



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

MEMO

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Questions and Answers

1. Joint Communication and the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy (Action Plan)

Why does the EU propose a new Action Plan?

The EU is founded on the values of respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. These values guide the EU's external action.

The global picture in relation to human rights and democracy is mixed: while there have been great leaps forward, the pushback against the universality and indivisibility of human rights and backsliding on democracy must be addressed. New technologies present both opportunities and threats. At the same time, human rights are increasingly intertwined with global environmental challenges, such as climate change.

In this changing context, the EU must remain a credible actor that is able to maximise the opportunities brought by the new changes, while defending EU values and interests as well as agreed international norms and principles. This Action Plan is a renewed political roadmap setting the priorities to achieve that.

Since the adoption of the EU strategic framework on human rights and democracy in 2012¹, the EU has adopted two EU Action Plans (2012-2014 and 2015-2019) to implement it. Today's proposal follows up on this, setting out the priorities for the period of 2020-2024.

What are the priorities?

The Action Plan identifies priorities in view of changing geopolitics, the digital transition and environmental challenges. It also offers an opportunity to refresh the EU's approach to human rights and democracy to address current challenges.

This Action Plan identifies priorities around five mutually reinforcing lines of action:

- Protecting and empowering individuals;
- Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies;
- Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy;

¹ https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131181.pdf

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- New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges;
- Delivering by working together.

Under each line it sets concrete objectives, for instance:

- Develop tools to detect and respond to early signs of closing civic space and space for civil society, including the use of digital technologies;
- Support the development of child-friendly justice systems for all children in contact with the law and deprived of liberty;
- Develop a new horizontal global human rights sanctions regime to tackle serious human rights violations and abuses;
- Refine electoral observation methodology to monitor and assess the use of social media and other digital technologies during election campaigns against international standards;
- Promote the accessibility of technologies for persons with disabilities.

What is new in this Action Plan: how does it differ from the previous one?

The new Action Plan builds on the previous action plans and continues to focus on some long-standing priorities, such as supporting human rights defenders and the fight against death penalty. More importance is given to empower people and defeat discrimination on all grounds. It also addresses more prominently the accountability gap, the erosion of rule of law and access to justice.

This Action Plan takes account of today's world new challenges and therefore focuses in particular on:

- environmental challenges and climate change;
- leveraging the benefits of digital technologies and minimising the risks of misuse in line with EU's commitment to lead the transition to a new digital world;
- stepping up economic, social and cultural rights;
- more emphasis on democracy, including on the misuse of online technologies and shrinking civic and political space;
- a stronger focus on human rights defenders;
- strategic communication and public diplomacy.

How will the Action Plan be implemented? What resources does the Commission have for the implementation of the Action Plan?

The objectives under the Action Plan will be implemented at country, regional and multilateral level, taking account of local circumstances and specificities. The EU will leverage the broad range of policies, tools and political and financial instruments at its disposal to implement it, such as:

- political, human rights and sectoral policy dialogues;
- EU trade policies, including the EU's generalised scheme of preferences;
- thematic and geographical instruments under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework;
- actions in multilateral and regional human rights fora;
- communication activities and awareness-raising campaigns;
- public statements, *démarches*;
- observing trials of human rights defenders;
- the implementation of 13 EU human rights guidelines²;
- election observation and its follow-up;
- dialogue with civil society, human rights organisations and the business sector.

² https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/asia/65018/eu-human-rights-guidelines_en

The EU Action Plan provides guidance to over 140 EU Delegations and Offices as well as Member States embassies for targeted initiatives and actions at country level all over the world.

How will the Commission and the High Representative follow up on and monitor the implementation of this Action Plan?

Effective implementation will require close work between the EU and its Member States to ensure greater coherence and impact. In line with his mandate, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights will be guiding the implementation of the Action Plan.

Actions apply to all regions in the world taking into consideration local needs and specificities. The EU's 142 Delegations and Offices will take a lead in reflecting the priority actions in initiatives at the country level including through the adoption of tailored-made strategies at a local level. The EU will also engage with different stakeholders on the overall implementation, and organise an annual meeting with civil society. The public EU annual report on Human rights and democracy in the world is another effective tool to monitor the progress made in a transparent manner. A mid-term review of the implementation is foreseen.

What has the EU achieved on human rights and democracy worldwide so far?

- Since 2015, more than 30 000 human rights defenders were protected by the EU via the dedicated mechanism *ProtectDefenders.eu*. In 2019 alone, the EU raised Human Rights Defenders cases in dialogues and consultations with over 40 countries.
- The EU advocated for abolition of death penalty. Since 2015, 5 countries abolished death penalty – Burkina, Guinea, Benin, Congo, Guatemala, Suriname and Mongolia - bringing a total of 114 countries that abolished death penalty in law. The EU-led resolution on a UN moratorium on the use of death penalty was adopted by the UNGA in December 2018 with the support of 121 countries.
- The European Economic and Trade Office in Taiwan has been working with Taiwanese NGOs to support non-discrimination against LGBTI persons. In April 2019, Taiwan passed a bill that gave same-sex couples the right to marry – the first of its kind in Asia.
- Between January 2015 and October 2019, the EU supported over 3 350 actions relevant to children's rights in 148 third countries and territories. For example, under the global programme on Female Genital Mutilation (€11 million), 16 countries adopted action plans and 12 established national budget lines to put an end to Female Genital Mutilation.
- In 2014-2019, the EU supported democracy in more than 70 partner countries with €400 million aiming at, for instance, contributing to the organisation of elections and supporting oversight bodies, independent media, parliaments and political parties to play their essential role in democratic societies. 98 EU Election Observation Missions were deployed worldwide.
- The General System of Preference contributed to the implementation of human rights and labour Conventions, including through monitoring missions in 11 countries in the last year. For example, this contributed to a reduction of child labour to 1% in Sri Lanka through pioneering 'Child Labour Free Zones'.

2. JOINT PROPOSAL

What is the joint proposal about?

The EU needs to be more strategic, assertive, effective and united in its approach to external relations. This is reflected in the *Commission's Political Guidelines* and the *Strategic Agenda 2019-2024* adopted by the European Council. The High Representative and the European Commission expressed an ambition to strengthen the EU's capacity to promote its values and strategic interests around the world and to use the clauses foreseen in the Treaties to achieve it.

Article 22 of the Treaty on the European Union offers the European Council the possibility to adopt a unanimous Decision setting out the EU's strategic interests and objectives in specific areas of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Once the European Council sets the strategic objectives, the Council would then be able to adopt by qualified majority (QMV) decisions implementing the European Council's strategic decisions.

It is in the strategic interest of the EU to take global leadership on human rights and democracy. Hence, the Joint Proposal paves the way for the European Council to adopt – by unanimity – the Action Plan as a strategic interest of the EU. Decisions on actions implementing the Action Plan could then be taken by QMV.

Why is this proposed now?

In 2018, the Commission has proposed to move from unanimity to QMV in certain areas of the CFSP³. The Von Der Leyen Commission recognises that *to be a global leader, the Union needs to take decisions in a faster and more effective way and overcome unanimity constraints that hamper our foreign policy, as set out in the High Representative/Vice-President's mission letter*. The Joint Proposal adopted by the College today offers such a possibility, by proposing to take decision related to the implementation of the Action Plan by QMV.

For more information

[Press release](#)

Joint Communication EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024

EU Action Plan 2020-2024

Joint Proposal for a recommendation of the Council to the European Council

³ COM(2018) 647