

Human rights challenges persist for minorities in the Western Balkans

HRWF (11.12.2012) - Human rights challenges persist for minorities in the Western Balkans, especially in Croatia, Serbia and Kosovo, said a Professor Wolfgang Benedict from the University in his report presented at the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights.

On 29th November the Subcommittee on Human Rights examined the findings of a recent report on minority rights in the Western Balkans. Professor Wolfgang Benedict of the University of Graz presented the study, along with other researchers involved in the report, raising particular concern over growing intolerance and discrimination against lesbians, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) people and against the Roma population in the region.

Although the Benedict study commended progress in the Western Balkans, still recovering from recent wars of ethnic and religion-based conflict, it also indicated the persistence of human rights challenges for minorities, especially in Croatia, Serbia and Kosovo. In these countries the OSCE Commissioner on National Minorities has noted poor implementation of agreed standards, inadequate monitoring and insufficient mainstreaming of minority rights. A more proactive, coherent and sustainable approach is needed, noted the OSCE representative present, rather than short-term initiatives that are too broadly defined to be really effective.

Speakers emphasised that such an approach is especially needed for the protection of LGBT people and Roma in the region. LGBT people are frequently discriminated against for housing, employment and other basic needs. Roma suffer poverty, social exclusion and the lack of basic services in many countries of the region.

Nebojsa Kaduđerovic, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration for Montenegro, referenced the stable development that has been achieved in his country while still protecting the human rights of minorities. In 2012, Montenegro was elected to the UN Human Rights Council and also became a candidate for accession to the European Union.

Kaduđerovic stressed that alignment with international human rights law is not enough for the protection of vulnerable minorities. There must also be harmonisation with national laws and resolute implementation of these laws. There is also the overall task of changing attitudes, he said, which is the most difficult of all.

Ethnic conflicts reflect long-standing problems in the region; however, respect for the rule of law is a precondition for the prevention of further conflict. For the Western Balkans to secure its future stability and move toward further integration with the rest of Europe, those countries' governments will do well to build greater respect for the rights of minority groups within their borders.