

Addressing shrinking civil society space in developing countries

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The European Parliament adopted by 509 votes to 90, with 96 abstentions, a resolution on addressing shrinking civil society space in developing countries.

Members recalled that the civil society (which includes non-governmental and non-profit organisations) represented, together with the public and private sectors, the third sector of a healthy and decent society, as a necessary counterweight to the existing power in force.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have become important players in development aid at the global level, while the Cotonou Agreement recognises civil society as a key actor within ACP-EU cooperation.

Recognising the major role of civil society: the resolution stressed the importance of an independent, diverse and pluralistic civil society to ensure the development and stability of a country, to ensure democratic consolidation, social justice and respect for human rights, and to establish an inclusive society.

Parliament stressed that the contraction of space devoted to civil society - through legislation, taxation, restrictions on funding, excessive administrative burdens, or by stigmatization as foreign agents of CSO representatives - was a global phenomenon that was not limited to developing countries, but also increasingly manifested itself in countries where democracy is firmly anchored, including in EU Member States.

Members therefore called on the EU to recognise the need to assist the governments of beneficiary countries in creating a political, administrative and legal environment for civil society organisations to work effectively.

Protecting human rights defenders: Parliament called for the systematic denunciation of the killings of human rights defenders, and any attempt to subject them to any form of violence, persecution, threat, harassment, forced disappearance, imprisonment or arbitrary arrest. It invited the Union to:

- support human rights defenders and increase the conditions and funding mechanisms for civil society actors;
- put in place monitoring tools for the effective joint implementation of EU guidelines on human rights defenders;
- ensure the protection and application of sanctions in the event of serious violations human rights;
- implement EU guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief.

Parliament also called on the EU to:

- work towards greater autonomy of civic space, not only through EU development and human rights policies, but also by integrating all other EU internal and external policies, including justice, home affairs, trade and security policies;
- address the root causes of shrinking civil society space within the framework of a uniform and coherent approach in its relations with the third countries;
- promote institutional mechanisms and initiatives to strengthen dialogue and build partnerships between governments, CSOs, local authorities and the private sector in developing countries;
- monitor counter-terrorism measures and aspects of anti-money laundering and transparency legislation and anti-money laundering legislation;
- develop a monitoring framework of EU external financing instruments, with a special focus on human rights
- strengthen the role of civil society actors in trade agreement institutions, which should contain binding clauses on human rights.

Parliament reiterated the obligation incumbent on the private sector to adhere to both human rights and the highest social and environmental standards.

Benchmarks and indicators: Members called on the Commission and the EEAS to establish best practices and to develop clear benchmarks and indicators related to shrinking space in the context of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). They also advocated:

- increased European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) funds to address the threats to human rights defenders;
- systematically including shrinking civic space in their bilateral relations between the Union and the Member States;
- improving protection of civil society organisation representatives in third countries in order to prevent any hostility against them.

Lastly, Parliament shall commit to establishing, on an annual basis, a list of countries where civil society space is most under threat.