

European Union annual report: signs of growing racism and xenophobia

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23 February 2000

A few weeks ago the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) published its first annual report (for 1998). Entitled "Looking Reality in the Face", part 2 of the report is intended to portray the current spread of racism and xenophobia in the countries of the European Union.

The centre, which has only been in existence since 1998, points out at the beginning that the report "is neither a study of the individual countries nor a thematically comprehensive investigation". The main sources used by the authors are reports or letters from national or European authorities and government agencies. The authors indicate by way of excuse that the national studies contain insufficient statistics, and point out that only publicised incidences of racism and xenophobia were taken into account.

Despite these defects, the report shows that all of Europe is now threatened by the rise of racism. In dealing with this subject, part 2 begins by establishing "that racism and xenophobia are present everywhere; not one (EU) member state is exempt from this".

A section entitled "Statistics of Racist Acts" provides some statistical figures.

In Germany, 53,000 members of extreme right-wing organisations were registered for 1998, which is equivalent to an 11 percent increase over the preceding year. Roughly half of the acts of violence committed in the new federal states in eastern Germany were influenced by right-wing extremism.

According to government statistics, there were 165 intimidation attempts in France (threats, graffiti, pamphlets, insults, minor crimes, etc.), of which 81 were anti-Semitic. For those who know the situation in France, these official statistics would undoubtedly seem wildly understated. In a national opinion poll, 67 percent of the French population stated they were in favour of stricter immigration controls, and 24 percent were in favour of completely closing the borders.

In Finland, 194 racially motivated crimes were registered in 1997, and, in the following year, 591 "acts against ethnic groups" were reported in Sweden (there were 344 in 1997, 281 in 1996). Two "Eurobarometer" surveys showed that 55 percent of Belgians consider themselves to be racist (1997) and only 54 percent of the inhabitants of Luxembourg stated that they were definitely not racist (1998).

In addition to this, it is apparent that immigrants are still subject to serious labour discrimination. According to the report, 28 percent of immigrants between the ages of 25 and 49 from non-EU

countries do not find employment in Danish companies, with the highest levels being encountered among Turks and Pakistanis (35 percent) and recent immigrants, such as people from Somalia (60 percent). Extreme exploitation is characteristic among immigrant workers in Greece, and in Portugal "ethnic minorities form a substantial segment of the poor population.... A large percentage of Roma and Africans are in jail or receive minimum state income [a general subsistence support for the poorest of the poor]."

Another important aspect is state racism. The report notes that asylum applicants in Austria are subjected to maltreatment by public authorities (police and prison officers), and that "especially in Vienna, numerous racist incidents emanated from police forces. According to NGOs, when combating drug-related crime the police have a marked tendency to regard skin colour as sufficient grounds for suspecting a person."

The report states that, among the racist incidents registered in Spain in 1998, there were 40 cases of power abuse and aggression by police officers. "In Spain, court sentences for racist crimes reveal that the perpetrators can equally be members of the extreme right wing, neo-nazis and skinheads or other youth, individuals or police officers."

The report also mentions that in Luxembourg two gendarmes "beat up" a Spanish national in the summer of 1993, and that a noticeable occurrence in the United Kingdom in 1998 was the indictment of police officers in connection with the investigation of a racially motivated crime committed against a black youth in 1993.

The report points to the situation in Denmark as an example of the role played by the media in promoting racist prejudices, concluding that the media not only misrepresent facts, but also spread false information. "In general, the authorities do not attempt to correct erroneous information disseminated by newspapers or television.... Also, the authorities issued various statements regarding the 'fight against international crime' without providing an exact definition of this term or explaining its extent and possible development. As a result, the impression may be gained by the population that major 'international' crimes are committed by foreigners, and that therefore foreigners must be regarded as being particularly dangerous."

However, a selective listing of these facts is as far as the report goes. It hardly attempts any systematic analysis, and refrains from making any generalisations.

Instead, the report goes on endlessly in its sections "Measures

Taken in the Struggle Against Racism and Xenophobia” and “Measures Taken by the European Union” about the allegedly exemplary efforts of the European states and governments. Referring to the German government, for instance, it states that “the Federal Government will continue, wherever possible and particularly where it can create appropriate basic conditions, to support the numerous activities of the federal states in combating right-wing extremism (for instance, by forming special police squads).”

It is no wonder that cases in which government authorities were themselves the perpetrators are mentioned as an aside, at best. The deaths of a Nigerian woman, a Tunisian man and a Sri Lankan during their deportation are only mentioned out of context. And there is no mention of Aamir O. Ageeb, Markus Omafuma, Kola Bankole or Joy Gardener—to name only the most widely publicised cases of individuals who died during deportation from European countries during the past few years. These people suffered treatment including being bound, gagged, injected with sedatives or receiving nothing to eat or drink for hours.

The report is incapable of getting to the actual root causes of the development it portrays, and descends into banality when it imparts such information as in Section 1.3, “The Victims”, where we discover that these victims “generally include populations or groups of aliens or immigrants”. And who would have thought that many of the perpetrators could not be positively identified because they wore masks?

This is followed by a long-winded discourse, which is positively ludicrous in its bureaucratic helplessness, on the astounding fact that the victims of racism are generally people of different skin colour or origin. The limited perspective of the report could scarcely be more obvious than in this passage. The Monitoring Centre cannot undertake any serious study of the causes of racism without questioning itself, the policies of the EU and, above all, the politics of the individual member states.

Today's forms of racism and xenophobia are closely interlinked with the economic situation within the European Union itself. In practically all of the member states, a Social Democratic government has come to power at some point, and is now orchestrating the most severe social attacks against its population. The transition from the politics of social balance to the politics of social confrontation can be observed throughout Europe. The economic basis of social consensus no longer exists, and the Social Democrats are dismantling democratic rights and other achievements of the working population at a furious pace.

Frequently enough, they pursue this aim by translating racist demands of extreme-right-wing parties into political practice—justifying this by claiming that it “takes the wind out of the right wingers' sails”, thus making them superfluous. Instances of this can be seen in the boast of Austria's former Social Democratic Minister of the Interior that he had “reduced net immigration to zero”, or in the position of the German Minister of the Interior who now questions the entire principle of the right to asylum. All this results in a further strengthening of the right wing.

Another important aspect of this development is the resurgence of militarism in Europe. As governments attempt to avail

themselves of the huge amounts of funds required for military armament, social welfare and social balance are seen as an unnecessary encumbrance. Also, in order to take an aggressive outward stance, national governments need to line up popular opinion behind them in their own countries. Stirring up racist prejudices is unavoidable in this process in order to create false images and silence critics.

Since the report in no way takes into account this development, it can only speculate superficially about the root causes. In one instance, it mentions an interconnection between racism and immigration, but then can find no discernible connection between the number of immigrants and the number of racist incidents. It then offers—almost with a tone of surprise—counter-evidence in the form of a survey carried out in France: “The opinion poll in France showed that fear of foreigners was most pronounced in those communities where there were the fewest immigrants. Xenophobia is low in urban quarters where numerous foreigners from various nations live together with the indigenous population.”

The perspectives offered at the end of the report are correspondingly limited: repressive laws implemented by the state and various events, campaigns, educational measures, competitions, exhibitions and projects on the subject of racism and xenophobia.

But education “from above” that is not accompanied by a noticeable improvement in social conditions and a completely different policy towards foreigners on the part of the states and governments will be of no avail, and is ultimately nothing more than hypocritical preaching to the “lower classes”.

The short-sightedness of this perspective can be clearly seen in the latest election results in the German federal state of Brandenburg, where about a year ago a government initiative called “tolerant Brandenburg” was launched concurrently with the formation of a special police flying squad against violent crime. At the elections, the extreme-right-wing DVU party was voted into the state parliament for the first time.

See Also:

British High Court ruling opens way for deportation of over 6,000 Kurdish asylum-seekers

[9 February 2000]

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[8 February 2000]



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