The EU Guidelines of Human Rights Defenders

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted an own-initiative report by Hannah NEUMANN (Greens /EFA, DE) on EU guidelines on human rights defenders.

Members recall that human rights defenders are key allies in the EU's efforts to protect and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law and to prevent conflicts worldwide. It is therefore in the essential interest of the EU and its Member States to support and protect their activities.

Overall assessment of the EU's strategic framework

Members welcome the EU policy framework for human rights defenders, which has developed over the last 20 years around the guidelines adopted in June 2004 and revised in 2008. However, they consider that **the overall implementation of the Guidelines by the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Commission and the Member States has been uneven**, focusing mainly on reactive measures, lacking consistency in the overall implementation of the strategy and characterised by insufficient visibility of EU action and channels of support for human rights defenders.

The EU is called upon to **strengthen its policy framework** for human rights development through continuous, concrete and effective action in third countries, in particular in its relations with authoritarian regimes and in places with which the EU and its Member States have concluded association, trade, investment or cooperation agreements, or have important commercial, energy, security, migratory and other interests.

Team Europe - Working together for maximum impact

The report calls on the EU to implement a genuine Team Europe approach to human rights defenders, encouraging Member States that are not yet active on human rights development issues to develop a specific strategy and framework for action. It calls for greater consistency and a strategic overall approach in this regard and for a firm commitment by the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VP/HR) and his office on ensuring the consistent implementation of the Guidelines across all delegations.

Greater focus on prevention and funding needs

Members welcome the EU's substantial and steadily increasing financial contribution to supporting human rights defenders worldwide. They call for a **qualitative shift towards a more comprehensive, long-term approach** to ensuring the integral security of entire communities mobilised to defend their rights. They call on EU delegations to facilitate the establishment and funding of local and regional networks and movements of human rights defenders.

The report stresses the importance of placing the protection of human rights defenders at the heart of the EU's political commitment and diplomatic action vis-à-vis third countries. The Commission and Member States should give priority to: (i) systematically identifying key allies in third country authorities and institutions; (ii) providing more financial support for the establishment and strengthening of national human rights institutions; and (iii) strengthening national legislation and policies on human rights defenders.

Members reiterate their call on the Commission to refrain strictly from providing budgetary support to **third country governments responsible for widespread human rights violations** and repression of human rights defenders.

New challenges

The report calls, *inter alia*, for (i) implementing the Guidelines with a gender perspective; (ii) addressing climate protection as a separate issue in its policy on human rights defenders; (iii) integrating violence against human rights defenders into its crisis management policy, (iv) prioritising the fight against the misuse of surveillance technologies in the field of human rights defenders; and (v) addressing the issue of human rights defenders in the context of the UN Human Rights Council, (iii) integrate violence against human rights defenders into its crisis management policy; (iv) prioritising the fight against the misuse of surveillance technologies to undermine the work of human rights defenders; (v) integrating the protection of the rights of human rights defenders, in particular trade union representatives and defenders of land, indigenous peoples' rights and the environment, into its corporate sustainability due diligence directive and its trade agreements and instruments.

The report stresses that visas are an essential protection tool and that, in order to effectively assist human rights defenders at risk, the Commission should take a proactive role in the establishment of a European multiple-entry visa system for these defenders.

European Parliament oversight and practical support

The report stresses that Parliament, as a full member of Team Europe, should be fully integrated into the EU's policy on human rights defenders.

Parliament should decide to strengthen the promotion and protection of human rights defenders, including through: (i) the adoption of a **new European Parliament strategic framework** on support for human rights defenders, (ii) a more systematic dialogue with human rights defenders in all its relevant bodies, and (ii) the organisation of an annual meeting with human rights defenders by each interparliamentary delegation and the external affairs committees.

Necessary institutional and policy changes

The report calls for, *inter alia*:

- the designation by each interparliamentary delegation of a human rights focal point among its bureau members;

- a comprehensive assessment of the Union's action in favour of human rights defenders in the framework of the mid-term review of the implementation of the 2020-2024 Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy, scheduled for June 2023;

- updating the Guidelines in the light of the evolving challenges and risks faced by human rights defenders, in particular the digital transformation and online threats;

- improving communication and transparency on the implementation of the Guidelines;

- the possibility of strengthening the EU's presence in all countries of serious human rights concerns.

The report calls on the EEAS and the Commission to systematically consult civil society representatives and human rights defenders prior to any human rights dialogue.