

Berlin 15<sup>th</sup> June 2007

*ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN GREECE – RECENT DEVELOPMENTS*

Greece is a state which respects human rights and democratic institutions. Real democracy practically cannot be found at any governmental system. Nevertheless, when a regime is structured and based on democratic ideals, stemming from the rule of people and oriented towards the protection of human rights both in legal and practical terms, then it can be characterized as a democratic one. It should be mentioned that the degree of protection and respect of human rights is interlinked and depends on the social, economic and political developments in each country, as well as international developments.

Greece, for example, over the past decade, has been rather rapidly transforming from a country of origin of immigrants to a receiving ,a hosting country , due to the collapse of communism and the massive flow of immigrants coming from countries belonging to the former eastern block. Therefore, Greece was not fully prepared to deal with this new reality and, as a result, many human rights violations took place until the legislative framework and relevant administrative procedures were adjusted, despite the fact that Greece is a country that, as a usual practice, ratifies international conventions and protocols on human rights relatively quickly. Hence, it is more than obvious that protecting human rights should be a constant and on-going process. That is why mechanisms of sufficient control are vital in order to ensure that all people enjoy the same rights and freedoms.

Due to the complexity and the extent of the issue, it is not easy to present in a few minutes the whole picture regarding the situation of human rights in Greece. Therefore, I will mention those points I consider to be of greater importance and interest.

During the last years, Greece has made great efforts in the specific fields of gender equality and women's rights. The Greek constitution already provides for equality between women and men, as well as for the adoption of positive measures, wherever necessary, in order to promote gender equality. Moreover, discriminating quotas on employment have been removed from the Greek legislation, while, at the same time, political quotas have been introduced at the level of local authorities' elections.

Furthermore, the Greek Parliament recently adopted a law on domestic violence, which contributes to the protection of women's and children's fundamental rights, introducing five crucial reforms:

- It provides for stricter penalties for acts that are already qualified as criminal offences under the Penal Code, when these are committed in the context of the family (domestic context) as defined by law.

- Rape within marriage is regarded as a criminal offence.
- Non-marital cohabitation between men and women is covered by the scope of the law.
- Physical violence against minors as a disciplinary measure is explicitly forbidden.
- The institution of mediation in criminal cases is established as an innovative instrument for certain domestic violence offences.

As concerns trafficking, unfortunately, Greece has been both a transit and destination country for a great number of women and children, coming mainly from eastern European countries. Greece, since 2001 has started to tackle trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation of women and girls, in a systematic way. The new legal framework against trafficking in human beings qualifies relevant acts as criminal offences – mostly felonies. Severe punishments for the perpetrators have been established, as well as affective protection and assistance to victims. Since August 2004, the Greek government has been implementing an integrated National Action Plan against trade and trafficking in persons, aiming at screening, identifying, protecting and assisting the victims, as well as giving relevant support to the countries of origin through prevention and reintegration programs.

This Plan covers a broad spectrum of actions and more specifically: granting of a residence permit, a work permit and a reflection period, voluntary repatriation with financing of reintegration programs, training of police officers, judges and public prosecutors, information and raising awareness of the society and the creation of a national database for monitoring the phenomenon. The National Action Plan is coordinated at the political level by a Special Inter-ministerial Committee of Secretary Generals, in cooperation with specialised NGOs.

Another major issue Greece is faced with is the status and human rights of the immigrants. As already pointed out, after the geopolitical changes of 1989, the country was rapidly converted into a host of mainly undocumented immigrants from eastern and central Europe, the former Soviet Union, as well as from the Third World. The dramatic and sudden increase of immigrant influx was an unexpected phenomenon for both the government and the population.

Thus, the new situation has been characterised by administrative and political confusion with regard to migration policy, as well as by an increase in xenophobic behaviour and racism from the mid-1990s. In 2001, the government issued a three-year programme: *the Action Plan for the Social Integration of Immigrants (for the period 2002-2005)*. This Plan includes measures for their inclusion in the labour market, their access to health services and an overall series of measures promoting cultural dialogue and combating xenophobia and racism within Greek society.

In August 2005, the Greek Parliament adopted a new immigration bill on 'Entry, stay and integration of third country nationals in Greece'. The objective of this new legislation is to rationalise co-ordination of Greece's immigration policy, simplify procedures and cut down red-tape. The core innovative features include unifying residence and work permits into one document, clarifying family re-unification conditions, addressing the status of victims of human trafficking and strengthening regional migration commissions. However, still much remain to be done in this field,

mainly concerning implementation of those legal measures into practice, as well as the status and rights of illegal immigrants in the country.

Last but not least, regarding refugees and asylum seekers, it should be mentioned that despite the numerous developments during the last decade, the legislative and practical framework for their protection still exhibits weaknesses, which mainly have to do with the lack of a modern and long-term refugee policy. In this respect, it should be noted that the phenomenon of refugee migration has taken on a different and rather complex character since the 1990's, due to global socio – political changes. Therefore, in order to be able to adapt to the contemporary context and to cope with its international obligations, Greece should immediately proceed to the establishment of a modern and practical legal framework for the protection of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as launch a comprehensive national policy on such issues.

Before closing, once again it should be noted that those issues are just a small dimension of the whole spectrum. Still, there are many fields and areas where action should be taken. Greece, as a democratic country is committed to its duty to protect human rights and freedoms. Let's not forget that the protection of human rights is a highly important component of the process to achieve sustainable peace, development and towards offering enhanced democracy to our people.