European External Action Service (EEAS)

Human Rights: Speech by High representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas at the EP plenary on the 2024 Annual report on Human Rights and Democracy in the world

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Opening Remarks

President, Honourable Members,

Let me thank the Rapporteur, Ms Isabel Wiseler Lima, the shadow rapporteurs, and other Members who have contributed to the [European] Parliament’s Report on Human Rights and Democracy.

I would like to share with you what I said three weeks ago at the United Nations Security Council. The rules-based international order, enshrined in the UN Charter, is a set of universal principles that create the conditions for peace, prosperity, human rights, dignity and development for all.

Yet, eighty years on, we see these principles under heavy fire. We witness blatant violations of international law, the erosion of democracy, backsliding of human rights, a strong pushback against gender equality, invasions of sovereign states, and the silencing of media and human rights defenders. We see attempts to replace the rule of law with the rule of force.

As close to home as it can get, Russia's unprovoked and full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine is a direct challenge to the rules-based international order and an assault on sovereignty. Human rights are continuously trampled on in this war.

In the Middle East, the conflict between Israel and Gaza is another reminder of how fragile human rights are in times of violent conflict.

And as your 2024 report underlines, the threat from authoritarian and illiberal regimes on human rights is only increasing.

I will spare you with listing too many recent examples. We all know and see what is happening throughout the world from our direct neighbourhood to all other directions.

But hope is never lost. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 ended 54 years of brutal dictatorship for the people of Syria. Yes, I agree there are immense challenges ahead. For the transition to succeed, the rights of all Syrians without distinction must be guaranteed and protected. But there is hope, nonetheless.

The European Union must do what it can, wherever it can, to keep this hope alive, not least because defending human rights and democracy is not only a Treaty obligation but a strategic interest and an investment in peace and prosperity.

Over 10,000 high-risk human rights defenders received EU support in 2024. We have supported over 80,000 people since 2015. At a time of shifting policies, funding cuts and growing unpredictability, the EU remains a steadfast and predictable partner on human rights and democracy. We have renewed our commitment by extending the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy until 2027.

Two weeks ago, the European Union adopted a €349 million package for worldwide human rights and democracy funding up to 2027. And we will counter the pushback against gender equality, the rights of women, girls and LGBTIQ+ people.

As your report shows, the European Union remained an active supporter of the UN's work to protect human rights in 2024. We advocated for adequate funding of the UN human rights pillar, supported the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and pushed for fact-finding and accountability. The EU has always underlined that the respect of international humanitarian law by state and non-state actors, and accountability for violations committed, are the cornerstone for peace and security. This is why the European Union also stands by the International Criminal Court and the principles enshrined in the Rome Statute.

We are all aware of the growing urgency of supporting the Court, both financially and diplomatically, and we are exploring available tools and possible measures that could be put in place to protect the Court and its personnel, and mitigate the risks. I met the President of the Court last month to reiterate the support of the EU. We also have the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, established in 2020, which enables the EU to impose restrictive measures on individuals or entities that commit serious human rights violations or abuses.

In 2024, we moved fast to impose several restrictive measures under the sanctions regime in particular in Russia, the Middle East and North Korea. This demonstrates our determination to strengthen our role in addressing serious human rights violations and abuses worldwide.

Last year was a 'super election year' with over 75 countries holding elections. EU Election Observation Missions remained essential for enhancing the integrity of electoral processes and reinforcing democratic governance. We will continue to support strong parliaments,

independent media, journalists, and democratic actors at the frontline in the most challenging contexts. And I will work with the European Parliament in this field.

I also look forward to publishing my own annual report on human rights and democracy for 2024.

I look forward to the discussions.

Thank you.

Link to the video (starting 05:06): https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-270223

Closing remarks

Honourable Members,

Thank you for this exchange of views.

When we discuss the challenges posed to human rights and democracy today, at the heart of these challenges, of course, is peace. And peace is not simply the absence of war; it is active cultivation of justice; it is protection of the most vulnerable, the realisation of all human rights, and commitment to dialogue and reconciliation.

And peace cannot come at the expense of human dignity and human rights. Peace endures, because human dignity and human rights are protected. Therefore, protecting human rights and human dignity is also a fundamental strategic interest for the European Union. Because, like many of you said, the European Union is founded on peace, democracy, [and] unity, and we must make very clear that we will not tolerate the erosion of these rights and freedoms that really define us.

Now more than ever, we must unite in defence of our common values. Defending human rights and democracy is an opportunity for the European Union to also play on its strength, because third countries are also looking towards us in this regard. [This is] an opportunity to grow the European Union's partnership around a model that combines mutually beneficial investments with sustainable progress for all parts of society.

And to address global challenges [with] integrity and reduce global inequalities all together. So, the European Parliament here is a crucial ally. Thank you for your work and I continue to count on your support. Thank you.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-270225

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