

Article – MEPs condemn racism and police violence in debate on George Floyd’s death



On Wednesday 17 June MEPs debated racism, discrimination and police violence, often faced by minorities such as those of African descent, with Council and Commission representatives.

In late May, George Floyd, an African American, died while being arrested by police officers on the street in the US city of Minneapolis. His death, along with other such cases, has sparked both peaceful and violent protests against racism and police brutality in the US and around the globe the past few weeks.

At the opening of the plenary session, Parliament held a minute of silence for George Floyd before President David Sassoli gave the floor to a black MEP Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana (Greens/EFA, Germany). She gave an account of her own experience with police brutality in Belgium when she took photos of police officers during an incident with two young black people at Brussels' North Station.

"I think we have to take a lot of measures to protect a lot of people who are not here and have not been able to escape police violence," she said.

Racism in Europe

Acknowledging the existence of racism in Europe, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said, "As a society, we need to confront reality."

"We relentlessly need to fight racism and discrimination – visible discrimination, of course, but also more subtle – in the justice system and law enforcement, in our labour market and the housing market, in education and health care, in politics and migration," she added.

Hermann Tertsch (ECR, Spain) said that in the current debate on racism, the focus has largely been on the US, who are seen as the bad guys, even though racism and hate also exists in Europe.

Alice Kuhnke (Greens/EFA, Sweden) agreed: "We need to send a strong signal to the US but also to clean our own house. This Parliament and the Commission will define how the EU steps up to create a sustainable society that leaves no-one behind. There can be no room for racism and discrimination."

Younous Omarjee (GUE/NGL, France) said "European history has always swung between barbarism and civilisation" with conquests, slavery, colonisation and the Holocaust. He called for measures to address both racial and social inequality in Europe.

Susanna Ceccardi (ID, Italy), however, said some of the recent protests had resulted in looting and damage to historical statues. "Apart from racism there's another plague spreading across the world: that's the plague of ignorance and the stupidity of those who want to erase their own history."

Dacian Cioloş (Renew Europe, Romania) questioned whether the EU institutions themselves reflect the diversity of the European Union. "We must contribute to building an inclusive society, starting with being more inclusive ourselves. And when we set the example ourselves, then we can ask others to respect that principle," he said.