

## Annual report on human rights and democracy in the world in 2015

Just a few days after the UN's Human Rights Day, marked annually on 10 December, the European Parliament (EP) will debate its annual resolution on human rights and democracy at the December 2016 plenary session. Addressing the numerous pressures on human rights encountered in 2015, in its report, Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) calls on all the EU institutions and the Member States to place human rights at the centre of EU relations with all third countries. It calls upon the Member States to lead by example, by speaking with one voice in support of the indivisibility, interdependence, interrelation and universality of human rights and, in particular, by ratifying all UN international human rights instruments.

### Overview

Human rights and the promotion of democracy worldwide are top priorities for the EP, and fall under the remit of its Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) together with its sub-committee on Human Rights (DROI). AFET's [own-initiative report](#) on the 'Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the world 2015 and the EU's policy on the matter' (rapporteur: Josef Weidenholzer, S&D, Austria) was adopted by the Committee on 28 November 2016, and is due to be debated and voted in plenary session on 13 and 14 December respectively. The report includes the opinions of the [Committee on Development \(DEVE\)](#) and the [Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality \(FEMM\)](#). The debate in plenary coincides with the annual marking of [Human Rights Day](#) a few days earlier, which commemorates the day on which, in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

### EU human rights policy at the heart of EU activities

This year's report by AFET is based on the Council's [EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World in 2015](#) of 20 June 2016. It describes the EU human rights approach to conflicts and crises; how the EU addresses the main human rights and democracy challenges worldwide; and how human rights are mainstreamed throughout EU external policies; including trade and development cooperation. The AFET report calls for the EU and its Member States to enhance their efforts to effectively place human rights and democratic values at the heart of their relations with the wider world and, to this end, it welcomes the adoption of the second [Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy](#) for 2015-2019. The report calls upon the EU and its Member States to fully, consistently and transparently implement the action plan worldwide, wherever respect for human rights is under threat; wherever the universality of human rights is seriously challenged, as it is by a number of authoritarian regimes; and, wherever there are attempts worldwide to shrink the space afforded to civil society, including in multilateral fora. It also calls upon the EU and its Member States to implement this action plan in coherence with the [Gender Action Plan 2016-2020](#) and to set aside sufficient resources and expertise for the projects within the scope of the action plan.

The AFET report commends the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission for their exhaustive reporting on the activities undertaken by the EU in the area of human rights and democracy in 2015. It considers this year's format of the annual report to be improved and more concise, thus making it more easily accessible to the general public. It reiterates its call for systematic and comprehensive reporting on the steps taken, the results achieved and the political conclusions drawn from action in response to the EP's highlighting cases of breaches of human rights, democracy and rule of law. It welcomes the addition of democracy to the key priorities of the [EU human rights and democracy country strategies](#) (HRDCSs), and reiterates the EP's earlier request for appropriate access to the strategies, to allow proper scrutiny.



To ensure that human rights will be further mainstreamed in the external aspects of EU policies, focus is placed particularly on those areas that require renewed political commitment and additional efforts to empower local actors; addressing human rights challenges in key areas (such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion, anti-discrimination, gender equality, children's rights, combating torture, and promoting economic, social and cultural rights); tackling and redressing human rights violations in conflicts and crises; fostering better coherence of the EU response in strategic policy areas such as migration, trade and counter-terrorism; as well as deepening the effectiveness of, and improving the results obtained with, the [EU's human rights tools](#). While the AFET report [reiterates a number of requests](#) previously stated in the [EP's resolution](#) of 17 December 2015, special emphasis is placed this year on the following:

- a) The shrinking space within which human rights defenders can operate due to the restrictive laws passed in many countries;
- b) Trade, business and human rights, whereby it calls for the swift, effective and comprehensive implementation of the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#). It welcomes the Commission's new trade strategy 'Trade for All' and reiterates the importance of the principal value of a human rights clause in trade agreements to demonstrate the shared commitment of the parties to human rights, while it also constitutes the legal basis for appropriate measures, including the suspension of an agreement, in the event of grave human rights violations. It calls upon EU companies operating in third countries to be in full compliance with international human rights standards, and promote corporate social responsibility;
- c) The adoption of the [Gender Action Plan 2016-2020](#) is welcomed, as it improves the situation of women with regard to equal rights and empowerment. The report strongly condemns all forms of sexual-based gender violence and calls upon the EU and Member States to ensure more internal-external coherence of EU policies in this regard, and for those [14 Member States](#) which have not yet done so, to sign and ratify the [Istanbul Convention](#). It also calls upon the EU to step up its support in the area of women's rights regarding access to education and health as a basic human right, and the protection of sexual and reproductive rights especially in ensuring that all necessary, and safe, medical and psychological assistance and services are provided to female war rape victims;
- d) The increase in [violence and discrimination](#) against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons is of concern. LGBTI asylum-seekers are often at risk of additional dangers, which can take the form of harassment, exclusion, sexual violence or other forms of violence. A number of third countries deemed 'safe' discriminate against LGBTI people, or even criminalise homosexuality, and therefore such vulnerable groups require additional safeguards;
- e) The report condemns terrorism and reiterates its full support for actions aimed at eradicating it, but expresses grave concern over the use of armed drones outside the international legal framework. It calls for judicial review of drone strikes to ensure that victims of unlawful drone strikes have access to effective remedies;
- f) According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2015, [65 million people](#) were displaced worldwide due to grave human rights violations in high numbers, as victims of conflict, governance failure, economic hardship and trafficking. Strengthening of cooperation with countries of transit and origin, and a comprehensive and well-coordinated common European asylum system are needed. The growing number of child refugees and the situation of unaccompanied, missing or separated children calls urgently for age- and gender-sensitive policies, and the end of [detention of children](#). The determination of the best interest of the child is crucial. To this end, it calls for the universal ratification and implementation of the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional Protocols](#) and requests the EU to continue promoting the [EU-Unicef Child Rights toolkit](#);
- g) It calls upon the EU and its delegations to identify early-warning signals, such as repression of minorities and human rights violations, which point to potential conflicts and humanitarian catastrophes, and to develop best practices for promoting and protecting human rights in post disaster and post-conflict situations, paying special attention to vulnerable groups.
- h) The report recalls the importance of a stronger and more flexible mandate for the position of [EU Special Representative for Human Rights](#) (EUSR) and its transformation into a permanent function, as an important element of EU human rights policy, giving the EUSR the right to speak publicly, own-initiative powers, higher public visibility and adequate resources;
- i) It also reiterates the EP's call for the creation of a new EU Special Representative mandate specifically on international justice and international humanitarian law, to give the necessary prominence to this field and to advance the EU agenda effectively and mainstream the EU's commitment to fight against impunity in its foreign policies. To this end, it recalls the universality of the [International Criminal Court](#) (ICC) and reiterates its full support for its work and to transitional justice.
- j) Last but not least, EU leadership to push for reforms of the UN with the goal of strengthening the impact of the rules-based multilateral system is needed, to ensure more efficient human rights protection and the advancement of international law, as well as permanent [EU representation in all multilateral forums](#), for stronger visibility of EU action.

### The European Parliament's role

Further to its previous [resolution](#) on the annual report on human rights and also its recent [resolution on human rights and migration in third countries](#) of 25 October 2016, the EP remains committed to improving [Parliament's own procedures, processes and structures on human rights](#), to ensure that human rights and democracy are at the core of its actions and policies.