

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

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The European Parliament adopted by 487 votes to 80, with 120 abstentions, a resolution on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter - Annual Report 2021.

Parliament expressed its deep concern about the **threats to human rights and democracy**, which are reflected in the weakening of the protection of democratic governance and institutions and universal human rights, as well as in the shrinking space for civil society worldwide.

Stressing the link between the rule of law, democracy and human rights violations, Members called on the EU and its Member States to increase their concerted efforts, to lead by example and to be true global leaders in the promotion and protection of human rights, gender equality and the rule of law.

Key issues and instruments

Parliament underlined 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. It recalled that the use of qualified majority voting in the Council on human rights issues would lead to more effective and forward-looking action in the Union's foreign and security policy.

Concerned about the growing number of **illiberal democracies and autocratic regimes**, which are in the majority in the world for the first time in 20 years, Members called on the EU and Member States to use the tools at their disposal, including their economic leverage in bilateral trade relations, to provide more ambitious support for freedom, good governance, the rule of law and democratic institutions.

Recalling that respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law is a cross-cutting objective throughout the whole NDICI, Parliament reaffirmed that diversifying and maximising the modalities and mechanisms for funding civil society actors under the NDICI are essential elements. However, it called on the Commission to strictly refrain from using budget support to third country governments as an operational modality for humanitarian aid in countries where there are widespread human rights violations and repression of human rights defenders.

Parliament also welcomed the work of the **European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights**, who makes a significant contribution to enhancing the effectiveness of the Union's human rights policies through his dialogue with third countries, cooperation with like-minded partners and improving the internal and external coherence of the Union's policies on the ground.

Multilateralism and international justice

Members called on the EU and its Member States to continue their efforts to **speak with one voice** in the UN and other multilateral fora. They condemned the increasing number of actions that seek to undermine the functioning of UN bodies, in particular the Human Rights Council, by questioning the universality of human rights, and to undermine the rules-based international order. They reiterated their strong support for the International Criminal Court (ICC) as the only international institution capable of prosecuting

some of the world's most heinous crimes and bringing justice to their victims. Adequate financial support should be provided to enable the ICC to carry out its tasks.

COVID-19

The resolution 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

Parliament 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. They also stressed the need for increased public support for independent journalism worldwide.

The right to a safe environment

Stressing that climate change is one of the greatest threats to the human rights of our generation and future generations, Parliament encouraged the EU and the Member States to promote the recognition of **ecocide** as an international crime and asked the Commission to study the relevance of ecocide to EU law and diplomacy.

Other issues

Parliament also called on the EU AND its Member States to:

- advance **women's rights** and welcome the EU Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the EU's External Action for 2021-2025 (GAP III);
- strengthen their efforts to eliminate all forms of **child abuse**;
- take the lead in multinational fora to eradicate all forms of **human trafficking**, forced labour and modern slavery;
- intensify efforts to develop and implement action plans to combat racism, **racial discrimination**, **xenophobia and intolerance**;

- play a leading role in defending the rights of **LGBTIQ people** in international fora, including working towards the decriminalisation of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sexual characteristics;
- implement ambitious programmes to defend freedom of religion or belief worldwide;
- make the protection of **democratic and electoral processes** one of the main global concerns and establish a framework for effective intervention in the face of interference in electoral processes, in close cooperation with international organisations, such as the OSCE;
- extend the scope of the **EU global human rights sanctions regime** to include acts of corruption so that the economic and financial facilitators of human rights abusers are effectively targeted, and adopt a new thematic sanctions regime to combat serious acts of corruption;
- fully respect the human rights of **migrants**, refugees and forcibly displaced persons and integrate them into their cooperation with third countries.