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

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The European Parliament adopted by 496 votes to 113, with 103 abstentions, a resolution on human rights and democracy in the world and the EU's policy on the matter - annual report 2018.

Human rights and democracy: general trends and key challenges

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 stressed the need to ensure full respect for, and adherence to, the principle that human rights are universal, while regretting that a number of countries have still not put in place a moratorium on the abolition of the death penalty.

Parliament expressed concern about the links between authoritarian regimes and populist and nationalist parties and governments, considering that these links undermined the credibility of the EU’s efforts to promote fundamental values.

The resolution 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.

Members stressed the importance of promoting gender equality and women's rights worldwide, respecting children's rights and incorporate the fight against discrimination on the grounds of disability in the EU's external action and development aid policies. They expressed their deep concern about the increase in hateful and intolerant reactions targeting those who are victims of human rights violations, which continue to occur in many countries and societies. They also drew attention to the impact of environmental degradation on human rights.

Enhancing the effectiveness of the Union's human rights policies

Parliament 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 insisted that all human rights challenges (digital rights, environmental rights, the rights of the elderly, sport and migrants) should be addressed in this future action plan.

Stressing that trade, EU trade policies and human rights can be mutually reinforcing, Members called on the Commission and the EEAS to make effective use of human rights clauses in international agreements by creating an effective mechanism for monitoring serious human rights violations that may be committed by companies.

Developing solutions to protect and promote human rights and democracy

Parliament 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. The Council was invited to adopt the necessary legislation for the establishment of an EU international mechanism (on the model of the Magnitski List) to sanction human rights violations through targeted sanctions against persons complicit in serious human rights violations;
- 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 religion or belief: According to Members, freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, which includes the rights not to believe, to espouse theistic, non-theistic, agnostic or atheistic views, as well as the right to apostasy and not to profess any religion, should be unconditionally guaranteed throughout the world;
- 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;
- tackle the root causes of migration flows, Members stressed the need to create legal channels for migration and to facilitate voluntary returns, as far as possible, including in compliance with the principle of non-refoulement. They called for the external dimension of the refugee crisis to be addressed, including providing durable solutions to conflicts through cooperation and partnerships with the third countries concerned. They 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 resolution 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.