

Taking stock of EU human rights and democracy action: Annual report for 2018

The annual report on human rights and democracy in the world is a comprehensive exercise that takes stock of all European Union (EU) actions in the human rights and democracy field. The report provides the European Parliament with an opportunity to recommend future EU action, considering current challenges, in its yearly resolution adopted in response to the EU report. The report for 2018 underlines that the EU should continue to play a leading role in tackling global democracy and human rights challenges, a view shared by the Parliament.

Background and EU annual report

One of the fundamental objectives of EU external action is to advance democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as set out in Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union. To take stock of EU achievements in supporting and promoting human rights and democracy globally and of the main global challenges, each year the EU adopts a report on human rights and democracy in the world and on Union policy on the matter.

The [2018 report](#), which was adopted by the EU Council of Foreign Ministers on 13 May 2019, highlights the leading role the EU plays in difficult times for human rights: In 2018 the EU 'remained at the forefront of the protection and promotion of human rights in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape'. According to the report, 2018 witnessed 'serious negative trends in human rights and democracy around the world'. The report provides a comprehensive picture of EU human rights instruments and actions, by priority area, and across the EU's key external policies (such as migration, trade and development). It takes a thematic approach, as it is accompanied by a [country section](#), published concurrently by the European External Action Service (EEAS).

In 2018, the EU focused on boosting support for human rights through multilateral cooperation, as well as on priority areas: democratic governance; civil society and human rights defenders; freedom of expression and media freedom; freedom of religion and belief; torture and the death penalty; equality and non-discrimination; economic, social and cultural rights; as well as business and human rights. These priorities are in line with those defined in the [EU action plan on human rights and democracy 2015-2019](#), the overarching policy framework adopted by the Council that guides all EU action on human rights in the world. A new action plan for the next five years is currently being prepared.

A broad consensus on the backlash against human rights and democracy in the world: Independent human rights and democracy organisations share the EU view of the deteriorating human rights and democracy situation in the world. A Human Rights Watch [2019 report](#) speaks of a 'dark time for human rights', while acknowledging that the defenders of human rights and democracy are also gaining strength. The 2019 Varieties of Democracy Project [annual report](#), which analyses the state of democracy in the world from a multidimensional perspective, finds that democracy is in significant decline, despite a majority of countries in the world remaining democratic. 'The third wave of autocratisation' continues, affecting almost one-third of the world's population, with a particularly severe impact in countries such as Brazil, India, the United States of America, as well as several Eastern European countries. An International IDEA [report](#) 'The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise' also notes that: 'The value, viability and future of democracy are more contested now than ever before in modern history ... The idea of democracy continues to mobilise people around the world, but the practice of existing democracies has disappointed and disillusioned many citizens and democracy advocates.'

European Parliament resolution

Each year, the Parliament adopts its own resolution in response to the EU annual report adopted by the Council. While the EU report is mainly a stock-taking exercise, the EP resolution is more forward-looking, focusing on recommendations for the EU on how to improve its action in favour of human rights and democracy. On 4 December 2019, Parliament's Foreign Affairs (AFET) Committee adopted its report on the matter. Members will vote on the report during the January I plenary session. The report expresses 'deep concern at the attacks on democracy and the rule of law worldwide in 2018, which reflect the rise of authoritarianism as a political project', and notes that authoritarian regimes are more prone to conflict and instability. It also deplores the attacks against human rights defenders and media freedom.

Priorities for EU action highlighted in the AFET report:

- **Stronger mainstreaming of human rights in EU external policy.** For example, in the area of trade, **effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms of the human rights clause in international agreements**, including an effective and independent complaints mechanism for those affected by human rights violations.
- **'A new, ambitious, comprehensive and binding' EU action plan on human rights and democracy**, including digital rights, environmental rights, the rights of the elderly, sports and human rights, and the rights of migrants.
- **Reinforced human rights dialogues** with non-EU countries, as well as regular assessment of the efficacy of these dialogues and appropriate adjustments, with closer involvement of civil society in the process.
- Systematic responses by the EU and the Member States, 'using all appropriate means', to **shrinking civil society space** in authoritarian countries and to better protect human rights defenders.
- Tackling **impunity for human rights violations**, an issue of growing concern, particularly in conflict settings, that should become a priority in the new action plan.
- Strengthening **equality and non-discrimination in the world**, firstly with respect to women's rights and gender equality, as well as the rights of the child, but also with regard to more specific groups such as LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities, persons discriminated on basis of caste, indigenous peoples.
- In line with the [opinion](#) delivered by the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, a **stronger EU focus on women rights**, and in particular on sexual and reproductive health and rights, given that restrictions on access to sexual and reproductive health are an 'unacceptable violation of human rights'.
- European Commission, EEAS and the Member States advocacy and dialogue on **freedom of religion and belief**, aiming at preventing related violence and persecution.
- Addressing the potential **threat of new technologies to human rights**, including the increasing employment of dual-use cyber-surveillance technologies against human rights activists, journalists, political opponents and lawyers.
- Building cooperation and partnerships on **refugees** with the third countries concerned; enhancing refugee self-sufficiency; expanding access to third country solutions; and improving respect for migrants' human rights.
- Strengthening the **environmental dimension** of human rights, where climate emergency and mass biodiversity loss constitute 'a major threat to human rights'. The report calls on the Commission and the EEAS to work towards an EU strategy to protect a healthy environment.
- Continued EU **support for electoral processes**, including follow-up to the recommendations of election observation missions and providing democracy support throughout the electoral cycle.

The report welcomes the 14 October 2019 [Council conclusions on democracy](#), as a good start towards reinforcing EU support for democracy. Concerning the **EU report drafting process**, AFET 'recognises the progress made in terms of the procedure and format of the EU annual report', but asks the Council to finalise these annual reports earlier in the year and improve the consultation process.

Resolution on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter – annual report 2018 ([2019/2125\(INI\)](#));

Committee responsible: AFET, Rapporteur: Isabel Wiseler-Lima (EPP, Luxembourg); Committee for opinion: FEMM

