Human rights in the European Union. Annual Report, June 1998 to June 1999

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PURPOSE : the presentation of the first EU annual report on Human Rights (part of which is dedicated to Human Rights in the European Union). CONTENT : the Council submits the first annual report on human rights to the European Parliament which is made up of two distinct parts : the first deals with human rights in the Union, the second with the evolution of human rights in the world (see INI/1999/2002). This report takes the place of the traditional memorandum on the Union's activities in the domain of human rights addressed up to now each year by the Council for the European Parliament to informing it about EU action on human rights in the world over the past year. In presenting this report, the Union would like to contribute to a better understanding of the motives and institutional structures and policy instruments of the Union. More specifically, the report highlights that several new provisions have been created by the the Amsterdam Treaty relating to human rights thus strengthening the basis for EU action in this field, in particular in the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Thus, the Treaty has enshrined in principle the respect for fundamental rights, as guaranteed by the Council of Europe's Convention for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Union bases its actions on the principles of freedom, democracy, the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, the Treaty establishing the European Community, as amended by the Treaty of Amsterdam, specifically empowers the Community to take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, race, ethnic origin, religion, or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. It also contains measures concerning asylum, refugees and immigration. It should also be noted that any Member State violating human rights in a serious and persistant way can face the suspension of the rights it is granted under the Treaties. With the process of enlargement, the Union has clearly indicated that accession is only open to states that respect the principles of the Treaty, which refer to the protection of human rights and minorities. At Union level, respect for human rights is guaranteed by the European Parliament and the Ombudsman, the Commission, the Council of Ministers and, in particular, by the Court of Justice. The main responsibility for the protection and promotion of human rights rests, however, with the Union·s Member States. The European Parliament is an important participant in making and implementing the EU·s Human Rights Policy. The EP has become an important forum for discussion on human rights and maintains regular contact with human rights organisations and human rights defenders. It also undertakes human rights missions to countries outside the EU and has influence in treaty-making processes with third countries. According to this report, progress in implementing human rights is based on interaction between governments and civil society. The Union has a tradition of cooperating with its active and well-established NGO community which makes efforts to combat racism and xenophobia, in particular. Moreover, the Union seeks to strengthen the position of NGOs as participants, promoters and beneficiaries in the democratization and development process. As for racism and xenophobia in the EU, the commitment of the EU to curbing racism and related intolerance was reflected in numerous activities in all Member States by Governments and NGOs during the European Year Against Racism in 1997. The most visible outcome was the establishment of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia situated in Vienna. Its prime mandate is to provide and analyse objective, reliable and comparable data and best practices on racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism in EU Member States. Another focus of activity of the Centre is the organizing of Round-Table seminars in the Member States aimed at increasing the visibility and interaction between the actors in this field. Lastly, with the Treaty of Amsterdam, a new opportunity for promoting fundamental rights and fighting discrimination is offered under Article 13. Legislative procedures with this goal will be initiated as soon as possible seeking to combat racial discrimination and discrimination concerning employment.