European lawyers active – from Turkey to the Balkans

The European Lawyers for Democracy and Human Rights (ELDH) together with the Haldane Society welcomed the release from prison on 21st March 2014 of lawyers in Turkey. They are members of our sister organisation ÇHD (Progressive Lawyers Association). They had been held in detention for 14 months facing unjust charges. ÇHD’s president, Selçuk Kozağaçlı, said on his release:

‘Thanks, thanks for all. In these 14 months we never felt alone, not even for a moment. We were so glad that there were so many people, such a big support. We couldn’t imagine what a big family we are, what a big solidarity. We didn’t recognise the prison sentence at all. For us, this didn’t recognise at all that it was a prison sentence at all. For us, this was an imprisonment. We never didn’t accept that the decision didn’t recognise the solidarity. We didn’t accept the song Die Gedanken Sind Frei, the significance of which was lost on the guards.

Three German lawyers, including ELDH secretary general Thomas Schmidt, outlined their personal experience of observing the KCK trial in Diyarbakir, the KCK lawyers’ trial in Istanbul, and the ÇHD lawyers’ trial in Istanbul, all shocking miscarriages of justice. Finally at the awards ceremony, Munip Emriş, ÇHD vice president, spoke on ‘The Right to Resistance – the Role of Progressive Lawyers’.

Several Turkish colleagues were at the ELDH executive committee meeting on 18th May 2014 in Berlin, also attended by representatives of ELDH associations from the Basque Country, the UK, Germany, Greece, Spain, and Switzerland. The Basque lawyers’ organisation Eskubideak has now been welcomed into ELDH.

As always, the meeting started with a lively and engaged political discussion, and reports of intense activity from the ELDH members. There were topics which divided opinion among those taking part in the discussion but ELDH prides itself on its open debate.

The ELDH conference ‘Human Rights and Democracy in the Context of EU Enlargement – Western Balkan Perspectives’, held on 6th June 2014 in Belgrade, was a great success. It was organised with the Belgrade associations Lawyers for Democracy and Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. The conference, with over 70 participants, focused on the topics of European Union enlargement and democracy, social rights and labour rights under threat in Europe, and freedom of assembly and the right to protest. Among the speakers from across Europe was the Haldane Society vice-president John Hendy QC.

Bill Bowring

With Rafael Stuhr, Sebastian Bammack, Rachidto Yiannis and Elena Vizquez at Käthe-Kollwitz-Platz, Prenzlauser Berg, Berlin.

No Minister! The battle against the cuts in leg

March

27: A planned industrial action by criminal barristers over legal aid cuts was called off after the Ministry of Justice agreed to freeze cuts to advocacy fees until the general elections next year. Criminal solicitors and probation officers proceeded to walk out for two days from 31st March 2014 protesting against legal aid cuts and privatisation of offender rehabilitation services.

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29: The first same-sex weddings take place after gay marriage was legalised through the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. Couples vied to be the first to be legally married at midnight the night before.

April

8: The European Court of Human Rights holds that the United Kingdom could lawfully impose limits on collective action and that a ban on secondary strike action was a justified interference to Article 11, the right to freedom of association. Some commentators have criticised the decision as a step to appease the UK Government following threats to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights.

9: The High Court orders the Home Secretary, Theresa May, to review a decision to freeze Government payments to asylum seekers for essential needs. Support for asylum seekers has been frozen since 2011. Single asylum seekers currently receive £36.62 per week and are prohibited from working until a decision has been made on their claim. Refugee Action welcomed the decision and called for a transparent and robust inquiry into how asylum support rates are calculated.