A ‘sad day’ for racial diversity in the EU

Written by Rajnish Singh on 10 February 2020 in Opinion

With the UK’s departure from the EU, MEPs and the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) say the Brussels institutions have become ‘whiter’ and less representative of Europe’s diverse population. Rajnish Singh reports.

When the UK’s 73 deputies left Parliament last week, the number of MEPs from ethnic and racial minorities dropped too. Karen Taylor, chair of the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), told The Parliament Magazine that although Brexit day was a sad day for racial diversity in the EU, its institutions now have the opportunity to “step up their game and finally take the measures needed to ensure a fairer representation of racial and ethnic minorities in their structures.”

According to research carried out by the ENAR, ethnic and racial minorities were already underrepresented in all EU institutions, but they acknowledged that the 2019 European elections had
brought about an improvement in their representation.

Their research also showed that Brexit rolled back most of the gains that had been made in the European elections, with the UK having elected the most MEPs from ethnic and racial minorities. In fact, the number of representatives from racial and ethnic minorities decreased from five to four percent.

The ENAR believes this affects other EU institutions too, although data on racial diversity within their workforces is not collected.

This makes it difficult to know the extent of the problem, says the campaign group. However, from anecdotal evidence, many of the staff members from a racial or ethnic minority background are also from the UK.

“After Brexit, not only will there be seven less MEPs of colour, but there is also a risk that the EU’s commitment to equality and diversity principles such as data collection, positive action, and even the acknowledgement of racism as a major issue, will decline,” said Taylor.

The ENAR points out that although at least 50 million people of colour are estimated to be living in Europe, none of the institutions have people of colour in senior management positions, nor are there any specific measures to improve their representation.

Co-president of parliament’s Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup (ARDI), MEP Evin Incir, like many other deputies, was upset over Brexit saying that “the UK’s decision to leave our common union is a historical mistake”.

The Swedish representative highlighted the important role UK deputies had played in combatting racism, saying, “ARDI’s British co-presidents took concrete steps to transform the Parliament from within, including dealing with the lack of diversity.”

“With Brexit and the departure of British MEPs and their assistants, it will be an even more unicoloured, whiter, parliament than it already is, and it is certainly not the Von der Leyen Commission, which is also unrepresentative of diversity, that will help us. It's saddening” Younous Omarjee (SE, GUE/NGL)

“But we will keep cooperating and we will continue transforming the institutions too. It is simple: We want to see our institutions reflecting diversity in Europe.”

Co-President of ARDI, GUE/NGL deputy Younous Omarjee, agreed with Incir, saying, “With Brexit and
the departure of British MEPs and their assistants, it will be an even more unicoloured, whiter, parliament than it already is, and it is certainly not the Von der Leyen Commission, which is also unrepresentative of diversity, that will help us. It’s saddening.”

One of the UK’s recently departed MEPs, Greens deputy Magid Magid, was even more scathing in his criticism of the EU, saying, “Although there are some incredible people and organisations fighting to give minorities a stronger voice in the institutions, this is as far as it goes.”

“The idea of a balanced representative EU leadership is a joke. The mix of nationalities we have here in truth amounts only to pseudo-diversity of white names and faces.”

Magid believes true diversity in the EU is restricted to positions that are behind the scenes such as cleaners, catering staff and technical support who were the truly multicultural, multi-faith heart of these institutions.

“When around 15 per cent of the population of the EU are people of colour, they deserve more than a handful of MEPs representing them. The EU must step up as-a-whole to remedy this,” said Magid.

He wants the EU to introduce measures such as raising the number of non-white people working in the institutions to 10 percent, or creating internships specifically aimed at people of colour - similar to measurers introduced by the UK government. “Only with radical action can these institutions achieve some semblance of representation of the wealth and beauty of these 27 nations,” he added.

Belgian deputy Hilde Vautmans agreed with Magid, saying, "It's problematic that ethnic and racial minorities are underrepresented in the EU's institutions. It's sad to see that, after Brexit, there will be seven less MEPS of colour.” However, she said she is committed to transforming the EU's institutions to better reflect the diversity of our continent.

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Former S&D Co-President of ARDI, Julie Ward, said wants to see the EU “step up its game in-regards to promoting diversity within the institutions.”

Like Magid, she pointed out that the UK had a comparatively good record in supporting political candidates from ethnic minorities, resulting in the successful election of a significant number of UK deputies from diverse backgrounds, including those from a Muslim background.

Despite Brexit and the reduction of ethnic minority deputies, German Greens MEP, Romeo Franz, said that ARDI “will continue to strive for peace, tolerance and equality for all, including UK citizens.”

Franz also said he believes that diversity must also be promoted more at the level of the EU institutions too. That is why we agreed to strengthen our commitment to transform institutions.

Helping EU institutions to be more accessible, for people belonging to marginalised groups is “high on our priority list as well as combating racism and fighting for diversity in the Member States and beyond,” he added.

Meanwhile, EPP deputy Peter Pollak was more phlegmatic and believed the withdrawal of the UK was a warning to the Union. “Brexit has become a reality. But let’s be positive and let’s learn from it. We
must intensify our efforts in engaging with European citizens and communicating better the values we stand for.”

However, for Pollak, it was also important that “UK citizens should not be excluded from this process.”

About the author

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