Review of the EU's human rights strategy

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Strategic framework: the Council adopted a Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy with an Action Plan for putting it into practice. The adoption of the EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy represents a watershed in EU policymaking. The EU has a long catalogue of statements on human rights and democracy, but these have tended to focus on particular issues or countries. Over time, the EU has also developed a range of 'guidelines' and other policy guidance, but it is the first time that a unified strategic document has been adopted. This is the first time that the European Union has had a unified Strategic Framework for this vital policy area, with such a wide-ranging plan of action for its implementation.

The Framework sets out principles, objectives and priorities, all designed to improve the effectiveness and consistency of EU policy as a whole in the next ten years. **They provide an agreed basis for a truly collective effort**, involving EU Member States as well as the EU Institutions.

The Strategic Framework also anchors a commitment to genuine partnership with civil society. The Framework is also designed to be as readable as possible, so as to be accessible to all citizens.

The key messages of the Strategic Framework are:

- Human rights throughout EU policy
- Promoting universality of human rights
- Pursuing coherent objectives
- Human rights in all EU external policies
- Implementing EU priorities on human rights
- Working with bilateral partners
- Working through multilateral institutions
- The EU working together.

The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy brings together 97 actions under 36 headings, prepared on the basis of consultations by the European External Action Service, involving the European Commission and EU member states, which are jointly responsible for implementation. Informal consultations have also been held with MEPs and NGOs. The Action Plan and covers the period until 31 December 2014.

One of the commitments of the Action Plan is that the EU should present its performance in meeting its objectives in its **annual report on human rights and democracy in the world**. This should give an opportunity to all stakeholders in EU policy, including civil society, to assess the impact of EU action and contribute to defining future priorities.

EU action on human rights: on the same day, the Council approved the 2011 report on EU action on human rights and democracy in the world, as set out in *9238/12*.

Amongst the main elements brought to light in this document, the following may be summarised:

1. **the Arab spring** represented a landmark in the first year of the EEAS. A joint communication on 8 March 2011, by High Representative Ashton and the European Commission, stressed the need to

support the demand for political participation, dignity, freedom and employment opportunities, and sets out an approach based on the respect of universal values and shared interests. The EU has repeatedly condemned restrictions on **freedom of expression and access to the internet**;

2. the fight **against religious intolerance and discrimination** across the world : the report examines in-depth the issue of religious freedom or beliefs;
3. **the UN human rights system** : many resolutions have been adopted to support human rights in Syria, Belarus, Burma/Myanmar and North Korea;
4. child protection, including in armed conflicts;
5. **supporting the fight against impunity** for the most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole;
6. **continuous support for the abolition of the death penalty**;
7. **insert a human rights clause** in all political framework agreements.

Bilaterally, the EU held over 40 **bilateral human rights dialogues** with third countries thus providing many opportunities to address the EU's specific human rights concerns effectively. The EU launched the development of human rights country strategies for almost 160 countries worldwide, 130 being developed in 2011. The key objectives pursued through this approach are: to obtain a better and more comprehensive understanding of the key human rights challenges in partner countries; to focus EU action on key priorities in partner countries, both in policy terms and financial assistance terms, so that we can better tailor our approach to country situations and therefore be more effective, as requested by the High Representative; to facilitate and streamline relevant activities by Member States and EU diplomatic missions in the field; and to contribute in a more comprehensive and pertinent manner to the various country and regional strategies.

The report also highlights the following:

- the creation of a **European Endowment for Democracy** (EED) whose objective is to set up EED as an autonomous body with legal personality under the law of one Member State. EED would have an initial, although not exclusive, focus on the European Neighbourhood and it would be a new means to facilitate European support to political actors in democratic transitions or in peaceful struggle for democracy;
- the continuation of **Electoral Observation Missions** (EOMs) in particular in Tunisia, South Sudan, Niger, Peru and Zambia);
- the accountability of **private military and security companies** (PMSCs) to review existing initiatives and actual gaps in terms of accountability for human rights and international humanitarian law violations.