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Human rights dimension increasingly important in the European Neighbourhood Policy

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a pleasure to be here. I would like to thank the International Federation for Human Rights for organizing this event and for bringing together human rights organizations and defenders from around the globe.

For almost 90 years the International Federation for Human Rights has played an important role in defending human rights in Europe and globally. Its work, and the vision of some of its leaders such as René Cassin and Victor Basch have helped to shape our understanding of human rights today.

I should like to use this opportunity to share with you some thoughts about the role of human rights in the EU's external policies, notably as regards Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy for which I am responsible.

As you will be aware, on 1st December last year the Lisbon Treaty entered into force bringing substantial changes to the way the EU does business both internally and in respect of our external relations. In particular the Lisbon Treaty provides the opportunity for us to build a stronger, and more credible European foreign policy. As a result of Lisbon we will have better structures and more coherent tools to promote our external relations aims worldwide. From now on, the EU can speak and act as one, increasing its impact by bringing together traditional foreign policy instruments with the whole range of other tools such as financial assistance and trade.

Turning now to the issue of respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law, I should like to make three general points.

First respect for human rights, democratic values and the rule of law is and will remain a crucial element of stability within the EU and our neighbourhood,

Secondly respect for these principles is increasingly a decisive factor in determining the level of interaction between the EU and partner countries ,

Thirdly the EU's support for these principles is wide-ranging and determined.

1) Human rights are and will remain a crucial element of stability within the EU and our neighbourhood

The European Union is founded on a set of shared values which include respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law. These are not only central to the way the EU does business internally. They are also critical to our external relations and to the process of European integration.

This is because we firmly believe that adherence to these principles is a prerequisite for real and lasting peace, prosperity and security in any society.

Over the past 20 years, the importance the EU attaches to these values in its external policies has gradually increased. This in part reflects the process whereby our relations with third countries have gradually widened beyond economic issues. It is also a reflection of the increased recognition of the importance of human rights in international affairs globally.

Consequently since 1995 the European Community has inserted a human rights clause in all agreements, concluded with developing countries, and has defined respect for human rights and democracy as an essential element underlying the bilateral relations.

The Lisbon treaty has now given the EU an even stronger mandate to advance these values in the wider world: it clearly states that the Union's actions on the international scene: "shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms".

During the past decade, we have put in place policies which help us to achieve these goals. In 2004 the European Commission launched the European Neighbourhood Policy with the aim of promoting prosperity and stability in the neighbourhood. In 2006, the countries of South Caucasus were invited to join this policy and conclude ENP Action Plans with the EU, with agreed political priorities for cooperation. The protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms features prominently in the ENP Action Plans with all our partners, including that with Armenia.

More recently, in May 2009 the EU launched the Eastern Partnership. Essentially this consists of an offer of a new level of engagement in our relationship with our Eastern neighbours of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Belarus and the three countries of South Caucasus.

In a nutshell we offer our partners the prospect of political association and economic integration with the EU. At the bilateral level this will take the form of the negotiation of Association Agreements with deep and comprehensive free trade areas when conditions are right, and steps towards the long-term goal of the establishment of visa free regimes. Ultimately this will help to increase the mobility of people and goods between the EU and the partner countries, as well as foster development and enhance prosperity in our neighbourhood.

We have also established a multilateral framework for discussing issues common to all partners wishing to move closer to the EU. We have launched four thematic platforms and a number of so called five flagship initiatives. I would also like to draw your attention to the Civil Society Forum, which was launched in October 2009. This aims to contribute to civil society development and to foster people-to-people contacts between EU Member States and partner countries, as well as between partner countries themselves. Some of you will have already participated in these activities.

2) Respect for human rights, democratic values and the rule of law increasingly determines the level of interaction of the partners with the EU

For our partners, coming closer to the EU depends on the commitment to reform at home, including in particular as regards respect for human rights and the rule of law. Consequently we will up-grade contractual relations with those countries that have made sufficient progress towards the principles of democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights. This creates a clear, and strong conditionality for partners wanting to enhance their relations with the EU.

But ultimately the reason for promoting human rights, democratic values and the rule of law should not be because the EU or the Council of Europe or the OSCE says that this is important. The case for reform lies in pure self-interest.

Every society faces the challenge of how it can make itself competitive, dynamic and innovative. Every society must seek to ensure its stability and prosperity.

It can only do so by realising the full potential of all its citizens. In practice this means ensuring that everyone enjoys fundamental rights such as the right to education, freedom of thought, expression and association. It means that individuals, non-governmental organisations, businesses and investors should be able to rely upon a judicial system that is impartial and professional. It means that everyone should be judged on merit and not on their gender, race, ethnicity or other factors.

I encourage Armenia and the other partner countries to see the Eastern Partnership, as a real opportunity to anchor their own reform efforts. We in the European Union stand ready to provide you with political support and increased assistance both financially and through advice and know-how. Our assistance for Armenia will be doubled in the coming years, reflecting our enhancing relationship and commitment to support the ongoing reform efforts.

3) The EU can support respect for human rights and democratic development in the neighbourhood in a variety of ways

The EU continues to promote these universal values through political dialogue, bilateral agreements and assistance and cooperation in various formats.

One of the classical tools to promote human rights is the establishment of regular channels with our countries to discuss these issues. This provides an opportunity to exchange views on how to address challenges in this field and on how best we can provide political and financial support. I know that this can be difficult and that it sometimes takes some courage to acknowledge the existence of problems in the human rights field.

I am therefore pleased that more and more of our partner countries are ready to engage in a human rights dialogue with us. Ahead of these meetings, we hold regular consultations with representatives from civil society. This gives us a first hand opportunity to obtain the maximum amount of information about concrete problems in these areas. I am particularly pleased to note that in December 2009, the EU-Armenia Human rights dialogue held its first meeting.

Our tools also include financial and technical cooperation. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), with an annual budget of more than 100 Mio Euro, is specifically aimed at promoting the protection of Human rights and democracy worldwide mainly through civil society projects. I am sure that a number of organisations present today are familiar with this instrument and have received support from it in the past.

Democracy, rule of law and human rights issues are also important priorities within our bilateral assistance to the EaP partner countries. They account for roughly one third of the overall allocation. Good examples here in Armenia are the programme to support justice sector development, as well as the first twinning launched here, to support the Office of the Human Rights Defender. In addition, the EU Advisory Group includes a dedicated advisor on the human rights issues, and two others to support the National Assembly.

Finally, rights are worthless if they are not implemented. In this context, the rule of law and independent courts play a critical role. Our dialogue both with the authorities and civil society on these issues is crucial.

Let me conclude by saying that I cannot emphasise enough the importance we attach to the input we receive from representatives of civil society organisations. You are our eyes and ears on the ground. You carry out invaluable work, often in difficult areas with limited resources. I should like to pay tribute to your efforts publicly, and to your courage and determination.

Thank you for attention.