

**FRA 10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EVENT**

**28 FEBRUARY 2017, VIENNA**

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Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Tonight we are marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. We are quite deliberately not calling it a celebration, as there is far too much that is wrong out there for us to rest on our laurels and to engage in celebration. It is nonetheless very important to mark moments such as this. This is a milestone and as with all milestones, it provides us with an opportunity to acknowledge what has been achieved and to set a direction for the coming period.

Acknowledgement

Let me begin with acknowledgement. Over the last 10 years, we have given a voice to our primary clients, the rights holders living in Europe. We have achieved much in these 10 years, which I think deserves proper credit. We have delivered badly needed data, which otherwise would not be available to the policy makers who make the laws that shape our lives.

In so doing, the Agency has given visibility over the past 10 years to the most marginalised and the most vulnerable people in our societies. Still more importantly, it has given them a voice, and therefore in a sense given them a place at the table. And ultimately, of course, the Agency has succeeded in supporting the development of human and fundamental rights compliant law and policy, not just by EU legislators in Brussels, but also at the level of Member States.

To illustrate the Agency’s work across all these areas, I would mention one contemporary area of high priority, namely our engagement on issues of asylum and migration.

But first, why do we engage in the area of asylum and migration? We must, in the first place because of the scale of the problem, and second, because of the extent to which it is a problem of the violation of the rights of the most vulnerable people we could imagine. If the Agency did not engage on this issue, it would quite frankly be irrelevant.

## FRA and the migration crisis

So what do we do? Some of what we do is rather familiar to many of you, some less so.

In the first place, we deliver survey findings that help us to understand the human and fundamental rights dimension. For example, in just a few months' time, we will publish a survey on the issue of anti-Muslim hatred in the EU. This is important and for many of you a familiar working method from the Agency.

Another aspect of our work that may be familiar is the delivery of qualitative analysis. In just two weeks' time we will publish a report on integration strategies in Europe. And more to the point, the compliance with human rights obligations of such integration strategies across EU Member States.

A third way in which we are engaging with the crisis that is perhaps less familiar is our delivery of formal legal Opinions to the legislators in Brussels. This has always been in the Agency's toolbox, but was little used until 2016, when we delivered five formal Opinions on the human rights dimension of the legislative reforms with regard to refugees and migrants.

The penultimate way in which we work in this context is entirely new for the Agency. Since the beginning of last year, we have been present on the ground, where we are needed in the context of the crisis. That means above all in Greece and Italy at the first reception centres, the so-called 'hotspots'. This presence in the field has allowed us to do real-time analysis of the rapidly changing situation, and provide the kind of support and advice that can save lives and honour the dignity of individuals.

The final way in which we are engaging with the refugee crisis – and we thank Commissioner Jourová for having encouraged this initiative – is our delivery of monthly overviews on the human rights dimension of the crisis across the fourteen most affected EU Member States. Over the past year, this public information has figured increasingly large both in media analysis and in policy responses. The monthly report for this month, for example, not only describes the situation in 14 Member States, but also has a focus section on issues of torture and trauma.

I think that the work on the refugee crisis shows how over these 10 years, the Agency has demonstrated that it is truly a globally unique institution, that it has developed highly innovative methodologies that deliver on the human rights of real people. And

I think it is quite fair and reasonable today to say that the Agency has acquired the reputation of being the EU's independent centre of excellence for fundamental rights.

### Thanks

We have many people to thank for the achievements to date. In the first place, we have to thank the founding parents of the Agency. We are so delighted that Franco Frattini is with us this evening, the primary architect of the Agency when he served as Vice-President of the Commission. The backroom of architects is where the hard work is done by the draftsmen, and we are so honoured again that we have among us at least two of them this afternoon: Francisco Fonseca Morillo and Salla Saastamoinen. They and many others played such a crucial role in shaping the Agency.

We have to thank the Commission at the time, the European Parliament and the Member States for the support they gave. All three of the legislators had to play their role.

We must also acknowledge the role played by the Council of Europe. Getting the balance and the relationship with the Council of Europe right is critical, and I think there has been a good story of complementarity over the past ten years, in large part thanks to the openness of the Council of Europe to this new initiative.

We must thank consecutive Management Boards of the Agency, as well as the Chairs of the Management Boards. I particularly single out chairs because, having worked with Frauke Seidensticker over the past year, I have come to appreciate what a tough job that is. So thanks to all of you. We also thank the successive Scientific Committees, whose members have helped maintain the accuracy and quality of our work.

We owe a very large thank you to our host state, Austria. Austria is a supportive host and, through the excellent relationship with the government of Austria, we have been able to achieve so much that would not have been possible in a less friendly environment. We have been no less welcome in the City of Vienna. Vienna is a global city of human rights, and this has been demonstrated time and time again by the extent of the cooperation and its hand of friendship extended to us.

I do not think anybody will mind if I leave the most heartfelt thanks to the staff of the Agency. They are the engine of our achievements, and let me say to you, staff of the Agency, we could not have done this without you. And to the extent that we have set such a high bar of achievement, it is because of the passion, the commitment and the

vision of those wonderful colleagues who have served in the Agency over the last ten years. And then of course, among the staff, it would be highly inappropriate not to take the opportunity to acknowledge the exceptional leadership of the two directors, Beate Winkler who headed the EUMC and led the Agency through that very difficult transition, and Morten Kjaerum, who constructed the foundations and built the house. And it is again such a pleasure that both Beate and Morten are with us this evening, which allows us the opportunity to address our particular appreciation to them for their leadership.

### Facing the future

Now, if I may look briefly to the future, it goes without saying that we are operating in a very challenging environment. We spoke this afternoon of a situation of crisis. I know the distinguished speakers this evening will engage with these issues. So let me be brief here and give you just a few elements of the nature of that crisis as we see them.

Firstly, there is now, as there always has been, the crisis of the number of people who need us. The extent to which there are people who are vulnerable, who are exposed and who are at risk. The second dimension of this crisis is the extent to which we are seeing patterns of the deliberate abuses of the rights of those people, for example the rising incidence of hate speech. Third – and this is a very worrying trend that distinguishes now from previous analyses – is the extent to which there is a repudiation of the systems of human and fundamental rights by so many leaders in so many parts of our European societies. The fourth and last dimension of this crisis that I would mention is the extent to which we have to admit that we are losing the goodwill and the commitment and the engagement of our general populations.

So if we take these four dimensions of crisis and weave them together, we must then ask ourselves: how do we respond? In just a moment, I will suggest how the Fundamental Rights Agency is, must, should and will respond to this moment of crisis, but if you'll allow me, I would like first of all to speak to all of us. By and large, we are here because we are passionate about human rights, that is the thread that unites all the people in the room this evening. And so, if I may, I would like to suggest to all of us, whatever our role, wherever we work, what we can do.

### What can we do?

I will make five suggestions. In the first place, we should never repudiate the human rights system. It has not failed; it is fit for purpose; and there is no alternative. When it comes to human rights, there is no 'plan B' if we walk away from this system so carefully constructed since the end of the Second World War.

But, second, while keeping with the system, we must be much smarter in using it. We must persistently make the business case for human rights, and we must show how rights-based approaches lead to better outcomes for everybody.

Third, we have got to do a much better job of reconnecting with the general population, of working with the people in our society to demonstrate through evidence and results that human rights is about them. It is also about the forgotten people, and if we forget them we fail. But as well it is about us, about our families, our neighbours, people on the street.

Fourth, if we are to be serious about engaging with the general population, and really with grappling the foundations of the current crisis, we have got to get serious about tackling the patterns of inequality in the EU. They are intolerable. 80% of Roma in poverty. In some EU Member States, 50% of children in poverty. Let's put faces on these figures and get away from statistics. This is about people who go to bed hungry, this is about people who are shivering all night because they do not have proper accommodation, this is about not going to school, this is about going to school but being laughed at because you cannot afford the uniform or the books. These are real people, and we have to take this very seriously indeed. This means that all of us have to get much more serious about engaging with the socio-economic side of human rights. We are pretty much focusing on the civil and political, we are pretty much neglecting the socio-economic and we welcome of course current initiatives in the EU in this regard, although we have yet to see the final results.

Finally, of these five considerations for all of us, I would say that we have got to get local. We are not succeeding if we just engage at the level of the state or at the EU level. We have got to get to villages, to communities, to the smallest subset of how our societies are organised. It is in those places, engaging with the real experience of rights and the real experience of deprivation, that we can motivate decision makers, from the local village mayor upwards, to engage to make a difference.

What FRA will do

But within that space, what about the Fundamental Rights Agency?

In the first place tonight, I want to assure you of something that is not going to sound exciting, but it is nonetheless really important: the Agency will continue to do what it does well. It does not need to fundamentally reform itself to engage with the contemporary crisis. You can be guaranteed of continuity, of the continued production of the surveys that have made the Agency's name. You can also be guaranteed of a continued, sustained, prioritised focus on the thematic areas that are set for us every five years.

Continuity is fine, but we need more than that. Because particularly in this strange period of crisis, we have to stay nimble, we have to stay capable of adjusting to the changing environments, atmospheres and weather.

So let my final words be what it means for us to be nimble. In the first place, it means that everything we do in the Agency these days – as I am sure also in the past – has to take account of three elements.

The first element is relevance. We have got to speak to what people really need, not what we think they need, or what we think they might need at a distant point in the future. We have got to engage with real issues.

Secondly, we have to do it in real time. It is no use being asked to work on issues relating to children's access to justice because we have a policy file in Brussels and we need you right now, and then the Agency delivers a report two and half years later when the discussion has moved on to something else.

The third of our overarching preoccupations is impact. We have got to ensure that what we do will ultimately lead to an improvement in the situation of somebody out there in the street. We are not delivering directly to the person in the street, but we must know that we are contributing to a process that will lead to that result.

It is on the basis of these considerations that you will see a strong, fresh focus of the Agency in 2017 and going forward. On this basis, you will see for instance enhanced support for civil society. We do not just want to cooperate with civil society, but to engage on the so-called shrinking space for civil society. We need to be a better support to our NGO and other civil society friends.

Second, but not unrelated, we have to contribute to the strengthening of the national human rights infrastructure.

Third, we have to do a much better job of communicating rights. Time does not allow me to do anything more but mention that this is a big concern of ours at present.

Finally, we have to do a much better job of calling out abuses where we see them, and at the same time offer support to redress these abuses.

Dear friends, your Excellency, dear Commissioner Jourová, colleagues, let me conclude by saying that if we were to reduce our future to just one phrase, it is that the Fundamental Rights Agency looks forward to going on into the next 10 years in partnership with all of you so that we together can realise that lofty dream of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of a world in which all people are born and live together free and equal in dignity and in rights.

Thank you.