Human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union’s policy on the matter - annual report 2019

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the report by Isabel SANTOS (S&D, PT) on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter - annual report 2019.

Putting democracy and human rights at the heart of the EU's foreign policy

Members argued that coherence between the EU's internal and external policies, but also between the Union's external policies, was a prerequisite for the success of an effective European human rights policy. They called for policies in favour of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and the fight against impunity to be integrated into all other EU policies with an external dimension, such as development, migration, security, the fight against terrorism, women's rights, gender equality, enlargement and trade.

The report stressed the importance of:

- developing an explicit strategy to counter the increasing withdrawal and retreat of states from the international human rights framework;

- improving the effectiveness of the Union's foreign and security policy through the use of qualified majority voting in the Council;

- systematically introducing human rights clauses in all international agreements, in particular trade and association agreements between the EU and third countries;

- regularly consulting civil society and engaging in a structured and regular dialogue with Parliament on the implementation of the new EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024.

Human rights and COVID-19

Members welcomed the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by States that have made the rights to life and health their first imperatives. They stressed that all measures taken in response to the pandemic must be based on human rights and the principles of non-discrimination.

Expressing concern about the decline in democratic and human rights standards that the crisis has led to in some countries, Members said that states must refrain from exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to consolidate authoritarian power, to weaken democracy and the rule of law, or to trample on human rights.

Democratic governance and creating space for civil society

Members considered that democratic governance and the rule of law are under threat globally due to a combination of factors such as the rise of authoritarianism and populism, growing inequality and poverty, pressure on civil society, the proliferation of information technology, cyber-threats and political interference by external actors.

The report called on the EU to support the strengthening of democratic institutions and transparent and credible electoral processes worldwide, to foster democratic debate, to fight against inequalities and to ensure the functioning of civil society organisations.

Climate action and human rights

Members consider that environmental emergencies, such as climate change and deforestation, are the result of human actions and lead to human rights violations against not only those directly affected but also the whole human race. They affirmed that the promotion and protection of human rights and climate and environmental action are closely interlinked, stressing in particular the importance of ensuring access to water when it comes to preventing tensions in certain regions. They also underlined the need to pay particular attention to assisting people displaced for environmental and climatic reasons.

Human rights defenders

The report called for an end to all attacks on human rights defenders, the release of all those arbitrarily detained and the accountability of those responsible. It called on the EU and its Member States to develop a high-level strategic vision to counter this phenomenon, including through the adoption of strong conclusions by the Foreign Affairs Council.

Women's rights and gender equality

The report condemned the ongoing backlash against gender equality and women's rights, including all attempts to roll back existing rights and protections in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as the legislation, policies and practices that continue to deny or restrict these rights in many countries around the world.

Members called for the adoption of an EU action plan for gender equality and women's empowerment in external relations for 2021-2025 (GAP III) and called on the EU to promote gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights in all its external actions.

The report also condemned stigmatisation, arbitrary detention, torture, persecution and killings of LGBTI people.

Children's rights

Members called for increased cooperation and dialogue with third countries, making children's rights and protection a priority, with the aim of upholding children's rights worldwide and ensuring that no child is left behind. Children's health and education, the eradication of child labour, the fight against violence, sexual abuse and early and forced marriages, trafficking and exploitation, and the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict are the main challenges to be addressed.

Migrants and refugees

The report deplored the plight of migrants and refugees around the world, particularly displaced women, children and persons with disabilities and belonging to persecuted ethnic, religious and belief minorities. It rejected the negative trend of harassment and criminalisation of the activities of those who defend the human rights of migrants and refugees and provide them with assistance.

Members also condemned the engagement of dictatorial or authoritarian powers in proxy wars and expressed concern about the rise in international political tensions and, in some parts of the world, the increased activity of non-state armed groups and terrorist organisations and the rise in communal violence.