# The EU Guidelines of Human Rights Defenders

2021/2204(INI) - 16/03/2023 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 400 votes to 43, with 86 abstentions, a resolution on EU guidelines on human rights defenders.

Parliament recalled 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.

Stressing that the human rights defenders dimension has yet to be **mainstreamed throughout the Union's external action** in a systematic and consistent manner, Parliament called on the EU 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 resolution called 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**. Such an approach, through which all EU institutions and actors, including the EU Special Representative on Human Rights, as well as the Member States, would work together on implementing the Guidelines, would prove effective in helping to counter the global backsliding of human rights and democracy.

The EU is invited to increase its **institutional capacity**, both in Brussels and in its delegations, in order to be able to adequately respond to the worsening environment faced by human rights defenders.

***Greater focus on prevention and funding needs***

Parliament underlined the importance of putting the protection of human rights defenders at the heart of the EU’s political engagement with and diplomatic agenda for third countries. The Commission and the Member States should prioritise:

- the systematic identification of key allies within third-country authorities and institutions,

- **increased financial support** for the establishment and strengthening of national human rights institutions;

- the strengthening of domestic legislation and policies on human rights defenders, in line with the UN framework on human rights defenders;

- the promotion of national campaigns, networks and structures to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of human rights defenders;

- efforts to encourage governments to dedicate sufficient funding to the protection of human rights defenders;

- assistance to develop independent mechanisms to address the climate of impunity for violations committed against human rights defenders;

- the provision of training for human rights defenders on issues such as reporting human rights violations and attacks against them.

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

***New challenges***

The resolution called, *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 resolution stressed that visas are an essential protection tool and that, 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***

Parliament reiterated its commitment to playing a leading role in shaping and enhancing the EU’s action in support of human rights defenders, notably through its plenary urgency resolutions and debates, the work of its Subcommittee on Human Rights, specifically reports and hearings, its missions to third countries and international and regional organisations and its annual Sakharov Prize.

Parliament decided 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***

Parliament called for, *inter alia*:

- 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.

Parliament called on the EEAS and the Commission to systematically consult civil society representatives and human rights defenders prior to any human rights dialogue.