

FRA Press Release

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The crisis is a time to boost access to justice

Budgets cuts in the wake of the current economic crisis should not affect a person's legal entitlement and right to access justice. This is the theme of the [2012 Fundamental Rights Conference](#), organised by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). Entitled '*Justice in austerity - challenges and opportunities for access to justice*', the event is being held at the European Parliament in Brussels. Key speakers will include the President of the European Parliament, the EU Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. FRA will also be presenting a new report that looks at the practical barriers to accessing justice in discrimination cases.

"The crisis is putting existing structures, including our justice systems, under increased pressure", says Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament. *"While we are all in a prolonged global economic slowdown that forces governments to stringent budgetary cuts, those values guaranteed in the Lisbon Treaty should in no way be undermined",* says Loucas Louca, the Cypriot Minister of Justice and Public Order.

Senior decision makers, practitioners and experts will come together at the conference to examine existing policies and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of different judicial systems and their financing mechanisms. They will also identify how the crisis can be turned into an opportunity for reform by exchanging promising practices and innovative solutions that could feed future policy developments, such as the EU's upcoming review of its non-discrimination laws.

"As times grow harder, more and more Europeans are in a vulnerable situation. Unemployment in the EU is at its highest rate in well over a decade, and with this and stagnating wage growth in many countries, poverty and social exclusion are rising," says FRA Director Morten Kjaerum. *"In times of crisis, the search for scapegoats can lead to xenophobia and other fundamental rights violations. So more help in access to justice is needed, not less. Indeed, cutting back during these difficult times not only exposes more people to human rights violations, but is also short sighted. Safeguarding access to justice for all must be a key consideration in any discussion of potential budget cuts".*

The new FRA report, '*Access to justice in cases of discrimination in the EU – Steps to further equality*', examines the process of seeking justice in discrimination cases in eight EU Member States, based on fieldwork interviews. It highlights a number of the practical barriers faced by complainants and suggests some solutions. The proposals include:

- Simplifying overly complex complaint systems;
- Ensuring that non-judicial mechanisms are made more use of, as they can improve access to justice while potentially reducing the overall cost of the justice system;
- Stipulating minimum support structures for victims such as legal advice and guidance, as well as counsellors for psychological support;
- Raising awareness on equality and diversity to build a fundamental rights culture in which no justified claims are discouraged.

The report also gives examples of how various Member States are already working to overcome difficulties in accessing justice.

To read the report, see:

Access to justice in cases of discrimination in the EU: Steps to further equality

<http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2012/access-justice-cases-discrimination-eu-steps-further-equality>

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Notes to editors:

- The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) is mandated to provide evidence-based advice to EU and national decision makers, thereby contributing to more informed and better targeted debates and policies on fundamental rights.
- Under EU law, Articles 21 and 47 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union guarantee, respectively, the right to non-discrimination, and to an effective remedy and a fair trial, including access to justice.
- The European Parliament and the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union are both supporting this event.