

The Humanist Union - A Historic Outline

The Humanist Union (HU), the first German civil liberties union, was established by Gerhard Szczesny in 1961. At that time he was Head of Department of the Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavarian radio station) and later on worked as an independent publisher. Szczesny's ambition was to create a civil liberties union as a counterbalance to the political incidences of the restoration period during the Adenauer Era.

His aim was to unite people from a wide political spectrum, which would support the ultimate goals of the HU:

- The liberation of the people from the shackles of an authoritarian state and clerical ties.
- The promulgation and recognition of human rights and civil liberties and duties.
- The establishment and support for educational and care facilities.
- The right for the freedom of expression in all spheres of society (e.g. press, science, literature, art etc.).

The early years

In its early years the HU's campaigns focused on the recognition and extension of basic human rights, the maintenance of the German Constitution as the guardian of these rights and the possibility of psychological rehabilitation. The Union opposed to sexual oppression and discrimination and the dominance and engagement of the Church in society, especially in the fields of education, politics and culture. It initiated actions against the state of emergency laws (Notstandgesetze) and called for an altered criminal law and reformed penal system.

Influenced by the protest movements of the 1960s an increasing number of people lost their trust in politics as the only controller and initiator of societal change. During this time the HU supported emancipative efforts in all spheres of society and reassured that the achieved changes were protected by law. Until today, the HU has been playing an important role in the debate regarding the abolition of Penal Code 218 - the current abortion law.

Faced with the freedom and anti-nuclear power movements the HU became an actor in the new social movements without however losing its independence. It supported civil and civic disobedience. It called upon political parties to exhaust all legal possibilities in the fight against the deployment of missiles.

Anti-Surveillance initiatives

The inability on part of the modern constitutional state to solve existing political and social problems as well as the causes and uprising of nationalist tendencies - partly invoked by the end of the East-West paradigm in 1989 - has led to the introduction of new state defence mechanisms. The establishment and growth of a comprehensive state surveillance apparatus has been an increasing threat to civil liberties. In this respect the HU has taken on a leading role in the debate about the so called security laws and in questions regarding data-protection in the new digital age. The HU has been very active in opposing legislative efforts giving away greater powers and authority to the secret service.

Related to ever growing state led security, the HU has been active in opposing efforts at European level to reduce and even abolish the rights of asylum seekers.

The HU - member of a wider human rights network

Unlike in its early days, the HU does not stand alone with its demands and fight for human and civil rights. Throughout its existence members of the HU have founded their own organisations and initiatives focusing on specialised themes and spheres within societal life - for example legal issues regarding homosexuality and psycho-analysis.

Furthermore, the HU is a member of an ever-growing network of human rights activists and organisations. It often cooperates with organisations such as human rights watch, amnesty international, statewatch, the Forum for Human Rights (Forum Menschenrechte), Pro Asyl etc. Close links also exist with specialised legal associations and initiatives within the field of data protection.

Initiatives with sustainable impact

The propagation and recognition of human and civil rights is an objective which requires tough implementation efforts and common intellectual input. The HU has been able to provide for such input (in form of publications, symposia and expert discussions) and has been realising initiatives, which even today have an important impact on current political and societal debates:

- The implementation of anti-discrimination legislation in regard to women, minorities, unprivileged groups
- Safeguarding the rights for children
- The removal of state regulation on abortion
- The abolition of secret services and surveillance of citizens
- Safeguarding digital rights, such as data protection
- Safeguarding the right for freedom of information
- Constitutional separation of the Church and the State, including the abolition of firmly rooted privileges on part of the Church
- Safeguarding democratic participation rights, such as public opinion polls and referenda
- Humanisation of living conditions, for example in prisons and psychiatric facilities
- Safeguarding civil and human rights at European level, such as the rights of refugees and asylum seekers
- Safeguarding the right of sick people for self-determination, e.g. advance directives and euthanasia