



COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSAIRE AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME



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***Sharing experiences among local and regional authorities
is crucial to improve human rights protection***

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Address by Nils Muižnieks
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Dear members of Congress,

Thank you for inviting me to your 34th session. I come here always with great pleasure because I regard your work as crucial in our common efforts to respect, protect and fulfill human rights. As you know my mandate ends in four days, therefore this is my last opportunity to discuss human rights issues with you in this setting.

The past 6 years have been very intense and challenging from a human rights perspective. During these years I have visited all 47 member states of the Council of Europe at least once. Old crises deepened, new crises emerged and commitment to Council of Europe values of peace, democracy and justice for all and to the European system of human rights protection seemed to weaken among governments and parliaments.

I have tried to maintain human rights high on the political agenda of national, but also regional and local authorities, reminding them that for all the progress done so far, our work remains incomplete as poverty, armed conflicts, oppression, inequality and discrimination are still a reality for so many people.

As you know, I have often met with local elected officials during my country visits. This was a deliberate choice because you often play a key role in the system of human rights protection that we have been painstakingly building in the past seven decades.

One of the fields in which our paths often crossed was the handling of migration flow. Uncoordinated migration policy at national and international level led not only to an unnecessary human suffering on the side of migrants and asylum-seekers, but also put a strain on your daily work. Many of you and large parts of your population have been in fact in the forefront of reception and integration efforts, often without much support by national authorities. Sometimes, however, I have witnessed how local and regional authorities can also be part of the problem, for example by refusing to receive asylum-seekers and engaging in a discourse which often spread racism and intolerance.

Another field of work in which our paths often crossed was the protection of the human rights of Roma. In my speech to this Congress last year, I referred to some of the meetings I had just had with mayors and municipal councils during country visits and missions to discuss how to improve Roma housing and access to education, health and employment. As in the migration field, I was happy to see that some of you were finding solutions to the serious and long-standing human right problem of Roma exclusion. In other occasions, however, I could not but intervene to try to stop harmful practices, like unlawful evictions, which only perpetuate Roma exclusion and feed stereotypes about them.

In several other occasions, I had to intervene to remind national as well as regional and local authorities of their obligations to uphold the rights LGBTI people. While LGBTI persons enjoy greater protection in many European countries than ever before, they still struggle to enjoy basic freedoms and rights in contexts where homophobia and transphobia are widespread. The situation is exacerbated when authorities back - with their action or inaction - intolerant attitudes among the population.

For example, during the last 6 years, some mayors banned Pride marches, thus contravening the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees the right to free expression and peaceful assembly. In other occasions, LGBTI people and their defenders were victims of discriminatory acts, violent attacks, smear campaigns or hate speech, without receiving the support of elected officials. In some cases, it was local officials committing these acts. Fighting this trend is matter as much for national authorities as for you. Neither cultural, traditional or religious values, nor the dominant views of the majority, can ever justify violent crimes or discrimination against LGBTI persons. LGBTI persons do not ask for special or additional rights – but simply to enjoy the same human rights as anybody else.

These are just a few thematic examples in which I have seen that your role is particularly crucial, for better or worse. Sometimes, human rights violations occur because of political reasons. But in other cases, I have seen that they often happen because of lack of awareness among local authorities and their administrations. While in the first case the only thing to do is to change mindset, in the second scenario one of the solutions at your disposal is information sharing. Knowing about good practices and others' experiences is crucial to equip you with the tools necessary to identify viable solutions to the problems you are facing.

For this reason, I think that the Resolution that you are going to discuss and vote today, represents an important instrument that can help you better engage within the system of human rights protection. In particular, the handbook attached to it may become a useful tool because by making your policies and practices more human rights compliant, you may improve social cohesion among your population and find new opportunities for political, cultural and economic development.

I am particularly happy to see that the first draft of the handbook has just seen the light before the end of my mandate. I was in fact among those who contributed to its preparation, convinced as I am of the utility of sharing information, harmonising practice and establishing a network of contacts among the members of this Congress, but also among local and regional authorities which are not represented here.

I have seen the first draft of the handbook and I think it is not only a very practical tool for you to develop policies and practices in line with human rights standards. It can also be used as an effective instrument to better communicate human rights to your population.

This is crucial in a time when a discourse deeply hostile to human rights is emerging and a growing number of people perceive human rights issues as irrelevant for them, or feel excluded from the discussions.

I therefore wish to congratulate Harald and his team for their commitment and efforts in realising the handbook and I encourage you to make full use of its potential, both in terms of practical measures and of communicating human rights.

I hope you will share it within your constituencies, use it to train your personnel and contribute to it with your good practices. I also invite you to further develop it and make it a living instrument. I understand a web platform is being prepared to provide updated and broader information on specific human rights issues that you face. I consider it a very encouraging initiative with a great potential to become an invaluable ally in your work. By sharing experience, asking for help and working together with others who are facing similar problems, you can find solution that eventually can have a huge impact in the long-term effectiveness of the European system of human rights protection.

I wish to thank you all, current and past members of this Congress, for the cooperation you have offered me during these six years. It has been for me a privilege to serve as Commissioner for Human Rights and work with you, as well as with your Secretariat here in Strasbourg, who has kept an indefectible commitment to human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

In a few days, I will pass the torch on to my successor, Dunja Mijatović. I hope you will continue and strengthen with her the fruitful cooperation you have offered me.

Thank you.