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Opening remarks at the European Parliament Hearing in the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE)

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

European Parliament Hearing

Brussels, 11 January 2010

Mr Chairman, Honourable Members,

Today is the third time that I have the honour of appearing before this House as a Commissioner-designate.

For me, **the hearings at the beginning of a new Commission are always a strong moment of our European democracy.**

A strong moment of political accountability.

A strong moment of debate.

And a strong moment to show all the citizens who are following these hearings via the Internet, that Europe is a very strong and unique democracy.

There are not many Parliaments around the world who have successfully battled for the right to examine in this way the future members of the executive branch of their government.

As you know, I was myself a Member of this House during 10 years and I have participated in this battle.

I believe that **we Europeans can be proud of this strong moment of our democracy.**

I am particularly proud as I am standing before you today as Commissioner-designate for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship.

Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship are policy areas where citizens expect most from policy-makers.

But where Europe has also often disappointed the expectations of our citizens in the past.

The reason for this was not a lack of will. But that for a long time, Europe was **not fully equipped** to act in the interests of citizens in these important areas.

I remember this well from my time when I was Vice-Chair of the Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs Committee.

At the time, decisions taken by the Justice and Home Affairs Ministers were not very transparent or happened behind closed doors.

The Parliament had little say in the so-called "Third Pillar".

And EU legislation in this field was only the dream of a few visionary members of our Committee.

But now, the fight of the European Parliament has finally paid off.

Since 1 December, we – finally! – have the new Lisbon Treaty.

We all cannot stress enough that **this means a true revolution for the whole field of Justice and Home Affairs.**

The co-decision procedure with the Parliament and qualified majority in Council are now the rule for new legislation.

Judicial review is fully available both at the Court of Justice and in the national courts.

And – most important in my view – our EU Charter of Fundamental Rights is finally legally binding, and on equal footing with the Treaties.

It has been a long journey to arrive here.

Our citizens will now expect from Europe action and concrete results.

I am therefore convinced that the Lisbon Treaty is the right moment to re-orient our policies in the field of Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, and to turn them into practical results.

The reformed EU Treaty says, in Article 3, that the Union should offer our citizens an area of freedom, security and justice.

To me it is clear that there can be no freedom without both security and justice.

However, I believe that during the past decade Europe's policies have too often focussed only on security.

And neglected justice.

The Lisbon Treaty gives us the opportunity to bring now a new balance into our policies to strengthen the rights and freedoms of our citizens.

To emphasise this policy re-orientation, President Barroso has created a new separate portfolio specifically dedicated to Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship.

If you confirm me as Commissioner, I intend to make full use of this re-orientation of EU policies made possible by the Lisbon Treaty.

In the interest of justice.

And in the interest of the rights of our citizens.

The Action Plan to implement the Stockholm programme will be the first test-case if this re-orientation will really happen.

The Stockholm programme includes around 170 new initiatives which the Commission will take and which will be debated and decided in this House.

I would like to single out three priority areas where I believe we need to show strongly that Europe's policy is changing with the Lisbon Treaty.

First of all, we need to strengthen substantially the EU's stance in protecting the privacy of our citizens in the context of all EU policies.

And this also when it comes to law enforcement and crime prevention.

And this also when it comes to our international relations with partners such as the United States.

Secondly, we need to strengthen the right of citizens to move freely in the European Union, whether alone or with their partners or family members.

Free movement is after all a core right of EU citizens.

It must be more than an abstract idea.

It must become a concrete reality across all EU Member States, and EU law must be rigorously enforced wherever necessary.

Thirdly, we need to ensure that also accused and suspected persons have clear rights in Europe.

It is all well that we have a European Arrest Warrant and a European Evidence Warrant.

But where a possibly innocent citizen must today expect to be surrendered, under European law, to the judicial authorities of another country, we must at the same time insist that European law guarantees a high standard of rights, notably as regards the fairness of the procedures, but also as regards prison and detention conditions.

It is evident that we also need to strengthen the rights of victims.

This is simply the other side of the coin. **There can be no area of justice and no mutual trust without common fundamental rights standards based on our common values.**

I therefore want to work swiftly with you on new EU legislation to strengthen procedural rights and the rights of victims.

Mr Chairman, Honourable Members,

There are many more items on my list for the Stockholm programme, where we can demonstrate the new focus of EU policies on the rights of citizens.

I am looking forward to debating these challenges further with you.

I am now available for all the questions that you will certainly have.