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- World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)
- World Vision

The EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human rights and Democracy

Time for more collective political ambition

*On the occasion of the two year anniversary of the EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, **the Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN) calls on EU Member States and EU institutions to collectively put some momentum back into EU human rights and democratization policy and ensure a firm, coherent, transparent and uniform approach to human rights abuses worldwide.***

Two years ago, the HRDN stressed that the time had come for the EU to stop the habit of dealing with human rights behind closed doors and that the adoption of the Strategic Framework and Action Plan should represent a transition to a more transparent and accountable EU human rights policy. Against a background of continuing human rights violations; uneven transitions in the Arab Spring; and backsliding within the EU itself, we also called on the EU to be at the forefront of the international community in speaking out against violations whenever and wherever they occur. **While we note progress in some areas of EU external human rights policy over the past two years we have also seen the EU at times punching below its weight and losing the collective energy that existed in the run up to the adoption of the human rights and democracy package.**

Some positive outcomes include the adoption of new EU human rights guidelines and toolkits, the establishment of a Brussels based Council working group on human rights (COHOM) and annual Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on UN Human Rights Council/UN General Assembly priorities. The recently established Democracy Profiles and Democracy Action Plans demonstrate a real attempt to apply the principles of the comprehensive approach, and to bridge democracy assistance to human rights. We note that the EU has also developed human rights country strategies, however their non-public status has made it difficult from the outside to assess how they are being implemented nor is it clear how exactly they relate to the Strategic Framework and Action Plan.

The Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN) is an informal grouping of NGOs operating at the EU level in the broader areas of human rights, democracy and conflict prevention. Participation in the network is open to non-governmental organisations which engage at the EU level in the promotion of human rights, democracy and conflict prevention in and outside the EU.

The vision of the HRDN is that human rights and democracy are placed at the heart of the EU's internal and external policy agenda. This vision should manifest itself in an EU that effectively protects human rights at home and is a force for positive change in the world. In pursuit of this vision, the Network aims to influence EU and Member State human rights policies and the programming of their funding instruments to promote democracy, human rights and sustainable peace.

While important commitments were made in the Strategic Framework, we have yet to see the EU fully **live** its pledges to throw its “full weight behind advocates of liberty, democracy, and human rights throughout the world”, for human rights, democracy, the rule of law and international justice to be promoted “in all areas of the EU's external actions without exception” and for the EU to “place human rights at the centre of its relations with all third countries including strategic partners”. The EU puts too much emphasis on its lower level human rights dialogues and tends to prefer “quiet diplomacy” over “public diplomacy” for expressing its concern over rights violations with abusive governments. Substantive discussions on human rights and democracy appear absent in higher level meetings and Summits with third countries, in particular with the EU’s strategic partners. Concerning policy coherence, while we welcome the rhetorical commitment, the relative lack of progress in areas of the Action Plan on this indicate that the EU needs to step up its efforts to truly mainstream human rights into the work of all EU institutions and mechanisms to ensure that human rights and democracy are at the core of all EU actions and policies. While the onus of implementation of the Strategy and Action Plan has tended to rest primarily on the shoulders of the human rights division of the European External Action Service (EEAS) – whose efforts should be recognized and supported – the aim should be a shared responsibility of EU Member States and EU institutions, including line DGs (notably Trade, but also others) whose policies impact on human rights.

There should also be no double standards in EU human rights policy. In this respect the EU needs to do more to make it clear that it is committed to respecting human rights at home and strengthen its resolve to address human rights violations that occur within the EU and those caused by European companies abroad.

Moving forward we call for:

- ***A greater buy-in from all EU member states and EU institutions*** to the Strategic Framework and Action Plan which is essential for an effective EU human rights policy. We furthermore call for increased transparency and accountability on how the human rights commitments undertaken are implemented by EU Members States and institutions. The HRDN supports the European Parliament’s call for a public annual Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) debate on human rights.
- ***The EU to speak out publicly*** when faced with persistent human rights and international law violations whenever and wherever they occur.
- ***Greater policy coherence in promoting human rights and democracy in all areas of EU external action without exception.*** A more integrated approach to EU human rights and democratisation policy is needed which ensures the full involvement and commitment of all EU institutions.
- ***EU-third country human rights dialogues to be connected to top level political dialogues*** and closely linked to the EU’s human rights country strategies and other policy instruments such as trade agreements. We furthermore call for human rights dialogues with third countries to be ambitious, to be consistently followed up on by all EU institutions and EU Member States and to be accompanied by clear public benchmarks based on which their success can be objectively measured.

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- **Clear instructions to be provided to all EU staff on their own individual roles and responsibilities** in implementing the EU's human rights and democratisation policy. We repeat our call for performance reviews on human rights to be an integral part of the annual evaluations for all EU diplomats and relevant officials.
- **Increased consultations with local and international civil society organisations** on the implementation of the Strategic Framework and Action Plan. There should also be **a non-negotiable policy that all high level EU officials travelling to third countries should meet with civil society**. It is important to ensure the participation of rural civil society organizations and grass roots human rights defenders in such consultations/meetings.
- **A comprehensive EU internal human rights strategy** to be defined that mirrors the external EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan to ensure internal and external coherence and an end to double standards, which undermine the EU's credibility.

Brussels, June 25, 2014

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