

## **The Austrian League for Human Rights**

### Tradition and Continuity

The Austrian League for Human Rights, Austria's oldest human rights organization, was founded in 1926, when human rights still had no legal status. Faced by the threat of totalitarianism and growing anti-Semitism, humanistically oriented individuals of various political persuasions and educational and professional backgrounds joined forces to stand up for the following issues in particular: that every person has a right to live in dignity as a human being; that every state must undertake commitments to respect certain internationally ratified basic human rights; and that democracy and the rule of law form the basis for every kind of peaceful coexistence.

The first members of the League were pioneering thinkers in the field of human rights and thus active in the resistance to totalitarianism and anti-Semitism. The League was forcibly dissolved in 1934. Many of its members suffered violent reprisals on account of their political opinions and activities; a large number did not survive the Nazi period. The re-foundation of the Austrian League for Human Rights in 1946 was thus a tribute to the victims of National Socialism and was intended to help Austria face up to come to terms with its immediate past. The Austrian League for Human Rights has retained this keen *sense of history* and is committed to counteracting the ever-increasing neglect of the historical dimension in present-day society. Even when dealing with the latest issues, it endeavours to ensure that historical developments are not disregarded in discussion and decision-making, constantly reminding those active in the field that human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are achievements of the greatest importance.

### Networking

The Austrian League for Human Rights lives from its networks and cultivates the best possible contacts with *academic institutions and other NGOs/NPOs*, both within Austria and internationally. It endeavours to organize all its events and activities in co-operation with other organizations. As many of its committee members are also actively involved in other organizations, the League is well positioned to generate a great variety of positive synergies.

The Austrian League for Human Rights is involved in the following active networks:

1. It was founded as a member of the Paris-based international federation of human rights organizations FIDH and thus enjoys observer status as the Austrian representative of this UN-accredited umbrella organization.
2. Since 2002, the League has been engaged in close networking and information exchange with *NGOs from new and EU candidate countries*. The resulting network has been built up through the project NGO-Network for Central Europe, funded from 2002 to 2005 by the city of Vienna. The League continues to be responsible for its operation.
3. Since 2005 the League has also been a member of the *NESOVE* network: "Network Social Responsibility" (*Netzwerk sozialer Verantwortung*). This network founded as the result of an idea conceived by the Vienna Workers Chamber (*Arbeiterkammer Wien*). It aims to take a critical look at the activities of business and enterprise in the light of corporate social responsibility.

### Publicity work and awareness-raising

The Austrian League for Human Rights aims to use carefully targeted publicity work to raise awareness of human rights-related issues. The issues addressed by the League span the whole gamut represented in the Declaration of Human Rights, from the fundamental rights through

the political rights to the social rights. Its work focuses primarily on the situation in Austria and in the EU.

The League orientates its work not so much around day-to-day political developments as around *longer-term tendencies*. It tries to *identify and publicize those issues* that receive less attention in political life generally but are essential to peaceful social co-existence. As such, its place amongst the Austrian NGOs is not so much that of a “power press group” as that of a “trendscout”.

The Austrian League for Human Rights is noted for the high quality of the publicity work, which is manifest both in the *seriousness* of its approach to important issues and also in its public image, which is designed to appeal to a wide target group including people of all age groups, levels of education, and professional backgrounds. It is a principle of the League that its publicity work should not be aimed solely at experts. On the contrary, it aims to provide “interested laypeople” with information about human rights-related areas and to make them more sensitive to the issues involved. This approach stems from the conviction that the following goals should be high priorities: working on a variety of levels to give people a sense of the reality of human rights; spotlighting fields where violations of human rights make themselves felt, even in the most banal areas of everyday life; demonstrating what consequences these violations have for certain groups of people; and identifying the locations where discrimination takes place. The League uses concrete examples to provide insights into a wide variety of real-life situations and to raise awareness of the plight of the disadvantaged (in connection with issues such as poverty or discrimination).

At the heart of the League’s publicity work – which includes workshops, symposiums, discussion groups, readings, and the like – is the periodical *Liga*, which has been awarded international prizes for the high quality of its layout and its well-prepared texts.

#### Contact point for legal aid cases

The League acts as a contact point for individuals with human rights-related problems, offering basic information and advice, drawing individuals’ attention to relevant specialized NGOs or lawyers. Many of our members have offered to represent individuals with human rights cases at no cost. The League frequently mediates with state authorities on behalf of individuals suffering social hardship.