

Report on the Challenges for Race Equality in Europe event

Despite severe weather across the UK, some 33 people attended the Challenges for Race Equality in Europe event on 5 December 2013 out of the expected 50 participants.

The event kicked off with two insightful presentations. One from Nicolette Charalambidou (KISA - Action for equality, support and anti-racism, Cyprus; and vice-chair of ENAR) who covered the context of racism and discrimination in the EU, EU anti-discrimination legislation and policies, and the challenges for the EU's institutional and legislative framework on discrimination. The second address was by Joseph Harker (The Guardian newspaper) with his personal view on the key race equality issues in the UK.

Then participants divided into three groups and through facilitated discussion they determined the challenges facing race equality, what we could learn from Europe that is relevant to the UK situation, and how we might together counter divisive politics and re-frame the debate on race and immigration.

On the challenges facing race equality, participants noted:

- Voter apathy and anti-Europe sentiment
- Refugee security was getting worse
- Islamophobia/exclusion/racism and discrimination/stigmatisation was rising, especially against EU migrants
- Government austerity measures were legitimising xenophobia
- Public debate and media reporting was negative on immigration issues
- Race equality was no longer on the agenda and there was a lack of political leadership on race issues
- Far-right across Europe appeared to be unified

On opportunities, participants identified:

- European Parliament elections might be exploited to strengthen the work of anti-racism organisations with a possibility for communication, capacity building and groups working together
- Possibility to mobilise voters in key political constituencies, especially young voters
- Variety of media sources could be used to promote a positive new narrative on race equality, reframing the debate
- Effective action often takes place at the local level

On what we could learn from Europe, participants noted that monitoring the situation across Europe was important within the ongoing negative debate on assimilation, national security concerns and economic recession. It was also important to recognise that European countries do have different contexts and that there was a difference between populism and extreme right-wing ideology. Members thought that engaging the European Commission was difficult, with unclear competences between Commission DGs and MEPs on race equality issues. On the Council of Europe, participants thought that the consultation on the longer-term future of the European Convention on Human Rights might result in reform of the composition and workings of the European Court of Human Rights but also a weakening of its power. Refugee law was seen to be less well protected than other human rights legislation.

Members of UKREN discussed the following ideas on how divisive politics might be countered and the debate on race and immigration re-framed:

- Intelligence on the situation at the local level could be gathered through a focus group involving local anti-racism organisations
- Information could be collated so that it could be shared among members under the main race and immigration issues, with key messages
- Hustings might be organised in key political constituencies
- Bridges might be built on local race equality issues among community groups, activists, BME employers, individuals, and local media, MP, MEP, trade union branches, universities/colleges through UKREN, ENAR and roundtable events
- Stories might be told about the value that minorities bring to society in the UK, and on social justice issues, re-framing the debate to tell a different story entirely, with 'ordinary people' co-opted particularly through social media channels
- Migrant and BME communities were underestimated on their power to influence election outcomes. More could be done with BME celebrities to re-frame the debate.
- Activities relevant to towns and the regions might be held, such as working with Citizen Advice Bureaus (and the CAB Black Workers Group), and establishing Global Cafes to give advice and network communities.

Ideas on the role that UKREN might play centered around coordination and communication, and included:

- Collating and disseminating information for members on actions at the local and national levels
- Facilitating a virtual regional group, with a few nominated regional representative organisations identified for local groups to contact
- Organising regional roundtable events and coordinating strategic communications from the intelligence gathered by local groups
- Drafting a EU election 'manifesto' for local groups to amend to reflect local issues, for example addressing the question of what Europe has got to do with me
- Drafting a list of 20 Frequently Asked Questions for local groups to use and share
- Supporting participation from the regions to attend the 22 March anti-racism rally.