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Interview with Marco Mascia, UNESCO Chair on Human Rights, Democracy and Peace, Antonio Papisca Human Rights Center - University of Padua



The Press Office for the Global Campus of Human Rights had the opportunity to ask Professor Marco

Mascia – UNESCO Chair on Human Rights, Democracy and Peace and member of the Antonio Papisca Human Rights Center at our partner university of Padua – to share his impressions on the current challenges facing human rights education at the institution he represents.

The Global Campus of Human Rights has been collaborating with the University of Padua for more than twenty years. How do you see the relations between the University of Padua and the Veneto Region developing in terms of promoting human rights and peace?

With its Human Rights Center, the University of Padua was one of the first universities to offer the European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation as part of the Global Campus of Human Rights. In late 1996, the Head of the Unit on Human Rights and Democratisation for the European Commission came to the University of Padua's Human Rights Center (founded in 1982) to exchange ideas on potential initiatives for human rights education at a post-graduate level. We came up with a structural investment in the form of a European Master's Degree. We were approaching the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Commission wanted to mark the celebration with a long-term initiative that could educate new generations of young people through a human rights mindset.

In 1998, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration, the European Council adopted a solemn declaration, in which explicit reference was made to the European Master's Programme. At the same time, the Legislative Assembly of the Veneto Region unanimously endorsed a dedicated bill to ensure substantial support was provided to the EMA on a regular basis (Law No. 33 of 28 December 1998, "European Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation").

It's worth remembering that the Veneto was the first region in Italy to adopt a Regional Bill in 1988 (Law No. 18 of 30 March 1988, "Regional Intervention for the Promotion of a Culture of Peace") to promote a culture of human rights, peace, development and co-operation. Article 1 of the Regional Bill reads:

"1. The Region of Veneto recognizes peace and development as fundamental rights of human beings and people, in accordance with the principles of the Italian Constitution and the International Law for the promotion and protection of human rights and the rights of people, of democratic liberties, and of international co-operation by means of initiatives relating to information, research, education, decentralized co-operation and humanitarian aid. 2. For the purpose of paragraph 1, the Region promotes human rights, a culture of peace, and development co-operation."

The law has been particularly fruitful in helping develop a culture of peace in its own wake, i.e., human rights and education in legality, non-violence, active citizenship, dialogue, and solidarity. It is important to emphasize that the pioneering Law 18/1988 set a precedent for similar laws that were subsequently adopted by other Italian regions.

The Veneto Region has had a councilor dedicated to human rights since 1988, in addition to a budget official devoted to implementing the Bill. The current councilor is Cristiano Corazzari.

Future collaboration with the Veneto Region will develop in the fields of human rights education and training, capacity building, empowerment of the local civil society, and the promotion of active and democratic citizenship. A significant moment in this ongoing collaboration will be the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of the Human Rights Center at the University of Padua (1982 - 2022).

What are some of the best results to come out of the University of Padua's cooperation with the Veneto Region?

The Veneto Region has always been fond of the Human Rights Center and has supported its activities,

nurturing a fertile and increasingly organic collaboration over the years. The Center owes much of what it has become to the local region, and gives back by helping to organize training and information courses for teachers, local administrators, and volunteers from civil society organizations and community-based organizations.

Thanks to the support of the Region, the Human Rights Center has been allowed to carry out educational and research activities both in Veneto, but also at a national, European and international level. Among other things, we lobbied the Ministry of Education, University and Research to extend the teaching of human rights to the entire Italian university system. Nowadays, the subject of human rights, peace and development cooperation is the focus of dedicated Bachelor's and Master's programs. Among these is the European Master's in Human Rights and Democratization.

The main project carried out by the Region and the Center is the "Pace Diritti Umani Regional Archive" (*Peace and Human Rights Archive*). It was established in 1988 under Law No. 18/1988. The archive is one of the main tools used by the Veneto Region to promote a culture of human rights, peace, cooperation, development and solidarity. The archive collects, expands and makes available its collection of documents, themed databases and informational resources on regional law to the public. The archive also manages a database of associations and NGOs in the Veneto Region. During 2020, the archive website recorded over 323,000 unique visitors (users). A total of over 638,424 pages were consulted, and user numbers increased by almost 90,000 compared to the previous year, demonstrating the website's excellent accessibility.

I want to mention three exemplary initiatives carried out in collaboration with the Veneto Region in the early 1990s.

The first initiative involved the diffusion of a proposal drawn up by the Human Rights Center of Padua among local municipalities and provinces in Veneto to include the "human rights peace norm" in new statutes. The text for said norm reproduces Article 1 of Law No. 18/88. The proposal has spread rapidly from Veneto to the rest of Italy. There are now thousands of municipal and provincial statutes containing the aforementioned norm. The number of departments and offices with specific mandates on the subject has also multiplied.

The second initiative was carried out in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Center and the Region organized the first major international Helsinki Citizens Assembly (HCA) conference in Venice, established on the initiative of President Vaclav Havel and other human rights activists belonging to Charta 77. It was an important opportunity for civil society organizations from countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the European Union to meet.

The third initiative refers to the diffusion of the culture of "institutional civic defence" in Italy. Seminars and conferences are organized with the participation of the first regional ombudsmen. The strategic objective is to contribute to placing this new institutional figure at the Ombudsman within a context that is innate to it, that of the non-judicial method of promoting and protecting human rights.

Since 2000, the Region and the Center have organized a series of training courses on active citizenship, human rights, solidarity, and intercultural dialogue, with the involvement of hundreds of teachers from Veneto's seven provinces. The initiative has involved coaching educators, or rather, qualified groups of teachers and tutors in connection with a broader project run by the Ministry of Education.

The Region also supports two publications released by the Center: *The Italian Yearbook of Human Rights* and the *Peace Human Rights Governance* (PHRG) academic journal. *The Italian Yearbook* intends to take stock of how the international human rights monitoring system assesses Italy's performance on an annual basis in order to provoke an informed and open debate on this fundamental aspect of public life.

Would a closer collaboration between universities and academic networks be possible or useful in relation to the main regional events involving universities and the most pertinent topics right now? For example, additional on-site courses such as the European Master's in Human Rights (EMA), and events related to human rights, sustainability and the Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Padua.

Networking is a fundamental tool when it comes to tackling the challenges of our time. It has become a structural characteristic of university action. Several university networks are making unmistakably positive, creative, concrete, scientifically significant, project-oriented contributions to the current debate on human rights and the rights of people. Such networks include the Global Campus of Human Rights, the UNESCO Chairs on Human Rights and Peace, and the Jean Monnet Chairs.

There is a clear awareness that networking and shared actions constitute a fundamental resource for influencing relations with other actors in international politics, and in terms of state-centric relations, in particular. Such awareness stems from the fact that networking strengthens and develops the capacity of universities to organize and manage their activities independently, as well as to influence the behaviour of governmental and intergovernmental power centres by means of a detailed referral to the principles and values expressed in international human rights law. It also allows them to come up with new concepts, principles, and programs for action, promoting their acceptance by national and international governmental institutions. Lastly, it sensitizes global public opinion and helps people to exercise their rights as citizens at every level of social and political life. "From the city to the UN", as Professor Antonio Papisca once said.

From this perspective, it is essential to promote an even closer collaboration between the Veneto Region, the Human Rights Center, and the Global Campus of Human Rights if we want to make a substantial contribution to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Veneto Region, focusing on objective 4.7 of the 2030 Agenda in particular: "By 2030, we must ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development."

What can we ask young people to do in the future in terms of promoting human rights and democratisation? What are the most important and urgent challenges in this field?

Human rights constitute the core of legality in a world that is frantically searching for human and ecologically sustainable governability. They represent the legal, political and moral compass with which we face the great planetary crisis that is affecting hundreds of millions of people and threatening the survival of all humanity.

The logic of human rights focuses on the centrality of the human person, equality and non-discrimination. It is a logic that sees past borders, and therefore, it is the logic of inclusion. Everyone must be able to exercise equal rights of citizenship, be they civil, political, economic, social, or cultural.

The culture of human rights teaches us that we must take care not only of ourselves and others, but of our democratic institutions, the environment, and common goods. Covid-19 has forced us to encourage participation and solidarity. We need to give young people the following messages:

- human rights have not always existed; we must continue to promote them and defend them
- human rights are human rights, be they civil, political, economic, social or cultural. Rule of law and welfare state are two sides of the same coin. We must rekindle the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as stated by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
- the internationalization of human rights was facilitated by the multilateral international

organization. We must fight to democratise the multilateral system of international relations because international law and democracy represent the road to world peace

- there are no rights without responsibilities. Responsibility does not only imply knowledge of the rules and compliance with one's duties but also the will and ability to personally implement the constitutional and universal principles of solidarity, justice and equality. It is not enough to claim rights, we have to accept our personal and collective responsibilities. We all have responsibilities, as people and as institutions.

Can you leave us with a message for teachers, alumni, students and staff of the Global Campus of Human Rights?

Human rights education is the main way to build a more just, equitable, democratic and inclusive world. The Global Campus of Human Rights is the largest and most prestigious global network in the field of human rights education and training. Teachers, alumni, students and staff of the GCHR are human rights defenders. As Antonio Papisca once said, you are “a living community of expert and committed people, which I like to call the civil servants of the human family.”

For more information contact our [Press Office](#)

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