

FRF closing speeches

Speakers:

1. Dimitris Avramopoulos, EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship (video message)
2. Lucia Žitňanská, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice of the Slovak Republic, Slovak EU Presidency
3. Stavros Lambrinidis, European Union's Special Representative for Human Rights

Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos

The Fundamental Rights Forum comes at a perfect time, with EU values being thrown into disarray in the current context of European and world politics and events. This event was organised to facilitate conversation, allowing us to address complex and multifaceted challenges in a comprehensive manner.

The migration crisis is fundamentally questioning the unity of the European Union Member States, and there is a pressing need to come up with new solutions to reform the asylum system and prevent the unnecessary loss of life. We must think of the future, and recognise the importance of migration in providing Europe with the skills it desperately needs, and the need to integrate these people into a diverse and inclusive European culture.

The EU Commissioner for Migration has played a fundamental role in pushing Member States to live up to their obligations to resettle refugees, developing a resettlement proposal, and is pushing to remind European citizens of the European values which protect and facilitate the integration of migrants and refugees within our societies. We must remember that we have an obligation to protect people from oppressive environments and live up to our obligations to provide asylum, protecting their right to life and other fundamental rights.

Lucia Žitňanská

Modern Europe is full of challenges that cause governments to make snap decisions. There is no doubt that we are experiencing times in Europe that are challenging. The current radical solutions create a new environment in which we have to take our political positions but also our personal decisions into consideration. We live in a Europe of great challenges. Our fundamental rights need to be protected. We strive to protect them, but we come under pressure. The fact is we have to arrive at quick decisions in how we want to have our political life and we must arrive at political answers.

History in Central and Eastern Europe shows support for liberal democracy: I never would have thought that we would have to resort to this. I am afraid that in central and Eastern Europe we will not be able to live up to those challenges.

Let me briefly start with a historical introduction: liberal democracy after World War II was based on respect of human rights, the elective representatives upheld individual freedom in the case of history and in the wake of new situations this catalogue of new rights and liberties also supported a new level. Central and Eastern Europe have declared their preparedness to the countries who were on the other side of the iron curtain to sign the most important agreements and join institutions.

Historically people in Central and Eastern Europe were not aware of individual rights, but after the fall of the iron curtain they latched on to the idea and began championing it for marginalised parts of society. Here we find the first contradiction: the protection of individual rights, but this has not been implemented in political life nor education. As a society, we have failed to implement this principal and concept. After the collapse of the iron curtain in 1989, the concept of liberal democracy was again accepted and we did so seriously and full of hope assuming that this value would always be maintained. All the political representatives and civil representatives agreed. They started to deal with the rights of those who are marginalised and minorities. They started to raise awareness for their rights. They came across resistance. Resistance among the greater part of society. Why? We become more aware of the fact that we see groups arising that do not perceive individual rights as being their own rights.

Now there are people who do not see individual rights as belonging to them and we need to change their view on that. In Central and Eastern Europe, we did not have a situation where we look back on our history and see individuality. As a society today, we are more susceptible if we take the foundation of individual rights we have not fully become aware of those rights. From this perspective, we experience dangerous times.

Acknowledging the seriousness of the new challenges, I think that the greatest challenge of our times is finding a remedy for establishing closer ties to those who have never fully perceived the rights of individual freedom and dignity. We need to sell this to them. We need to make clear to those people that these rights are values of great importance. It does constitute a big challenge for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

I think we have the answers. The answer lies in education; in training our young people need to be educated as very self-confident citizens of Europe. They should be able to understand their own history and that the foundation of human rights is not a luxury, but constitutes the foundation of human kind.

Slovakia is prepared to work on these problems: We (Slovakia) are prepared to look for common answers and find answers to the questions that have been raised today. We will organise a meeting on the rising violence and xenophobia in Europe. We'll also take the liberty of drawing the conclusion that we need to engage in this conversation and invite you to join us.

Stavros Lambridinis

My job isn't to promote human rights in the EU, but rather around the world in our foreign policy. But there is no place I do this around the world where ministers do not turn around and say, 'yes but what about racism and the state of human rights in Europe.' They're right. No one is perfect in human rights but that doesn't mean that nobody is equally imperfect.

There should be independent bodies in place to monitor human rights violations in all countries. We should not shove our imperfections under the carpet. We must have minimum institutional requirements in place that prevent us from hiding our human rights violations. Those institutions that would force us to always try to be perfect. They will say do you have a

judiciary in place in the case of human rights abuses? These values are not western or European values but they are international values, UN values. Do you have independent parliaments where dissidents and supporters can be elected? Do you guarantee that those members can freely express their views without fear of retribution? Do you have a free press that can put a spotlight on violations? Do you have a civil society where you do not persecute nor defame nor imprison nor kill or allow killing? Civil society can be a human rights partner to any government. Do you have independent watchdogs on human rights? To monitor and suggest ways to improve yourself?

FRA is the EU's independent watchdog. What I tell them is that in the EU our credibility in promoting human rights abroad depends on our ability to promote human rights in Europe. FRA is a shining example of what an independent institution means. It keeps a spotlight on weaknesses and suggests improvements. Domestically, it is a watchdog. EU Member States should work even more closely with FRA and more closely follow its reports and recommendations.

The three topics of the forum —inclusion, migration/refugees, and the digital age— were exceptionally well chosen. Given my experience around the world the EU is a leader. We are struggling to protect rights in all areas, but we face some challenges because as I said before no one is perfect.

Inclusion through business: The UN's Agenda 2030 will be a guiding document for sustainable development for the next 15 years. We contribute to sustainable development more than any power in the world. We are 10% of the world's populations and 20% of the economy but we give more than 55% of the world's development aid. What is that aid if not aid for inclusion and human rights when it builds schools and hospitals and brings water to places where children die without it? These days the European Commission is promoting a model based on human rights. The focus is not just on economic development but also on human rights.

You spoke a lot about business and human rights at this conference and I'm glad you did. Over the years I have made clear that if a company is investing in a place it is important to involve human rights in its plan. But human rights in business is not about donating money. It is about how you make your money. Child labour. Decent salaries. How can you produce your supply chain in a way that promotes human rights? In the short term you

can be quite competitive if you abuse human power and the environment, but is that the way we want to be seen both in and outside Europe. We should uphold our ideas. We should be investing in human rights, and education, and development.

Migration – people come to Europe to be protected: Do we want development based on quality or inequality? I say equality is the way. It is a challenge in Europe. We have saved tens of thousands of lives in the sea in the past year. But we have also faced challenges. Will we allow fear, populism and extremist voices around Europe to dominate this debate? Will we allow this to destroy our values and our credibility around the world? The migration crisis when it comes to Europe is not one that has come from the desire of millions of people to leave Europe because their rights are violated and their lives are poor. It is that people have come here because they feel that here their rights will be protected.

We need to rebuild European values of solidarity: Let's be hard on the root causes, corruption, poverty, violations of fundamental human rights in areas around the world today. Let us try to address our own values crisis in Europe. We created the euro and many predicted it would not stand since you cannot have a monetary union without a political union, but it remains today the most powerful currency in the world. It was built on a firm foundation of European values. We know the value of all of us together to abide by the common set of rules that put this union together. The pillar of solidarity brought the understanding that not everyone was at the same level, but we would support each other to lift ourselves up. The refugee crisis is shaking the solidarity pillar. If our values become quicksand, then even very reasonable refugee distribution policies cannot stand because our base is shaking. We need to return the bases that we were built on, but it will not be easy.

Protecting our data is a matter of safety: As Vice President of the European Parliament I was rapporteur for migrants and for fundamental rights in the age of the internet. It is not a question that the coming of the internet has created an opportunity for a better promotion of human rights. At the same time the internet has allowed everyone: government, companies, criminals, and terrorists, to have better access to our private and personal data. The difficult task of insuring that our privacy is protected while this is simultaneously being threatened by criminals is difficult. In a democracy, it

is the citizens who should monitor the thoughts and acts of government and not vice versa. If you do the opposite, you have turned democracy on its head. I'm proud of the work that Europe has done at this forum today. What is the problem with privacy? If you have nothing to hide you have nothing to fear. My answer to that is that that if you have nothing to hide, you don't have a life. Get a life. If you have nothing to hide, then just give me your credit card right now. Tell me about your love life. All of us have something perfectly legal and legitimate to hide. We have to work internally to guarantee that.

The development of policies and the promotion of values to combat terrorism is a necessity. We discussed sustainable development before, but what we have to discuss is something difficult. What if we add sustainable to the word security? Sustainable security. Can you really have sustainable security if you base it on mass privacy violations? Can you fight terrorism if you don't have human rights? Boko Haram fear educated girls. Empowered women in any society do not leave space for terrorism and hatred to get in. Shouldn't we be educating girls? The terrorists in Paris feared freedom of expression. So, make sure you promote freedom of expression around the world. We must counter the actions of all terrorist groups. Sustainable security begins at home and the FRA is a guarantor.