

Council of Europe reports racism on the rise in Finland



Helsinki, September 11 (RHC)-- Racist and abusive language is "commonplace" online in Finland and on the rise in political discourse, a report by the Council of Europe has warned.

Although the Nordic nation frequently tops international comparisons regarding happiness, gender equality and quality of life, its population has the lowest share of foreign-born residents in western Europe, at 6.6 percent, and anti-immigrant sentiment is widespread.

The hardline Finns Party, which campaigns on a platform of staunch opposition to asylum, has been the second-largest party in the past two general elections. "Racist and intolerant hate speech in public discourse is escalating; the main targets are asylum-seekers and Muslims," the council's Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) said in a report on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, online "expressions of racism and xenophobia containing anti-immigrant rhetoric as well as targeting persons of African descent, LGBT persons and the Jewish community are commonplace, as is abusive language when referring to Roma," the authors said.

Last year, the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency found that people of African descent in Finland suffered the highest levels of perceived racial harassment and violence out of 12 member states studied. Although ECRI welcomed recent measures to try and address the problems, it said that "the

responses of the Finnish authorities to these incidents cannot be considered fully adequate".

Finnish authorities recorded 1,165 hate crimes in 2017, but the report criticised the patchy collection of data which it said prevented accurate year-on-year comparisons. Nonetheless, it noted that civil society groups have marked an increase in hate incidents since 2015.

Ethnic profiling by the police appears to still be common practice despite being outlawed in 2015, ECRI said. It also criticised the lack of diversity in the police, which it said did not reflect the make-up of Finland's population.

The report also singled out Finland's so-called "trans law", which requires people to undergo sterilisation before they can be recognised as another gender. In June, new Prime Minister Antti Rinne pledged to overturn the widely criticised sterilisation requirement.

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