

Annual report on human rights and democracy in the world 2016 and the European Union's policy on the matter

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Godelieve QUISTHOUDT-ROWOHL (EPP, DE) on the Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2016 and the European Union's policy on the matter.

The main aim of the report is to look at the human rights and democracy challenges in third countries and the parliamentary scrutiny of human rights in external policies for the year 2016.

General considerations: the report expressed profound concern about the pushback against democracy, human rights and the rule of law and reiterated that the EU and its Member States must actively pursue the principle of mainstreaming human rights and democracy, ensuring increased coherence between the EU's internal and external policies and greater coordination between the external policies of the Member States. Members recalled that the EU's objective to increase its international influence as a credible and legitimate international actor is greatly shaped by its ability to pursue human rights and democracy internally and externally. They highlighted the work carried out by Parliament and in particular its Subcommittee on Human Rights.

Addressing human rights challenges: the report expressed particular concern about the increasing number of attacks against religious minorities, and deplored the fact that many countries have and enforce anti-conversion and blasphemy laws. It noted that civil society, including faith-based organisations, is increasingly under attack worldwide, through a growing number of repressive laws adopted throughout the world. The EU and its Member States were called upon to constantly raise cases of the various forms of bans on civil society organisations (CSOs) and their activities.

Members reiterated the importance of freedom of expression online and offline that nourishes a culture of pluralism that empowers civil society and citizens to hold their governments to account. They welcomed the new European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) launched in 2016, with its specific focus on how to apply the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline. They also condemned hate speech and incitements to violence, both on the internet and elsewhere, since they constitute a threat to the rule of law and the values embodied by human rights.

The report also noted, inter alia:

- the crucial role played by human rights defenders and the need to support them;
- the importance of defending women's rights, including their sexual and reproductive rights, through legislation, education and by supporting CSOs, and the aims of EU Gender Action Plan 2016-2020 and the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019. Gender mainstreaming should be integrated into all EU legislation, with a special emphasis on EU external relations policies;
- the EU's efforts to support the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) set up by the UN to assist in the investigation of serious crimes committed in Syria;
- the urgent need to take genuine steps to tackle the root causes of migration flows and find long-term solutions based on respect for human rights and dignity.

Addressing democracy support challenges and activities: Members welcomed the invaluable assistance provided to CSOs worldwide under the EIDHR, which continues to constitute the flagship instrument of the EU in implementing its external human rights policy. They reiterated their positive view of the EU's continued support for electoral processes and recalled the importance of proper follow-up of the reports and recommendations of the EU's electoral observation missions as a way of enhancing their impact and strengthening the EU's support for democratic standards in the countries concerned. The report suggested that the EU's experience with enlargement could be of great assistance in its support for democratisation and the rule of law.

Ensuring a comprehensive approach via EU policies: Members welcomed the adoption by the Council in July 2015 of a new Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for 2015-2019 and the performance of a mid-term review in 2017. They called on the EU institutions and Member States to ensure the efficient and coherent implementation of the current Action Plan, including through genuine collaboration with civil society organisations.

The committee went on to recognise the key role of the EUSR for Human Rights in enhancing the EU's visibility and effectiveness and reiterated its request for his mandate, which expires in 2019, to be made permanent. Members recommended that the EUSR be given own-initiative powers, higher public visibility and adequate staff and financial resources.

Lastly, the committee reiterated its full support for the EU's strong engagement in promoting the advancement of human rights and democratic principles through cooperation with UN structures and other international bodies.