

## **Inter-parliamentary gathering addresses need for internal-external coherence on human rights policies**

HRWF (07.10.2013) - On the 25<sup>th</sup> September 2013, the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights and Committee on Foreign Affairs co-hosted an inter-parliamentary meeting along with national EU parliaments on EU actions regarding human rights and the internal-external coherence of these policies. MEPs and MPs from EU Member States discussed ways to ensure greater consistency within Europe and in their engagement with third countries. The event also addressed the issue of strengthening the role of civil society at large.

The EU Special Representative for Human Rights since September 2012, Stavros Lambrinidis, challenged both the EU and its Member States to work toward consistency at three levels – internal-external, internal-internal, and external-external. In relation to internal-external consistency, Lambrinidis queried how a third country might try to deflect EU criticism of its own human rights record by enquiring into the rights violations of Roma communities in certain EU Member States or whether xenophobia and racism in Europe are being adequately addressed. No country is perfect, he acknowledged; nonetheless, EU institutions and states must not shy away from upholding the human rights values that they share while continuing to work on improving their own performance in this regard.

"Every Member State is an ambassador for the European family," said Lambrinidis, and together the EU must strive for a consistent application of human rights policy and thereby ensure greater credibility.

Regarding internal-internal consistency, he appealed for deeper cooperation between Member States on particular situations, while still acknowledging the different approaches and varying national interests that can come into play. "We don't always sing the same song, but we should all be singing from the same songbook," he said.

The EU Special Representative also spoke to what he called "the attack on civil society" that is currently underway in some European countries. Member States must ensure that their respective legal systems and national policies protect the public space for civil society entities to operate freely and without obstruction. We must underscore the universality of human rights, he argued, and leave no room for those who claim that they are simply a modern Western construct in opposition to "traditional values." Human rights instruments are equally binding on all EU Member States. They articulate the voice of the powerless in the face of the powerful that would deprive them of their human dignity.

In the afternoon session, the joint bodies addressed more directly issues of internal-external coherence in respect to Freedom, Security and Justice. Morten Kjaerum, the director of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), appealed for greater transparency on the challenges that EU Member States face in harmonizing their structures and legislation in regard to national human rights policies. He also noted some shortfalls at a European level, such as the lack of more comprehensive protections for LGBT persons, a more effective strategy to address human trafficking and consistent migration policies. Kjaerum also echoed Lambrinidis' concern for the weakening of civil society in some countries.

Non-governmental organizations contributed to the exchange by accenting the need for coherence between EU institutions while at the same time dealing with human rights breaches in third countries. Human Rights Watch warned of a "democracy deficit" when EU institutions develop policies without sufficient consultation with civil society actors. National MPs likewise called for greater coherence among the EU institutions. Issues such as immigration reform, LGBT rights, Roma policy, equal opportunity, minority rights and hate crimes were among the concerns raised by MPs.

Conclusions were drawn in the final session on the respective roles of national parliaments and the European Parliament regarding the monitoring of EU policies on human rights. The challenges ahead include not only better transparency and communication at every level but also the political will and resources to put these policies into practice. Whether the European Union can stay a credible model for the respect of human rights remains an on-going project.