



Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN) reaction to the Council Conclusions on the action plan on human rights and democracy 2015 - 2019

From words to action: Time for EU leadership to walk the talk on Human Rights and Democracy

June 2015

The adoption of the recent Council Conclusions and revised Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan is a timely reaffirmation of the European Union's (EU) commitment to pursuing a comprehensive human rights and democracy support agenda.

Human rights and democracy are under threat globally and it is time for the EU to act on its commitments to protect, promote and fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms. We reiterate our call for the EU and its member states to be at the forefront of the international community in acting and speaking out against human rights violations whenever and wherever they occur.

HRDN welcomes the wide range of human rights issues and measures in support of democracy that the Action Plan covers but there is a need for concrete action and a clear division of roles and responsibilities so that the EU can manage to work effectively on the full scope of issues it confronts globally. Furthermore, to achieve impact, EU actions need to be backed by political will and ambition to deliver on this human rights agenda at the highest level within the EU institutions, coupled with greater buy-in from all EU member states. This Action Plan will only be a success if it is applied equally to the current crackdowns in places like Azerbaijan, Bahrain, China, Egypt, Myanmar, and Burundi and to tackle the shrinking civil society space and deepening repression in places like Ethiopia, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan.

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

We note that the Action Plan is a set of thematic priorities, rather than the sum total of the EU's human rights and democracy agenda. It is one of a wider range of policies and instruments on human rights and democracy which the EU and its member states have committed to put into practice. The HRDN would like to see greater transparency and accountability in how human rights commitments are implemented by EU member states and institutions. HRDN reiterates the European Parliament's call for a public annual Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) debate on human rights. HRDN further calls for member states to step up to lead parts of the Action Plan to ensure greater burden-sharing, ownership and coherence, including at the country level.

We recall that human rights were to be the silver thread running through EU policies and actions. Progress has been slow in achieving this goal, and human rights should therefore be integrated into geographic strategies, just as they must be fully supported in trade, migration, security, energy and other policies to achieve policy coherence. It will be critical to the success of the EU's human rights and democracy policy for all EU institutions to ensure adequate resources, requisite expertise and clear prioritisation are accorded to support people in realising their human rights and democratic freedoms. Human rights and democracy should have a prominent role in the structure and decision-making of the European External Action Service (EEAS), in Brussels and delegations, in line with the Lisbon Treaty.

We recall that the EU commits in its Strategic Framework to throwing 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 Strategic Framework and Action Plan should represent a transition to a more transparent and accountable EU human rights policy – including public diplomacy, so that the EU is a stronger voice for human rights and a more vocal supporter of human rights defenders.

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In recent years, this voice has been faltering. The EU has often preferred silent diplomacy and has lacked a strategic approach to addressing human rights violations. Now is the time for the EU to demonstrate that strategic political ambition by using the many tools at its disposal to bring about real change in the realisation of people's rights and freedoms.

We call on the EU and its member states now to walk the talk in implementing their commitments. HRDN stands ready to work with the EU and its member states at all levels to ensure that the EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan results in concrete, coherent and results-oriented actions across the world.

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