

Human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter - annual report 2018

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Isabel WISELER-LIMA (EPP, LU) on human rights and democracy in the world and the EU's policy on the matter - annual report 2018.

Continuing human rights abuses

In general, Members expressed deep concern about the attacks on democracy and the rule of law worldwide in 2018, reflecting the rise of authoritarianism as a political project, embodying disregard for human rights, repression of dissent, politicisation of justice and elections, shrinking space for civil society and limitations on freedom of assembly and expression. They expressed concern that there are still regimes that deny the very principle of universality of human rights enshrined in international law and regretted that a number of countries have still not put in place a moratorium on the abolition of the death penalty.

The report drew attention to the scourge of armed conflicts aimed, inter alia, at ethnic cleansing, which continue to cause civilian casualties and mass displacement. It also denounced the retreat of multilateralism and the rules-based international order, stressing that approaches adopted in the context of multilateral relations, including in the framework of the United Nations, were the most effective means of finding lasting solutions to conflicts on the basis of the norms and principles of international law.

Members denounced the fact that some governments had adopted legislation restricting the activities of civil society movements, including by banning NGOs or freezing their assets, while deploring the use of repressive cyber security and counter-terrorism legislation to repress human rights defenders. They stressed the importance of promoting gender equality and women's rights worldwide, of respecting children's rights and combating all forms of child abuse and of mainstreaming the fight against discrimination on the grounds of disability in the EU's external action and development aid policies.

Members expressed deep concern about the increase in hateful and intolerant reactions targeting people who are victims of persecution and discrimination based on ethnicity, nationality, class, caste, religion, belief, language, age, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, which continue to occur in many countries and societies.

Enhancing the effectiveness of the Union's human rights policies

The report called for the objective of promoting human rights and democracy in the world to be mainstreamed in all Union policies which have an external dimension. It called for the adoption of a new Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy for the next five years that is ambitious, comprehensive and binding, with a strong monitoring mechanism to assess the implementation and impact of the Action Plan. It called on the Commission and the EEAS to make effective use of human rights clauses in international agreements.

Developing solutions to protect and promote human rights and democracy

Members called on the Commission, the EEAS and the Member States to:

- monitor developments that have a negative influence on governance and civil society space in the world, and systematically respond to political and legislative changes introduced by authoritarian governments with a view to weakening governance based on fundamental democratic principles and restricting the space available to civil society;
- foster an EU approach to conflict and accountability for human rights violations: Members called on the EEAS and the Commission to include an ambitious strategy to combat impunity as part of the EU's Third Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy. They recommended the creation of a European observatory on prevention, accountability and combating impunity and the appointment of an EU Special Representative for International Humanitarian Law and International Justice. They called on all EU Member States to comply strictly with the European Union Code of Conduct on Arms Exports;
- adopt a strategic, visible and effective European approach to protect human rights defenders and to allocate sufficient funding for the protection of human rights defenders in the relevant thematic programmes of the Neighbourhood, Development Cooperation and International Cooperation Instrument (NDI) ;
- adopt a comprehensive gender equality strategy after the expiry of the strategic commitment; the Commission is invited to prepare and adopt a Communication aimed at renewing the Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development Cooperation after 2020;
- take new initiatives to promote and protect children's rights, prevent and combat child abuse worldwide, reintegrate children affected by conflict and provide them with a protective family and social environment. Members called for the EU to launch an international movement to defend children's rights;
- step up advocacy in relation to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, and to initiate dialogue with states and representatives of civil society and faith, non-confessional, humanistic and philosophical groups in order to prevent acts of violence, persecution, intolerance and discrimination against persons on the grounds of thought, conscience, philosophical opinions, and religion or belief;
- better monitor all forms of restrictions (online and offline) on freedom of expression and the media and to systematically condemn such restrictions using all available diplomatic means;
- establish a binding international instrument to regulate the activities of transnational corporations and other companies in international human rights law;
- adopt a Union strategy to put new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, at the service of the population and to respond to the threat these technologies can pose to human rights, including fake news, mass surveillance and hate speech.

Stressing the urgent need to tackle the root causes of migration flows, Members called for the external dimension of the refugee crisis to be addressed, including by finding durable solutions to conflicts through cooperation and partnerships with the third countries concerned.

Lastly, stressing that the climate emergency and mass biodiversity constitute a major threat to the population, the report highlighted the key obligations and responsibilities under the 2015 Paris Agreement to mitigate the effects of climate change, including its negative impact on human rights.