

# Human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter - annual report 2021

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by María Soraya RODRÍGUEZ RAMOS (Renew Europe, ES) on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter.

Firstly, Members stressed that serious threats to multilateralism and international law witnessed at present are such as to require the EU to have an even more committed role in promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The EU's policies and actions on human rights should lead to more assertive, decisive and effective actions, with the aid of all of the instruments at its disposal.

The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 is a roadmap of the EU's priorities concerning human rights, which should be at the centre of all EU external policies. However, in order to effectively advance human rights in the world, the EU must ensure coherence between its various internal and external policies.

## *General challenges and policy tools*

The report highlighted the weakening of the protection of democratic governance and institutions and of universal human rights, as well as the shrinking space for civil society, observed around the world. They called for the EU and its Member States to make more concerted efforts to address the challenges to human rights worldwide, both individually and in cooperation with like-minded international partners, including in the UN.

The importance of both the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe and the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 for this goal was stressed. Members called for the use of **qualified majority** voting in the Council on human rights issues which would strengthen cooperation on matters of key strategic interest for the EU.

## *Autocratic regimes*

Deeply concerned by the increasing number of illiberal democracies and autocratic regimes, which are in the majority worldwide for the first time in 20 years, the EU and the Member States are called on to make full use of the tools at their disposal, including their economic leverage in mutual trade relations, to develop more ambitious support for freedom, good governance, the rule of law and democratic institutions, as well as to help to ensure space for civil society globally.

The EU should continue to intensify its cooperation with the United States and other like-minded democratic partners to support freedom and democracy worldwide and to push back against authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

## *Human rights and democracy thematic programme*

Members called for greater transparency regarding human rights provisions in financing agreements under the NDICI and a clarification of the mechanism and criteria for the suspension of such agreements in the

event of a breach of human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law or of serious cases of corruption.

The Commission should strictly refrain from disbursing budget support to the governments of third countries as an operational modality for the provision of aid in countries witnessing widespread violations of human rights and the repression of human rights defenders.

### ***International justice***

Members reiterated their strong support for the International Criminal Court (ICC) as the only international institution able to prosecute some of the world's most heinous crimes and deliver justice for their victims. Adequate financial support should be provided to enable the ICC to carry out its tasks.

### ***COVID-19***

The report underlined that COVID-19 has significantly strengthened the recent trends of illiberal democracies and autocratic regimes weakening democracy. In this regard, Members deplored the abuse of the epidemiological crisis by these regimes to further constrain the freedoms of expression, assembly and religion and belief by restricting the functioning of democratic institutions and repressing dissent, including limiting media freedom both online and offline and targeting critics and whistleblowers with defamation campaigns.

Furthermore, the EU is called on to increase its support to tackle the negative consequences of COVID-19, particularly for groups in vulnerable situations.

### ***Human rights defenders***

Expressing serious concern about the precarious situation of human rights defenders and the fact that they are the victims of increasing violence, including targeted killings, the EU should develop a strategy for ambitious EU action to address the rising number of attacks against human rights defenders. It is also urged to create an EU-wide scheme for issuing short-term visas for the temporary relocation of human rights defenders.

### ***The freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association***

The report recalled that recent revelations such as the NSO Pegasus scandal confirm that spying against human rights defenders and journalists, among others, is an extremely alarming matter and appear to confirm the dangers of the misuse of surveillance technology to undermine human rights. Members underlined the need for more robust national and international regulation in this area.

### ***The right to a safe environment***

Members noted that 2020 saw a considerable deterioration in the situation of the victims of trafficking, the majority of whom are women, as they were left in an even more vulnerable position by the COVID-19 pandemic. The report welcomed the launch of the EU's Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2021-2025).

### ***The right to participate in free and fair elections***

Members strongly condemned the erosion of democratic values in a number of third countries and challenges to electoral integrity, electoral violence, the misuse of administrative resources by governing parties, clampdowns on political opponents, the censorship of and threats to independent media, and the rise of disinformation. The EU is urged to target and counter this extremely worrisome situation and come

forward with concrete and effective proposals, reaffirming its willingness to take a leading role in promoting democratic values and free and fair elections in third countries.

### ***Corruption and human rights***

Stressing that corruption facilitates, perpetuates and institutionalises violations of human rights, the EU is called on to adopt tools against authoritarian leaders and their financial enablers, including those involved in electoral fraud, to uncover and freeze illicit assets, and to promote the application of universal jurisdiction in cases of gross human rights violations.

### ***EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (EU GHRSR – ‘EU Magnitsky Act’)***

The report welcomed the adoption of the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (EU GHRSR – ‘EU Magnitsky Act’) as an essential addition to the EU’s human rights and foreign policy toolbox, which strengthens the EU’s role as a global human rights actor by allowing it to take restrictive measures against legal and natural persons involved in grave human rights violations around the world. Members reiterated their request to **extend the scope of the EU GHRSR** to include acts of **corruption** in order to ensure that the economic and financial enablers of human rights abusers are targeted effectively. The Commission should come forward with a legislative proposal to adopt a **new thematic sanctions regime** to address serious acts of corruption defined on the basis of the UN Convention against Corruption.