

Koenders: Governments and newcomers must uphold fundamental values; stress test for our values

Democracies in Europe can be organised in many different ways, but there are limits that must be safeguarded whatever the circumstances. While governments have a responsibility to uphold fundamental values, so do newcomers to our societies. Bert Koenders, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, addressed these issues in his opening speech at a seminar on the rule of law in Strasbourg, organised for the Council of Europe by the Netherlands' EU Presidency.

'Of course,' Mr Koenders said, 'many different democracies thrive in Europe, and this is not a matter of 'one size fits all'. But there are limits. The rule of law cannot be set aside for the sake of elections or the will of the majority. No government can ever uphold the rule of law by applying it selectively. No society can ever defend human rights while excluding certain groups from its protection.'

Cultural clashes

Mr Koenders also addressed the issue of recent cultural clashes in Europe. 'European governments have a responsibility to uphold fundamental values, but so do newcomers to our societies. The mass assaults on women in Cologne and other European cities prompted shock and outrage. This was a violation of their freedom, and it is now up to the state to bring the perpetrators to justice, whoever they may be. This is when the rule of law proves its worth.'

Mr Koenders believes 'us' versus 'them' rhetoric that dehumanises a group of people is unhelpful and runs counter to the very values we want to protect. 'This also applies to the refusal to accept entire groups of refugees, based on supposed cultural or religious incompatibilities. Instead, it is essential to hold individuals accountable for their actions.'

The minister acknowledged that it is 'unrealistic to expect all migrants, many of whom come from very different cultures, to fit in immediately. Integration is a complex, long-term process.' However, he said, 'there is a collective responsibility for newcomers to adapt and for host states to accommodate their integration and full inclusion in society.'

Mr Koenders reported that the Dutch government is introducing a 'participation statement' for migrants that emphasises the rights, obligations and values that are fundamental to Dutch society. 'For those granted permission to stay in the Netherlands, the statement marks the start of the civic integration process and the path to citizenship. My government is working on a law to make the statement mandatory for newcomers, including people who are granted asylum and family migrants. Those who fail to sign the statement will be fined, and may ultimately be denied a residence permit.'

The minister ended his speech by stating that the migrant crisis is a stress test for our values, but also an opportunity to show what Europe is made of. 'We should always keep in mind that the way we treat migrants and refugees is a reflection of who we are. If we treat them harshly and unfairly, we undermine our own dignity as civilised nations. You can't put a price tag on dignity; it is priceless.'