



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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NOTE

from:	General Secretariat of the Council
to:	Delegations
Subject:	European Parliament plenary session in Strasbourg on 12 December 2012: Joint debate on Human rights: Annual report on human rights and democracy in the world and Review of the EU's human rights strategy

Rapporteur Donskins (ALDE, LV) stressed that although his report was a report on past activities, the aim was to reflect the past in order to propose forward - looking strategic orientations on human rights policy. He highlighted the issues of human rights clauses in free trade agreements, the need to appoint an EUSR for Tibet, support for Human Rights Defenders, and discrimination against LGBT.

Rapporteur Tavares (Greens/EFA, PT) said that the EU should not be silent on human rights issues in times of economic crisis and stressed that some self criticism would be well placed in order to improve EU's credibility. In particular he called on EU companies not to do business in third countries where human rights were not respected.

Ms Kozakou-Markoullis, Cyprus Minister for Foreign Affairs, delivered the speech set out in [Annex I](#) on behalf of Ms Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Mr Svensson (DEVE) and Ms Gabriel (FEMM) briefly presented the Opinions of their committees.

The following comments were made on behalf of the political groups:

- speaking on behalf of the EPP group, Mr TÓKÉS said that the EP had produced a number of important reports in the past decade from which it was possible to identify certain negative trends and through these, to exercise pressure on those countries that had a particular disregard for human rights. He called on the Commission and the EEAS to work closely together with the EP on human rights issues and devise a solid strategy that would effectively and effectively support human rights. He concluded that the EU had a duty to defend human rights and called for special attention to be paid to China, North Korea and Russia;
- speaking on behalf of the S&D group, Mr OBIOLS expressed support for the two reports and emphasised that supporting human rights was not only a duty of the EU but in its self-interest. He said that the EU could further improve the internal/external consistency of human rights policy and better coordinate between Member States and the EU, and that various human rights dialogues should be evaluated regularly. He recalled that the EU was very close to a historic achievement of worldwide abolition of the death penalty ;
- speaking on behalf of the ALDE group, Mr KAZAK thanked the Rapporteurs for their excellent work. He stressed the need to focus on human rights in all EU policy areas, including trade agreements. The Arab Spring experiences showed that more contact was needed with civil society, NGOs and media in third countries. He stressed that Member States had to work in close coordination with the EU and expressed support for European Endowment for Democracy (EED), which would provide flexible and timely aid;
- speaking on behalf of the Greens/EFA, Ms KIIL-NIELSEN stressed that this annual review was important for devising a strategy for the future at a time when financial instruments were being negotiated. She considered that such strategic vision would reinforce the position of the EP. She stressed the need to learn from past mistakes, in particular in relation to the Arab Spring, and to face new challenges, such as Sahel and Syria.

She expressed deep disappointment at the fact that the EP had given its consent to the Peru and Colombia FTA; ignoring the lack of adequate human rights clauses in this agreement, which would have a detrimental effect on autochthonous populations, peasants and environment;

- speaking on behalf of the ECR, Mr TANNOCK stated his group's support for both reports and in particular welcomed the emphasis on freedom of expression and religion and protection of human right defenders and journalists in the Donskins' report. He expressed doubts about the need to have an EUSR for Human Rights, in addition to Member States and the EEAS, but left it up to Mr Lambrinidis to convince him otherwise. He particularly shared concerns over those countries which had been subject to numerous resolutions in the EP, namely Pakistan, Iran, North Korea, Belarus; China and Tibet, Russia. He was more critical of a number of passages in both reports that were in his view too prescriptive, *inter alia* on trade agreements, ICC, UNSC, asylum and rendition flights. In relation to the Report of Mr Tavares he warned of the risk of unintentional overburdening of the work of the committees with too much bureaucracy. He concluded that the ECR was fully committed to human rights but recognized the need for occasional balancing of human rights with other interests in order to avoid always imposing values on other cultures. He considered that the universality of human rights was often contested and concluded that for his group issues such as death penalty and abortion remained issues of individual conscience;
- speaking on behalf of the GUE/NGL, Mr MURPHY was critical that human rights fell victim to EU's economic interests as evidenced most recently in the High Representative's visit to Kazakhstan, where she emphasised the need for strong economic ties between the EU and a country where political opposition was suppressed and, human rights, in particular those of workers, grossly violated. He concluded that this hypocritical stance, which was valid for many other countries, was a slap in the face of the independent trade unionist and human rights defenders fighting for the rights of workers and democracy;
- speaking on behalf of the EDF, Mr SALAVRAKOS said he was concerned about not going into the substance of human rights issues. He considered that the negative economic context and austerity policies were leading to human rights violations, poverty and exclusion. He stressed the need to protect the most vulnerable groups and establish monitoring mechanisms for detecting human rights violations;

- speaking on behalf of the NI, Mr CLAEYS spoke about a very high number of journalists being imprisoned in Turkey and insisted that - in view of Turkey's human rights record - the EU should stop negotiating with Turkey on possible EU Membership.

In the subsequent discussion individual members echoed the positions expressed on behalf of the political groups, occasionally raising various additional issues. Ms Lochbihler (Greens/EFA, DE) regretted that HR Ashton was absent for the debate. Mr Vanhecke (EFD, BE) considered that there was no universality of human rights which were actually a phenomena that existed in the Western world but had never been adopted in other cultures. Several presentations focused on specific country situations, namely Syria, Israelo-Palestinian conflict, Tibet, and Western Sahara. Ms Ludford (ALDE, UK) reacted to the statement of Mr Tannock, by stressing the EU had a clear and established position of opposing the death penalty. Mr Lambsdorf (ALDE, DE) asked about coordination between various existing financial instruments and the newly created Endowment for Democracy.

Winding up the debate Ms Kozakou-Markoullis replied to some of the issues raised during the discussion. She explained that HR Ashton very much regretted that she could not be present. She explained that the EU was very active on Women, Peace and Security initiatives in over 70 countries and supported these with substantial funding. She agreed that human right record in Kazakhstan was of concern and this was conveyed to Kazakhstan's authorities. She also recalled the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy Fund which would complement the various existing instruments for the promotion of human rights.

Check against delivery**Speech by Ms Kozakou-Markoullis, Cyprus Minister for Foreign Affairs, on behalf of Ms Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy**

Mr President, on behalf of Vice-President/High Representative Catherine Ashton, I am honoured to address you and this august body in your annual joint debate on human rights.

It is fitting that this year's Human Rights Day should coincide with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union for bringing reconciliation and democracy to our continent. Human Rights are not only at the heart of the European Union's founding principles, they are a silver thread that runs through all our external policies.

The Nobel Prize is a great recognition of our past achievements. But it also focuses the spotlight on all of us – the EU institutions, the Member States, and 500 million citizens – to work together and redouble our efforts to promote and protect human rights, both within our borders and worldwide. With the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty and the creation of the External Action Service, we now have the means to make human rights an even more integral part of our foreign policy making.

2012 has been an intense and busy year. This past July, the EU adopted a human rights strategy and appointed our first EU Special Representative for Human Rights – your own, as was mentioned before, Mr Stavros Lambrinidis. His mission is to give more coherence and consistency, more effectiveness and visibility to the EU human rights policy and carry the message for human dignity around the world.

We agreed an action plan to translate our commitments into concrete results. We have pushed ahead with over 48 human rights country strategies, now agreed for the next three years. Our EU election observation missions continue their essential work, strongly supported by this House. And we have used our network of delegations worldwide to help ensure that the Disabilities Convention – the first human rights convention the European Union has been a party to – is fully applied.

We could not do the important work we do on human rights without the constant support and cooperation of this House. Together we amplify our calls to safeguard fundamental freedoms and democracy. Reports, such as those by Mr Donskis and Mr Tavares, which we are discussing here today, set the bar high and challenge us to do more and better. Quite rightly so. Your vigilance and support bolster our efforts. At the heart of our efforts lies a simple truth: that each man, woman and child has a valuable contribution to make; that every citizen is of inherent worth in our societies.

The award of this year's Sakharov prize to Ms Nasrin Sotoudeh, an imprisoned human rights defender and lawyer, and Jafar Panahi, a film director – both from Iran – sends an important signal. Through his work, Jafar Panahi has called attention to the hardship suffered by Iran's poorest. The courage and sacrifices of Nasrin Sotoudeh inspire us all. In their different ways, they both speak for those who have no voice and those whose rights have been denied. Every voice counts. This is the foundation of our democracy. And it is the principle on which this House is built.

The theme of this year's Human Rights Day focuses our attention on inclusion and participation in public life. It could not be more timely. The desire to embed these principles in society is the driving force behind what we are witnessing in the Arab world today. The recent steps taken towards democratic transition by several countries in the region and beyond are a beacon of hope for peoples everywhere.

But such progress is rarely linear, nor can it be taken for granted. A few weeks ago, we launched a task force to give much needed political and economic support to Egypt in its democratic transition. We are prepared to be a true partner. But we have also made it very clear that respect for human rights and democratic principles remain the fundamental tenet of our support.

The reaction in Syria to what began as a peaceful protest to demand political participation has cost tens of thousands of lives. Over 2.5 million Syrians are in urgent need of aid. More than 1.2 million are internally displaced, with hundreds of thousands more seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. The civil war risks destabilising the entire region. On Monday the European Union Foreign Affairs Council expressed its deep concern about the widespread and systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Syria.

The EU will continue working closely and comprehensively with international partners on planning to ensure the international community is ready to provide rapid support to Syria once transition takes place. As soon as a genuine democratic transition begins, the European Union stands ready to develop a new and ambitious partnership with Syria across all areas of mutual interest.

The Sahel is another case where the European Union needs a comprehensive approach, keeping human rights at its centre. The last few months have witnessed a further deterioration of the situation there. More than 16 million people are now directly at risk of malnutrition.

The humanitarian situation in Mali is particularly worrying. Radical rebels in the North have been recruiting child soldiers and imposing brutal punishments in the name of a fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia. We must make all possible efforts to ensure that human rights defenders are free to express their opinions. The Malian army must be fully trained to respect human rights.

In North Korea, unequal distribution of food continues to threaten the survival of many. Restrictions on religious freedom and freedom of expression violate the basic human rights of citizens. Simple dissent and opposition can lead to imprisonment and even torture.

In our relations with Russia, Vice-President/High Representative Catherine Ashton has been clear in all her statements on human rights. Be it in individual cases – such as the Magnitsky investigation and the ‘Pussy Riot’ trial – or with respect to recent NGO legislation, Catherine Ashton has conveyed the Union’s strong message of support for civil society and its unwavering commitment to human rights. In September she commented extensively in this House on the political use of justice in Russia, echoing many of the concerns raised by the honourable Members. We have also, on many occasions, reiterated our serious concerns over the worsening situation of civil society in Russia.

At a time when the European Union has just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, our thoughts turn naturally to Liu Xiaobo, the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate from China. Liu Xiaobo is today the only Nobel Peace Prize laureate who is not at liberty, serving an 11-year prison sentence for authoring Charter 08 and reprimanding human rights abuses in his articles on the internet. I renew the European Union’s call on the Chinese authorities to respect Liu Xiaobo’s right to freedom of expression and to release him from prison immediately and unconditionally.

Inequality between men and women continues to permeate all aspects of society. Girls are more likely to be kept out of school, to be forced into marriage and to be subject to violence and harmful practices. Women and girls are also still more likely to be denied access to basic healthcare. At the same time, there are estimates that some three million women and girls around the world face female genital mutilation or cutting every year.

It took the bravery of a 14-year-old Pakistani schoolgirl, Malala Yousafzai, to alert the world to the inequalities that exist in many places when it comes to education as well. Of the nearly 800 million people who still lack basic literacy skills, almost two thirds are women. Redressing these inequalities is not only about righting wrongs; it is also an investment in the future.

Research shows that income rises by 10% for every additional year spent in school. Education also helps us tackle inequality, teaching girls to grow into women who stand up against discrimination and violence to form pillars of a vibrant democracy.

Freedom of religion or belief is an inalienable human right and an essential pillar of safe and prosperous societies. It is an integral part of our political dialogues. This year we have expressed concern about the situation in Iran, Egypt and Nigeria, to name just a few examples. We are also working on common guidelines to address the issue even more systematically.

We must continue to speak out for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people across all continents. People should not be killed or imprisoned for who they are or whom they love. Yet homosexuality remains illegal in over 75 countries, with seven still imposing the death penalty.

We can only advance human rights effectively if we work together and share the responsibility of promoting them. Today the EU works closely with regional partners around the globe, such as the OSCE, the African Union, as well as the League of Arab States and the OIC. There is no better forum than the United Nations to ensure that universal human rights are recognised as just that – applying to every woman, man and child, wherever they may live.

The election of Estonia, Germany and Ireland to the UN Human Rights Council means that there are now nine EU Member States represented – a record level. We have already advanced human rights in a number of areas through this forum.

To name just a few examples: on Syria, the EU took the lead in tabling a resolution focusing on the continuing human rights violations as well as access to the country. We also worked hard to achieve the appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur for Belarus and for Eritrea.

A particular success was the resolution on the death penalty, which was adopted by a record number of 110 positive votes and 91 co-sponsors. And by deepening our engagement with the OIC, we have managed to adopt a resolution on freedom of religion and belief. We were particularly happy that the African-led initiative on the first ever resolution against female genital mutilation was adopted by consensus.

The positive developments in Burma/Myanmar have given hope to all of us. When Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the 1990 Sakharov Prize, she was under house arrest. She was blocked by her government from coming here to Strasbourg to collect her award. This year, she was not only able to travel to New York for the UN General Assembly, she also received an unprecedented public tribute from her country's President. The story of Burma/Myanmar shows that progress really is possible through painstaking work and political leadership. Events of this year have demonstrated how our world has become even more interconnected.

The Arab Spring is a recent example of how the internet works as a catalyst for social and political reform, spreading the message of the socially marginalised and the politically oppressed.

Unfortunately, these new and inclusive forms of expression are seen as a threat by some. Over the past year, we have therefore had to develop innovative measures in response to the worrying trend of increased internet censorship. We restricted the export of internet technology used to intercept citizens' communications in Syria and Iran. We have developed ways to assist internet users, bloggers and cyber-activists living under authoritarian regimes to circumvent arbitrary disruptions to communications technologies, including the internet. These are just two examples showing that the European Union is dedicated to safeguarding human rights both online and offline.

Social media are just one example of how we need to open up more arenas to address human rights. Civil society networks are key. This is why we team up with hundreds of NGOs from all over the world to champion the cause of human rights. Only last week, the 14th Annual EU NGO Forum brought together over 200 committed human rights defenders, activists and policy-makers.

These motivated men and women have the desire and will to effect change. They turn common interests into common action. Yet NGOs increasingly face severe restrictions on freedom of expression and association placed on them by governments that seek to silence their voices and stifle their actions.

To support their cause, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights has supported human rights defenders and civil society in over 100 countries in 2012. For the period 2014-2020 we hope to make an additional EUR 1.6 billion available to bolster their effort further.

In October, the European Endowment for Democracy was created to support pro-democracy defenders struggling for democratic transition in the European neighbourhood and beyond. It is a great pleasure to see that nine MEPs have agreed to be on the Board of Governors, including the honourable Member and Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Mr Elmar Brok, as Chair.

So looking back, 2012 has been a landmark year for human rights. We have every intention of continuing to push ahead in years to come, also on the issues of coherence and consistency raised by Mr Donskis and Mr Tavares.

In closing, Mr President, allow me once again to thank you, and the honourable Members, and the European Parliament, for your prevailing support. Promoting human rights requires our consistent vigilance and continued dedication. This can sometimes seem daunting. But we should never forget that by advocating the rights of the repressed, by giving a voice to those who are forbidden to speak, and by providing shelter to those in need, we honour our shared humanity.