

Review of the EU's human rights strategy

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Rui TAVARES (Greens/EFA, PT) on the review of the EU's human rights strategy.

Members recall that the EU is founded on the principle of respect for human rights and has a legal obligation, as outlined in its Treaties, to place human rights at the core of all EU and Member State policies, without exception, and at the core of all international agreements. To this end, the EU has developed an extensive toolbox of instruments as a policy framework to support this obligation. However, the cumulative effect of these policies has resulted in a piecemeal approach whereby the principle of coherence and consistency between the different areas of EU external action and between these and other policies has not been duly respected. This is why Members call for a high degree of consistency and of political will to obtain tangible results.

EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy: in general, Members consider that the **strategic review initiative** strives to respond to the main challenges identified by Parliament and other stakeholders. However, Members call on the EU to **move from words to action** and to implement the pledges made in a swift and transparent manner. Members stress that, in effect, the Strategic Framework and Action Plan represent **a floor, not a ceiling, for EU human rights policy**. They therefore insist that the EU institutions and the Member States adopt a firm and coherent approach to human rights abuses worldwide, in a transparent and accountable manner.

Members consider that the Parliament, as the only directly elected EU institution, should be closely associated with this reshaped policy framework and be involved in ongoing communication and collaboration between the Parliament and the EU Special Representative for Human Rights on human rights. Members reiterate the willingness of Parliament to intensify interinstitutional cooperation at all levels and consider that all the institutions should be involved within the framework of a **joint declaration** committing them to common founding principles and objectives.

Coherence and cooperation in policy areas and between the EU and its Member States: Members stress the need for coherence and consistency across all policy areas. The EU and its Member States must strengthen the coherence and complementarity of policies and programmes in the area of human rights to lead to effective and measurable results. For their part, the Commission and the EEAS are urged to live up to the pledge of a "human rights-based approach" across the entire development cooperation process.

Once again, Members urge the EU to honour its role as a **leading defender of human rights in the world**, through the effective, consistent and considered use of all available instruments. In this regard, Members stress the need to strengthen policy coherence for development, including **within the borders of the EU**. Members also point out the need for greater visibility to enhance its legitimacy, credibility and accountability of the EU in this field in the eyes of the public.

Specifically as regards the countries in North Africa and the Middle East, Members call for their inclusion within the Council of Europe Neighbourhood Policy so as to provide complementary tools for an approximation of their legislative framework and best practices in this area.

Towards an inclusive and effective approach: Members consider it essential that the EU adopt an effective approach to its partners by **advancing selected key priorities relating to human rights, democracy and the rule of law**, and that it concentrate its efforts on this approach so as to channel them into deliverable and achievable outcomes.

Several priorities emerge in this regard: i) the resolute defence of freedom of expression; ii) the fight against the death penalty; iii) efforts to combat discrimination against women; iv) the defence of the rights of the child. They recall that development, democracy and the rule of law are prerequisites for, but not identical to, the realisation of human rights and that they interact with and support one another. These priorities should be linked, for each country, to **realistic objectives** and forms of political leverage to allow more effective EU action. This is why Members take the view that human rights country strategies should be mainstreamed in the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the EU's trade and development policies (in both geographical and thematic programmes) in order to ensure greater efficiency, effectiveness and coherence. As part of the human rights country strategies, the EU should agree on a **list of "minimum items"** that its Member States and the EU institutions should raise with their relevant counterparts in third countries during meetings and visits.

Members believe that the Strategic Framework and the accompanying Action Plan should be limited to **three years**, the terms of which should be entirely assessed.

EU Plan of Action in favour of human rights and democracy: Members then reviewed some more technical points of the Plan of Action and expressed themselves as follows:

- **Human rights clause:** in this area, Members urge the Commission to propose legislation requiring EU companies to ensure that their purchases do not support perpetrators of conflicts and grave human rights violations, namely by carrying out checks and audits on their mineral supply chains. This mechanism should be based on an "early warning" system to respond in a progressive manner when a third state violates the rules, with full involvement of the European Parliament before any suspension of an agreement;
- **Human rights impact assessment:** Members call for human rights impact assessments before negotiating any bilateral or multilateral agreements with third countries as this is the only way to ensure consistency between primary law, EU external action and the third party's own obligations;
- **A benchmarking policy:** the EU should make full use of the relevant instruments and expertise of the UN and of the Council of Europe, including the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights as a viable element of such a human rights and democracy benchmark catalogue for the member countries of the Council of Europe. Members recommend developing a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators and country-specific public benchmarks that could serve as a coherent and consistent basis for the annual assessment of EU policies in these countries;
- **The renewed European Neighbourhood Policy:** for the countries affected by this policy, Members stress the importance of creating programmes and supporting projects that allow for contact between civil society in the EU and in third countries. As a priority everything must be done to build up the capacity of civil society to participate in decision-making processes at local, regional, national and international level. With regard to the countries of the **Arab Spring**, Members find that failure predominates rather than a real democratic transition. They stress that there are a number of shortfalls in EU policies towards the region, including the situation of young people, and call for a new approach, for example, through strengthened European exchange programmes and stronger contacts with **civil society** to understand the causes and consequences of the problems, particularly those of an economic and social nature, undermining progress in these countries. Special attention should be paid to the position of women. Members also encourage all mediation initiatives as well as the creation of national human rights institutions in the EU neighbourhood countries. In addition they believe that **countries clearly assessed as not making progress on deep democracy and deeply embedded institutional and social change should see the Union's support reduced;**

- **Joint interinstitutional responsibility:** finally, Members call for Parliament to be duly involved in the implementation phase of the Action Plan, inter alia through exchanges in the Contact Group on Human Rights, which brings together the EEAS, the relevant services of the Council and the Commission, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights and the EP's Subcommittee on Human Rights and Committee on Foreign Affairs. They recommend that Parliament develop more dynamic relations with the EU delegations, and propose a series of technical measures to allow more systematic follow-up of developments relating to human rights worldwide. They also plead for improved cooperation in the field of human rights with the national parliaments of Member States, the need for better utilisation of the potential of the Sakharov Prize Network, and recommend, in cooperation with the national parliaments of the Member States, **an annual event on human rights defenders around the world.**