THEMATIC WORK

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Human rights have been a pillar of European construction, inspiring co-operation between countries and people. However, all too often implementation has lagged behind standard setting; lofty words have not always been matched by concrete action to the benefit of human rights. In order to fulfil Europe's promise, it is necessary to address systemic shortcomings in member states and to establish sustainable human rights centred policies at national and local levels.

As Commissioner for Human Rights, I am building on the work done so far towards the achievement of this objective. Closeness to people and the situation "on the ground" characterise my approach, as does a constructive, ongoing dialogue with national authorities and intense co-operation with national human rights structures and human rights defenders. Only by working together can we make human rights a reality for all.

Particular attention should be paid to the most vulnerable groups of people, such as children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. More resolute commitment to promoting and protecting the human rights of women, minorities and migrants is also needed. New challenges, such as those arising from a rapidly evolving information society, require a balanced approach which protects human dignity and fundamental freedoms, and promotes mutual understanding.

In this era of austerity and uncertainty, a renewed commitment to human rights principles is badly needed. It is my intention to keep human rights high on the agenda of European countries and to contribute to the development of more humane policies benefiting both present and future generations.

Nils Muižnieks

The Commissioner for Human Rights is an independent and impartial non-judicial institution established in 1999 by the Council of Europe to promote awareness of and respect for human rights in the member states. The activities of this institution focus on three major, closely related areas:

- country visits and dialogue with national authorities and civil society;
- thematic studies and advice on systematic human rights work; and
- awareness-raising activities.

The Commissioner is elected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, from a list of three candidates drawn up by the Committee of Ministers, and serves a non-renewable term of office of six years.

The current Commissioner, Nils Muižnieks, took up his functions in April 2012. He is the third Commissioner, succeeding Thomas Hammarberg (2006-2012) and Álvaro Gil-Robles (1999-2006).

COUNTRY WORK

The Commissioner carries out visits to all member states to monitor and evaluate the human rights situation. In the course of such visits, he meets with the highest representatives of government, parliament, the judiciary, civil society and national human rights structures. He also talks to ordinary people with human rights concerns and visits places of human rights relevance, including prisons, psychiatric hospitals, centres for asylum seekers, schools, orphanages and settlements populated by vulnerable groups.

Following the visits, a report or a letter may be addressed to the authorities of the country concerned containing an assessment of the human rights situation and recommendations on how to overcome shortcomings in law and practice. The Commissioner also has the right to intervene as a third party in the proceedings of the European Court of Human Rights, either by submitting written information or taking part in its hearings.
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