

State of Affairs on Human Rights in European Union

In May 2014, the European Union will hold elections. A new direct Parliament has to be elected; a new Commission and President of the European Council have to be nominated. Expectations for the outcome of these elections are very high. Can the EU further be deepened content wise and can the EU further be enlarged in the direction of Eastern Europe? The EU today is confronted with, next to the ongoing economic and financial crisis, at least three major problems: corruption, the emergence of xenophobic political groups and the lack of freedom in media.

Human Rights and Freedoms

One of the main principles of the European Union is the internal market system related to four freedoms: free movement of goods, capital, services and not at least people. These are the well-known four freedoms within the 28 member states. Even important are the values and rights of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights – these values have been embedded in the EU treaties right from the start. Now they have been reinforced by the Charter of Fundamental Rights.¹

Countries in the EU and those seeking to join must respect human rights. Clearly, human rights are universal. Through its human rights policy, the EU: (1) defends civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights; (2) seeks to promote the rights of women, children, minorities, and displaced persons; (3) opposes the death penalty, torture, human trafficking and discrimination; (4) is committed to defending the universal and indivisible nature of human rights, by working in full and active partnership with partner countries, international organizations, regional organizations and civil society.

According to the latest report of Freedom House² all 28 EU member states are ranked free and the region has the highest level for political rights and civil liberties worldwide. EU membership remains an important goal for most countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Croatia joined the EU on 1 July 2013. Six other Balkan countries are current or potential candidates for accession.

¹ www.freedomhouse.org

² <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Freedom%20in%20the%20World%202014%20Booklet.pdf>

Ukraine: a Divided Country

Meanwhile, since a couple of months large-scale street protests - even with the brutal use of violence from different sides and the loss of tens of lives - began in Ukraine. In general terms, the country is mainly divided in two regions: a pro EU and culturally Western part of the Ukraine; and a pro-Russian cultural Eastern part of the Ukraine. Many demonstrators demanded that Ukraine progress with the EU in order to become a member state of the EU within a couple of years. That part of the population is saying that they do not like to stay under both authoritarian governance and Russian influence. Of course, the reality is more complex and should be more nuanced. Also in Ukraine, people long for democracy, human rights and good governance. Ukraine is a member of the Council of Europe and located at the Eastern border of the European Union.

It became clear in Ukraine, as elsewhere in countries where the people long for freedom and democracy, that civil society is much stronger than the political opposition groups. Civil society is also much more seen as a threat for the political establishments, because the energy and motivation is basically amongst the ordinary people. Where we can see the increase of the activity of civil society, the reactionary measures by some governments are taking place as well.

A similar process is going on in Armenia, where Russian threats and incentives persuaded the government to drop its plans for closer EU integration and join a Russian-led customs union instead.

Fragility within some EU Member States

Member states including Greece, Italy, Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Cyprus have gone through varying degrees of upheaval during Europe's economic crisis, including early elections, high unemployment, street protest, and strikes. In most of the EU member states, a series of measures have been taken, and still are planned to be taken, in order to reduce the public expenditures and bring the overall budget more in balance. Social services in

the different countries do suffer from those measures. Unemployment and an increase of poverty are the main challenges. Another example is the media that suffered as a result of the economic crisis, with journalists shifting to new online outlets and bloggers closely scrutinizing the activities of the political class. Lack of freedom in the media seems to be a reality. Nevertheless, media has an important watchdog role to play.

Corruption and Xenophobic Attitudes

Two other problems have to be highlighted in the EU: corruption and xenophobic political movements. On corruption for instance, the prime minister of Luxembourg and Czech Republic had to resign over scandals involving corruption and abuses by intelligence services. In other countries, anticorruption legislation have been enforced, such as in Italy for instance.

With having the European Union elections coming soon, end of May 2014, right-wing factions that promote unorthodox agendas are on the rise in many of the EU countries. These groups range from Euro skepticism and greater curbs on immigration to extreme nationalism and outright racism. These ultranationalist tendencies and "our own people first" populist approach threaten the peace project of the European Union. In Central and Eastern European countries, Roma and Jews are, again, the minority groups of being guilty of the so called failures and problems in those countries. In other countries, the Muslim minority communities as well as refugees from Syria are targeted as the scapegoats of society. All these challenges are a test for the quality and the credibility of the European Union.

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