A number of member states of the European Union (EU) have appointed human rights ambassadors today. Among them are Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. There are also human rights ambassadors in Norway and Japan and several South American countries.

Informal meetings and coordination among the European human rights ambassadors has proved very useful since 2006, as the European ambassadors share values and fulfill tasks which do not differ in their essentials. Yet, each European ambassador represents his or her own individual ministry of foreign affairs. Accordingly, the priorities of their work depend on the specific mandate they are entrusted with by their respective ministries, on the role their country takes on in the area of human rights, and on the way in which human rights are integrated into the structures and activities of their ministry. In Spain, the human rights ambassador is located at the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. The Ministry also has a human rights desk. Both report to the Ministry’s Director-General of Multilateral Affairs and work in close cooperation.

In my understanding, human rights ambassadors are spokespersons for a certain view of international relations. His or her appointment constitutes a very important step in the promotion of human rights through diplomatic means. Their rank as ambassadors frequently allows them to engage in substantive dialogue with high-ranking officials of third countries—a privilege that can prove effective to bring about change in different situations. The appointment of a person directly responsible for human rights issues at the rank of an ambassador in different European countries also conveys a strong message to third countries that human rights have attained an important status in European states’ foreign policy. In this contribution, I will attempt to further explain a few aspects of the added value of the appointment of
human rights ambassadors for the framing of foreign policies in different areas.

Renowned professor Stanley Hoffmann of Harvard University once made the following statement: ‘I have taught international relations for 58 years and have arrived at the following dichotomic conclusion: First, everybody knows what should be done, and second, everybody knows that what should be done cannot be done.’ Persuading people that something can and should be done to further the implementation of human rights around the world is one of the most important tasks of human rights ambassadors. Without being naïve, human rights ambassadors believe in people’s capacity to seek solutions to the big challenges the world is facing today, among them widespread poverty, armed conflicts, pandemics and environmental damage.

We believe that we can build a better world—a more democratic world with responsible and accountable governments. Human rights ambassadors and other professionals who work towards the realisation of human rights have the hope that progress can be made even though it cannot always be seen on the near horizon.

The 1993 United Nations (UN) Vienna World Conference on Human Rights established that the promotion and protection of human rights is the responsibility of all governments. Promoting human rights through diplomatic action is also justified and required by their universality and the related rejection of the position that human rights are strictly matters of states’ internal affairs. Both the individual and inter-state complaint mechanisms that form part of most international and regional human rights mechanisms, and the concept of universal jurisdiction, are manifestations of this recognition. It has been acknowledged that human rights are a vital element on the international agenda. Ensuring respect for human rights is crucial when it comes to cementing peace and security and to establishing improved conditions for social and economic development.

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1 Stanley Hoffmann, Paul and Catherine Buttenweiser University professor of international relations at Harvard University and founder of the Centre for European Studies in Harvard University, addressing students during the celebrations of the 50th Anniversary of the Institut of International Relations of Harvard University in 2007 [on file with author].