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Interview with Michael O’Flaherty, Director of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)



The Press Office of the Global Campus of Human Rights had the opportunity to ask the Director of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) Michael O’Flaherty about the recent Fundamental Rights Forum

2021 and our partnership.

Could you tell us more about the Fundamental Rights Forum 2021 and the main objectives of your event?

The goal of the Fundamental Rights Forum 2021 was to build a vision of hope for the protection of human rights across the European Union. The event brought together many diverse voices to discuss the most pressing human rights challenges of today and find new ways to engage and work together on tackling them.

We had two days of stimulating discussions during 145 different sessions in 6 locations. Over 3,000 people joined the Forum in Vienna and online, making it the biggest human rights event in Europe this year.

It gave me the sense that the human rights community is a strong community of determined and passionate people, and that together we can make a difference. It reassured me that my hope for a future built on respect for human rights is entirely justified.

Listening to people from all walks of life and taking part in the many different discussions, I see five main takeaways from the Forum:

First of all, we need to 'wake up' from our complacency and acknowledge that no system or organisation is permanent and infallible, guaranteed to live into the ever future.

Once we wake up, we need to 'join up' and bring everybody who cares about human rights together, to engage and work with each other on our common concerns. This includes bringing those who are normally excluded from decision making into the discussions.

We also have to 'wise up', acknowledge the skills of the adversary and be equally smart. This includes improving our tools, getting better at data gathering and making a business case for our claims.

At the same time, it is imperative that we 'catch up' with digitalisation and meaningfully engage with new technologies, especially artificial intelligence.

Last but not least, we need to 'listen up' and engage the voices of young people. This requires that we stop working for people and always insist on working with people. They must be our partners in our effort for the promotion and the protection of human rights.

Could you give us more details about the joint efforts of EU FRA with other eight international organisations regarding a new portal to promote global cooperation on Artificial Intelligence (AI)?

Artificial intelligence can be a powerful force for good, but it can also pose a risk to our fundamental rights. There is an urgent need to 'catch up' with the fast-evolving artificial intelligence technologies and ensure they respect and protect our rights.

This is where the globalpolicy.ai portal comes in.

Launched in September by eight international organisations, the portal's main goal is to encourage global cooperation on artificial intelligence.

It provides access to the necessary tools and information, such as projects, research and reports to promote trustworthy and responsible AI that is aligned with human rights at the global, national and local level.

By joining forces with other international organisations, we are speaking with one voice when we call for rights-based approach to artificial intelligence.

Through our network of 100 universities, the EU helped fund human rights education and more than 6000 graduates of these universities are now human rights ambassadors and defenders in international, governmental and civil society organisations. What motivates you as Director of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) to continue being a long-time partner of the Global Campus of Human Rights?

I have known and worked closely with the Global Campus and its predecessors for well over 20 years.

Working as a member of its governing bodies, I have seen first-hand the enormous value it brings for the promotion of human rights education in Europe and globally.

The Global Campus is not only an educational service. It is a laboratory for fresh thinking on how best to promote and protect human rights across the world.

The Fundamental Rights Agency is and will continue to be its close friend in our shared struggle in the service of people at the edges of our societies.

What does EU FRA hope to achieve through the continued support to our rapidly growing academic network in the coming years and which are the main challenges and topics to be addressed regarding human rights and democracy?

Human rights are at risk in far too many places, not just globally but also in Europe.

By working with academics from your network, we can join up forces and work together on achieving our common goal – to better protect and promote human rights across Europe.

I have reflected on the challenges to human rights in my takeaways from the Fundamental Rights Forum 2021.

When it comes to specific topics, there are far too many. I would like to name just a few:

First is the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on our rights. The pandemic has laid bare the glaring inequalities in our societies, and we can no longer turn a blind eye on them. It is an opportunity to address these issues and create a fairer, more equal society everyone can take part in. We need to grab it.

Ensuring our rights are respected in a digital age is another important issue, especially with the rise of artificial intelligence and digital platforms. We have some catching up to do in this regard to ensure new technologies promote and protect our human rights. And we have no time to waste.

Migration also needs urgent attention of European as well as national policy makers. We cannot afford to create a lost generation of refugees. Instead, we need to do our best to allow migrants and refugees who have a right to stay in Europe to become full members of our societies. We have to treat everybody with dignity and respect their fundamental rights.

Could you give a personal message to students, professors, partners and staff of the Global Campus of Human Rights?

I would like to repeat the message of my speech from the graduation ceremony of the Global Campus of Human Rights this September.

And that is: 'Get indignant!'

That means that we need to do our human rights work with indignation. We must first wake up to what is at stake. We must be aware of the need for urgent response. We must never turn away from injustice. And we must be unapologetic in demanding respect for law.

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

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