

Public awareness of human rights must be improved, says agency chief

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News

The head of an EU agency has conceded that “more needs to be done” to promote public awareness of human rights.



Photo credit: Press Association

Speaking at a conference in Brussels, Michael O'Flaherty, Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, said that the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights is driving change and helping improve the lives of people across Europe, but added, “we still have a long way to go.”

“We have a duty to bring the rights enshrined in the Charter to life, to make them a reality for everyone – for the public at large, for Roma and Jewish communities, for newly-arrived migrants and for LGBTI people.”

The conference was also attended by MEPs, Commission officials, civil society representatives and

legal experts, who all agreed on the need to do more.

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The Charter, which recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, set out those rights that must be respected both by the EU and Member States when implementing EU law.

It is seen by the EU as an essential tool in making sure the bloc remains an area in which basic freedoms are guaranteed and respected.

Despite the importance of the Charter, a Eurobarometer survey has shown that only 4 in 10 Europeans have heard of the Charter and only 1 in 10 know what it is.

Another speaker at the conference, Anna-Maia Henriksson, Minister of Justice for Finland, emphasised the role of Member States in making sure that citizens and non-citizens alike are aware of the Charter in the context of the Finnish Presidency of the EU.

“We have a duty to bring the rights enshrined in the Charter to life, to make them a reality for everyone – for the public at large, for Roma and Jewish communities, for newly-arrived migrants and for LGBTI people” **Michael O’Flaherty, Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights**

She said, “We need to think of the state apparatus as a whole, encompassing the legislative and administrative branches as well as the national courts. The conclusions on the Charter adopted at the JHA Council in October provide an important tool for enhancing the implementation of the Charter both at the Council level and in the Member States.”

Roger Casale, Secretary General and CEO of the civil rights group New Europeans said, “There is a huge mismatch between the expertise and resourcing of the human rights community at the top level in the EU and what is actually happening on the ground.”

“To be truly effective the public needs to be fully aware of what guarantees they have under the treaties and what they need to do to defend themselves, if and when the EU institutions or EU Member States breach the fundamental rights we have as EU citizens (and in many cases non-EU citizens as well) under the EU Treaties.”

“That is why we need a properly-resourced public awareness campaign to promote Fundamental Rights and such a campaign should be led by civil society. It is civil society organisations that are closest to those communities that are the most vulnerable, the most marginalised and therefore the most in need of protection.”

Earlier this year, the Commission published a report on how the EU institutions and Member States have been applying the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

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The Charter is subject to important protocols which aim to restrict the ability of the European Court of Justice to find against the laws of the UK and Poland.

As a result, groups are campaigning to highlight what they call the UK government’s “systematic disenfranchisement” of EU citizens from the EU elections in the UK.

Casale said they fear they may not be able to rely on the Charter to “secure justice” for those affected and instead have called for an investigation by the Council of Europe and a public inquiry in the UK.

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine

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