

Human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter – annual report 2024

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the report by Isabel WISELER-LIMA (EPP, LU) on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter - Annual Report 2024.

Global Challenges to democracy and human rights

The report emphasised the duty of the EU and its Member States to promote and **protect democracy and the universality of human rights worldwide**. It called on the EU and its Member States to lead by example and strictly promote and defend human rights and international justice. Respect for, protection of, and enforcement of human rights and fundamental freedoms must be the **cornerstone of the Union's external policy**. Members condemned in particular:

- the **growing trend of violations of human rights** and democratic principles and values worldwide (threats of a rollback of human rights, particularly women's rights, torture, gender-based violence, repression of civil society and marginalised and vulnerable groups, etc.);
- slavery and forced labour, excessive use of violence by public authorities, the instrumentalisation of the judiciary, censorship, and threats to independent media, including threats in the digital sphere such as online surveillance;
- the weakening of the protection of democratic institutions and processes and the **shrinking space for civil society** worldwide.

Members noted with deep concern the ongoing international crisis of accountability and the challenge to the pursuit of **ending impunity** for violations of core norms of international human rights and humanitarian law in conflicts around the world. They underlined the serious consequences of discrediting and attacking the organisations of multilateral forums, such as the UN, which can foster a culture of impunity.

Despite these challenges, the Union recognises the **positive progress** made in human rights, highlighting, in particular, the work of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders.

Strengthening the EU's toolbox

Members welcomed the extension of the **EU action plan on human rights and democracy until 2027**, with a view to maximising the synergies and complementarity between human rights and democracy at local, national and global levels;

The report:

- supports the work of the **European Union Special Representative (EUSR)** for Human Rights, who contributes to the visibility and coherence of the Union's human rights actions in its external relations;

- recalls the fundamental role played by the **Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)** - Global Europe, in particular its thematic programme on human rights and democracy;
- reiterates its call for the inclusion of human rights assessments and robust human rights clauses in **agreements between the Union and third countries**, accompanied by a clear set of criteria and procedures to be followed in the event of violations;
- underlines the need to increase the visibility of the Union's human rights dialogues;
- suggests that the **EU Global Sanctions Regime** and other ad hoc sanctions regimes be used more effectively against those responsible for serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including senior officials;
- calls on the Commission to continue and expand its **democracy support activities** by increasing funding for EU bodies and agencies and by directly supporting civil society in the current context of heightened global tensions and repression in a growing number of countries;
- stresses the urgent need for a comprehensive review of the EU Guidelines on **Human Rights Defenders**, given the continued shrinking space for civil society and the increasing threats to the work of human rights defenders and CSO members;
- emphasises the important role of civil society and journalists in third countries in monitoring the **fight against impunity and corruption**, and calls on the EU to step up efforts to reform the justice system, combat impunity, and improve transparency and anti-corruption institutions in third countries;
- emphasises the particularly important role of the **United Nations** and reaffirms that the EU and its Member States must speak with one voice within the United Nations and other multilateral fora in order to effectively address global human rights and democracy challenges in multilateral fora;
- calls on Member States and like-minded partners to develop a **robust strategy** to counter the increasingly frequent attacks on the rules-based global order by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, including through unprovoked and unjustified aggression against peaceful neighbours;
- reaffirms the Union's strong support for the **International Court of Justice and the ICC**;
- calls on all Member States to comply fully and unconditionally with **international humanitarian law**, calls for the systematic establishment of humanitarian corridors in war zones and to give high priority to gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights in their response to humanitarian and refugee crises.

Responding to universal human rights and democracy challenges

The report makes a series of recommendations regarding: the right to freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association; the right to food, water, and sanitation; the rights of the child; the rights of women, refugees, LGBTIQ+ people, and elderly persons; the right to equality and non-discrimination; the right to life (towards the universal abolition of the death penalty); the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief; the rights of indigenous peoples; the right to public participation; the role of trade as a key instrument for improving the human rights situation in the EU's partner countries; and, lastly, human rights in the face of threats posed by artificial intelligence (AI).