Review of the EU's human rights strategy

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the review of the EU's human rights strategy.

Parliament recalls 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 Parliament calls for a high degree of consistency and of political will to obtain tangible results.

EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy: in general, Parliament considers 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 Member States adopt a firm and coherent approach to human rights abuses worldwide, in a transparent and accountable manner.

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. Parliament also reiterates its willingness 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: Parliament stresses 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, Parliament urges 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, it stresses the need to strengthen policy coherence for development, **including within the borders of the EU** . It also points 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, Parliament calls 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: Parliament considers 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.

In an amendment adopted in plenary, Parliament considers that these key priorities should include core fundamental rights such as non-discrimination and freedom of expression, religion or belief, conscience, assembly and association. Other key priorities are (i) the fight against the death penalty; (ii) efforts to combat discrimination against women; (iii) defence of the rights of the child.

Parliament recalls that development, democracy and the rule of law are prerequisites for the realisation of human rights and that they interact with and supports 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 Parliament takes 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. Amongst other things, Parliament invites the competent EU institutions to engage with and provide assistance to religious actors and faith-based organisations in support of religious freedom and conflict resolution.

Parliament believes 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: Parliament then reviewed some more technical points of the Plan of Action and expressed themselves as follows:

- **Human rights clause:** Parliament urges 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. In an oral amendment adopted in plenary, Parliament asks the Commission to produce and make public a list of EU companies which have been directly complicit in human rights violations in their dealings with authoritarian regimes. It takes the view that mandatory due diligence by EU companies would protect the reputation of European businesses and make EU human rights and development policies more coherent. This mechanism should be based on an "early warning" system to respond in a progressive manner when a third state violates the rules. Parliament also notes that it is not involved in the decision-making process as regards initiating consultation or suspending an agreement. It considers that in the event that Parliament adopts a recommendation calling for the application of the human rights clause, the Commission should carefully examine whether the conditions under this chapter are fulfilled and present a report to Parliament's responsible committee.

- **Human rights impact assessment**: Parliament calls 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. These assessments must be sent to Parliament.

- **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. Parliament recommends 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, Parliament stresses 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. The plenary calls for the establishment of a **Women's Interparliamentary Euro-Arab Convention** since the situation of women in the Arab Spring countries is often critical in order to assess progress with regard to democracy and human rights. It also encourages all mediation initiatives as well as the creation of national human rights institutions in the EU neighbourhood countries. In addition it believes 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.** Parliament also insists that the High Representative and the Commission implement with conviction the renewed European Neighbourhood Policy by applying with equal attention the 'more for more' and 'less for less' principles;

- **Joint Interinstitutional responsibility**: lastly, Parliament calls for its own proper involvement 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. It recommends 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. It also pleads 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 recommends, in cooperation with the national parliaments of the Member States, **an annual event on human rights defenders around the world.**