



'Open doors' for empowering voices and understanding the most critical issues

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Abstract: Among the pressing human rights challenges for Europe as discussed at the FRA Forum 2024 under a valuable cross-generational perspective, it is worth highlighting insights on election impact, civic space promotion and protection, as well as digitalisation and AI impact.

A phrase that stood out and perhaps became an unofficial slogan of the [FRA Forum](#) in Vienna between 11th and 12th March 2024, was 'open doors'. It was first used during the grand opening ceremony to highlight the willingness to include all sorts of ideas and voices, and that openness could truly be felt throughout the forum. One was constantly surrounded by this approach – during the panels, sessions, and masterclasses, during the artistic performances that so greatly complemented the discussions and even in between – in the hallways, which resembled a gallery of sorts where participants could immerse themselves into the world of virtual reality and documentary. Consequently, the forum became a mosaic of passionate individuals and insightful considerations, some of which are highlighted below.

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Elections: hope for future generations

An omnipresent topic during the FRA Forum was that of elections. There were talks of national elections – like the quite successful parliamentary election in Poland in October 2023, but also of the election to the European Parliament in June 2024. The special attention paid to this subject showed people's appreciation of its significance, even if the state of democracy in Europe leaves a lot to be desired. Elections determine the future. They allow people to decide what is most important for them, and how they envision the world in the upcoming years and beyond. They are the opportunity to show what we believe in, and which issues we qualify as urgent. If we imagine the FRA Forum as a web, with the debated topics as its singular strings, the topic of elections could be placed right in the middle as it directly relates to so many other subjects such as climate change, digitalisation, and children's rights.

Saying that election plays an important role in people's everyday lives would be a truism. Nevertheless, we should start with that, because a great part of the population includes children and we should pay special attention to them as they deserve to live in a world that is clean, safe, and just at the very least. National parliaments as well as the European Parliament play a crucial role in shaping the legislative landscape in Europe. Arguably, one of the groups that depend on this legislation most is migrant and refugee children. The fact that migration and the 'refugee crisis' continue to be some of the most [widely discussed](#) topics through populist narratives negatively impacts thousands of people, many of whom are underaged. UNHCR representatives and some students of the [Vienna Master](#) of Arts in Applied Human Rights did an outstanding job in reminding this point to the participants at the FRA Forum. In particular, the opportunity to see some of the challenges migrants face (e.g. access to education or the labour market) through the eyes of children living through them made the FRA Forum particularly humane. The use of Virtual Reality (VR) and a short documentary to portray the way of life of children in refugee camps as well as in EU member states made the participants' experience more touching and allowed for more emotional reflection. This contribution was incredibly valuable and hopefully signified a shy permission to move away from the dryness of plain arguments and legislative discussions present during other events, towards a more comprehensive understanding of the most urgent issues.

Civic space through different lenses of analysis

Protecting and allowing civic space to grow is essential for a well-functioning democracy. In this regard, we had the incredible privilege to participate in the forum [Human Rights Table](#) where NGO representatives, lawyers, students, and business professionals debated on the most challenging themes surrounding civic space. They focused on four main topics.

First, they discussed how to communicate human rights challenges and whether the messages to spread within the society should be simplified. On the one hand, simplification may lead to a better understanding of complex contexts, which is beneficial while speaking to children, or a less educated audience. Some groups are also facing language barriers that prevent them from being active participants in civic society. Alternatively, certain messages describing broad concepts such as climate change cannot be simplified as this could potentially

minimise the problem concerned. Despite these challenges, many believe that emphasising positive developments and progress, rather than focusing solely on failures and threats, can inspire more proactive engagement and hope. This approach encourages people to contribute to solutions rather than feeling overwhelmed by problems. Therefore, as said by many, in a world full of threats it is important to lead with the narrative of progress, not failure.

Second, they addressed the significance of being pragmatic with the approach undertaken. Participants exchanged their views on the financing of the grass movements and tried to strike a balance between the departure from project-based financing and maintaining the standards for transparency and accountability of funding for NGOs.

Third, they discussed the importance of being able to defend human rights and democratic values from populist movements, which are progressively becoming a [concerning issue](#) in European politics. These movements often exploit societal fears and frustrations, undermining the principles of democracy and human rights. Strengthening legal frameworks and promoting civic education are essential strategies to counteract these threats and safeguard the core values of European societies.

Fourth, they considered the need to look for new allies sometimes in places that do not seem obvious. The [human rights table](#) provided an incredible opportunity to spark the discussion and advance how we as human rights defenders should engage with different actors using a flexible approach and hope-based communication.

In the world of tech

Digitalisation is a rapidly progressing field. It touches on multiple areas of life and therefore should be carefully observed and regulated. One of the major topics discussed during the FRA Forum was the usage of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a tool that could bring both great danger and huge advancement. Representatives from companies like Microsoft and Google spoke about their continued efforts to fight disinformation and enhance the tools that would provide a safe space for information exchange. Businesses and the private sector should operate with transparency and provide information about how AI systems work, ensuring that human rights, equality, non-discrimination, and privacy are not violated.

On the other hand, international organisations should support a human rights-based approach to AI technologies, using them to make their work more efficient. They should also advocate for laws that could help obtain eventual remedies for all the victims harmed by AI technology. Especially thought-provoking was the thematic panel on '[digitalisation and security](#)' which addressed some possible human rights implications of AI-powered tools, such as [facial recognition](#) and its usage for [monitoring demonstrations](#).

A cross-generational look

Besides the variety of key issues debated, what made the 2024 FRA Forum particularly powerful, was the quite unique opportunity to familiarise oneself with the cross-generational perspective. The inclusion of young voices by making them not only part of the audience but also – more importantly – guest speakers, enabled a deeper reflection on the Forum's topics. Hearing and learning from young people full of ideas – who are still hopeful about the possibilities of

moving forward and improving the world, and who grew up in times when globalisation and the European Union were seen positively rather than entailing complex challenges — makes one root for this new generation to become future leaders.