

The European parliament: a strong voice for human values and freedom in the world.

Honourable Ladies and Gentleman,

I am truly honoured and grateful to have been invited to speak at this international conference on genocide prevention. May I also add that I am proud that this conference takes place at the initiative of the Belgian Royal Institute for International Relations and the Belgian Federal Public service for Foreign Affairs, Foreign trade and Development which I have had the honour and pleasure to serve from 2000 till 2003.

The European Parliament is a singularly unique institution, comprising 766 members directly elected by the electorates of the 28 member states of the European Union. This number, by the way, will be reduced to 751 during the next direct elections which will take place from May 21 till May 25. The Parliament has two seats, one here in Brussels and the other one in the French city of Strasbourg. It has twenty four official languages, although English is the most frequently spoken one. This may appear as a recipe for inefficiency, overlap and waste but the European Parliament is actually working hard and efficiently, fulfilling its many tasks with more than due diligence.

Its tasks today are much larger than was the case in 1979, the year of the first direct elections of the Parliament of a Union that comprised nine member states. Today, the Parliament is a co-legislator for almost all of the areas of competence of the Union.

In those fields which remain mostly intergovernmental, like the common foreign and security policy, and defence policy, the Parliament is fully using its rights of oversight and initiative.

So it came about that the Parliament played an important role in the establishment of the European External Action Service, the diplomatic arm of the Union.

Human rights, fundamental values and freedoms have been matters of concern for the Parliament since it started functioning. In the beginning, it might have looked as if the Parliament was issuing opinions and resolutions on the state of human rights in the world, in third countries and in the member states because it

hadn't much else to do and those same opinions and resolutions might therefore initially have been easily dismissed as coming from an almost impotent institution that didn't much matter anyway.

The attention for those issues however remained strong even as the powers of the Parliament increased. The fact that human rights and the values of democracy, rule of law and individual freedom and dignity are at the core of many policies of the Union itself have added weight to Parliament's views on the matter.

Having been the foreign affairs coordinator for my political group for the last ten years, I can testify that foreign governments are anything but indifferent to how the Parliament views for instance the human rights situation in their country.

Ambassadors request to see me and the coordinators of other political groups to present their government views, or signal changes for the better in their countries or present reforms being undertaken. All this demonstrates that the parliament's views and judgments are increasingly taken into account in the rest of the world. In other words, the voice of the parliament is indeed increasingly being heard.

This however doesn't mean that the Parliament doesn't face difficulties in establishing its positions.

While the subcommittee on human rights understandably tends to give the protection of human rights prevalence over almost all other considerations, other committees, like the foreign affairs committee or the committee on international trade might take less stringent views on the matter because of economic or geopolitical concerns. So a need for arbitration might arise.

Other difficult issues concern the definition of the goals the Parliament wishes to attain. If the goal is to define the Parliament's position on a given human rights problem, the tone might be different than when the Parliament wishes to obtain a swift and positive result.

When the Parliament for instance wants to see one or several political prisoners or prisoners of conscience freed, it might adopt a different tone than when no such hope is realistic. In such circumstances public exposure and condemnation might work better than a more conciliatory approach.

Another tricky question is what yardstick to use to measure a given situation by. If the yardstick would be a situation of almost perfect respect for human rights, then small progresses might be overlooked and regression might set in as the real progress has not been noted. On the other hand one should not overestimate small progresses if the general situation remains bleak and the improvements might be merely cosmetic.

Finally, it is important to use the same yardsticks overall. That isn't always easy. Individual members of Parliament and the various political groups may have their favorite enemies and their favorite protégés. When too manifest, double standards inevitably weaken Parliament's positions and thereby undermine its effectiveness. In this respect, it is important that the Parliament and its members demonstrate the same degree of vigilance vis a vis problematic human rights situations within the Union and the member states as they do vis a vis the rest of the world.

Ultimately, I believe it to be very important for the Parliament to draw attention to little known and therefore largely ignored dire human rights situations like for instance the forceful abduction and trafficking of refugees in the Sinai.

Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen, I have briefly sketched how the European Parliament has acted in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms since its first direct election 35 years ago. I have also indicated the main challenges we face. These challenges are no different from those faced by every instance trying to incorporate respect for human rights and freedoms into general policies.

I do believe that my Parliament's views are noticed, taken into account and heeded.

The European Parliament has contributed decisively to combat the worst accomplices of human rights violations, silence and indifference.

I thank you for your kind attention.

Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck

Member of the European Parliament

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