

Annual report on human rights and democracy in the world in 2017

Every year, the European Parliament debates human rights and democracy in the world overall and the European Union's policy on the matter. In 2017, human rights were very much at the heart of the EU's external action. However, 2017 also saw a continued backlash, worldwide, against civil society, and particularly journalists, a rise in misinformation and growing populism. The European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) report calls for the continuous mainstreaming of human rights throughout EU action both internally and externally. Parliament is expected to debate it during the December plenary session.

Background

The international community observes 10 December, annually since 1948, as human rights day. The promotion and protection of human rights is a core and founding value of the European Union. This year, the day will be even more significant, as 2018 marks the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 25th anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, and the 20th anniversary of the United Nations human rights defenders declaration. It is also the 30th anniversary of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought, one of the actions through which the European Parliament supports human rights.

European Parliament position

On 12 November 2018, the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) adopted its own-initiative [report](#) on the 'annual report on human rights and democracy in the world 2017 and the European Union's policy on the matter'. Further to its previous [resolutions](#) on annual reports on human rights (and its resolutions, amongst other things, on [refugee and migrant movements and the role of EU external action](#) (April 2017), the [civil society space in developing countries](#) (October 2017), [progress on UN Global compacts for safe, orderly and regular migration](#) (April 2018), and [media pluralism in the EU](#) (May 2018)), the European Parliament 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. The importance of the **mainstreaming of human rights into EU and Member States' external action** is the principle emphasis of this year's report. This is defined as the strategic process of deliberately incorporating human rights considerations into EU external policies, programming and operational activities. It reiterates previous European Parliament [calls](#) for more thorough public reporting, where appropriate based in particular on the priorities and indicators identified in the EU's human rights country strategies. It encourages greater consistency in implementing human rights conditionality clauses, and assessing and adjusting the human rights impact of EU policies.

To improve the response of the EU to human rights challenges in third countries and in its neighbourhood, the report emphasises areas such as development, migration, security, counter-terrorism, women's rights, combatting all forms of discrimination, enlargement and trade, as these require further political commitment and additional efforts to empower local actors, including the reinforcement of civil society and the protection of [human rights defenders](#). Special emphasis is placed this year on the following areas.

a) **The continued shrinking space within which human rights defenders can operate, due to the restrictive laws passed in many countries**

The report underlines the importance of the implementation of the [EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders](#) and its capacity to maintain adequate support, through the [European Instrument for Democracy](#)

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[and Human Rights](#) (EIDHR), for human rights defenders and NGOs in situations where they are most at risk, notably by enhancing the capacity of the [ProtectDefenders.eu](#) mechanism. Over the last three years, this mechanism has provided emergency support to more than [11 000 human rights defenders](#) worldwide.

b) Institutional aspects of the EU's work on human rights

The report praises the work done by the human rights services of the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS). It welcomes the recent approach represented by the EU's '[Good Human Rights Stories Initiative](#)'. It highly commends the work of the EU's Special Representative for Human Rights (EUSR), [Stavros Lambrinidis](#), in increasing the effectiveness, cohesion and visibility of human rights in EU foreign policy. It reiterates its call for this mandate to become a permanent one, giving the EUSR own-initiative powers and adequate resources. It reiterates the European Parliament's past call for the creation of a new EU Special Representative mandate specifically on international justice and international humanitarian law, to 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. The report calls for EU leadership to push for reforms of the UN with the goal of strengthening the impact of the rules-based multilateral system, 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.

c) Media freedom and freedom of expression online as well as offline

The report denounces the fact that media freedom is more than ever [under threat](#). In 2017, [seven journalists were killed](#) in Europe. A high number of journalists, worldwide, were abused, arrested and forced to pay high fines in trials that did not meet minimum procedural standards. The report strongly condemns the fact that so many human rights defenders faced digital threats in 2017, including compromised data through the confiscation of equipment, remote surveillance and data leakages. It expresses deep concern at the ever-increasing use of certain dual-use cyber-surveillance technologies against politicians, activists, bloggers and journalists. It calls on the EU institutions to urgently and effectively update the [dual-use export control regulation](#). The report calls for the protection of the freedom of expression both online and offline. The spread of [fake news and disinformation](#) represents a [serious threat](#) to the state of democracy, since it limits people's access to impartial information, incites violence against certain groups and is seen to have already affected the outcome of specific elections. The EU is urged to step up its efforts to protect the right to freedom of opinion and expression in all its relations with third countries; and to ensure the systematic implementation of the [EU Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline](#).

d) Combating violence against women and domestic violence

The report welcomes the [EU signature of the Istanbul Convention](#) on combating violence against women and domestic violence, and calls on EU countries that have not yet done so to ratify and implement the Convention. A broad EU accession, taking into account all aspects of the Istanbul Convention will provide a strong legal framework across Europe to prevent violence, combat impunity and protect women from violence.

e) Migration

On 1 January 2017, the [number of third-country nationals](#) residing in an EU Member State was 21.6 million, accounting for 4.2 % of the EU population. The report calls for better protection frameworks for migrants and refugees, in particular through establishing safe and legal migration routes and granting humanitarian visas. It calls on Member States to engage in a serious dialogue to establish a common, inclusive understanding, shared responsibilities and a unity of purpose with regard to migration; it welcomes the UN initiative on the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#), the [UNHCR Global Compact on Refugees](#) and the pivotal role assigned to human rights in these compacts. It recalls that 'all attempts to work with third countries, including countries of origin and transit for migration, must go hand in hand with improving human rights conditions within these countries and complying with international human rights and refugee law', and the EU's monitoring of funds allocated to third countries must be transparent.

Own-initiative report: [2018/2098\(INI\)](#); Committee responsible: AFET; Rapporteur: Petras Auštrevičius, (ALDE, Lithuania).

