the basis of the colonial logic of integration and assistance.

Likewise, in the northern part of Europe the indigenous Sàmi people experienced colonialist practices that disregarded their culture, humanity and the ownership of their land. The Sàmi are indigenous to an area of Europe, which encompasses today's Norway, Sweden, Finland and parts of Russia. Colonialism started with the nation building of those countries. From the late 19th century until the 1930s, ethnologists with the help of the local police, forcibly "collected" data to justify theories of racial hierarchy and "race biology". Individuals were exhibited in human zoos, graves plundered for "scientific research" and eugenicists carried out forced sterilizations on Sàmi women. In the 1960s and 70s the Sàmi civil rights movement gained momentum in the fight against racism and the recognition of Sàmi culture. But it took almost thirty more years for Sweden, Norway and Finland to establish Sàmi Parliaments. In 2021, the Finnish government appointed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission concerning the Sàmi people. Sweden had started this process in 2020.

In the 20th century, anti-Semitic propaganda was used to justify the expropriation and killing of six million Jews during the Nazi Era. Influenced by the eugenicist movement, which started in the 19th century and categorised humans into those worthy of life and "reproduction" and those who are not; the Nazis tried to annihilate the European Jewish and Roma population to form societies in line with their ideas of racial purity. From 1937 on, through the process of "aryanisation", the Nazi had developed a scheme to systematically expropriate Jews from everything they owned. This included art, which they looted from European countries in an organised manner, now known as Nazi plunder. Approximately 20 % of art in Europe was looted by the Nazis. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that the issue became known to the general public. At the 1998 Washington conference on Nazi-confiscated Art, the Washington Declaration formulated principles on the restitution of Nazi-confiscated art.

The objective of this discussion is to support projects which aim to commemorate defining events in modern European history, including the causes and consequences of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. The projects also aim to raise awareness among European citizens of their common history, culture, cultural heritage and values, thereby enhancing their understanding of the Union, its origins, purpose, diversity and achievements and of the importance of mutual understanding and tolerance.

## **COLONIAL LEGACIES AND FACING THEM TODAY**

While for many, colonialism is considered a chapter in history, its effects continue to be felt today and there are debates about how to deal with this colonial legacy.

## **Restitution**

The demand to return African art brought to the European continent during colonial times, often looted, reached its first high point in the late 1970s when calls by formerly colonised African countries were amplified by UNESCO and entered the mainstream discourse in European media. Yet, experts estimate that almost 90 percent of Africa's material cultural legacy is still to be found outside of Africa, in museums and collections on the European continent. African governments and active civil society groups have for decades been calling for important objects to be returned, only to be met with resistance and various legal and political arguments as to why restitution is not an option. The debate was reignited when Senegalese academic and writer Felwine Sarr, together with French art historian Bénédicte Savoy, published a report in 2018 on the restitution of African cultural properties. Since then, some European countries and museum directors have taken steps towards restitution, and on a European level experts recommend joint intercontinental provenance research to facilitate restitution.

## **Decolonising public spaces**

In current debates on decolonisation and postcolonialism, the issue of urban spaces is a focal point for clashes. The culture of remembrance of past colonial injustices or the perceived lack thereof, lead to heated debates. Debates that ignite over monuments and street names spark the question of how to rightfully deal with the memory of colonialism other past injustices. While some might argue that streets named after major colonial actors and monuments portraying them in public spaces are just a mere sign of Europe's complex history, activists and experts argue that these vestiges continue to honour the actors today. They are seen as a symbol that the horrific acts of violence perpetrated by these colonialists are still a blind spot in European history. This debate gained momentum during the international protests for Black lives in 2020 and some cities have since started removing some contentious monuments and developing concepts on remembrance.

## **Reparatory justice**

For Europe to come to terms with its colonial past there must be collective recognition of the atrocities committed and the economic advantages that were gained from it. In 2014 a group of Caribbean countries brought forward an action plan to seek compensation. The ten-point plan was later adopted by Caricom, the regional organisation of the Caribbean. Among its claims, the plan demands a full and formal apology, and calls for the cancellation of debt, as well as a development plan for rehabilitation of indigenous people into society. In northern Europe, the Sámi, are also fighting for recognition in truth and reconciliation commissions.

## **Aim of the discussion**

This breakout session focuses on Europe's colonial past and explored this issue of responsibility that arises from it. Three demands - as old as colonialism itself - have had major momentum in the discursive mainstream of the past few years: the quests for reparation, restitution of cultural properties and the decolonisation of public spaces.

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at raising awareness among European citizens of their common history, culture, cultural heritage and values, thereby enhancing their understanding of the Union, its origins, purpose, diversity and achievements and of the importance of mutual understanding and tolerance.

**Guiding questions:**

- Why is it important that the Member States acknowledge the historical roots of racism?
- What are the challenges, opportunities and examples of best practices in the teaching about colonialism, slavery, genocide and reparatory practices and programmes?
- How does a decolonised lens on Roma history in Europe help us understand the development of and fight against antigypsyism today?
- What can we learn from the discourse around Sàmi artefacts which were returned to the Sàmi people?
- What were the key developments in the Sàmi struggle for recognition?
- What can we learn from the still ongoing restitution of Nazi-looted art?
- What can we learn from the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-confiscated Art?
- What does restitution of cultural objects mean?
- How can a decolonised lens on art help reshape culture and alleviate the historical postcolonial power imbalance? Why is it important to have an African perspective on this?
- Why is it important to decolonise public spaces?
- What do we mean by reparations? What role do European countries play and can they play in the quest for reparatory justice?