

## Is the EU institutionally racist?

Written by Rajnish Singh on 8 March 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

MEPs believe the Commission is failing to recognise its problem with recruiting and promoting non-white staff.



Is the EU institutionally racist? | *Photo credit: Adobe Stock*

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On the current lack of diversity among EU staff, Syed Kamall says, “If you want to see diversity in the European institutions, look at the faces of the cleaners leaving the building early in the morning and contrast that with the white MEPs and officials entering.”

The UK deputy, co-Chair of Parliament’s ECR group, said, “A simple glance at any gathering of the EU’s elected officials shows a lack of racial diversity in EU institutions.”

Despite Günther Oettinger introducing the EU’s Diversity and Inclusion Strategy in 2017, Kamall, the only non-white group president, believed the Commission was ignoring the problem. “The sad thing is

that those in charge don't seem to believe there is anything wrong with the lack of diversity.”

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Cécile Kyenge, co-President of Parliament's anti-racism and diversity intergroup (ARDI), called on the Commission and the EU institutions “to reflect the diversity that exists in Europe.”

She added, “Greater representation from people of different communities and social groups would show that the EU is adhering to its own mottos, values and principles as well as living up to the commitments it expects of member states to combatting racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance.”

The Italian S&D group deputy believed that the Commission was making excuses for not tackling the lack of racial diversity, saying, “I have heard some within the institutions and other commentators argue that the EU is reflective, given the overall percentage/numbers of minority communities in comparison the number of roles in the EU.

“I strongly disagree with them, and I would say to them how is it that countries such as Germany, France, UK, Netherlands and Sweden, which have high Afro-European populations, do not have more Afro-European people working in the EU institutions?”

Kyenge, one of the few black MEPs, believes there is an unwillingness to reach out to minority communities. “I believe this is done on purpose, because there are ways to address it. The EU institutions can still change the levels of representation by doing more recruitment fairs at universities or in communities with high minority populations.

“Another option is to have scholarship or mentorship programmes for the best young individuals at universities with high demographics of minority communities. These are two examples but they show that things can be done if they seriously want to change things.”

Pointing the blame at the Commission, Kyenge said, “You could argue that the unwillingness is a form of institutional racism.”

Fellow co-President of ARDI, Soraya Post, believed Oettinger's strategy is also failing people from a Roma background. “My political party, the Swedish Feminist Initiative, and I believe that the actions of the EU in this area have been insufficient and unacceptable.”

The Swedish S&D group deputy wanted to see “the strategy amended urgently”, and called on the European Commission to “introduce an action plan that sets out to tackle under-representation (particularly at senior levels), discrimination within the workplace, as well as guidelines on reasonable accommodation of cultural and religious needs for Commission staff.”

Belgian ALDE group MEP Gérard Deprez said, “The various institutions can and should do more to reflect the diversity in the EU.”

Pointing out the positive aspects of a more diverse work, he said, “Various studies show more efficiencies are gained and there is increased innovation/ productivity in workplaces that are diverse.”

Businesswoman and EESC member Madi Sharma pointed out that the lack of diversity also affects policymaking. “Prejudice, assumptions and bad decisions are made when people start deciding on the lives of others without knowing their reality.”

Although she did not go as far as Kyenge, she said, “It is harsh to state that the EU is ‘institutionally racist’, but just look around our Brussels bubble, you can see the fact speaks for itself. When you listen carefully to the debates, the lack of inclusion becomes even more evident.”

Sarah Chander, advocacy officer for the European Network against Racism (ENAR), believed the Commission’s failure to make racial diversity a priority demonstrates “the shortcomings of the ambivalence in the European institutions to racial and religious minorities.”

She said that if the Commission and other EU institutions were serious about tackling the lack of diversity, they should collect data to analyse progress on racial diversity. They must also listen to the concerns of racial, ethnic and religious staff about the working environment of the European Union institutions.

Interns working in the EU institutions have set up an informal group, the Europeans of Colour+ (EoC+). Susan Bremen, a member of the EoC+ group, said, “Experiences of everyday racism and discrimination within EU institutions are a subject that is often omitted inside and outside the institutions.

“This is reflected in the fact that, for example, staff belonging to racial, ethnic and religious minorities were not considered as a specific target group in the European Commission’s new diversity and inclusion strategy.

“Amidst this institutional vacuum and the call for more action by employees from within, the EoC+ was established as a trainee-led group aiming to address these issues through a bottom-up initiative.”

Rakhal Zaman, also a member from EOC+, believed the lack of diversity was due to the European Commission’s recruitment policy being meritocratic. “Evaluators are unable to discern your name, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity and religion.”

However, Zaman believed that “the selection process incentivises international experience by assigning higher points to those who had the privilege to pursue such opportunities.”

Zaman pointed out that “a disproportionate number of EU applicants from a migrant background simply do not have the privilege to take part in unpaid internships while relying on financial support from their parents.”

## **About the author**

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