



## EUROPEAN UNION SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

### EUSR for Human Rights – Newsletter – December 2025 - January 2026

In early 2026, many have woken up to a strengthened conviction that respect for international law is central to European and global security. The law protects us only if and when it applies to friends and foes alike. That is why the EU has recalled that international law and the UN Charter must be upheld under all circumstances - in **Venezuela**, **Ukraine**, the **Occupied Palestinian Territory**, **Greenland**, and anywhere else, which I also highlighted in my interview with [Politico](#).

Already in the first weeks of 2026, as demonstrated in this newsletter, we have witnessed such a scale and depth of violations across the world that it should not come as a surprise that international human rights law and international humanitarian law were indeed designed to protect us all from the worst forms of brutality, but is only as powerful as our will to uphold it. As the EU, we only have one option: to continue standing behind this system, with or without our traditional partners, strengthening partnerships with the vast majority of countries and people that share our priorities.

This is why it was a key signal to welcome **High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk** to the Foreign Affairs Council in January, as the [Council Conclusions](#) on EU priorities in human rights for a were adopted. The EU Foreign Ministers expressed their strong and unanimous support for the High Commissioner and his work. Championing the work of the High Commissioner's office will continue to be a priority for me in 2026, including to ensure that human rights remain central as the UN undergoes major reform.

This newsletter covers two months. Much of my engagement revolved around the **Americas region**, where two human rights dialogues were held with Colombia and Mexico. I also closely followed the events in Venezuela, which I also commented on in [Morning Joe](#). I visited the **United States**, primarily for multilateral meetings, but also to engage with media and students on the state of human rights worldwide. I spoke at **Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer** and **Carr-Ryan Centers** as well as at **New York University**, because I believe that universities play an essential role in democratic societies, to advance our knowledge and provide the basis for evidence-based policies. That is why **academic freedom** is an explicit action point of my mandate.

At the **World Economic Forum in Davos**, much of my focus was on abducted **Ukrainian children** and Russia's strategy to kill Ukraine's future. [I also wrote about](#) my outlook on human rights in 2026, and posted a [video](#) about key activities and plans for the coming period. I always welcome your feedback to make my work more accessible and visible to the relevant audiences.

### AREAS OF CONCERN

#### Americas

It is evident that many countries in the Americas region see the importance of partnering with EU, including because of our longstanding defence of international law, multilateralism and human rights. The EU has also long cooperated with the **United States** and other partners to combat transnational organised crime and drug trafficking. Such cooperation must be conducted with full respect for international law, including international human rights law. I had the opportunity to underscore this point in my appearance in [Morning Joe](#) in **New York** in December as well as the joint statement of the [EU-Colombia Human Rights Dialogue](#).

In **Venezuela**, amidst a series of dramatic events, I welcome the release of political prisoners, which the EU has long called for. While we rejoice with the released and their families, their charges must be lifted, and the EU's longstanding call for a democratic transition, enhancing civic space by repealing detrimental laws, and the presence on the ground of international organisations mandated to monitor the human rights situation, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), remain as relevant.

#### Africa

I am horrified by the ever-increasing reports of the catastrophic humanitarian situation in **Sudan** and the **DRC**. Recently, a number of civil society organisations have drawn my attention to the particularly alarming situation of women and children, who are repeatedly victims of sexual violence by armed forces operating in both countries. This situation has recently been further complicated by the withdrawal of US funding and, as a result, the departure of non-governmental and humanitarian organizations from these countries.

I am also continuing to monitor the situation in **Tanzania**, following the presidential elections on 29 October 2025. The violent suppression of the protests that followed the elections claimed hundreds of lives and left many injured. All this violence must be properly investigated and those responsible must be punished. At this point, I also reiterate my call for the release of opposition leader **Tundu Lissu**, who remains imprisoned and whose trial has been stalled since before the election.

Unfortunately, the elections in **Uganda**, too, were accompanied by repressive measures against the opposition, both before and after the elections. Arbitrary arrests of civil society members and internet shutdowns in the run-up to the election may ultimately cast doubt on their fairness. The subsequent violence and threats against opposition leaders are also regrettable.

#### Asia

In **Myanmar**, after a month-long political performance that few could describe as a genuine democratic process, the military junta's proxy has unsurprisingly declared victory. These sham elections will neither unite the country nor advance peace and reconciliation. Instead, they merely confirm what the people of Myanmar already know: the junta has no intention of honoring its promises of a peaceful transition to democratic rule. Equally troubling is the largely muted reaction of the international community. Aside from the UN and the European Union ([statement](#) of the High Representative and European Parliament [briefing](#)), too many voices remain silent. Silence, however, will not bring stability. As the junta consolidates its grip on power, we can expect renewed efforts to impose control by force, with devastating consequences for civilians. The world must not only condemn this charade, but finally act in support of the people of Myanmar.

The EU–**India** Summit on 27 January was a welcome opportunity to reaffirm the importance of human rights as a core element of our partnership, and I am glad that the topic has been addressed on the highest level. The EU strongly believes that sustainable cooperation must be grounded in respect for fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. I stand ready to follow up on these discussions and to deepen engagement with India through concrete and continued dialogue.

#### Middle East and North Africa

At the turn of the new year, we have all been shaken by the brutality of the **Iranian** authorities against their citizens. Despite the growing evidence, the authorities have sought to downplay the scale of the crackdown, while NGO reports indicate that at least 20,000 people were arrested during the demonstrations. The nationwide communication blackout has made accessing reliable information

much more difficult. However, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, Mai Soto, estimated that the death toll could be at least 5,000, adding that reports from Iranian doctors inside the country suggest the number could be 20,000 or more. To get a better understanding of the situation, I am in daily contact with civil society, and also aim to convene a dedicated discussion with them to chart the way forward. Meanwhile, the Council adopted [new sanctions](#) over serious human rights violations. The EU continues to be a [staunch supporter](#) of accountability efforts, including the mandates of the **Fact-Finding Mission** and Special Rapporteur on Iran. I also issued a [statement](#) on the unfolding events.

Across the **Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)**, too, the situation remains dire despite a nominal ceasefire. The developments around the Board of Peace have raised concerns when it comes to the human rights of the Palestinian people, particularly the right to self-determination, but also the primacy of the UN as a forum to determine matters on peace and security. Meanwhile, the decision of the Israeli authorities to enter and demolish the **UNRWA headquarters** in East Jerusalem is a serious attack against a UN entity, and constitutes a [violation](#) of Israel's obligations under international law. On a more positive note, the limited re-opening of the **Rafah crossing** is a positive step, which must be followed by others.

In **Syria**, where I aim to travel in March, the developments have been rapid and alarming amidst clashes between transitional government forces and Kurdish-led forces, with reports of human rights abuses and violations of humanitarian law on both sides also reaching my office. While the 16 January 2026 presidential decree has addressed some concerns of the Kurdish community, these are aspects the international community needs to consistently monitor, in the northeast and other regions alike. Like [UN experts](#), I call for a durable ceasefire, the protection of civilians and minority rights as well as the safety and security of detainees and prisoners. I am also alarmed by the humanitarian conditions in the Kobani/Ain al-Arab junction. Ahead of my mission, I continue to engage with diverse Syrian civil society.

In **Lebanon**, violations of the ceasefire have continued, rendering it extremely challenging to pursue efforts to extend a state monopoly of arms in the country, and also pursue longer-term reforms in the areas of rule of law, justice and accountability. I was pleased to see that the [EU's position](#) ahead of the first **EU-Lebanon Association Council** – held shortly after my mission – referenced the need to advance justice and accountability for the **2020 Beirut Port explosion**. Yet, despite projections we received during my mission, I regret that no visible progress has been made on the investigation of this case, which I consider an emblematic one in charting a new path forward for Lebanon. In my [interview in Arab News](#), I reflected on my impressions of the vision and other also reflected on engagements in the region and beyond.

### Europe and Central Asia

In **Ukraine**, Russia has turned winter into a weapon of war. Repeated large-scale attacks by Russia on energy infrastructure in Ukraine keep shutting down heating and electricity in urban areas across the country. With freezing temperatures outside, interior temperatures in many residential buildings have dropped to unimaginable lows. On 10 December, on the occasion of International Human Rights Day, [I spoke to Slawa TV](#), a Warsaw-based Ukrainian language channel. There can be no just and lasting peace in Ukraine without accountability for the horrors Russia has committed and the return of all those Ukrainians, young and adult, forcibly transferred and deported to Russia.

## BILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS

On 1 December 2025, I had the honour of co-chairing the **EU Human Rights Dialogue with Colombia**. The EU is heavily invested in a peace, democracy and human rights in Colombia and our annual Human Rights Dialogue takes stock on our cooperation and concrete steps forward. As cast their ballots on 8 March this year, the EU Electoral Observation Mission is a clear example of how we support democratic elections and counter the worrying trend of increased political violence. Despite close cooperation and support, the number of killings and attacks remain among the highest in the world. Reversing this trend remains a top priority.

At the end of the year, I also co-chaired the **EU-Mexico Human Rights Dialogue**, preceded by a visit to the **state of Zacatecas**, where the EU is working together with local authorities to improve the identification of **missing persons** in a context of large numbers of disappearances in Zacatecas and other parts of Mexico. Throughout my mission in Mexico, I consistently heard shared concerns of the impact of violence and organised crime on the population. I was deeply touched by the unimaginable suffering experienced by the searching mothers, some of whom had spent up to 15 years searching for their missing family members without answers. Combatting violence and strengthening law enforcement are key pillars to promote trade and investment as well as social wellbeing. That is why human rights are central as the EU and Mexico strengthen their bilateral relationship through the modernization of the global agreement.

I had the opportunity of sharing this message in bilateral meetings as well in [my interview in El Universal](#) and an [OP-ED in El Excelsior](#). Mexico has made impressive progress over the last years in several areas, including gender equality. As an outcome of last year's dialogue, we also held an exchange on policies to combat **gender-based violence** between EU entities such as the European Commission's **Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST)**, the **European Institute for Gender Equality** and the **Fundamental Rights Agency** as well as Mexican authorities. This is also an excellent way to connect internal EU discussions with external relations.

In January I received the **US Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, Riley Barnes**, in Brussels. We had a direct and frank discussion on the importance of dialogue between the EU and the US, to exchange on human rights issues and concerns in our respective countries and globally. I look forward to continuing that dialogue with a wide range of US actors as I travel to Washington later this spring.

In December, I met with **Kenyan Ambassador H.E. Joash Maangi** to discuss deepening EU-Kenya cooperation in the area of human rights. We focused on the situation of the younger generation, which is struggling with a lack of jobs, a factor which may be reflected in the upcoming elections. I will discuss this and many other topics with Kenyan officials and local civil society during my mission to the country in mid-February.

The EU's cooperation with **Central Asian states** continues to deepen. I see this as an opportunity to explore what we can collectively do to defend the international human rights architecture. In January, I had a very good first meeting with the **Ambassador of Kazakhstan to the EU, H.E. Roman Vassilenko**. Kazakhstan's continued constitutional reforms are especially commendable. At the same time, the anti-LGBTI propaganda laws adopted early in the year are a cause of great concern as they may seriously undermine the right to freedom of expression, to non-discrimination and to access to information.

I was supposed to start the year with a mission to **Jordan**, including to strengthen our dialogue on human rights issues in the context of the **Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership** and to shed a light

on the situation of both Palestinian and Syrian refugees in the country and beyond. Unfortunately, the seasonal flu also hit me, and I had to schedule my mission to later in the spring. In preparation, I met with **Ambassador H.E. Yousef R. Bataineh** to discuss our common priorities, and I hope to confirm the new mission dates the soonest. I also held a civil society consultation with CSOs working on Jordan, which shed light on issues related to the freedom of expression and civic space in particular.

In December, I also met with **Dr. Dindar Zebari, Coordinator for International Advocacy in the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq**, and his accompanying delegation, to discuss human rights policies in both Iraqi Kurdistan and in Iraq at large, including legislative developments. The Kurdistan Region stands apart with the *de facto* moratorium on the death penalty in place as well as higher protection and representation of minorities. I was made aware of the regional Human Rights Action Plan, and also received an invitation to visit Erbil in the future.

I also had a follow-up meeting to my November mission with **Egyptian Ambassador H.E. Ahmed Abu Zeid**. In addition to discussing possible avenues for cooperation to preserve the multilateral rules-based order, I renewed my call to advance the releases of human rights defenders, including **Hoda Abdel Moneim, Ibrahim Metwally** and **Marwa Arafa**, among others. I also urged the authorities to consider lifting the **travel bans and asset freezes** on personnel of human rights organizations, including those under case 855/2020, to ensure their operating space.

Finally, I was in touch with **Israeli counterparts** regarding the re-registration process of international NGOs working in Israel and OPT, which makes it legally and ethically impossible for many to comply. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza remain without the lifesaving aid they need, while INGOs, alongside their UN and Palestinian partners, are the key providers of such aid. In my recent statement, I also raised concerns regarding the [access of foreign journalists](#) to Gaza. In addition to closely following a proposal of the possible reintroduction of the death penalty for terrorism-related offences, my team was further made aware of the dire situation of **Palestinian juvenile detainees** in Israeli prisons.

## MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS

My first visit to the **UN in New York** took place as the UN stands at a pivotal moment, politically and financially, challenged by members of UN Security Council, who have the foremost responsibility to uphold international peace and security. As the organisation shivers, we should not forget that it continues to be the foremost multilateral arena where the majority of states continues to address issues that require the attention of the international community. One such example is the UN General Assembly Emergency Special Session on **Ukrainian children**, which attended in New York.

I also had the opportunity to mark the outcome of a session of the **Third Committee**. Despite the disruption of a previous consensus, a majority of countries rallied around the adoption of a number of resolutions. In my meetings with key UN actors, including **Under-Secretary General for Legal Affairs Elinor Hammar skjöld**, **Under-Secretary General for Global Communication Melissa Flemming** and **Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights Ilze Brands Kehris**, we discussed how the UN continues to provide us with essential facts about the situation of human rights worldwide, support states to better protect human rights, and advance accountability for violations. The EU-UN partnership is central, the two entities being premised on multilateral cooperation and international law.

In January, I also met a group of 15 African journalists and influencers who visited Brussels as part of the **African Union Media Fellows programme**. We discussed human rights as part of the partnership between the EU and the African continent, and the fellows shared with me their opinion on the situation in their respective countries. I look forward to reconnecting with members of the group in the context of my missions.

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS, DEMOCRACY, CIVIC SPACE, MEDIA FREEDOM

In December, on **Human Rights Day**, I participated in the [EU-NGO Human Rights Forum](#). The 2025 edition of the Forum, which brought together human rights defenders from all over the world, was held under the title “Partnering for Equality and Non-discrimination”, and focused on global trends and emerging challenges in the fight against discrimination. In my opening remarks, [I shared some of my thoughts](#) and recommendations on the topic of "Global Trends and Emerging Challenges in Combating Discrimination."

In Mexico, I met with the Oaxacan human rights defender **Yolanda Perez Cruz**, who travelled all the way to Mexico City to tell me the story of her imprisoned husband, the environmental and indigenous human rights defender **Pablo López Alavez**. López Alavez has spent 15 years in prison. In my bilateral meetings I reiterated the concerns expressed by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and others on the grounds for his detention and urged for a revision of his case.

I also met with a group of members of **Southeast Asian Parliamentarians against Corruption** (SEAPAC). We discussed how corruption undermines the rule of law, weakens civic space, enables trafficking, and disproportionately affects vulnerable groups. Many of the observations, concerns and concrete examples on the impact of corruption as a root cause for human rights abuses and fragility regrettably echoed those I heard during my mission to Kuala Lumpur and the 6<sup>th</sup> EU – ASEAN Political Dialogue on Human Rights (PDHR). Corruption fuels impunity and facilitates border-based criminal networks across the region, including in Myanmar, where the expansion of online scam compounds has become a major regional security threat.

In December, I also met with the **Free Voices Collective** who informed me about the worsening situation of human rights in **Azerbaijan**. They were particularly concerned for researchers **Bahruz Samadov** and **Igbal Abilov**, and journalist **Ulviyya Guliyeva** who all remain in prison. I further met with **Ruth Kronenburg**, Executive Director of **Free Press Unlimited** (FPU), an organization focusing on supporting and protecting journalists in crises and conflicts. I look forward to further cooperation with FPU, both in terms of specific cases and broader emerging trends.

In the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, the upcoming election has put to test **Armenia's** democratic resilience. I was glad to see the European Commission allocating additional funds to help combat disinformation, support civil society and independent media in this crucial time for the country. Democratic backsliding persisted in **Georgia**, with further legislative restrictions on the right to freedom of association, assembly and of expression. Such actions stand in violation of Georgia's human rights obligations including as a member state of the Council of Europe. In **Russia**, repression of civil society and all forms of dissent remained entrenched, increasingly enforced through criminal prosecutions under broad security laws as reported by human rights experts and civil society groups. In **Belarus**, repression against all segments of society continued. Despite the release of some political prisoners, the number of political prisoners year-to-year still averages approximately 1,200 people.

In **Tunisia**, the intensified crackdown on political opposition, journalists, lawyers and critical voices as well as repression of civic space continues, which is why I have decided to prioritize this context moving forward. In the context of the so-called '*conspiracy against state security case*', I took note of the heavy verdicts pronounced, and I continue to call upon the importance of the freedom of expression, respect of the right to a fair trial and due process requirements, as the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms continue to form the basis of the EU-Tunisia partnership, as enshrined in the Association Agreement. Moreover, the dire situation for refugees and migrants and



the harassment of civil society organisations working in the refugee and migration field are some of my key concerns.

### **CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT**

The latest report by the **UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC)** documents continued patterns of grave violations against children in 2025, including killing and maiming, recruitment and use, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. It confirmed the negative trends and persistent patterns of grave violations, now in a context of a global decrease in humanitarian funding.

In December, I met with SRSG, **Vanessa Frazier**, who shared her vision for advancing the CAAC agenda. I reaffirmed the EU's unwavering commitment to protecting children affected by armed conflict, and underlined my own commitment to bringing attention to their plight, including in forgotten crisis contexts. We discussed specific country situations, our shared priorities and ways to work together to strengthen child protection. The SRSG insisted on the devastating impact of **explosive ordnance** on children globally, and the tangible results of successful demining both for children and their communities – an assessment shared by the EU. Therefore, EU support to humanitarian mine action has been substantially increased.

### **JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

NGOs play an indispensable and multifaceted role in the fight against impunity, not least by supporting the work and mandate of the **International Criminal Court (ICC)**. In January, I met with ten representatives of **NGOs working on accountability**. As the NGOs called for a renewed and strong political support by the EU for the ICC, I reiterated the EU's commitment to fighting against impunity and promoting international criminal law and justice. I further reconfirmed the EU's unwavering support for the ICC and our resolve to defend it from any attempts aimed at obstructing the course of justice or undermining the international system of criminal justice. It is essential that the Court and its officials be defended against external threats and sanctions. Protecting and enabling the work of individuals and organisations collaborating with the Court against undue threats and pressure is equally important.

### **FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF**

I recently met with the **EU Religion and Diplomacy Advisors**, a unique network that brings together expertise from across the EU to reflect on the role of religion in today's global challenges. Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right, but it is also a key enabler of peaceful, inclusive and resilient societies. When protected, it allows individuals and communities to live with dignity and mutual respect; when instrumentalised, it can fuel exclusion, violence and conflict. Our discussion confirmed that engaging with religious actors and supporting interfaith dialogue are essential parts of EU human rights diplomacy and peacebuilding efforts. Sustainable peace cannot be built without tolerance, pluralism and equal rights for all, regardless of religion or belief.

The importance of the freedom of religion and belief has again come to the forefront in the context of the crackdown against the **Baha'i community** in Iran. My office has been made aware of alarming developments, including the airing of an alleged confession obtained under torture from two young Baha'is from Kerman, **Venus Hoseininejad** and **Peyvand Naimi**, claiming the Baha'i had been behind recent demonstrations, inciting violence, while the whereabouts of the two youths remain unknown. This incident seems to be part of a broader trend by the Iranian authorities to justify the persecution of the Baha'i community.

## LOOKING AHEAD

I am looking forward to my first African mission which will lead me in February to **Kenya**. In February I will travel to Geneva twice, to co-chair the **EU-OHCHR Strategic Consultations** and to attend the High-Level Segment of the **UN Human Rights Council**.

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*EU Special Representative for Human Rights*

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