



Conference of European Churches • Conférence des Églises Européennes • Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen • Конференция Европейских Церквей

Church & Society Commission

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The Church and Society Commission of CEC participated as a member in the meeting of the Fundamental Rights Platform of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency in Vienna

Report on the First Meeting of the Fundamental Rights Platform

Vienna 7-8 October 2008

Nature and Purpose of the Fundamental Rights Platform (FRP)

Around 100 people were invited to the first meeting of the Fundamental Rights Platform which was created by the EU Regulations establishing the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA). Here the relevant Statutes:

“The Agency shall closely co-operate with non-governmental organizations and with institutions active in the field of fundamental rights, including the combating of racism and xenophobia at national, European or International level. To that end the Agency shall establish a co-operation network (Fundamental Rights Platform) composed of nongovernmental organisations dealing with human rights, trade unions and employer’s organizations, relevant social and professional organisations, churches, religious, philosophical and non-confessional organizations, universities and other qualified experts of European and international bodies and organizations.

The Agency shall call upon the Fundamental Rights Platform in particular to:

- make suggestions to the Management Board on the Annual Work programme
- give feedback and suggest follow-up to the Management Board on the (FRA) annual report
- communicate outcomes and recommendations of conferences, seminars, and meetings relevant to the work of the Agency to the Director and the Scientific Committee. (i.e. the Committee appointed to carry out professional research on human rights).”

In fact the invitees to the first FRP seemed mainly come from single-issue human rights NGOs. There were only two representatives of the churches (CSC of CEC and COMECE) with one representative each from the Muslim and Jewish communities. There were hardly any representatives of ethnic minority groups in Europe and the churches would be among the few who are in contact with the whole range of civil society.

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Clearly both the Agency staff and the Platform were exploring the boundaries of their respective briefs at this meeting. The FRA had set up the first Platform but was anxious that it elected its own Chair and that some kind of continuing group (the 'Panel') operated between FRP meetings to ensure that the FRP Report and concerns are communicated to the FRA Management Committee (representatives of EU member States), and also that this group makes recommendations about balanced representation on the FRP itself. However, one suspects that the mix of a Platform composed of NGOs working in the field, a Management Committee of elected politicians and an agency of EU staff will not always find it easy to live together! Hopefully the resulting tension will be creative for the improving of fundamental human rights in Europe.

From the perspective of the Platform there was a desire to know the possibilities and limitations of the work of the agency. The FRA summed up the work of the FRA as research, awareness-raising and networking which must be related to EU legislation and aimed at influencing the human rights legislation of the Member States. There was much talk about a new way of promoting human rights, not only through legislative processes conducted by 'experts' but a through a more participatory approach which remains close to the real issues of human rights and sees them as part of daily life.

The concern of the CSC of CEC that the FRA will continue the commitment of the EUMC to issues of racism, xenophobia and related intolerance was shared by others at the Platform. The danger of the enlarged mandate of the FRA is that its efforts become dissipated over a wider range of human rights issues and it is less effective, and this was clearly recognized. One suggestion was that the whole work of the FRA should be seen under the general heading of 'anti-discrimination'.

Another concern of the FRP participants was related to what consultation with Human Rights NGOS there can be at the stage of data collection for FRA research reports. Examples were given of groups consulted in the past who had not necessarily been the right ones in the views of some NGOs present. At the moment it is difficult to see how professional researchers working under the direction of the FRA Scientific Committee will interact with NGOs working on the ground and this is something which the Platform and the Agency will continue to explore together.

Overall, everyone was concerned to see what the 'added value' of the Agency's work is to the work of those working closest to human rights issues in Europe and a challenge to the Agency to be proactive e.g. in the situation of the Roma in Italy. In the end the Management Committee, not the FRP, will set the policy and direction of the FRA which means that the relationship the presentation of the FRP Report to the Agency at the end of October will be a key test.

Please find CSC of CEC contribution for the FRA's Work Programme 2009 (http://www.cec-kek.org/pdf/CSCHR_Contribution1FRAWorkPgmdf.pdf) and suggestion for the follow up of the FRA's Annual Report 2008 (http://www.cec-kek.org/pdf/CSCHR_FRAAnnualReport08.pdf) .

For more information about human rights work please contact Human Rights Secretary on eki@cec-kek.be.

For more information about EU Fundamental Rights Platform visit: <http://www.fra.europa.eu/fra/index.php> .