EU external policies in favour of democratisation

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report drafted by Véronique DE KEYSER (S&D, BE) on EU external policies in favour of democratisation.

Recalling that democracy has evolved into a universal value, Members believe that only democracies based on the rule of law can function as a foundation for balanced structural partnerships between third countries and the EU that are also in keeping with the needs and interests of both parties and their respective populations.

In this context, they intend to redefine EU policy on this issue.

Need for a paradigm shift: Members consider that the EU's role as a 'soft power' in the international system can only be consolidated if protection of human rights constitutes a **real priority** for it in its policy towards third countries. They point out that it is essential, if the EU is to have a credible, consistent foreign policy and support the development of democracy, that an exemplary policy of respect for human rights and democracy is always pursued within the EU and its Member States, both now and in the future.

However, they note that the events unfolding in North Africa and the Middle East have demonstrated the limitations of a focus on security. They consider therefore that the question of social justice and the fight against inequalities has to become an essential objective of the Union's external policy, as it is an indispensable factor in the building of a peaceful, prosperous and democratic society.

The report highlights the need for a paradigm shift aimed at **genuine consolidation of democracy** on the basis of endogenous, sustainable and comprehensive development that benefits the population and respects the rule of law and basic human rights and freedoms.

To this effect, the EU must encourage the establishment of an environment conducive to the development of a democratic society.

If a democratisation process is to be successful, Members consider it crucial that it should address the social and economic development of the country concerned, in order to ensure that the inhabitants' basic rights, such as the right to education, health and employment, are met.

Priority should be given to:

- making greater and more vigorous practical use of the Union's existing range of instruments and incentives;
- consistent policies aimed at discouraging human rights violations, such as **reducing the financial envelopes for governments that fail to respect democracy** and human rights;
- strengthening the EU's common commercial policy in terms of sustainable development, the eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights;
- the ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), giving priority to the regions that are underrepresented;
- the inclusion in all free trade agreements legally binding clauses on social and environmental aspects and respect for human rights, taking as a minimum basis the list of conventions contained in the GSP+ Regulation;
- the involvement of the European Parliament at every stage in the negotiation, conclusion, application and suspension of international agreements with third countries;
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a detailed analysis of the scope for reform in third countries based on regular exchanges of views with all democratic forces in a country, in order to ensure that it is rooted in mutual confidence and knowledge;
- imposing **appropriate, proportionate and smart sanctions** targeted against the regime's main authorities – while providing support for the population and increasing direct assistance to strengthen civil society – on countries which fail to honour their commitments with regard to human rights, good governance and democratisation.

Members recommend, in the case of the most problematic partnerships, that the Union refrain from isolating the countries concerned, and that it instead conduct relations with them on the basis of appropriate, effective conditionality, serving as a genuine incentive to democratic reform, compliance with the rules of good governance and respect for human rights, and that the Union verify that such cooperation genuinely benefits the population.

The report stresses, however, that this approach, together with the upcoming revised European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), implies that the differentiated approach can only be a valuable and credible instrument if it requires the same human rights and democracy objectives for all ENP partner countries. It stresses that the **EU would lose its credibility** once again by making a difference between '**minimum standards**' to be respected by the most difficult countries and **more ambitious standards** for the most advanced countries.

Further developing the political dimension: Members consider that a **global, coherent approach** is required, based on targeted strategies relating to development, human rights, good governance, social inclusion, promotion of women and minorities and religious tolerance, as an additional instrument of EU foreign policy.

They support the following initiatives which aim:

- to ensure the **participation of women in decision-making at all levels** both in public and private sphere;
- to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially in connection with financial assistance given by the EU;
- to continue upholding the apolitical nature of humanitarian aid provided during the democratisation process;
- to call for systematic support for new, freely and fairly elected parliaments;
- to strengthen dialogue with as wide a range of local actors as possible;
- to emphasise the role that legitimate democratic political parties, genuine social movements and a free press can play in safeguarding the public interest;
- to underline the important role of third countries' civil society and parliaments in democratic budget oversight
- to develop country strategies in the area of human rights and for these strategy papers to be made available to Parliament;
- to involve women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts;
- to call for an overall strategic, prioritised and longer-term approach which ensures that gender equality is put at the heart of all policies, programmes, projects and activities promoted at EU level;
- to create a Human Rights and Democracy Directorate within the EEAS;
- to support regional programmes to protect the most vulnerable individuals, particularly for the benefit of children, women and older people;
- to strengthen electoral observations mission;
- to emphasise that governments must be held accountable for human rights violations, bad governance, corruption and misappropriation of national resources intended to be used for the benefit of the whole of society;

- to calls for the EIDHR to be retained and strengthened when the next revision of the financial instruments is carried out, and calls for more resources to be assigned to it.

Supporting civil society: Members stresses the need for a decentralised approach which complements the political dimension and is better able to take account of the realities of daily life in the countries concerned, by means of support for both local and regional organisations, which help to consolidate democracy by creating fora for dialogue and exchange of good practice with the Union. They propose that a more open and active policy of supporting civil society be developed, which encourages democratisation and civic participation. They emphasise the need to enhance civil society capacities through education and awareness-raising, and to enable them to participate in political processes. A close partnership between the public and private sectors, as well as the empowerment of oversight institutions, including national parliaments, are key to promoting democracy. Targeted support for non-extremist social movements, genuinely independent media and political parties working for democracy in authoritarian states are necessary.

The report acknowledges the vital role played by NGOs and other non-state actors in the promotion of democracy and calls for the allocation of more funds if the situation in the country is such that there is a civil society and democracy on the road to success.