



PSYCHOLOGY – a contribution to EU Policy Making November 9, 2011 – European Parliament Brussels

On Nov. 9th, 2011 the first psychological conference for policy-makers took place in European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium. This event was organized by the European Federation of Psychologists Associations (EFPA) at the occasion of its 30th anniversary. It was hosted by MEP **Leonidas Donskis**, MEP **Nadja Hirsch** and MEP **Vilja Savisaar Toomast** and supported by the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.



The aim of the conference was to provide Members of the European Parliament, officials from the European Commission and other European bodies up-to-date information on psychology and what it can offer to European society. The conference

highlighted psychologists' expertise and possible contributions to policy-making in such areas as health, education, work, community, traffic and other fields.



The delegates were welcomed by MEP Prof. Dr. **Leonidas Donskis**, who emphasised the need to act upon the problems of public and mental health and to rely more heavily on psychology.

This line of thinking was further developed in a presentation entitled „EU Policy on stress on working places“ by Mr. **Gyula Hegyi** (European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) whose main question was „What is EU doing to improve the health of workers?“. In his presentation, Mr. Hegyi placed the contributions of psychology in the context of the EU's Strategy on Health and Safety at Work. Psychologists could help to design preventive and intervening strategies that help reducing stress and burnout, countering harassment, improving social relations at work, working hours, combining increased flexibility of employment with greater job security (“flexicurity”) for workers and division of working plan can be addressed.



Prof. Dr. **Robert Roe**, President of EFPA and professor-emeritus from Maastricht University, the Netherlands, spoke about „Psychology for Europe“. He clarified how psychology differs from other disciplines and why using psychology can have a multiplier effect on policies based on technical or medical sciences. He warned against relying on common sense, stressing that psychology roots in measurement, facts and theory. Prof. Roe highlighted seven areas in which psychological expertise can contribute to EU policy-making: health, school, work, community, transport, sport, law and law enforcement. He put a special emphasis on prevention. He noted that psychologists can do much more than treating



individual clients on a 1:1 basis, namely by helping to change the behaviour and the living and working conditions of large number of people. In his view, psychologists can be made more effective by strengthening their role as gatekeepers in schools, neighbourhoods, and organizations, signalling problems and intervening at an early stage. They can also play a role as architects of behavioural interventions that raise

awareness and equip people with self-management and social skills. And finally, they can acts as designers that help changing the legal and material conditions under which people live. Prof. Roe also made a case for teaching psychology at schools. He argued that it is hard to understand why people should learn the basics of physics and biology, but not the basic of human thinking, feeling and acting. Psychological literacy for all might help to avoid and reduce many problems people suffer from.

Other speakers looked into psychology in mental health care, education, organizations and public health.

The president of Professional Association of Austrian Psychologists, Mag. **Ulla Konrad**, stressed that “there is no health without mental health”. She addressed the burden of mental illness, which affects 38% of the EU population, and amounts to 277 billion Euro in direct costs. She noted that the high indirect costs (such as sick days, disability and early retirement) could be lowered by involving psychologists in collaborative care, timely diagnosis, and training of general practitioners and medical specialists. All of this can be supported by EU policies.

Marianne Kant-Schaps, from EFPA’s Network of European Psychologists in the Educational System (NEPES), Brussels, Belgium, emphasized the contribution of school psychologists to well-being, life-long learning and economy. She gave examples from several international projects, which aimed at reducing illiteracy in secondary schools, crisis intervention in schools, rights of children, the costs of mental health problems of children etc. She made clear that school psychologists can make huge contributions to lowering long-term costs for society and that promoting school psychology, even in times of economic crisis, is a cost-effective approach to promoting citizens’ well-being throughout the life-time, life-long learning, and overall competitiveness.



Prof. **Jose Maria Peiro**, Director of the Research Institute of Human Resources Psychology, Organizational Development and Quality of Working life (IDOCAL) in Valencia, Spain, introduced the notion of “sustainable well-being at work”. It combines greater productivity with positive outcomes for people at the workplace. He mentioned four areas of psychological expertise that directly relate to EU policies and that can be used to promote sustainable wellbeing: work content, new skills and new jobs, occupational distress and eustress, and organizational justice. Prof. Peiro argued that using existing knowledge on these topics can help achieving the goals of EU2020.

The last presentation was by **Susan Michie**, professor of Health Psychology at University College London, UK, who outlined the psychological principles of behaviour change. She illustrated the logic and necessity of changing people’s behaviours with examples from



behaviour during the recent H1N1 pandemic and obesity. In her presentation she asked such questions as why did people follow government vaccination policy in some states but not in others, why do people resist vaccination etc. Prof. Michie presented a model of behaviour change that considers capability, motivation and opportunity. Influencing these in a well-planned and coordinated way can greatly increase the effectiveness of behaviour

change. Since most EU policies aim for behaviour change adopting this model might be considered when devising new EU policies in the future.

After a series of supplementary statements by experts from other fields, the conference was concluded by MEP **Vilja Savisaar-Toomast** from Estonia, who stressed the importance of policy inputs by psychologists and welcomed more policy-oriented conferences in the future.



Overall, the conference was a great success. It was attended by 120 participants from 28 countries, including experts from various psychological specialisms and more than 20 EU policy makers. The broad scope of psychology and its relevance for Europe’s policy-making process was well acknowledged. Yet, it was a first step on a long road, any many more will be needed for psychology to gain an effective influence on European policy.

Report of the conference
by Veronika Polisenska, EFPA Executive Council (CZ)