

How to make the European Parliament a more visible, consistent and coherent actor in defending human rights and democracy worldwide

Following the European Parliament elections, new members will take their seats within different parliamentary Committees. The Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN) believes that this is a timely moment to share recommendations, which would ensure that the European Parliament (EP) will be an important actor in defending democratic governance and human rights worldwide, notably through its Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI). With the backlash against human rights, the shrinking space for civil society and attacks on human rights defenders in many countries, the EP must be more efficient than ever in defending EU values.

Mainstreaming Human Rights and Democracy

1. DROI as a fully-fledged committee

Article 21 of TEU obliges the EU to respect the principles of human rights, rule of law and democracy and to pursue their consolidation and consistency in all external actions and external aspects of its policies. By “confining” DROI to a Subcommittee, the current EP structure does not reflect enough the primacy of these principles, thus remaining unable to better ensure their respect, protection, promotion and mainstreaming in all EP actions in external relations and external aspects of EU policies. To be in a position of ensuring effective implementation of the EU’s external human rights commitments, the DROI Subcommittee should be upgraded to a fully-fledged Committee, with proper competence and resources.

2. Human Rights focal points in every Committees and Delegations

The EP should step up efforts to mainstream human rights effectively into its own structures and processes to ensure that human rights and democracy are at the core of all EP actions and policies. It is imperative that human rights concerns be systematically considered, debated and reported on by all EP Committees and Delegations, with special attention to Human Rights treaties ratified by the EU. To this end, and in addition to upgrading DROI, every Committee and Delegation should designate a member (for instance a Vice-Chair) as a focal point, with a clear track record on protecting and promoting human rights and democratic governance. Particularly relevant Committees include FEMM, LIBE, DEVE, AFET / SEDE, INTA, ENVI, BUDG.

3. Specific focal points for Human Rights Defenders

The EP should appoint members from the different political parties (for instance members of DROI) as focal points for human rights defenders (HRDs). The appointed MEPs should be in charge of addressing specific cases and situations where HRDs are at risk. The focal points should be able to liaise with the EU Special Representative for Human Rights and other relevant EU decision-makers, as well as with any other relevant international and third countries stakeholders during Committees and Delegations’ missions, such as members of national parliaments and joint parliamentary assemblies, UN Special Rapporteurs, international, regional and local civil society organisations and human rights defenders.

4. Supporting the Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG)

DROI members, notably its Chair, should fully support the DEG in its role of coordinating EU democracy support and election observation missions and linking EP resolutions and reports to democracy support programmes in concerned countries.

Monitoring, Accountability & Transparency

5. Monitoring of EU institutions

The EP should be a leading force in demanding more transparency and accountability from all EU institutions on how human rights commitments are being implemented. For instance, the EP should insist on getting access to the EU’s third country human rights strategies. The EP should also monitor more closely the use of EU funding and its impact on human rights; the implementation of EU human rights guidelines on the ground and the renewed EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy, for which the EP’s full participation is crucial. Furthermore, the aim of the EP Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy should be adapted to focus on assessing the EU actions in relation to these dimensions.

The Human Rights and Democracy Network is an informal grouping of 53 NGOs working to ensure that human rights, democracy and peace are placed at the heart of the EU’s internal and external policies.

6. A follow-up mechanism for resolutions and reports

The EP needs to renew its efforts to follow up on its own resolutions and reports on human rights and democracy-related matters. Specific language on who is in charge and the timeframe envisaged for the implementation should be included in EP resolutions and reports. For instance, DROI could convene a meeting with the EEAS and the concerned Council of the EU's Working Group Chair(s) following the adoption of a human rights urgency resolution, to discuss how they could implement the EP's recommendations.

7. Raising human rights concerns & recommendations

All EP Delegations & Committees' missions travelling abroad should systematically raise human rights concerns and recommendations included in relevant EP resolutions and reports. Such missions should be organized only if certain conditions are met such as meeting with independent civil society organisations and human rights defenders, notably those who are imprisoned; having an accompanying member from DROI during missions or at least coordinating with the committee before and after them. Furthermore, the organization of such missions should not interfere in the process of choosing urgency resolution topics.

Cooperation with civil society and promotion of an enabling environment

8. Engaging with relevant stakeholders is vital for informed policy-making and democracy, in Europe and beyond. Therefore, the EP Committees and Delegations should step up contacts with independent civil society organisations working on human rights & democracy in third countries as well as in Brussels. We strongly recommend that the EP always adequately consult with them and take their input into account in its activities.
9. In particular, when organizing missions, EP Delegations and Committees are strongly encouraged to meet with independent civil society organisations and human rights defenders before, during & after missions to third countries.
10. The EP should prioritize and take every opportunity throughout its work to promote, and not undermine, an enabling environment for independent and critical civil society in Europe and abroad, allowing it to exert its watchdog role, free from institutional and political attacks; and grant the maximum possible access to, and consultation by, the EU institutions.

Cooperation with EU Member States

11. The EP should strive for improved cooperation on human rights and democracy with EU Member States. Regular meetings between EU and national decision-makers (parliaments and governments) should be organized, to discuss issues and coordinate national and European actions on human rights and democracy. For instance, quarterly meetings of DROI with their national parliaments' counterparts could be organized. Member States 'ambassadors or Council of the EU's Working Group Chair could also be invited to similar meetings.