



ANNUAL HIGH-LEVEL EU DIPLOMACY LECTURE



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EU INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND DIPLOMACY STUDIES

Summary of the first high-level *EU Diplomacy Lecture*

EU International Relations and
Diplomacy Studies

College of Europe, Bruges

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The Rights of Others – Why European Human Rights Diplomacy Matters

Mr Stavros LAMBRINIDIS, EU Special Representative for Human Rights

This “EU Diplomacy Lecture” was the first event in a new annual series of high-level lectures organised by the Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies of the College of Europe in Bruges. Professor Sieglinde Gstöhl, Director of Studies, welcomed the audience and introduced the high-level speaker, EUSR Stavros Lambrinidis.

She underlined that 25 years after the fall of the Berlin wall, the world was still far from universal democratisation and respect for human rights. The end of the Cold War was not “the end of history” as many had expected. On the contrary, the promotion of human rights seemed even more necessary today. This lecture on the role of human rights in EU diplomacy around the world was therefore very timely in light of the many conflicts also in the EU’s immediate neighbourhood.

The mandate of Mr Lambrinidis as the first EU Special Representative for Human Rights is to contribute to the implementation of the EU’s human rights policy, in particular the EU Strategic Framework and the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy adopted in 2012, and to enhance dialogue with governments, international organisations and civil society on human rights in order to ensure the effectiveness, visibility and coherence of the EU’s external action on human rights.



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Mr Lambrinidis began his lecture by recalling Belarusian dissident Ales Bialliatski's visit to Brussels in June 2014 to thank those whose efforts helped secure his release after three years of captivity. In the ten years since the EU first published Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, the EU has helped hundreds escape harm or imprisonment and thousands fight their cases in courts and support their families. However, the space for civil society appears to be shrinking around the world and the voices questioning the universality of human rights are again growing louder.

Why defend human rights abroad? Far from being a footnote of foreign policy, Mr Lambrinidis argued, human rights violations are 'hard core' foreign policy problems, affecting war and peace, and defending human rights is central to resolving them. The 2012 EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy put human rights at the heart of EU foreign policy. Moreover, human rights are enmeshed with and crucial for the success of every EU external policy



objective from countering terrorism through promoting trade and investment to governing the internet. For instance, only few investors and companies would be comfortable striking deals without functioning institutions and legally enforceable human rights. In addition, Mr Lambrinidis argued, human rights are fundamental EU values, the moral compass that gives direction to EU policymaking. If the EU is to be a soft power, the European priority must be to defend international law to restrain the hard powers.

But how can the EU promote these values abroad? Mr Lambrinidis submitted that the promotion of human rights worldwide depends on **six 'E's**. The first is to **empower** the state institutions, courts, civil society organisations, media and activists who fight for rights in their own countries. The EU cannot impose human rights, but it is the world's biggest supporter of human rights defenders, sometimes loudly so, at other times more discreetly to avoid increasing the risks for those already in danger. By funding and keeping an eye on local human rights defenders and those who wish to silence them, the EU prevents human rights violators from sweeping their crimes under the carpet.



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Second, where the EU cannot bring economic and hard power to bear on offenders, it can practice more subtle means of persuasion to **encourage** foreign governments to see the human value and interest of defending human rights.

Third, the EU must **engage** even with governments that are guilty of grave and widespread human rights violations, some of which, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, are often sensitive about their international reputation – while taking care not to provide them with a fig leaf of respectability.



Supporting human rights defenders and confronting violators is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Today, at the level of ideas, under the flag of “cultural relativism”, human rights violators try to undermine the universality and indivisibility of human rights as enshrined in international law. In order to uphold this cornerstone principle, the EU must – as a fourth pillar – **enlarge** the defence of human rights by reaching out to

local governments and regional organisations such as the African Union, the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Human rights do not pit one human culture or religion against another: they are the universal language of the powerless against the relativism of the powerful. The EU should act not as a “leader” but as a “convener” of human rights-minded forces. Understanding local settings should not translate into applying human rights *à la carte* but provide the means for promoting them more effectively. Human rights often clash with interests and beliefs upheld by the powerful. As with female genital cutting, the victims themselves might often defend traditional practices, and change is possible only by fostering local reflection to confront the underlying beliefs and promote frank discussion of the consequences, often taboo, of such long-practiced acts.

Regardless of place and culture, some violations are so gross and at such a scale, or so deeply engrained and sustained by particular regimes, that they should provoke immediate and universal outrage. Yet it took televised beheadings of Western hostages for the international community to muster the will for forceful intervention in the brutal war in Syria and Iraq which had already cost hundreds of thousands of lives and forced millions to flee. Impassivity in the face of such massive atrocities is costly not only in terms of human lives but also for the credibility of human rights and



the EU's commitment to uphold them. While empowering defenders, engaging with offenders and supporting locally driven change are essential, the EU and the international community must at times be prepared to “**enforce**” human rights as a fifth element, including through vocal public statements.

Sixth, the EU will inevitably face reverse scrutiny of its record at upholding human rights at home. Foreign governments attempt to deflect criticism by pointing at the migrants drowning off the EU's Mediterranean Sea coasts, or the odious agendas of extremist movements active within Europe. However, in doing so they are often partly missing the point. While recognising that no country or region is free of wrongs, Europe has been



unprecedentedly successful in fostering effective institutions to monitor and redress abuses: a free press, an open internet, a robust civil society and independent universities which help preserve human rights under the rule of law. In order to be able to promote these values and institutions abroad the EU must continually strive to **embody** human rights at home and to ensure consistency across its actions and actors. And when dealing with third countries, whether business, development or security issues be on the agenda, the EU and its member states must sing from a common songbook, embed human rights clauses in all policies and agreements and stand ready to invoke them against any country, big or small.

Our choice of words, Mr Lambrinidis argued, also matters. Europeans tend to recast the ‘human rights’ the EU promotes abroad as ‘fundamental rights’ within the EU, while across the Atlantic the Americans refer to ‘civil liberties’. Moreover, Europeans inadvertently tend to dissociate ‘human rights’ from the social and economic security which they have known for decades thanks to their welfare states’ safety nets. When promoting human rights abroad, this semantic bias leaves the EU vulnerable to counter-depictions of ‘human rights’ as a luxury which is secondary to social and economic development – which, in fact, are just different words for social and economic, and therefore human, rights. Hence, the EU should extend the language of promoting human rights more widely to its economic and security policies to emphasise their overarching ambition to advance human rights in all of their dimensions.



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The lecture by EUSR Stavros Lambrinidis was followed by a stimulating question and answer session in which members of the audience asked questions on *inter alia* the choice between loud or discrete human rights diplomacy; how to improve coherence between EU actors and policies; how local beliefs and cultural values can oppose supposedly universal human rights; the growing number of voices challenging human rights within the EU and the incoming EU leadership's priorities for the years ahead. As his closing remarks, Mr Lambrinidis called for his audience to resist the creeping cynicism and despondency in foreign policy, and to recognise that we all, at some moment in our lives, will be in the minority in need of rights to protect us against a powerful majority.



Stavros LAMBRINIDIS is since August 2012 the EU Special Representative for Human Rights. In 2011, he was Minister for Foreign Affairs of Greece.

Between 2004 and 2011 Stavros LAMBRINIDIS was a Member of the European Parliament and served as Head of the Greek Social Democratic Party (PASOK) Delegation to the European Parliament. In July 2009 he was elected Vice-President of the European Parliament in charge of the Bureau's international relations and the Parliament's communications policy. He was also responsible for the Bureau's transatlantic relations and for relations with international organisations.

Between 2004 and 2009 he was Vice-President of the Parliament's Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee (LIBE). He has served as the Parliament's rapporteur on issues such as the Promotion of Security and Fundamental Rights in the Internet Age; the Integration of Immigrants in Europe; the Protection of Critical Infrastructures against terrorist threats; and as shadow rapporteur for the Processing of Personal Data and the Protection of Privacy in the electronic communications sector.

Before that, Stavros LAMBRINIDIS served as Ambassador ad personam of the Hellenic Republic (1999-2004); Secretary General of the Greek Foreign Ministry responsible for expatriate Greeks (1996-99); and chief of staff to the Greek Foreign Affairs Minister (1996). Between 2000 and 2004, he was Director General of the International Olympic Truce Centre, an International Olympic Committee organization. From 1988 to 1993 he worked as an Attorney at Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering in Washington, D.C., specializing in international trade, transactions and arbitration.

Stavros LAMBRINIDIS studied Economics and Political Science at Amherst College, USA (B.A. degree, 1984) and Law at Yale Law School (Juris Doctor degree, 1988). He is a 1980 graduate of the Athens College High School in Athens, Greece.



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