EU: Lisbon—the first step in solving Europe's identity crisis

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On 1 December 2009 the Treaty of Lisbon—the agreement reforming European Union institutions—was ratified, making the European Charter of Fundamental Rights (ECFR), a document that lays out the entire range of civil, political, economic and social rights of EU citizens and residents, legally binding. Europe’s diverse citizenry is now-thankfully-better protected legally against discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation.

But Lisbon is no panacea to Europe's current identity crisis. Europeans must also learn to live together.

A recent EU-wide survey revealed disturbing findings in the level of discrimination that minorities face in their everyday lives. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) released the results of a Gallup poll that surveyed over 23,000 EU citizens from ethnic minority and immigrant groups about their experiences with discrimination across nine areas of their lives, such as seeking employment and housing, medical care, social services, education, shopping, and opening a bank account or obtaining a loan.

The results are alarming: 11 per cent of the respondents of North African origin reported experiencing ethnicity-based discrimination in the past 12 months when simply entering a shop, while another 19 per cent felt they were stopped by the police because of their ethnicity. Seventeen per cent of Roma surveyed indicated that healthcare personnel had discriminated against them and almost a quarter of Sub-Saharan Africans felt they were discriminated against at least once when applying for a job.

Given these figures, one can easily imagine the potential for discrimination against a person with a multiple minority makeup. It begs the question: does a dark-skinned Muslim woman have any place in today’s Europe?

Moreover, the survey indicates that about 46 per cent of respondents were unaware of their rights with regard to discrimination in shops, restaurants, bars or nightclubs while 63 per cent have never heard of “equality bodies”, public institutions that offer support and advice for minorities dealing with discrimination. Finally, 82 per cent of those who felt they were discriminated against did not report their most recent experience to an authority or organisation.

These statistics reveal serious challenges. First, they draw attention to a severe lack of awareness of civil rights and of society's responsibility toward minorities. Minority groups, as much as service providers (including hospitals, police, employers, landlords and business owners), must be fully aware of the provisions of the ECFR and of the related regulatory bodies. The FRA, individual EU member
states, the Council of Europe—an inter-governmental organisation working toward European integration—and European civil society can play a key role in sensitising targeted audiences—including journalists—about these legal aspects.

The next challenge, which reflects the contemporary identity crisis of European citizenry, is more acute. The Europe of the 21st century is indisputably diverse, yet this survey demonstrates that many Europeans are not fully appreciative of diversity. The latest controversy over Switzerland's vote banning the construction of minarets, or the highly polarised and politicised debates over the meaning of national identity in France, are illustrations of this difficulty.

Is there a way out of this European identity crisis? The answer is yes. Efforts to resolve it should start with the education, media and entertainment industries—the arenas that shape people's attitudes and beliefs.

Mainstream political parties must also urge Europeans to invest in diversity-sensitive curricula for schoolchildren across Europe. Moreover, news teams' composition (including broadcasters, editors and producers) must better reflect the reality of ethnic and racial diversity in European society. Finally, the European entertainment industry should adopt a corporate social responsibility charter and produce films and television series that are not only entertaining and popular but which also transform attitudes and behaviours to foster tolerance among people.

Enforcing the European Charter of Fundamental Rights is a legal and moral responsibility not just for government authorities, the media and political groups, but also for all of European society. To help resolve this identity crisis, it must sustain efforts to cultivate coexistence within the European Union.

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