

Acts of the Workshop “The EU as a Union of Equality?”

Tuesday 19 March 2024, 14.30 - 16.00
European Parliament, Brussels



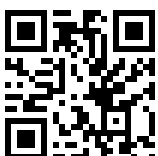
WORKSHOP
POLICY DEPARTMENT FOR CITIZENS' RIGHTS AND
CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
Tuesday 19.03.2024 - **14:30-16:00**
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The EU as a Union of Equality?

Chaired by:
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Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home
Affairs

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Abstract

The European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs organised upon request of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs a Workshop on “The EU as a Union of Equality?”, which took place on Tuesday 19 March 2024 from 14.30 to 16.00 pm.

The present document collects the transcriptions of the audio-video recordings of the event, which are publicly available on the EP website.

This document was drafted for the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs.

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INTRODUCTION

The European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs organised upon request of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs a Workshop on **"The EU as a Union of Equality?"**, which took place on Tuesday 19 March 2024 from 14.30 to 16.00 pm.

The Workshop's aim was to discuss the state of play of the Union of Equality Strategies, action plans and strategic frameworks launched by the European Commission, which are:

- the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025
- the EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025
- the EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion, and participation 2020-2030
- the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025
- the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030

The Commission also:

- adopted a EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life (2021 - 2030),
- launched initiatives to combat anti-Muslim hatred,
- adopted on 9 December 2021 a Communication with a draft Council decision aimed at extending the list of EU crimes to hate speech and hate crime and in December 2023 a Joint Communication on "No place for hate: a Europe united against hatred",
- monitors and ensures the application of the Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, as well as of the Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation,
- monitors and ensures the application of the 2008 Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA on racism and xenophobia, notably through a series of infringement proceedings,
- has proposed the 2008 Council Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation (beyond employment and to cover social protection, including social security and healthcare; education; access to goods and services, including housing),
- has proposed and is enforcing a EU Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online and the Digital Services Act, with the aim of fighting against hate crime and hate speech online,
- has proposed a Council Directive¹ and a Directive² on standards for equality bodies, which were in the meantime approved.

¹ Council Directive (EU) 2024/1499 of 7 May 2024 on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment between persons irrespective of their racial or ethnic origin, equal treatment in matters of employment and occupation between persons irrespective of their religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, equal treatment between women and men in matters of social security and in the access to and supply of goods and services, and amending Directives 2000/43/EC and 2004/113/EC.

² Directive (EU) 2024/1500 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment and equal opportunities between women and men in matters of employment and occupation, and amending Directives 2006/54/EC and 2010/41/EU.

The Workshop saw the participation of a number of speakers and experts representing EU institutions and bodies,³ such as: the European Commission (notably of a member of the Cabinet of Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli); the coordinators of the EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025, of the EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life (2021 - 2030), on combating anti-Muslim hatred; the EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity of the European External Action Service; a political advisor in European and International affairs of the State Secretary for Gender Equality, Equal Opportunities and Diversity Marie-Colline Leroy, representing the Belgian Presidency of the Council; the Head of the Equality, Roma and Social Rights Unit of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights; the Director of the European Network of Equality Bodies (Equinet); the Director of the Migration Policy Group and Specialist Coordinator in non-discrimination law of the European network of legal experts in gender equality and non-discrimination. During a subsequent questions and answers session, MEPs could intervene to raise issues and make questions to the speakers (MEPs Marc Angel of S&D, Sophie In 't Veld of Renew, Malin Björk of The LEFT, Kim van Sparrentak of the Greens/European Free Alliance intervened). The Workshop was opened by Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar, Chair of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, then chaired and concluded by Pietro Bartolo, Vice-Chair of the Committee.

In the days and months following the event:

- on 25 March 2024, 9 equality and anti-discrimination organisations (the [European Disability Forum](#), [ILGA-Europe](#), [AGE Platform Europe](#), the [European Network Against Racism](#), [ERGO Network](#), [OII Europe](#), [IGLYO](#), [EL*C](#), and [TGEU – Transgender Europe](#)) noted the rising inequality and backlash against human rights and minority groups and released a joint statement calling for a series of concrete actions on equality, anti-racism and fundamental rights during the next EU institutional mandate to prioritise the building of a Union of Equality.⁴
- on 17 May 2024, the Belgian Presidency organised a LGBTIQ+ Conference in Brussels entitled “Pride Alliances and Policy: Towards a Union for Equality”, with the participation of Member States representatives and NGOs, which led to the launch of pledge signed by 18 Member States committing them to pursue a European policy for LGBTIQ rights. They notably pledged to promote the human rights of LGBTIQ persons, to reaffirm equality and non-discrimination, they undertook to improve national legislation and called for the appointment of a new Commissioner for Equality, as well as for a new European LGBTIQ equality strategy post-2025.⁵

³ See the agenda of the Workshop at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/281583/Draft%20Agenda%20PolDepC-LIBE%20Workshop%20on%20Union%20of%20Equality%202024%2003%2019.pdf> and the dedicated workshop website <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/events/details/workshop-the-eu-as-a-union-of-equality-20240313WKS06021>, as well as the briefing prepared by the Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs “The EU as a « Union of Equality »?” [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2024/759624/IPOL_IDA\(2024\)759624_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2024/759624/IPOL_IDA(2024)759624_EN.pdf)

⁴ See <https://www.edf-feph.org/9-organisations-calls-for-next-mandate-to-prioritise-union-of-equality/>: European NGOs call for 1) the appointment of an EU Commissioner with a strong mandate for Equality and Fundamental Rights; 2) strengthening the European Commission’s services working on equality, non-discrimination and anti-racism, especially by establishing a new Directorate-General for Equality and Fundamental Rights; 3) revise and introduce strong strategies on all grounds under the Equality Framework beyond 2025 and ensure their mainstreaming in all policy areas; 4) ensure that the [Equality Task Force](#) has a strong mandate and cooperates internally and externally; 5) host an annual “Equality Forum”; 6) create an EU Council formation on Equality; 7) ensure the next EU budget properly funds equality, non-discrimination and anti-racism civil society organisations; 8) ensure discrimination is also addressed in the work of the EU in external action, international cooperation and humanitarian action.

⁵ Belgium, Malta, France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Austria, Cyprus, Spain, Greece, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Estonia. See the Declaration <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/media/kvibjar1/declaration-final.pdf> and the related press release <https://belgian->

The present document collects the transcriptions of the audio-video recordings of the event, which are publicly available on the EP website.⁶ They have been obtained through artificial intelligence tools, then checked based on the recordings, and corrected where it was deemed most appropriate.

presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/18-members-states-committed-to-pursue-a-european-policy-for-lgbtq-rights/.

⁶ https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/libe-committee-meeting_20240319-1430-COMMITTEE-LIBE.

1. AGENDA

Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs
Directorate for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs



WORKSHOP 'The EU as a Union of Equality?'

*Organised by the Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs
for the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs*

Tuesday 19 March 2024

From 14.30 to 16.00, Room JAN 2Q2
European Parliament, Brussels

DRAFT AGENDA

14.30 - 14.35 (5 minutes) Introductory remarks by **Juan Fernando LÓPEZ AGUILAR**, Chair of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

14.35 - 14.50 (15 minutes) Interventions by European Commission representatives:

Annelisa COTONE, Member of the Cabinet of Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli (7 mins)

Michaela MOUA, EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025 Coordinator (2 mins)

Katharina von SCHNURBEIN, EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life (2021 - 2030) Coordinator (2 mins)

Marion LALISSE, Coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred (2 mins)

14.50 - 14.57 (7 minutes) Intervention by **Stella Ronner-Grubačić**, EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, European External Action Service

14.57 - 15.04 (7 minutes) Intervention by **Katarzyna SZKUTA**, political advisor in European and International affairs of the State Secretary for Gender Equality, Equal Opportunities and Diversity Marie-Colline LEROY, Belgian Presidency of the Council

15.04 - 15.11 (7 minutes) Intervention by **Siobhán McInerney-Lankford**, Head of Equality, Roma and Social Rights Unit, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (by remote connection)

15.11 - 15.18 (7 minutes) Intervention by **Patrick CHARLIER**, Director, European Network of Equality Bodies (Equinet)

15.18 - 15.25 (7 minutes) Intervention by **Isabelle CHOPIN**, Director of the Migration Policy Group, Specialist Coordinator in non-discrimination law, European network of legal experts in gender equality and non-discrimination

15.25 - 15.55 (30 minutes) Questions and Answers

15.55 - 16.00 (5 minutes) Concluding remarks by **Pietro BARTOLO**, Vice-Chair of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

The Workshop will be [webstreamed](#)

2. TRANSCRIPTIONS

2.1. **Juan Fernando López Aguilar, Chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)**

Thank you for your presence and your attendance, we have been having a series of voting this morning, along with the EMPL committee, then LIBE on its own, then with ECON on anti-money laundering. But we announced that Members should be back by 2:30 PM, obviously the attendance is not high, we apologize for that, but we should get going.

And I thank you for your presence. Our special guests for this point on the Union of equality. It's a workshop, organized by the Policy Department on Citizens Rights and Constitutional Affairs, is reminding us what the European Union is all about: it is about cohesion, solidarity, correcting imbalances and social gaps, both socially and internationally and of course fighting discrimination. Equality was presented by President Von der Leyen at the beginning of this mandate 2019-2024 as a priority for the current European Commission.

Actually, there is one portfolio, which bears the name of equality, the portfolio entrusted to Commissioner Helena Dalli. In terms of policy actions, there have been some key strategies, action plans adopted by the Commission on matters of equality: EU gender equality strategy, anti-Racism action plan, EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation, LGBTQ equality strategy, and strategy for rights of people with disabilities.

So, you see five key priorities, and the Parliament, this European Parliament, the LIBE Committee, has supported them all, all the way. We have adopted a number of resolutions, this mandate of the European Parliament making our clear mind on the matter, calling for more funds, investing on education and prevention, public policies and universal services, fighting inequalities and of course, discrimination, and aiming to achieve real equality and opportunities for all European citizens we represent in this European Parliament. And, of course, progress is underway, but there have been obstacles and hurdles yet to be overcome, and precisely because we cherish the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European and the prohibition of discrimination of Article 21, we have been calling time and again for the unblocking of the equal Treatment Directive, which has been blocked by the Council for so many years. It is even painful to remind that that directive still a pending issue.

And in order to raise some thoughts as to the work which is to be done in the future ahead, considering that we're coming to the final track and the end of this mandate of the European Parliament, we have gathered here in this special workshop of us on fields of anti-discrimination and equality: representatives of Commissioner Dalli, EU coordinators for the anti-racism action plan and the EU strategy in combating anti-Semitism and the coordinator combating anti Muslim hatred. The EU ambassador for gender and diversity from the European External Action Service is also invited.

So, we thank you all for joining us for this workshop and we are to discuss with representatives of the Belgian Presidency too, representative of Fundamental Rights Agency and director of EQUINET, all this field against discrimination and for equality.

So, it will be I guess 7 minutes first to our first speaker, which is Annelisa Cotone. Yes, she is a Member of Cabinet of the Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli. Then we will be hearing from Michaela Moua, that is the coordinator for anti-racism action plan. Katharina von Schnurbein, on the strategy combating antisemitism, fostering Jewish life, another couple of minutes. Then, Marion Lalisse, another couple of minutes on combating anti Muslim hatred, welcome coordinator for the matter. And then

Stella Ronner-Grubačić, EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, External Action Service. You will be having some 7 minutes as I am listed here. So, it'll be a series of presentation. And then also some floor for the Presidency of the Council, that is the Belgian Presidency, represented by Katarzyna Szkuta.

So, we have some people to go through and connected it remotely, it will also be Siobhán McLerney-Lankford, Head of the Equality, Roma and Social rights unit, Agency of Fundamental Rights. And Monsieur Patrick Charlier, European network of equality bodies. And then Isabel Chopin, Director of Migration Policy group.

Wow, we have quite a list of people to go through before opening some floor for discussion. And of course, members which are absolutely pugnacious, absolutely committed to equality, are also present in the room. Surely, they will be shooting their questions after having heard of so many speakers in a row, so we welcome you all and I understand the 1st floor, as we said, will go to Cabinet of Helena Dalli and Annelisa Cotone, 7 minutes. First the floor goes to you.

2.2. Annelisa Cotone, Member of the Cabinet of Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli

Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of Commissioner Dalli, to provide you an overview of the achievements during this mandate, and I want to thank this Parliament, particularly this committee, and also my fellow panelists, because the achievements I will speak about would have not been possible without your work on our side.

We have been entrusted to strengthen Europe's commitment to inclusion and equality, so that our Union can draw strength from its diversity, use all its potential, and create a fairer society in which those who share the same aspirations have the same opportunities to fulfil them. These are not my words. I'm quoting president von der Leyen and her vision for a Union of equality.

We have translated this vision into action by building on three foundations. The first one is political leadership, because we have for the first time a portfolio and a Commissioner devoted to equality. We have set up the structures that are needed to anchor equality considerations in the working methods of the Commission, thanks to an internal task force. And we have also created the policy frameworks to overcome inequalities experienced by specific groups and all our strategies they have in common mainstreaming, intersectional approach, the combating of stereotypes, the need to mobilize all our available tools, and to engage with Member States and civil society.

I will speak first about gender equality. Here, we have worked to create the conditions, first of all, to live free from violence. With the first legal instrument at EU level to combat violence against women, victims will benefit from protection, support and access to justice measures, and this complements the accession of the EU to the Istanbul Convention. We are also working to tackle gender gaps in the labor market, for example, the gender pay gap, by introducing pay transparency measures. We have also worked to increase the participation of women in the labor market and for this we need care services for childcare, for long-term care, as well as the equal uptake of family leaves and flexible working arrangements to support the reconciliation between work and private life.

We have been empowering women to lead equally in society, for example by tackling the under representation of women in corporate decision making bodies in companies. And we have led by example by appointing the first gender equal College of Commissioners.

When it comes to equality for LGBTIQ people, we have adopted the first ever Commission strategy in this field and this strategy has given the framework also for Member States to pursue their work in this area with a growing number of Member States stepping up their commitment. We are working on the mid-term review of this strategy and I want to thank this committee for the input that they are giving through their resolution.

At the same time, we witnessed the surge in hate speech and hate crime, which means that the progress can be fragile and we need to remain vigilant. That is why recently we have reaffirmed our will to say that Europe is no place for hate and we are stepping up our efforts to fight hatred in all its manifestation.

The criminalization of hate speech across the Union remains fragmented, and that is why we have made a proposal to act in this field and we count on the Council to advance on our proposal. We thank as well here LIBE for the support that they have given just recently with a resolution on this topic.

On the rights of persons with disabilities, we are working to create the essential conditions for equal access to opportunities for them. This means, first of all, accessibility. It means also conditions for independent living, which means that people with disabilities must benefit from services in the community to support choice and control over their life.

We are improving also access to quality jobs and skills, and improving the enjoyment of free movement rights in the EU thanks to a disability card and the parking card which were just being agreed a couple of weeks ago.

On Roma inclusion, we have a framework to jointly work with the Member States to tackle the anti-gypsism that still persists in our societies, the segregation in education and housing and the poverty that these communities too often live in. We call on Member States to be more ambitious, to match the scale of the problem with their action and to use the funding opportunities that the EU has to complement their work, also with the participation of the local communities that are affected.

A word also about equality bodies and we have here our colleagues from Equinet. Equality bodies in the Member States, in all this work we have done, are our key partners to challenge discrimination and to assist the victims. So the new directives which soon will be finally adopted by the co-legislators, are really the tools to give the necessary powers, independence and resources to these bodies to fulfil their crucial role.

A last word, I would like to mention the Equal Treatment Directive, the proposal, which is so long blocked in the Council. All these achievements in the past five years have created a momentum, which we must seize in order to create stronger foundations for our work with a coherent legal framework that protects all the grounds from the Treaty in an equal manner.

Therefore, we welcome the determination of the Belgian Presidency of the Council to steer this proposal to a conclusion, hopefully very soon. So thank you again for all your support and I look forward to engaging in this workshop. Thank you.

2.3. Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Yes, thank you very much, Mrs. Cotone. The next speaker will be Michaela Moua. And thank you very much for the information we've heard. We in the Parliament are fully involved with this issue, I can assure you.

2.4. Michaela Moua, EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025 Coordinator

Thank you, chair, and thank you to the Members of Parliament present and thank you to the LIBE Committee for giving us the opportunity to take part in the workshop. I would like to complement what Annalisa mentioned and add indeed to this policy framework mentioned. I will start with talking about the EU anti-racism action plan, which is the first action plan against racism of the Commission and also the first action plan that specifically mentions and acknowledges structural racism.

It is an action plan that spans over the course of five years, so from 2020 to 2025, and the appointment of the anti-racism coordinator, namely myself, was one of the deliverables of the action plan itself. The action plan also recognizes and applies the intersectional policy approach, with the recognition that rarely people fall only under one protected group, and it is important to recognize these intersecting inequalities.

While looking at the 2023 Eurobarometer figures on discrimination, it is imperative to continue calling on Member States that have not yet done so to develop and adopt national action plans against racism. The EU Anti-Racism action plan indeed encourages Member States to adopt anti-racism action plans, national anti-racism action plans, and at this point currently we have 15 Member States that have standalone action plans against racism, and seven Member States that have integrated measures on combating racism as part of broader human rights action plans or strategies.

The EU Anti-Racism action plan furthermore emphasizes the need to strengthen the EU equality legal framework and, of course, the main legislations are the Racial Equality Directive, but also the framework decision. And this is the work that I'm carrying out with the subgroup on the national implementation of the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan, as Member States of course play an important role in the fight against racism. They've already mentioned that the action plan was an important tool in the planning of the national efforts to combat racism, as well as they've expressed their appreciation for the different policy tools that we have together with the Member States drafted to support the work on combating racism on the Member State level. Namely the common guiding principles for effective national action plans against racism, as well as the monitoring checklist and reporting tool and the collection of promising practices.

Concerning civil society actors and racialized communities, their participation in all steps of policy processes is essential to mainstreaming anti-racism.

Along with the Commission' Citizens Equality Rights and Values program funding program, excuse me, we have taken several steps to provide civil society with institutional support and support in capacity building. The consultation mechanisms we have put in place through the permanent anti-racism Civil Society Forum has ensured our commitment to engaging with civil society. They are also an important part in collecting racial equality data and experiences of racialized communities is central in the reporting of hate speech and complaints on discrimination and harassment. However, they also reported that there are difficulties in engaging with Member States due to the shrinking of civic space.

The Commission is currently working on a progress report on the EU anti-racism action plan's implementation and the Progress report undertook a broad consultation process with civil society, Member States, equality bodies, various Commission services, and other EU institutions. We hope that it will provide guidance to our stakeholders on how to counter racism, including encourage them to develop a dialogue, a close dialogue with civil society.

Dear MEPs, we count on your support to carry forward the momentum and advocate for a post-2025 EU anti-racism action plan. And on our side, the Commission is still determined and committed to help

and create a true union of equality, where all people, regardless of their racial or ethnic origin or any other ground, have equal opportunities. I thank you for your attention.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much, Michaela. And I think that the Action plan would be very interesting, so let's now give the floor to the next speaker. That's Mrs. Katharina von Schnurbein. And I'd ask you to speak for two minutes, as agreed. Thank you very much.

2.5. Katharina von Schnurbein, EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life (2021 - 2030) Coordinator

Since the heinous attacks by Hamas on Israeli civilians on the 7th of October, everything has changed for Jews in Europe. A Jewish student said in a recent interview: "Ever since, I felt like I was grasping for air. The last several months on campus have been a huge anti-Semitic nightmare". A Belgian lady who survived the Shoah in hiding in Belgium told me: "Faced with the current Jew hatred, I don't want to hide any more". And at the opening of the Dutch Holocaust Museum last week, we witnessed the dramatic conflation between Europe's responsibility to remember the Shoah and the consequence of the Hamas attacks. To say it with the words of President von der Leyen, "if Europe fails the Jews, Europe will have failed all of us. Never again is now".

Attacks on Jews and Jewish premises have increased in Europe, in European countries, between 320% and 2300% since the 7th of October. It is fully unacceptable when Jews, for security reasons, feel the need to wear the Star of David necklace under their shirt or put a baseball cap over their kippa.

When Jewish students are deprived of their right to education because they do not feel safe at university, when Jews feel they have to hide their identity in public. These incidents remind us of Europe's darkest chapter, and I think we have seen such a significant increase with regards to these actions happening that it is frightening not only for Jews but to society as a whole.

Yet the situation is different than in the 1930s. The EU and all its Member States side with the Jews and any group exposed to hatred for their identity. This is the *raison d'être* of the EU. Since the adoption of the EU strategy on combating Anti-Semitism and fostering Jewish life - fostering Jewish life, really being at the heart of this strategy - in 2021, it runs until 2030, 20 Member States have adopted strategies or actions against anti-Semitism. Many have special envoys appointed. And all Member States have expressed in three Council declarations their support for the anti-Semitism definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. We have also put structures in place, a working group with all Member States and Jewish communities that meets twice a year, and also I chair an international network of special envoys and coordinators in 40 countries. The EU in this sphere has put itself at the spearhead of the fight against anti-Semitism, and this is also recognised.

So on state level we have seen a lot of progress, but how about civil society? Hannah Arendt said with regards to 1933, "important was not what our enemies did, but what our friends did".

The silence has been deafening when it comes to civil society actors. Where are the marches on European streets against anti-Semitism? Where is the empathy with Jewish students on campus? And why do Jews have to organise their own solidarity events? Fighting anti-Semitism is not a responsibility for the Jews. It's the responsibility for all of us. Anti-Semitism is a threat to democracy and to everything

the EU stands for: freedom, equality, fundamental rights. It's a threat to free speech, to minority rights and many other liberties for which we have fought dearly.

In response to recent spikes of hatred in the EU and in view of the European elections, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy adopted on the 6th of December 2023 a joint communication on "No place for hate, a Europe united against hatred". The communication calls for the creation, through a series of events, of an open pan-European Space of dialogue, which brings together citizens from across the EU, in particular young people, to discuss about ways to reconcile a shared enjoyment of the values of equality and respect for human rights and dignity. A series of European citizens' panels on tackling hatred in society involving 150 randomly selected citizens is one of the answers to call and to take place now between April and May 2024.

On a personal level, I also look forward to participating tonight at the Iftar here at the European Parliament; I think these kind of signals are very important. Fighting against anti-Semitism, against any form of hatred, means fighting for democracy. And I believe that is important to understand also when it comes to addressing anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred online, because beyond the implementation of the DSA, the European Commission has also upscaled its action to address hate speech online, including through trusted flaggers and fact checkers. And this is an important step forward because we need to not only have the legal framework in place, but also the manpower to implement it on the ground.

I apologize already now for having to leave at 3:30 because I have to go to another meeting, but I will take any question in writing afterwards as well.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much for your contribution. I'd remind you that the Speaking time was 2 minutes, but it's a very interesting debate. Marion Lalisce is the next speaker.

2.6. Marion Lalisce, Coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred

Thank you Mr Chair and thanks to the LIBE Committee for this invitation. As you know, my nomination as the European Commission coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred last year gave a new impetus to our work based on the foundations laid by my predecessors over the past decade.

The EU Anti-Racism action plan and the joint communication of the 6th of December are decisive steps from the European Commission to tackle hatred and discriminations that Muslims and people perceived as such are facing both online and offline in the EU.

I have carried out consultations with EU Member States, civil society actors, academia and international organizations. I've established extensive cooperation with different EU services to mainstream the combat against anti-Muslim hatred in various fields, including security, employment, education, or media.

On 29th of November, in the aftermath of the 7th of October and the subsequent increase in anti-Muslim hatred in Europe, we issued a groundbreaking joint statement with 21 signatories, including eleven EU Member States.

Last week I organized together with the Council of Europe the first ever coordination meeting on the subject, with 38 countries and international organizations, including twenty now EU Member States.

I also stepped-up cooperation with the network of equality bodies Equinet, the EU Agency for Law Enforcement Training CEPOL and the Fundamental Rights Agency. We have witnessed that events outside the EU, such as the 7th of October and the unfolding war, can fuel existing anti-Muslim hatred, anti-Semitism and racism. Dehumanizing language, polarization and disinformation have reached alarming levels worldwide. We need dedicated actions to make sure that our Muslim fellow citizens can thrive in our societies, without being affected by scapegoating and stigmatization.

Dear members of the European Parliament, to build a true union of equality, inaction is not an option. Thank you very much.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much for your remarks. I give the floor next to Stella Ronner-Grubačić, who is the Ambassador for gender and diversity of the External Action Service.

2.7. Stella Ronner-Grubačić, EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, European External Action Service

Thank you for having me in this discussion today to indicate how the European External Action Service contributes to the implementation of the external angle of the different agendas that have been adopted in the EU relating to the Union of Equality and of which we have heard already so many relevant actions. To start with, clearly, all these different strategies and agendas, such as the gender equality, LGBTI, anti-racism, Roma and persons with disabilities’ agendas have of course been made widely available in the EEAS, including very much in our approximately 150 EU delegations around the world. And obviously, it is important that apart from headquarters, our delegations, who are really our eyes and ears in the field, where most of the work is done directly with civil society organizations, relevant authorities and other international actors, are aware about these strategies and act on them wherever needed and possible. And this, I would like to underline, of course includes also very much our delegations to multilateral organizations, the UN in New York and Geneva, as well as other places, but also very much the Council of Europe delegation, the EU delegation to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

In addition though the EEAS has another set of policy documents to specifically guide our external action, and an important example of this that I hope you are familiar with is the Gender Action Plan III. I will not go into detail about GAP III here, but I would like to just briefly mention that it very much takes an intersectional approach. So clearly, all other strategies that have been developed, or were already developed, need to be read in conjunction with GAP III. Maybe we can come back to that later on, but now, in view of the time, let me turn to another important policy document that we have developed at the EEAS to guide our actions in the external domain: it's the EEAS Agenda for Diversity and Inclusion.

This agenda was launched in February of last year and it is the first time that we have included in one comprehensive document both external and internal actions focused on diversity and inclusion. We were and are of the opinion that we need coherence and consistency between our external

engagement on the one hand and internal work on the other to make the EEAS a credible actor in combating discrimination and promoting diversity and inclusion and equality worldwide.

So, we have this agenda that outlines 6 main objectives and some very concrete strands of action with which we aim at all in the EAS, all staff, headquarters and delegations, and I should add that indeed in this document we have annexed, of course, an overview of all the existing frameworks for external action that I just mentioned.

So let me just briefly mention a few words on our external action in different areas, while underlying once again that much work is being done on a daily basis in our multilateral delegations. But a few very specific points: on anti-racism, our main priority is to emphasize the need to ensure universal ratification and the full implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

We also engage with all UN mechanisms related to anti-racism and continue to underline the need to implement the Durban Declaration and program of Action.

When it comes to disability and age, the EU very much likes to champion the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities globally. This includes supporting partner countries in implementing the CRPD and encouraging its ratification worldwide. We believe that the EU has best practices to share at the global level at the CRPD and through our bilateral dialogues with relevant countries. We work with partner countries to take concrete steps towards the social inclusion for people with disabilities, for instance promoting deinstitutionalization - a problem also in countries in Europe -, fostering independent living opportunities, and on accessibility.

We also actively participate in international discussions on the human rights of older persons, such as the UN Open-ended Working Group on Ageing. This allows the EU to contribute to identifying best practices and potential gaps in the international framework for protecting older person's rights.

On freedom of religion or belief, the EU, apart from supporting our colleague, of course, but we have also supported the UN mandate for the Special Rapporteur on FoRB⁷ and also our own recently newly appointed Special Representative for Human Rights consistently prioritizes the freedom of religion or belief in human rights dialogues.

The EU has recently tabled its annual resolution on FoRB in the Human Rights Council in Geneva, as well as General Assembly in New York, and the guidelines on freedom of religion or belief will continue to lead our work.

Our delegations, for instance, when we adopted the agenda for action, have also been encouraged by the leadership of the EEAS to engage with religious leaders and organizations, a task that though is easier in some countries than in others, as I am sure you understand.

And last but not least, on LGBTIQ Persons, with the launch of the agenda last year and on occasions like IDAHOBIT, also last year, we made it clear to our colleagues in all EU delegations that LGBTIQ persons, their rights, their situations, are a priority for delegations. We want our delegations to consider reporting on the situation of LGBTQ persons as really a part of their regular work, part of their regular reporting. So this would mean also that the delegations follow closely legislative developments in the countries where they are posted. Unfortunately, there has been a lot of reporting to be done recently. And then finally to mention that last week we also for the first time discussed in the Africa Working

⁷ FoRB stands for freedom of religion and belief.

Group of the Council the regional developments and trends affecting LGBTQ persons, specifically in Africa.

I think that that is all what I would like to share with you. Now there is more, but I will be there for questions. Thank you so much.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much, ambassador. I think it's a very timely explanation of what you are doing to help people who face discrimination. I would like to thank you very much for your remarks.

And now I would like to give the floor to Katarzyna Szkuta, political adviser for European and international affairs to the Secretary of State for Gender Equality, Equal Opportunities and Diversity, that Secretary of State being Marie-Colline Leroy.

2.8. Katarzyna Szkuta, political advisor in European and International affairs to the State Secretary for Gender Equality, Equal Opportunities and Diversity Marie-Colline Leroy, Belgian Presidency of the Council

Thank you, chair. So yes, I'm speaking on behalf of the State Secretary. I am really happy to be here with you and to also present the priorities of the Belgian Presidency at the mid-term for our Presidency, already, the time flies. I would like to also thank you, the Parliament and especially this Committee of having done so much in the in the terms of equality, of gender equality and the fight against discrimination, and being so forceful in the negotiations with the Council.

I think we have already a quite a good result to share with you, so the Belgian Presidency decided to put gender equality in the fight against discrimination, put front and center in our priorities. This is something that Annelisa Cotone referred to as well. This is because we have a political leadership that puts equality as a priority and we have also a first gender equal Belgian federal government, and the first state secretary for equality with a specific portfolio, similar to Commissioner Dalli's. But also we need a policy framework as Annelisa also mentioned. And we need institutional setup that really enables gender mainstreaming and equality mainstreaming, and that's why we have decided to encourage the creation of a stronger equality agenda at the heart of the future in social framework and actions. And we have done it through a first informal meeting of Equality Ministers that took place last month. We have done it, not the first time because it was done already by the Austrian Presidency, German or French, but we thought that it's important that we reiterate this meeting because the Equality Ministers do not have as much as opportunities to meet, and we are in the moment of preparing the Europe strategic agenda for the next five years and we wanted to put to the Minister the question on which subjects for gender equality you would like to see the strategic agenda, but we also wanted to have a discussion, as I said, on the future institutional framework. And this is why we are really also proud that Belgium is the first Presidency to organize a first EPSCO formal meeting, in the EPSCO configuration just for Equality Ministers, on the 7th of May. We really count on ministerial presence and on equality agenda that can put as a precedent having this meeting in this setting. What we have been also currently discussing, and this is something that we have gathered support for, is to

reflect on having "Equality" as well in the EPSCO Council and to reflect it in the in the name of the Council.

Of course, those are international settings, but we have already mentioned specific policy objectives that have been already concluded. So firstly, thanks to the efforts of the Swedish, Spanish and our Presidency, we managed to conclude negotiations on the Directive against Gender-based Violence. And this completes the framework with the ratification of Istanbul Convention that that will, we hope, fully protect women and girls, in all their diversity, against violence.

I'm really happy as well that the work on Directives on Equality Bodies is almost concluded and we will be soon voting on it in the Council and in the Parliament, and it is a real step towards a better protection of all EU citizens against all forms of discrimination, and it's also recognition of the excellent work that equality bodies are doing across the EU.

However, and this is what we have already said as well, but I would like to stress it, the Equality framework on the EU level is not full. We're still missing a part of the existing framework regarding the Council directive on discrimination outside the labor market. We are currently having technical discussions in the Council, and the Belgian Presidency hopes to also make a real step towards adoption.

As regards to the rights of the persons of the LGTBIQ community, we have a planned high-level meeting on the IDAHOBIT⁸ Day to give the Commission a political impetus for a new strategy. And the Belgian Presidency is working together with our friends from the Netherlands. So the IDAHOBIT Day will be really a pride week, because the Netherlands will host the IDAHOBIT Forum in The Hague, and we have planned to have a civil society pride train that will bring the civil society from The Hague to Brussels to celebrate the IDAHOBIT Day, and have a real discussion on what we have done and what lies ahead.

We are of course working together with all the three European coordinators on anti-Semitism, anti-racism and Islamophobia and we have planned several initiatives and events around those themes, and the next one will be on the 15th of April in Kazerne Dossin on the commemoration of Holocaust and the role of different State railways in the Holocaust.⁹

We are also discussing currently with the Member States the Council conclusions on the Beijing Platform on the Economic Empowerment, financial independence of women, and this is something that we really think is a pathway of substantive gender equality. And finally, we are also promoting gender mainstreaming with different initiatives linked to gender pay gap. For example, we have a high-level conference on the 15th and 16th of April on the social pillar where we will be discussing women's access to the labor market.

And I've just come from New York where the State Secretary hosted a European side event on social protection in the frame of the CSW¹⁰, and we hope that our priorities will really contribute to the pursuit of a feminist and more equal Europe. I thank you.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much for those comments.

⁸ International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, celebrated on 17 May.

⁹ See <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/events/tracks-of-time-preserving-holocaust-memory-via-railway-remembrance/>

¹⁰ Committee on the Status of Women.

Now online we have Siobhan McLerney-Lankford, Head of the Equality, Roma and Social Rights unit of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, and I will give her the floor for seven minutes. Go ahead.

2.9. Siobhán McLerney-Lankford, Head of Equality, Roma and Social Rights Unit, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

(by remote connection)

Good afternoon. Thank you very much. Delighted to have the opportunity to share some perspectives from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency. I would like to thank Mr Aguilar, Members of the European Parliament, colleagues at LIBE, for this invitation. I'd also like to acknowledge the Parliament steadfast commitment to addressing intolerance and hatred in key resolutions and initiatives over the years. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of the European Commission to prevent and combat racism and other forms of intolerance by initiating legislative proposals and adopting strategies, as well as supporting Member States through various working groups and subgroups.

Despite these efforts, however, FRA's surveys, including those recently conducted, continue to show that those most at risk of discrimination, such as Roma travelers, immigrants and their descendants, people of African descent, Jews, Muslims, LGBTIQ persons and others, continue to experience discrimination and bias motivated harassment and crime to an extent which does not show progress over time. Indeed, prevalence rates are similar to those recorded 15 years ago. FRA's findings show that racial discrimination and racial racist harassment and crime persist across the EU in all areas of life. Victims of crime continue to avoid reporting such incidents. Incidents that are not reported to authorities are also not recorded or investigated, resulting in impunity. In this regard, States fall short of their obligations to combat and investigate hate crime. They also fail in their obligations under the Victims' Rights Directives and the Framework Decision on Racism and Xenophobia.

Today I have reflections to share with you on three key recommendations. These relate first to strategies and action plans, second to measuring equality and third to the role of rights- based approaches in this space.

First on strategies and action plans: these need to be extended and aligned. As available data shows, now is not the time to scale back on our efforts. Combating discrimination at the EU and national levels requires a sustained and coordinated approach affected through a broad range of complementary measures. Strategies and action plans are an important part of that.

EU and national strategies and action plans should be renewed and extended beyond 2025, and their timelines and areas of coverage should be aligned. In addition, they should reflect the specific provisions to address the rights and situations of vulnerable groups and communities and permit an assessment of their effectiveness.

Second, there is a need to measure, monitor and assess. Data collection is one of FRA's primary tasks, together with improving survey methodology for hard-to-reach populations. However, a significant gap exists with respect to official equality data, that is data that can be disaggregated in such a way that it can help to describe the experiences and situations of affected groups based on a range of characteristics protected by law.

It is time that all EU Member States begin collecting evidence on their commitments, policies and measures, and the actual outcomes of their efforts to fight inequality, discrimination and racism. The collection and use of equality data must be done in full compliance with applicable national and EU data protection legislation.

Every equality strategy or action plan should be accompanied by a comprehensive and independent monitoring and accountability mechanism. The EU should adopt a monitoring framework that includes the measurable targets and indicators of progress, as is the case for the Roma framework on equality, participation and inclusion, which other speakers have mentioned. We have practical experience to draw from in this regard, together with the Commission, the EU Member States, FRA developed a portfolio of indicators to monitor progress on Roma inclusion.

FRA also prepared the outline of a monitoring framework on how to use the data and populate the proposed portfolio of equality indicators in order to monitor and assess the implementation of the Roma framework. A similar approach could be applied in other areas covered by the Union of Equality. Another key step would be to identify the common elements in all of the equality strategies and action plans.

But a monitoring framework should also be flexible enough to reflect specific features and considerations relevant to different equality groups. There should also be periodic implementation reports to the Commission to ensure effective accountability and application and enforcement. Policymakers can draw on the guidelines and tools developed by the EU subgroup on the national implementation of the EU Anti-Racism Action plan, which was also mentioned previously.

Third and finally, I would like to note the importance of a human rights-based approach for the design and evaluation of strategies. The EU and Member States should ensure that, when developing, implementing and monitoring action plans and strategies, all actions follow human rights-based approach grounded in the legal obligations of the EU and Member States.

And such an approach should provide explicitly for rights, ensure participation, inclusion and accountability, and structure cooperation and coordination between rights holders and duty bearers. It should also pay attention to vulnerable groups.

To guide policymakers in each phase of the strategies and action plans, the Commission and FRA developed eight common guiding principles. These principles are complementary and interlinked. They include the principle that policymakers should ensure that the EU's legal and policy frameworks and other commitments derived from international obligations are fully embedded and implemented in national instruments.

They also called for identifying and tackling potential manifestations of structural racism and inequality. Also, the mainstreaming of anti-racism and anti-intolerance actions at the policies at national, regional and local levels, and ensuring for the active participation and transparency in the design and implementation of National Action plans.

In closing, I would like to reiterate the commitment of our agency to supporting EU institutions and Member States in their efforts to fight all forms of discrimination and intolerance. Thank you very much.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much for your comments. The next speaker for seven minutes is Patrick Charlier. You have the floor for seven minutes.

2.10. Patrick Charlier, Director, European Network of Equality Bodies (Equinet)

Thank you, chair. Thank you, members of the LIBE Committee.

"The EU as an Union of equality?" is the title of this workshop, but this question mark, is it really necessary? Let's remember that according to the EU Treaties, equality is one of the founding values of the Union. It should really be proud, be a proud exclamation mark, although not yet understood as a *fait accompli*, but as a program for action.

Therefore, we welcome the much needed and perhaps overdue strong focus of the current Commission on equality issues, including policy and legislation, part of this commitment by the Commission President, another part is the appointment of the first ever Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli.

Equinet hopes that such a strong focus on equality is here to stay, given the horizontal importance of equality for the EU. An important measure and alleging this horizontally of equality has been the setting up of a task force on equality in the European Commission. We are convinced that this step is in the right direction and we hope that the next Commission will sustain and strengthen it, and take steps to make this mainstreaming process more visible and transparent, also for the outside world and partners.

Let's also acknowledge the adoption of a large set of equality strategies and action plans under this Commission, promising important steps towards gender equality and equality for LGBTIQ persons, Roma persons, persons with disabilities, racialized persons, and combating anti-Semitism, among others.

Having such targeted sectoral strategies is an important symbol of the EU's drive towards a Union of equality. However, two important notes are due. First, they remain important and often even disadvantaged peer groups for which currently exist no new strategy.

An obvious example being older persons. Let's hope that with the recently released demography toolkit this will change in the near future and that any other such gaps will be also filled. And secondly, while some strategies and action plan are designed until 2030, others expire next year, necessitating a renewed focus on what works and what could be done better. For instance, we as Equinet have set out in our work plan to 2040 to look at these equality strategies using the practical experience and expertise of equality bodies dealing with discrimination cases every day to identify what works and what needs improvement. Policy papers and strategy are important, no doubt. However, one of the true strengths of the EU lies in its ability to legislate for harmonized and ambitious standards across the continent.

We have seen quite a bit of that in the past five years, especially in the fields of gender equality, with the adoption of the EU directive on work life balance, women on company boards, pay transparency or violence against women. As the chair of Equinet, I must mention also the successful negotiation and imminent adoption of the two directives setting out standards for equality bodies ensuring stronger institution in the service of all victim of discrimination.

Despite some efforts, there has been less progress on some other fronts. For instance, in filling the identified gaps on Racial Equality Directive or including hate crime and hate speech in the list of EU crimes. We can't talk about the importance of equality without mentioning the infamous horizontal directive: a directive that would render the EU equality legislation more, although not fully, comprehensive in the interest of tens, if not hundreds, millions of people.

A directive that builds on the regulatory mechanism of the existing EU Equal Treatment directive and a directive that has been stranded and stuck in Council since 2008, due to the to the opposition of a small number of Member States. This this is deplorable and begs the question of far we can call the EU a true union of equality if we are unable to adopt this directive.

I have talked about adopting new legislation, but let me also mention the crucial importance of strong enforcement of our existing laws. You will be aware of the difficulties in adequate implementation of the Council Framework Decision on Racism and Xenophobia, but the difficulties plague equality legislation across the field.

It is enough to think about the persisting gender pay gap. The many cases of sexual harassment at the workplace and beyond, or the school segregation that Roma children are facing virtually everywhere. Therefore, enforcement is just as crucial as legislation itself, and let me call particular attention to the need for effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions in discrimination cases. These are expressions taken from the directive, but they are clearly not implemented.

I would like also to emphasize the extent to which the impact of the Middle East conflict is reflected not only in a significant, worrying and condemnable rise of anti-Semitism in many countries, but also in case of discrimination, hate speech and hate crime against Muslims.

Last but not least, the horizontal importance of equality is also illustrated by, for instance, two emerging issues in the field: AI and climate change. Neither of the two are traditionally seen as equality issues, but in recent years some painful cases in many studies, including from Equinet, have shown the discriminatory potential of biased AI system. No doubting of the potential of it to be used to tackle health discrimination also. We are increasingly more aware of the discriminatory effects of climate change, invariably disadvantaging the poor and those who are already marginalized due to, for instance, their racial, ethnic origin, disability or gender.

Equinet and our members, equality bodies, stand ready to face these old and new challenges and to assist the EU in becoming a true Union of Equality. Thank you.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much, Patrick Charlier, and to the European Network of Equality Bodies. Now we move on to the last presentation. This is Isabelle Chopin, who is director of the Migration Policy Group, and specialist coordinator in non-discrimination law from the European Network of legal experts in Gender equality and non-discrimination. You have the floor.

2.11. Isabelle Chopin, Director of the Migration Policy Group, Specialist Coordinator in non-discrimination law, European network of legal experts in gender equality and non-discrimination

Sorry, thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you very much to the LIBE Committee for organizing this workshop and for its support on the issue of equality, and I seize the opportunity to also congratulate the authors of the in-depth analysis that was distributed before this workshop.

The information I will share with you today is based on the work that the European network of legal experts in the field of gender equality and non-discrimination has done. As you might know, we publish

a lot of country reports, thematic report, law reviews and the aim of this network is to monitor with the Commission the transposition and implementation of gender and non-discrimination legislation, and we are also the authors of the comparative analysis that's that is mentioned in this briefing.

As Patrick just said, and I am afraid I'm going to repeat some of what you have already mentioned, we welcome all the efforts and actions taken by the Commission. A lot has been achieved, the situation has changed drastically for the past 24 years, and I'm very proud of having been part of this journey for the past 30 years - but I'm afraid I'm going to focus on the gaps, and on the problematic areas, without forgetting all the progresses that have been made.

So, unfortunately, looking at our conclusion from the comparative analysis last year, - as to whether political intentions and objectives of the Commission to build a Union of Equality have been implemented and achieved correctly in making the EU a real Union of Equality, - not much has changed. So, our conclusion would remain the same.

The vast majority of the Member States do provide further protection regarding the grounds or the fields that the both non-discrimination directives offer. But in some countries, there remains uncertainty, notably in countries where there is a patchwork of legislation, like Latvia, or different very scattered pieces of law, and generally speaking case-law is very severely lacking. There are still difficulties or uncertainties regarding definitions, regarding exceptions, some that might constitute a breach of the directives, and some that are more worrying trends, so, as we call them "key issues" in the implementation. We do obviously not have the time to go into detail and I would recommend you to have a look at this comparative analysis or at the country reports that are published on the Commission's website. But I can give you a few examples of problematic areas.

Exceptions for ethos-based employers; harassment, whether it is within the definition or within the punishment; instruction to discriminate, sometimes requiring direct intent in quite some countries; reasonable accommodation, that still remains an issue; segregation of Roma children in education has been mentioned already; legal standing of NGOs: it is in the directives and in some countries it's very difficult for organizations to still go to court or to have legal standing; justification of direct discrimination; the definition of disability that might not comply with the EU standards; the difficulties in implementing national strategies, lack of public policies and accompanying policies; the functioning of the equality bodies; and limited data available on discrimination complaints, and the lack of equality data in general.

So, in theory, the two directives are well transposed, but the practice remains sometimes difficult, and the vast majority of the Member States highlight as the main problematic areas: the lack of case-law; sometimes still again today, the lack of knowledge, understanding and awareness about anti-discrimination legislation; access to justice; and inadequate sanctions. And the lack of case-law can obviously be explained by the difficulty to access justice. What do we mean by accessing justice? Awareness, as I said, it means that in some countries there still is a need of training the judiciary, training the lawyers, training the police, training the enforcement mechanism at the national level. And the lack of assessment as well, and that's something that I will mention also later regarding the national strategy, there is a lack of assessment of what has been done.

Within access to justice: lack of legal aid and assistance to victims; the legal cost, when in some country like Sweden, you have "the loser payer" rule, I mean victims are of course not very much willing to go to court because it might be too expensive for them. The length in judicial proceedings; the fact that definitely and Patrick mentioned, the sanctions are not proportionate, not effective and not dissuasive - I mean, how can we say that sanction will be so when women who have been forcedly sterilized in the Czech Republic do receive 8000 to 10000€ of compensation, whereas it is racial discrimination? The

legal standing as mentioned before: it is still difficult in some countries for organization and equality bodies, and I am a big fan of Equinet, but we have to recognize that a lot has been put on the shoulders of the equality bodies and they do not always have the sufficient staff and financial resources to do everything they are asked to do. And again, the vast majority of the Member States are highlighting the rise of hate speech and hate crime, whether it's online, verbal or physical. And the difficulty to launch a complaint, especially when these hate speeches are provided by public figures or politicians.

Briefly, on the pending horizontal directive, I mean it's long-awaited, we all know that. According to the information we have, a lot of countries have already extended their level of protection, so in 16 Member States out of 27, the protection is guaranteed for the five grounds of discrimination, so racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, age, disability and sexual orientation, in all the field covered by the racial equality directive.

In two Member States, Poland and Estonia, no protection is granted for any of the above-mentioned grounds, so the foreground is dealt with by the horizontal directive, and in the other countries, the situation really varies and again I mean, for a question of time, I am not going to go into detail, in Ireland for example, it is not on legislation, but it is very much based on the case-law. In Italy, it's only age and sexual orientation, but not disability and religion and belief, etc.

And on the strategy, well as you know, and we welcome the initiatives from the Commission to adopt a certain number of strategies, we still see some issues there. I mean national anti-racist plans, our colleague and the coordinator for the EU anti-racist plan said around 20 countries have adopted measures. I mean, according to our figures, less have adopted a specific national anti-racist plan and the other Member States have put these measures into more general plans, such as human rights plan or action plan for the promotion of non-discrimination.

Regarding the disability strategy, 19 Member States have adopted such strategies. Anti-Semitism: only six have adopted specific anti-Semitism plan. Some other countries have chosen to include anti-semitism within other more general plan. LGBTQ strategy, nine countries have adopted specific plans, and Roma strategies, 12 countries.

But the main issue is regarding the implementation of these plans and again their assessment. The lack of resources sometimes prevents the national level to conduct all this. And there are very rarely proper assessments being conducted. Furthermore, quite a lot of these strategies came to an end in 2022 or 2023, and new ones have not been adopted because there are no proposals from the government or because they're still in discussion, and that's not acceptable. So again, thank you very much for your time, a lot has been achieved. I mean, next year we're going to celebrate the 25 years anniversary of the adoption of the two directives. Let's hope that we can also celebrate the 1st anniversary of the adoption of the horizontal directive. Thank you.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much, Isabelle Chopin. Now I would like to thank all of our speakers for their extremely interesting comments.

Now we have planned a question-and-answer session. We have about 20 minutes to have questions from Members and then answers from the speakers. So first of all, I'd like to give the floor to Marc Angel, of S&D.

2.12. Marc Angel (MEP, S&D)

Thank you, and thank you very much to all the speakers present, I can assure you that in the moment this Parliament, you have allies, you still have a majority, and I do hope that we do not wake up on the 10th of June this year and that there will be a different Parliament who wants to destroy what has been achieved. And I think it's good that we have a question mark on the title, because we are not there yet. So that is why we have to work together very strongly, because those who want to go against the Union of equality are the same who wants to divide us and they want to play one group against the other, and this is not good. We want a united Europe and united in diversity, and this is the Union we are thriving for.

Also, when it comes in this subject of Union of equality, I'm often with many of us who are here, we are defending this not only in LIBE, but also in the EMPL committee and in FEMM committee, in many committees, and we are often portrayed as ideologists. And this is not true because then I have to recall our friends that already in the Treaties and we have to recall the article of the Treaty, Article 8, which says in all its activity the Union shall aim to eliminate inequality, to promote equality between men and women. So this is not an ideological agenda, this is just human rights, and this is about fundamental rights, and we have to keep on recalling that, and not being treated as ideologies, because the others are the ideologists, and not us.

There are a few things I wanted to say. I was very active with many colleagues in the Conference on the Future of Europe and inequalities was a subject that the citizens were very much interested in, was one of the main subjects, social inequalities, but inequalities in general, and also, they asked for some Treaty change in these questions and that we should get more grounds of discrimination when it comes especially to sex characteristics to protect intersex people, and also gender expression and gender identity. This is something I think is also a challenge, that we have to fight for in the future.

I am also very happy that Stella Ronner is here because the external dimension is so important and I would have maybe a question: would we qualify the European foreign policy as a feminist foreign policy? I was yesterday in Mons where there was the summit of the cities of the region and there was the leader of African women, elected local women, she's the mayor of the capital of the Gambia, and she represents thousands of elected women in Africa, and she said that we have to support African countries more and women in African countries more, because they are really having a very tough time and so then I think a feminist foreign policy is also an instrument to help, to get more equality in other places in the world. And when I travel and I meet civil society, LGBTI activists or other activists in, they always say how difficult it is to get funds, European funds, and I think we really have to make sure that the European funds are also accessible for civil society in Member States, but also outside, in the countries we have relations with. I also believe that we have to fight very hard that in the next Commission there will be again gender equality in the College, but also a Commissioner especially dedicated to equality and diversity. This is of utmost importance, and that we finally get a permanent Council formation of equality and Diversity Ministers, I think there is a resolution of the Parliament, which got a huge majority which calls for that and I hope that this will be the case. I was, I was happy that we've passed also the directive for the Equality Bodies, and I want to thank the representatives of Equinet that was really important.

And everybody of you said that we cannot, we have to include when we do legislation. It's so important to do nothing without EU and and I think we've proven that this in this last five years and I hope we can continue that in the next in the next years.

I think one big challenge will be also artificial intelligence to make sure that there is no bias in this artificial intelligence and this is data feminism is something very important also where we should really

work more in that. And then I also hope that in the next Parliament, the Committee, the committees, will be - for example, now we have 41%, unfortunately, only 41% of female colleagues here in this Parliament - but then at least every committee should have this ratio of because I we have committees here which are dominated only by men, etcetera. And that's not good. We should have a better distribution in the committees. Thank you. Sorry for having been too long.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you, Marc. Would Miss Ronner-Grubačić like to respond to the question? Go ahead.

2.13. Stella Ronner-Grubačić, EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, European External Action Service

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, dear Marc, for your question. I listened carefully. Your question was: can it be qualified as feminist foreign policy? I would like to respond positively to that; of course, we do not have formally speaking a feminist foreign policy at this moment. I think. I am not bothered by the question, because I get it very often, and I stick to my view that we do not need to have a feminist foreign policy in order to be able to act and to do the things that can be qualified as feminist foreign policy. And I actually even more, I believe that, with due respect to the countries that do have a feminist foreign policy, I think that there is always a risk that when you have a feminist foreign policy, sort of, you know, label, that you can stick to your foreign policy, it may risk leading you to believe that you're done and actually, in my view, it may sometimes be the case that the work needs only to get started so, it's something that we need to work on, but without being able to use the label, I think is what I would like to say.

And by the way, I am very intrigued by your proposal or your suggestion that there be a permanent Council formation for ministers dealing with Gender Equality, I think that would be excellent, but I think for that I would refer to some of the Member States present here. That is maybe a difficult one to realize, but perhaps certainly worth the work on it.

And I also very much share your view of AI having a risk for gender equality. It was very much as you know the topic of last year CSW. We need to really keep an eye on that and continue working on that, I think.

That is all. Thanks.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you. Now I'll give the floor to Sophie In t 'Veld, from Renew. Go ahead, Sophie. Could you be brief?

2.14. Sophie In t'Veld (MEP, Renew)

I apologize to the others, but I will have to leave immediately after my intervention. I'll try and be brief. Of course, hatred, discrimination and inequality exist everywhere. The question is: how do authorities react? Are they part of the problem or, you know, do they tolerate it, or are they actively pursuing policies that enhance equality.

Now let's look at the EU institutions and their component parts, the European Council and the Council, representing the Member States. I think that is where the problem starts, because if I look at the different governments, there's just a random selection. Let's start with the Orban government who takes all the boxes when it comes to hatred, inequality and discrimination, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and what have you.

If I look at my country of origin, the Netherlands, I see that the Muslim-hating party of Mr. Wilders has become the biggest party and is now going to be in government. I would also like to remind of the one of the biggest post-war scandals of massive, massive, ethnic profiling by the tax authorities and rampant racism in police forces.

Or let's look at Italy's Prime Minister Meloni restricting LGBTI rights.

Not to mention several countries where marriage between a man and a woman has been, or marriage as a bond between man and woman, has been enshrined in the Constitution and not a long time ago, but very recently.

Bulgaria refuses to sign the Istanbul Convention.

Poland, even the new government has forgotten who helped them getting into office, namely the women's vote, and yet they have no plans to legalize abortion.

OK, Roma rights, we do not even need to start because I, frankly, I have been here for decades, I have seen hardly any progress. With all the money, all the programs, all the good intentions, it still remains dramatic.

Many political leaders who call themselves "anti-woke" - I never really fully understood what it means, but I think it's about human rights and essentially good things. But they say they're against. All of them, are collectively blocking the horizontal directive for 15 years now, and fairly recently they've collectively stripped the gender-based violence directive of most of its meaning.

And in conclusion, migration policies, which are also made by the Member States, driven by deeply engrained xenophobic and racist views. Now all of these nice people are together in the Council and in the European Council, so if you wonder why we're not making much progress, well, here is it.

So can we expect then any leadership from the from the European Commission? I would like to start on a positive note. I would say that Helena Dalli has shown leadership, she has put forward action plans, she has driven the agenda. However, if I can look at the head of the European Commission, Mrs. Von der Leyen, I see no track records. I see wonderful speeches, but under her leadership, the enforcement of European values has been weak and I am being diplomatic here and usually I think her response to the crisis in the Middle East was very one sided, and her reluctance to recognize the suffering in Gaza, I think, sent altogether the wrong message to a certain groups in society. The European Commission refuses flatly to enforce case law by the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights. Need I say, or need I refer to the Coman ruling or the baby Sarah ruling and many others. And they also don't even enforce their own laws like the, their anti-gay propaganda laws in like in in Lithuania and other places where, you know, the Commission just said, yeah, we're in dialogue with these countries and they have been for 15 years or so.

So, we have a Commissioner in charge of the promotion of the European way of life and I have to say, you know, five years into this Commission, it's more and more of a mystery to me what the European way of life is that the European Commission is promoting there.

OK, now the European Parliament, and I could be critical there too, but let's say that overall, the European Parliament has been the defender of equality, but there are big fears for the makeup of Parliament after the June election, fear of a tidal wave of the far right with their racist, sexist, homophobic and nativist and otherwise, you know agenda of hatred. I would just like to remind everybody present here and watching that the rise of the far right is not an inevitability, OK, the elections are on the 9th of June. We are now March. We have plenty of time to prove the pollsters wrong. OK? So, if all of us here were stand for an agenda of equality and fundamental rights. So, let's all make sure that everybody will go and vote.

And finally, I'd like to conclude by saying: some people are talking, you know, they make all sorts of racist, sexist and other unpleasant remarks, and they call that freedom of opinion. Well, let's be clear: hatred is not an opinion. Discrimination is not an opinion. Exclusion is not an opinion. Hate crimes are not an opinion. They're not European values and we will never tolerate that they are being trodden on. Thank you.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much, Sophie. Well, I can see that Sophie In t'Veld has made some very just remarks. I did not see too many questions for our guests. But I'll now give the floor to Malin Björk from the Left group.

2.15. Malin Björk (MEP, The LEFT)

Thank you very much and thank you to our guest speakers. When speaking after Sophie this time, I do not think I have so much to add in terms of the shortcomings and the lacks that we actually see. And it is true that in this Parliament we have asked for tougher implementation actions by the Commission to fulfil its role as Guardian of our democratic freedoms and rights, as well as anti-discrimination and equality.

And I just want to make the point of, I think it's extremely important to have all the different representatives, special representatives here today, but also the overview that integrates all these perspectives, because I think that we all know that we have to work in an intersectional way. But that also means that we don't make anyone invisible. So, I think, you know, equality is something that is challenging, but that just means that we have to work more coherently, and harder, I would say. So all different forms of discrimination or inequalities have to be addressed and we have to make sure that nobody is left behind.

I also think that it's very interesting that we have our special representative Stella Ronner here, that works with external dimension, because if we are working internal and external in the EU, and we must be, we can only be as good externally as we are internally. And that's why Sophie's comments here on our shortcomings are so important, because if we're going to be legitimate when we speak with women's rights and rights, gender based violence and refugee rights abroad and how different countries are, you know, in our work together with them are supposed to, we expect them to, to respect international law, then we have to live up to that here and I am worried about some of the

developments when it comes to respect for International Convention on Refugee Rights, for example internally.

And then I just want to say that I used to be, when I was younger, less of an institutional, you know, believe less in institutions, and today I think it's very good that we have institutions we have put in place, specific representatives for issues that we think is particularly important for, specific budget lines, we have spokespersons, etcetera, we have a specific Commissioner on Equality, and I think the big challenge is to translate it into legislation and into to action. And we have seen in some areas where we have been successful, we have watered it down, but we do have a directive against violence against women and gender-based violence. We have equality bodies, we have a new legislation, a revised directive against trafficking human beings that I worked on and we have all those pending pieces of legislations, hate crime, the horizontal directive has been mentioned and the freedom of movement for rainbow families, just to mention a few. So, you know, we have to deliver when it comes to the legislative part as well. That's what we do here in the Parliament. And I think we do it quite well if we get, if we get moving, the Council moving. So my question is basically a little bit to all the distinguished guests.

You know, if you look ahead because some of the worries are filling up, but of course we will not be dystopic about this. We will make change happen. We will build equality. So my question is a little bit how you see the coming three years in terms of priorities that you would outline. I think it's a big question, but you can be you know short as we always have to be in this House. But thank you very much for this.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you, Malin. Is there somebody wants to speak over there? Go ahead, go ahead.

2.16. Kim van Sparrentak (MEP, the Greens/European Free Alliance)

Yeah, I'm a Green MP. Thank you and thank you so much to the speakers for coming here today and address us and it's a good moment to reflect, I think on all the achievements and steps we took in the past mandate and also indeed to look ahead.

And I think, you know, when we look at the state of the world, we see a general surge in hate speech, hate crimes. We see the parties that win elections by sowing hate and division growing. And I think it is really positive thing that we have targeted groups, targeted strategies for all the different forms of racism and discrimination, but I was wondering in this current situation, to what extent and how is the Commission actually aggregating all the signals?

How is the Commission able to make sure that, you know, we have the most effective response not only targeting or protecting one specific group, but there's a whole backlash against equality in general? So I'm very curious to hear more specifically what the Commission is doing on that, and not only specifically on all the different subcategories.

And then one specific question to Madame Ronner. Thanks so much for being here. You already addressed some of the things that are going on, specifically on the African continent and notably, of course, we're very concerned of human rights defenders in in Ghana, for example, and in Uganda, currently they're in dire need of support. So, you already said that you have quite a LGBTI forward

policies within your Service, but how are you ensuring also that these for some of these human rights defenders have access to funding, support, protection, relocation visas, etc. I would be very interested to hear that, and also when it comes to, we see that it's of course of global movement of different groups that are really targeting politicians in these countries, so are you also or are have there, for example in that working group and discussions on considering targets specifically against religious leaders for example, that are instigating and supporting these kind of anti-LGBTI bills to see if we can actually stop it from that side. Thank you.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you, Mrs. van Sparrentak, from the Greens, is there anyone else who wants to take the floor?

No, in that case I'll give the floor back to our guests to respond to the questions asked.

2.17. Stella Ronner-Grubačić, EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, European External Action Service

Thank you. Yeah, I can take some of the questions at least. And of course the one by the distinguished delegate Malin Bjork is for all of us. But I'll give it a try too. But to start, maybe the other way around with the specific questions at the end regarding human rights defenders. Fully, of course, in agreement that helping human rights defenders, and especially in emergency situations, like the ones we've had not only Ghana recently, but Uganda already last year, helping these human rights defenders is absolutely crucial and we have - I'm sure you know - we have to provide protect defenders mechanism that really does what you had just outlined, namely not only support financially, but also indeed to help people get out if the situation becomes really one of urgency. And I guess I can say that - I regret to say that - in the last year, 30% of all beneficiaries of this mechanism were actually LGBTIQ defenders, which is the highest share ever, so it shows indeed that the need has increased, unfortunately. Over the years, by the way, the percentage has been around 7%.

On the discussion that took place in the Africa working group, this discussion took place on the basis of a report that we established and shared with Member States. While there was, I think overall, majority support for the report, it wasn't supported by everybody. So it means that on certain specific - as you call them - targets, I would say measures, we cannot really take them forward. But what we do and what we did agree is that having reports like the one on Africa is useful and we will certainly take it forward when it comes to also discussing in other geo-working groups similar reports so that because also of course as we all know, Africa is not the only continent that deserves our attention when it comes to LGBTIQ issues.

And then the question the three-year looking ahead I think we will have to have a longer discussion about that. But what I would really say is that we have no other option but continuing on the same track, we need to do what the French so beautifully call *frapper toujours*, and where you Italians say Rome was not built in one day, we have no other option, we just need to keep beating on the same drum, doing it with hopefully with more conviction, more passion, more support of others. And I would say, since I am also indeed very much working on UN issues, we need to do whatever we can to indeed enhance our engagements, work with partners that are not necessarily at first sight like-minded, but can be with a little bit of, as I said, enhanced engagement, can maybe be drawn into our court and help support the efforts that we consider so important and so urgent. I would leave it at that. Thank you.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much. Next speaker please.

2.18. Annelisa Cotone, Member of the Cabinet of Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli

I will answer to the question about how we see the future priorities and the question about how we unify all this work that we are doing on the different strands of equality strategies.

So on the future, of course, this will all depend, and we have heard it today, on the elections, on what the voters will say and how the new priorities will be shaped. But I can say already now that we will have first of all to implement all the legislation that we have passed during this term, because otherwise they remain only on paper, but we will have to see that Member States transpose them and really turn it into action.

We will also have to make sure that all these mega-trends like skill shortages, the demographic change, competitiveness, that all of these changes are an opportunity to reach out to the groups that are at risk of discrimination, to activate those who are far away from the labor market, women, low skilled people, persons with disabilities and so on. So, to use all these challenges as opportunities to activate people.

And then we will also have to work in the next term on the design of the new funding programs, so the budget and that's very important to put also the right mechanisms in there.

On the question about how we unify this work on the different strands, well, of course we need to pay attention to the specific needs of each of the groups. When we look at the labor market, the barriers for women or for persons with disabilities or for Roma communities, they are different, so we need to tackle the specificities and the root causes of all these problems. But the Union of equality concept is in itself a unifying concept, because what we do is that we enshrine in all our political priorities the very notion that we need to promote the equal opportunities for all these groups, while taking into account all the specificities. So I think that the combination of having this unifying concept of equality, plus the attention to specific needs, is what helps us advance our agenda. Thank you.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much. Could you please keep your remarks brief because we are far beyond the official finish?

2.19. Marion Lalise, Coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred

About the three upcoming years, I would like to be optimistic, but unless we take actions, we will continue to see a civil society stifled. Anti-racist activists targeted, but also the spread of conspiracy theories against Muslims and those conspiracy theories and attacks are also carried out by politicians, including members of this House. And freedom of the press has also been affected regarding the coverage of racism and anti-Muslim hatred but also anti-Semitism and therefore we must protect it.

Therefore, in terms of how we see the three upcoming years, we will put in place a dedicated work stream on combating anti Muslim hatred, including improving reporting and recording of those acts, because at the moment, depending on the Member States, we don't have much information, and we will continue to help Member States to combat the phenomenon and also strengthening and funding relevant civil society organizations in the field. Thank you.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

OK, we have a remote speaker next. Siobhán McLerney-Lankford.

2.20. Siobhán McLerney-Lankford, Head of Equality, Roma and Social Rights Unit, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

I may not even take the two minutes just in response to the question posed by the Member regarding the horizons of our perspectives to the following three years. I would reiterate the three recommendations that I made in my presentation, which include, of course, as others have said, to extend an alliance strategy. But I think also we can put an important accent on the need to follow up with monitoring, close monitoring, including by the Commission and with respect to Commission oversight also, to ensure the enforcement of existing law and uphold accountability through infringement proceedings. In the end, I think it's important to remember that this is that while there are gaps, as others have noted, in the existing legal framework, there's enough there that still needs to be enforced. So, to recall that this is not, as somebody had said, a political advocacy and it is also about law. And I'd close with that. Thank you very much.

Pietro Bartolo, Vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE committee) (S&D)

Thank you very much everyone for being involved so intensively in this debate.

I hope that we will achieve the results we would all wish to see in the future. Thank you very much.

The European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs organised upon request of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs a Workshop on "The EU as a Union of Equality?", which took place on Tuesday 19 March 2024 from 14.30 to 16.00 pm. The present document collects the transcriptions of the audio-video recordings of the event, which are publicly available on the EP website.

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