

## **Afrophobia is 'a reality confronting millions of Europeans'**

Written by Jallow Momodou and Malin Björk on 16 December 2014 in Opinion  
Opinion

The European parliament needs to engage in a mature and inclusive debate on Afrophobia, Jallow Momodou and Malin Björk argue.



There are an estimated 7 to 12 million people of African descent and black Europeans in Europe and they are particularly affected by racism and discrimination across the European Union. To date, however, they are one of the most invisible 'visible' minorities on the European political agenda.

On 16 December in the European parliament, a debate on this topic was held that triggered hatred and hostility. This shows why European progressive politicians and non-governmental organisations must come together against growing xenophobia and bigotry, including within the European parliament.

Millions of black Europeans lack equal access to education, employment, housing, as well as goods and services. A 2009 survey by the EU fundamental rights agency shows that 41 per cent of sub-Saharan African respondents had been discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity at least once in the previous 12 months.

Black people in the United Kingdom are on average six times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than white people. A recent report on Afrophobia in Sweden reveals that Afro-Swedes are the Swedish minority most exposed to hate crimes.

Yet despite this harsh reality, the organisation of a debate on 'Afrophobic stereotypes versus tradition: the case of Zwarte Piet in the Netherlands' in the parliament has triggered a wave of negative and aggressive reactions. This has come from Dutch politicians and MEPs in the media. As a consequence, organisers received numerous hate messages via email and social media.

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Earlier this year, Cécile Kyenge - one of the very few black MEPs - has also been the target of racist speech and even physical assault. A Polish far-right MEP was even fined in 2014 for using the n-word in parliamentary work.

This backlash shows the urgency and importance of having a discussion on Afrophobia, its manifestations and its impact on black people in the EU. This also provides evidence that a reform of parliament's regulations is needed to react to hate speech in the European parliament.

The 'Zwarte Piet' (Black Pete) figure, a traditional character in Saint Nicholas celebrations in the Netherlands and Belgium, perpetuates colonial stereotyped images of black people. 'Blackfacing' and stereotyped representations of black people are the result of a long European history of negation of Africans and black people's humanity, rooted in the legacy of slavery and colonialism. They reinforce deeply ingrained negative stereotypes of black people and maintain power structures within European societies, leading to high levels of discrimination.

Such representations are not isolated incidents limited to 'Black Pete' in the Netherlands and occur across Europe. This is not about pinpointing one particular country, but taking the case of 'Black Pete' to have a deeper discussion on the existence of Afrophobia in Europe and how the role of parliament could contribute to challenging this form of racism.

Indeed, the European parliament, the only democratically elected institution of the EU has a responsibility to uphold principles of equality and non-discrimination, enshrined in EU law, by combating specific forms of racism such as Afrophobia. Having a balanced debate on a reality confronting millions of Europeans is part and parcel of this responsibility and should not result in an avalanche of hate speech.

## **About the author**

Jallow Momodou is vice-chair of the European network against racism and Malin Björk is a member of parliament's civil liberties, justice and home affairs committee

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