



REPORT OF THE HIGH REPRESENTATIVE
OF THE UNION FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
AND SECURITY POLICY

2023 ANNUAL REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS
AND DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD



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Tea farmers from Paksong District in Laos who are benefiting from the European Union funded SOLAR project, implemented by the International Labour Organisation and Oxfam. With higher incomes and continuous support from this project, agricultural workers will have better working conditions and access to social security.

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WORLD**

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FOREWORD BY HIGH REPRESENTATIVE JOSEP BORRELL



Josep BORRELL

High Representative
of the European Union
for Foreign Affairs and
Security Policy

We are witnessing two major wars in EU's neighbourhood: the brutal Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the resurgence of war in the Middle East after the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October. The EU continues to call for an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire, the unconditional release of all hostages and the provision of humanitarian assistance in Gaza. Too many conflicts are also raging elsewhere, endangering the lives and trampling on human rights of millions like in Sudan which, according to the UN, is 'one of the worst humanitarian nightmares in recent history'.

In 2023, we marked the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. After the huge destruction, terrible loss of life and horrific human rights violations during World War II, states were eager to come together to codify and promote the inherent rights of every human being. Since then, this law has improved the lives of millions.

Today, power politics is back and the rules-based multilateral order is increasingly being challenged. We face new challenges – owing to climate change and loss of biodiversity, an increasing number of people are deprived of their right to food and water.

This deteriorating geopolitical context has led to a 'crisis of humanity', as my colleague and friend UN Secretary General Guterres put it. This crisis is jeopardising what is most important: human rights, democracy, international cooperation and dialogue.

I have seen with my own eyes all too many war-torn regions since the beginning of my mandate – the suffering is simply too much. It is time to stop posturing and scoring points. It is an individual state obligation and a collective international responsibility to work together to realise the rights and standards we have set. There must be accountability for violations of international human rights and humanitarian law wherever they are committed. We must also protect the progress made since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in areas such as gender equality, women's empowerment and the rights of children and other vulnerable groups.

This year will see nearly half of the global population vote. Yet, with only 13% of the global population enjoying the benefits that come with liberal democracies whilst 71% live in autocracies, we must work tirelessly to push back against regressive trends¹.

Democracy and the rule of law are the foundational building blocks of our societies and key to protecting human rights. In the face of rising authoritarianism, internal and international conflicts and displacement, we desperately need to come together again to protect and promote human rights and democracy.

We must redouble our efforts to tackle the crisis of implementation of the international law we wrote together and the international human rights standards we set together. Our steadfast commitment

1 See the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute democracy report for 2024 available at https://v-dem.net/documents/44/v-dem_dr2024_highres.pdf

to the universality of human rights will guide the EU's action towards the UN Summit of the Future this September, a defining opportunity for the international community. Human rights and democracy, sustainable development and prosperity, peace and stability are deeply interconnected. They depend on each other and on each of us.

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the European Union remained steadfast in its commitment to upholding and promoting human rights and democracy across the globe. The year marked the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a fundamental document that paved the way for the human rights law that the world knows today. As we navigate an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape marked by unprecedented challenges, this annual report serves as a comprehensive overview of the EU's endeavours and achievements, and the challenges it faces in fostering a world where human rights are respected, democratic principles are upheld, and the dignity and freedom of all individuals are safeguarded.

Against the backdrop of multifaceted global crises, including continued conflict on the European continent, the resurgence of conflict in the neighbourhood and in many other areas of the world, the European Union continues to play a pivotal role in addressing pressing issues related to human rights violations and abuses, democratic backsliding, and rising to the new challenges of our ever more digitalised world. This report also describes the EU's work to respond to emergent challenges, advance justice and accountability, and strengthen its commitment to a rules-based international order and multilateralism.

The report follows the structure of the EU's action plan on human rights and democracy,² particularly the EU's work on protecting and empowering individuals, building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies, promoting a global system for human rights and democracy, harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges and ensuring we deliver by working with our partners.

2 EU action plan on human rights and democracy 2020-2024 available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_action_plan_on_human_rights_and_democracy_2020-2024.pdf

In the following chapters, we delve into the EU's comprehensive action around the world to uphold and advance the full enjoyment of human rights by all and defend democratic values and principles. We also present diplomatic initiatives, strategic engagements, and concrete actions taken to address crises including Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories, Afghanistan, Iran and others. The EU's resolute stance against violations of international law, including international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law, its support for justice mechanisms, and its dedication to empowering marginalised communities form the core of its collective pursuit of a more just and democratic world which guides the EU's external action.

Furthermore, this report highlights the EU's commitment to gender equality, the protection of children's rights, and the promotion of inclusive democratic processes. It explores our work at the United Nations in New York and Geneva, and with regional and bilateral partners, the implementation of the EU's global human rights sanctions regime, and innovative strategies to tackle threats such as disinformation and attacks on democratic principles and values.

As we reflect on the EU's engagement with the international community, including partnerships, collaborative activities with civil society, and the empowerment of human rights defenders (HRDs), we underscore the importance of a united approach in the face of shared global challenges. The report highlights how the Team Europe approach pulls together the contributions of the EU's Member States to achieve greater impact through joint action. It also provides insights into the EU's financial programmes under NDICI-Global Europe with a total budget of nearly EUR 80 million up to 2027, which signals a consolidated effort to increase the impact of our collective commitment to democracy and human rights. In 2023, building an ever-stronger partnership with the United Nations, the

EU became the largest donor to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) with a total contribution of USD 34.5 million.

In terms of democracy, a worldwide trend of backsliding continues and is contributing to the deterioration of democratic systems and processes. According to International IDEA, there has been a 'net decline' in democratic performance globally.³ The 2024 democracy report⁴ of V-Dem also underlines the gravity of the situation, indicating that 71% of the global population live in autocracies, while only 13% enjoy the benefits of liberal democracies. In 2023, the number of countries in the process of democratisation has dropped to 18, contrasting with the significant rise to 42 in the number of countries experiencing autocratisation, which encompasses 35% of the world's population. These numbers point to an alarming shift that is rolling back decades of democratic progress, bringing the overall global level of democracy back to pre-1989 levels.

In 2023, the EU deployed 15 electoral missions and received the Woodrow Wilson Award from the Wilson Center in recognition of the work of the EU Electoral Observation Mission to Guatemala. The award serves as testimony not only to the mission in Guatemala but to the EU's dedication to fostering transparent, credible and inclusive electoral processes across the globe, particularly during times when democracy faces challenges in many regions. The EU continued to support the strengthening of inclusive, representative and accountable institutions, and promoted a collaborative approach to democracy through the Team Europe Democracy initiative. The fight against information manipulation and interference continued to be a priority with initiatives such as EUvsDisinfo. Over the past year, the European Endowment for Democracy has continued its work on

3 <https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/>

4 https://v-dem.net/documents/44/v-dem_dr2024_highres.pdf

fostering democracy and working with free media and civil society in challenging circumstances in Belarus, Egypt and Ukraine among others.

The EU acknowledges the key role played by HRDs, who are at the forefront of many human rights struggles, including the battle for environmental justice, inclusive societies and fair democratic processes, and who lead the fight against corruption, and more recently, the call for a digital sphere that complies with human rights. The EU has stepped up its work to assist HRDs and, in 2023, helped more than 4 200 defenders from more than 100 countries. The EU also brought together over 130 young HRDs at the EU-NGO forum in Brussels to influence policy makers and testify to the enduring relevance of human rights to a young audience.

Although the outlook can seem bleak, the answer lies in deeper and more meaningful international cooperation with partners, and a redoubling of efforts to improve early warning and prevention. The EU stands ready to work with all partners to protect the multilateral human rights system and to keep at the fore the fundamental importance of human rights and democracy for peace, security and sustainable development. The EU will continue to invest in human rights advocacy and education, to carry forward the spirit of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and to renew its commitment to the principles it sets out.

EU SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

The EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, continued to work under the authority of the High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell. The EUSR is charged with promoting EU foreign policy on human rights, as well as compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) and support to international criminal justice.

In 2023, the international community celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The EUSR joined the celebrations, which offered an opportunity to reflect on the state of human rights and humanity's 'human rights journey' since 1948. However, the commemorations had been marred by new and existing crises with serious human rights and IHL ramifications, including in the EU neighbourhood in Ukraine, Gaza and Nagorno Karabakh. The EUSR's response to the erosion of international human rights and humanitarian law globally involved consultations with non-EU countries, multilateral actors and civil society and country visits. Throughout his engagements in 2023, the last year of his five-year tenure, he underlined the need to rediscover human rights, and to "de-code" and democratise human rights so that they are understood and reclaimed by people worldwide.

In 2023, the EUSR visited ten countries outside the EU: **Burundi, Colombia** (twice), the **Philippines, Israel, Palestine, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Bangladesh, Cuba**, and **Mexico**, major multilateral hubs in **Geneva** and **Strasbourg** as well as eight EU Member States. He co-chaired **11 human rights dialogues/consultations**, namely with Colombia, United States, Ukraine, the African Union, Azerbaijan, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Philippines, Cuba, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia.

Addressing Russia's invasion of **Ukraine** continued to be the EUSR's priority. He engaged with Ukrainian interlocutors on holding the Kremlin to account, the abduction of Ukrainian children to Russia, and on the domestic human rights reform agenda in the context of the country's EU candidate status. At several meetings with Russian civil society in the autumn, the EUSR voiced strong EU support for civic activists – in Russia and in exile – operating under increasingly harsh conditions for human rights in the country. His visit to Poland in May focused mainly on the human rights situation in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. He also pushed for a strong international support for civil society and democratic forces in **Belarus**.

The EUSR's visits to **Uzbekistan** and **Turkmenistan**, conducted jointly with the EUSR for Central Asia in April, elevated the bilateral human rights engagement with a region that is of growing geopolitical significance. The EUSR also addressed the crisis in **Nagorno Karabakh** with both Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts.

In June, the EUSR conducted a three-day visit to **Israel** and the **occupied Palestinian territories**. This visit was an opportunity for the EUSR to address issues of concern and to defend the viability of a two-state solution. He followed up on the mission through continued engagement with Palestinian and Israeli authorities, in particular after the eruption of the Israel-Hamas conflict. The situation unfolding since the Hamas terrorist attack of 7 October and Israel's response, including its intense military operation in Gaza resulting in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, were the focus of a number of engagements in the last two months of 2023.

In the Middle East, the EUSR raised individual cases of **political prisoners** and detained or persecuted **human rights defenders in Iran, Israel, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia**. He also engaged on human rights of **migrants and refugees** in North Africa in **Libya, Tunisia** and **Morocco**, holding a number of meetings with

third country representatives, EU institutions and civil society. In November, he chaired the EU–Saudi Arabia human rights dialogue, expressing the EU's concern over the application of the death penalty and the crackdown on dissenting voices both offline and online.

In Asia, the EUSR focused on the human rights and humanitarian crisis in **Afghanistan**. For example, he engaged on the deportation of irregular Afghan refugees from Pakistan and continued to highlight the plight of Afghan women and girls facing unprecedented violations of their human rights.

Addressing the crisis in **Myanmar/Burma**, the EUSR built on the dialogue established with the opposition National Unity Government and with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. In Bangladesh in July, he visited Rohingya refugees. The EUSR also engaged with the government, calling for free, democratic and peaceful conduct of elections, labour rights reforms and for widening

The EU Special Representative for Human Rights Eamon Gilmore is pictured with parents and children at an EU funded child protection community hub in a suburb of Dhaka, Bangladesh.



the space for civil society and independent media. Among issues of concern, he raised the de-registration of human rights organisation Odhikar and several individual cases.

The EUSR's visit to **the Philippines** in March built on the momentum created following the inauguration of President Marcos Jr. The EUSR addressed issues such as accountability for extrajudicial killings and human rights reforms linked to the renewal of the GSP+ regime. The EUSR also made a prison visit to former Senator Leila de Lima and assured her of the EU's continued support for her release.

Regarding **China**, the EUSR met with the Director General for International Organisations and Conferences of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Geneva in December to discuss the prospects for bilateral human rights engagement. At the same time, he continued exchanging regularly on the situation in China with civil society and with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Similarly, his engagement on the situation in **India** focused mainly on meetings with local human rights defenders and civil society, including on developments in Indian-administered Kashmir.

In Africa, the EUSR worked closely with the **African Union**. In May, he co-chaired the human rights dialogue, which contributed to further enhancing the cooperation with this important regional organisation. In the dialogue, he tackled a number of country situations of concern such as the security situation in **Sudan**, the precarious situation in **the Sahel** or the anti-homosexuality law in **Uganda**.

The EUSR continued his strong commitment to the transitional justice and accountability processes in **Ethiopia**, addressing human rights and humanitarian concerns with government interlocutors and with senior UN officials and civil society, including in the context of deliberations at the UN Human Rights Council.

In February, the EUSR made a visit to **Burundi** where he met with the President and a range of government ministers and raised a number of issues of concern. Following his visit, he was involved in the EU's

successful efforts to release five detained Burundian human rights defenders. The EUSR also regularly raised the issues of granting access to the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burundi to visit the country.

The EUSR broadened engagement with Latin America by participating in public events, including an event on **El Salvador** and transitional justice, a civil society-organised event in the European Parliament on the human rights situation in **Nicaragua** and an event organised by **Chile** in November to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the military coup.

In November, the EUSR co-chaired human rights dialogues with **Mexico** and **Cuba** and undertook bilateral visits in conjunction with those dialogues. The visit to Cuba in particular was ground-breaking. While it was not his first visit to the country, it was marked by openness and a willingness to engage on several issues as well as high-level engagement, including with the President.



EUSR Gilmore meets with women leaders in Quibdo, Colombia hearing their views on how to build peace and ensure social and economic progress.

01. PROTECTING AND EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS

Human rights are at the core of the **EU's policies and activities both within and outside the EU**. They structure how we live together within a society. They are **universal, indivisible and interdependent**, and rights to which every individual is entitled without distinction. Human rights are applicable everywhere and at all times, including in times of conflict or crisis. All human rights are equally important to ensure human dignity, whether they are **civil, cultural, economic, political or social rights**.

In a shifting geopolitical landscape, the EU remains a strong defender of human rights. While there has been significant progress, the pushback against the universality and indivisibility of human rights and backsliding on democracy are causes for concern. At the heart of our work defending and promoting human rights are the people to whom these rights belong. In order to protect human rights, eliminate inequalities and discrimination, the European Union works to protect and empower individuals, as discussed in the following chapter.

1.1 Protecting people and eliminating inequalities, discrimination and exclusion

THE DEATH PENALTY

The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. The European Union strongly and unequivocally opposes the death penalty at all times and in all circumstances. In 2023, we continued to advocate for the universal abolition of capital punishment, both through political dialogue and programmes to address the issue.

The world continues to move away from the death penalty. Over 70% of countries are now abolitionist in law or practice. Many other countries are making progress towards abolition and this positive trend was apparent in 2023. Following **Azerbaijan's** signing of Protocol No. 13 to the European Convention on Human Rights as of March last year, now all 46 countries in the **Council of Europe** have banned the death penalty in all circumstances. In other parts of the world, Ghana abolished the death penalty for all ordinary crimes, while bills to abolish the death penalty are pending in **Liberia** and **Zimbabwe**. In **Malaysia**, Parliament voted in April to remove mandatory death sentences and abolished the death penalty for 7 of the 33 offences that previously carried it. The State of Washington in the United States formally abolished the death penalty in April 2023. In **Uzbekistan**, 90% of the electorate voted for a referendum on codifying the abolition of the death into the Constitution. Further positive examples include the commutation of numerous death sentences to life imprisonment in Kenya and the revision of death sentences in Malaysia under the bill on the revision of sentence of death and imprisonment for natural life, which came into force in September 2023.

Capital punishment is at odds with the right to life and with human dignity. It neither deters violent crime nor contributes to a safer society. Death sentences are often handed down as a result of inadequate legal representation, faulty evidence, discrimination and prejudice. Capital punishment is increasingly used as a method of repression against people who exercise their human rights, and is imposed for other crimes that do not meet the minimum standards of international law, such as drug-related offences, espionage, economic crimes, blasphemy and apostasy, consensual same-sex relations or adultery.

The need to uphold the minimum standards outlined in international law was the centrepiece of the annual **joint statement issued by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and the High**

Representative, on behalf of the European Union, on the European and World Day against the Death Penalty. The EU also made several public statements welcoming positive steps towards abolition or, in some cases, deploring the use of the death penalty, and calling on those countries that still apply it to introduce a moratorium as a first step towards abolition.

In 2023, the EU continued to raise the abolition of the death penalty, including individual cases, in its **political dialogues and human rights dialogues** with countries that still sentence people to death. The EU underlined the need to eliminate discrimination and to uphold fair trial guarantees (including the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment), to ensure the right to adequate defence, to appeal and to seek pardon or commutation, and also recalled the prohibition of the mandatory death penalty in international law.

The EU continued to raise its opposition to the death penalty in all relevant **multilateral fora**, in particular at the UN, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe. In addition to contributing to various discussions on this issue, the EU also engaged actively in the negotiation on the resolution on the question of the death penalty at the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Civil society remains at the forefront of the global fight against the death penalty. In 2023, the EU joined forces with the civil society-led Global Consortium for the abolition of Death Penalty, which is active in over 40 countries and has come together under the leadership of the World Coalition against the Death Penalty. Through this strengthened partnership the EU will support work to reinforce the global trend towards the abolition of death penalty and promote the signature, ratification and implementation of international and regional instruments that advocate for the abolition of the death penalty. It will also promote innovative approaches, coordination and synergies in country-level activities against the death penalty,

and international experience-sharing, research, advocacy, capacity-building and awareness-raising activities. The EU also launched in 2023 a new project on the Death Penalty in Pakistan.

TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT

Every Member State of the United Nations is party to one or more international treaties that prohibit torture. The prohibition is also well established under customary international law (*jus cogens*) and requires states to take effective steps to prevent, promptly investigate and prosecute torture and ill-treatment, and to ensure redress for victims and survivors.

The EU continues to emphasise the importance of addressing the persisting impunity surrounding torture and of ensuring accountability for those involved in torture and other ill-treatment. This was reflected in a statement on the **International Day in Support of Victims of Torture** issued by the High Representative on 26 June 2023. Through various programmes, in 2023 the EU continued to work with partners to strengthen justice systems and to ensure the right to a fair trial, access to justice and legal assistance and the improvement of detention conditions of persons deprived of liberty.



Annual solidarity march held the 26th of June, The UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture in Tunisia.

The EU also raised the issue of torture and ill-treatment in most **human rights dialogues** with partner countries. Given that the UN Convention against Torture offers a unique blueprint for the prevention of these heinous acts, the EU has, throughout the year, continued to call on those states that have not yet ratified the Convention and its Optional Protocol to do so as a matter of priority.

Preventing torture also includes taking action to regulate and monitor the trade in goods that can be used for torture and ill-treatment. The **EU's Anti-torture Regulation**⁵ has been revised and strengthened over time, and it remains one of the EU's most important tools to prevent torture world-wide. It is currently the only binding instrument **regulating trade to contribute to the abolition of the death penalty and the prevention of torture.**

Globally, the EU continues to lead the **Global Alliance for Torture-Free Trade** together with Argentina and Mongolia. The alliance, composed of 63 states, offers a space to exchange information on best practices to end the trade in goods used for torture and capital punishment globally, as inspired by the Regulation.

In 2023, the EU signed a framework agreement with a group of civil society organisations to launch a new partnership, called '**United against Torture**'. This innovative initiative brings together six leading anti-torture NGOs⁶ that will push for change in over 100 countries. It allows the EU to make a difference on the ground, backing our clear political stance in support of the complete prohibition of torture in law and in practice with a more strategic investment. It is channelling EUR 8 million over 3 years to cover the whole spectrum of anti-torture work from prevention and protection to justice, reparation and rehabilitation, while also emphasising the emerging issue of extra-custodial use of force, which is often visible, for instance, in the policing of public assemblies. It puts victims and survivors at the centre of the EU's action for a torture-free future.

5 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019R0125>

6 APT, FIACAT, IRCT, OMCT, Omega Research and REDRESS

At country level, some EU Delegations made specific calls for projects to tackle torture and related human rights violations. In 2022, a total of 13 Delegations on all continents, from Paraguay to Comoros, engaged a total of EUR 8.7 million in country-level projects with civil society organisations (CSOs) on torture-related issues from prison conditions for minors and women to transitional justice and redress for victims of torture.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The EU acknowledges the key role played by human rights defenders (HRDs), who are often at the forefront of the fight for human rights protection, including for environmental justice, inclusive societies and fair democratic processes, the fight against corruption and, more recently, the call for a human rights-compliant digital sphere. In 2023, the world marked the 25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders⁷, which is an important document recognising human rights defenders as individuals or groups who act to promote, protect or strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms through peaceful means.

Throughout 2023, the EU used its political and financial tools, in line with the **EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders** to enhance the safety of individuals, groups and organisations at the forefront of defending human rights.

Human rights defender Marfa Rabkova is a political prisoner in Belarus. Since 2020, the country's authorities in Belarus wrongfully arrested tens of thousands. All those jailed & persecuted for exercising their rights must be released immediately and unconditionally.



7 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

HRDs often face risks of violence, silencing, persecution and prosecution. The EU continued to make its voice heard with public statements and declarations to support HRDs at risk, for instance on cases in **Belarus**⁸, **Nicaragua**⁹ or **Eswatini**¹⁰, including by asking for the immediate and unconditional release of people who have been arbitrarily detained, such as in the statement of the EU Delegation in China.¹¹ The EU further uses the platform of human rights dialogues to raise specific cases of HRDs at risk, for example in the human rights dialogues with **China, Laos, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan and Colombia**.

Through the EU's network of Delegations, diplomats engaged with HRDs, monitored trials and visited human rights defenders in detention. Annual meetings between the EU and HRDs have become an established practice in non-EU countries, increasing the visibility of the work of HRDs where safe and appropriate, and allowing for an in-depth analysis of the challenges they face.



Ugandan journalist Agather Atuhaire won the 2023 **EU Human Rights Defenders' Award**. Atuhaire was chosen in recognition of her outstanding recent work to increase transparency in public life, hold public institutions accountable and defend the rights of people who have been affected by corruption and mismanagement in the public service.

- 8 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/belarus-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-sentencing-ales-bialiatki_en
- 9 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/nicaragua-statement-spokesperson-revoking-citizenship-political-opponents_en
- 10 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eswatini-statement-spokesperson-situation-country_en
- 11 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/statement-eu-delegation-china-international-human-rights-day-2023_en?s=166

Throughout the year, the European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, continued to raise **individual cases** of HRDs, particularly those in long-term detention, and to meet human rights defenders, both in Brussels and during visits to different countries. The EUSR availed of every opportunity to express support and solidarity directly to the defenders themselves or their families. He raised specific cases during visits to several countries, including **India, Uganda, Pakistan, Egypt and Colombia and in other bilateral contacts, notably with Brazil and Cuba**. He also participated in several high-profile events aimed at raising awareness and visibility around their work and the need for their protection, such as events organised by the EU's partners **ProtectDefenders.eu**¹² and **Frontline Defenders**. EUSR Gilmore was also vocal on this topic using social media to raise the case of HRDs in Belarus and Palestinian prisoners on hunger strike and their deteriorating health conditions.

On the multilateral scene, the EU regularly interacts with HRDs particularly in advance of the sessions of the Human Rights Council (HRC) and Universal Periodic Reviews. During the HRC, the EU supported the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders. Very closely linked to supporting HRDs is ensuring protection from **reprisals**. The EU actively monitored any form of reprisals against HRDs who cooperate, seek to cooperate or have cooperated with the UN system.

The EU continued to be a major partner in supporting and protecting human rights defenders financially through Global Europe thematic programme on human rights and democracy. The programme funds the EU's HRD mechanism ProtectDefenders.eu with an envelope of EUR 30 million for the period 2022-2027.¹³ Since 2015, ProtectDefenders.eu has been a beacon of support, assisting approximately 66 500 at-risk HRDs and their families. The protection

12 EU Human Rights Defenders mechanism ProtectDefenders.eu: <https://protectdefenders.eu/>
13 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_5808

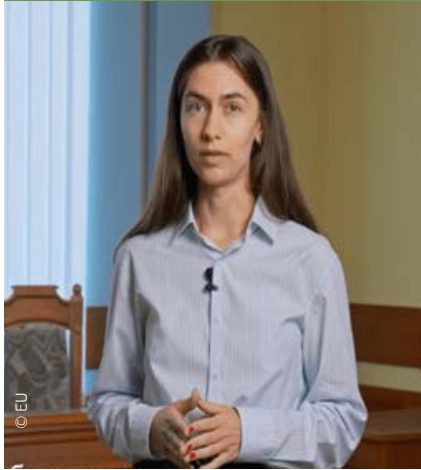
mechanism engages in diverse activities such as direct support, temporary relocation programmes, training, capacity-building, and advocacy at global, regional and local levels. **In 2023 alone, ProtectDefenders.eu extended support to over 4 200 high-risk defenders**, families, organisations and communities, and addressed threats and repression in more than 100 countries, including **Afghanistan, Myanmar/Burma, Nicaragua, Russia and Ukraine.**

Seminar, 'A Safe Haven for Human Rights Defenders - Visas as an EU Tool for Protection', Madrid, 24-25 October 2023

Organised under the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the EU and **ProtectDefenders.eu** brought attention to the need for an approved improved visa framework for HRDs from third countries. The seminar highlighted the pivotal role of visas in the protection of HRDs. Testimonials underscored the tangible impact of visa accessibility, while discussions delved into the legal, political and awareness-raising aspects of HRD mobility. The importance of a unified Team Europe approach for robust HRD protection was emphasised, with a strong call for continued collaboration and follow-up actions such as advocacy, updating the EU Visa Handbook and coordination with EU Member States.

Since 2010, the EU has also managed an **emergency fund for human rights defenders at risk**. The fund has supported at least 1 600 HRDs and their family members since 2014. This **direct financial support** helps to put into practice the EU guidelines on HRDs. Crucial assistance was provided through small grants to cover temporary relocation, subsistence, medical and legal support, prison visits, security (increasingly digital), equipment and training. An increasing number of HRDs supported by the EU work on freedom of expression

and the media, freedom of association and labour rights, governance and anti-corruption issues, the rights of LGBTI persons, and environmental, land and indigenous peoples' rights.



In Moldova, the EU is helping HRDs to be empowered in a safe and enabling environment. As part of the EU-funded project 'Shields for human rights defenders', the EU has been supporting the monitoring of 5 court trials against 3 HRDs and provides legal assistance to 9 HRDs. The project continuously monitors the situation of HRDs in Moldova, including attacks against them, and provides them with the necessary legal support.

The EU launched 22 new projects in 2023 in support to human rights defenders under the thematic programme on human rights and democracy, including in **Central African Republic, Chad, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, the occupied Palestinian territories, Peru, Philippines, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Uzbekistan and Ukraine.**

TACKLING MULTIPLE AND INTERSECTING FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

Equality remains a fundamental value guiding the EU's policies inside and outside the EU in 2023. The EU continues to apply human rights guidelines on non-discrimination in its external actions, with a focus on addressing **intersecting forms of discrimination.**

The EU remains fully committed to eliminating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, both within its Member States and through its external action. This commitment

was consistently emphasised in bilateral dialogues with non-EU countries, where the EU underscored the need to ensure the universal ratification and the full and effective implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Additionally, the EU stressed the need to implement the Durban Declaration and Programme for Action. In March 2023, the High Representative issued a declaration on behalf of the EU on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, reaffirming the EU's commitment to fighting racism in all its forms.



This "courtyard session" is a part of an awareness-raising campaign and illustrates how discrimination finds its roots in family, society, and school. The session involved members of different communities (including minorities) telling stories of discrimination as part of a "snakes and ladders" game.

At the United Nations, the EU remains actively engaged in the Human Rights Council's work to fight against racism and intolerance. It closely follows discussions on the follow-up to the Durban Declaration and the Programme of Action and participates in negotiations on related resolutions in both the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly. The EU contributes to UN working groups on combating racism by providing information on relevant EU legislation, policies and activities.

In December 2023, the Commission and the High Representative adopted a Joint Communication entitled '**No place for hate: a Europe united against hatred**'. This communication marks an intensified effort by the EU to combat hatred in all its manifestations, encompassing a comprehensive reinforcement of actions across several policy domains. It is a call to action for all Europeans to stand together to combat hatred in Europe and the rest of the world.¹⁴

The EU denounced acts of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred worldwide. In January 2023, in a Statement on the International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the High Representative emphasised that: '*The only way to prevent future atrocities is to ensure that past atrocities and their victims shall never be forgotten*'¹⁵.

The promotion of non-discrimination continues to feature prominently in human rights dialogues and in meetings under the Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the Western Balkans and under the EU-Türkiye Association Agreement.

30 new projects addressing discrimination in its various forms were launched under the NDICI-Global Europe's thematic programme on human rights and democracy.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

In 2023, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) remained high on the agenda of the EU's external human rights policy. These rights were an important part of the human rights dialogues held with countries such as Cuba, Kazakhstan¹⁶, Qatar¹⁷ and Ukraine¹⁸. The

14 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6329

15 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/international-holocaust-remembrance-day-statement-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell_en

16 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-kazakhstan-annual-human-rights-dialogue-and-sub-committee-justice-and-home-affairs-meetings_en

17 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/qatar-5th-human-rights-dialogue-eu-held-doha_en

18 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ukraine-8th-human-rights-dialogue-takes-place-kyiv_en

EU also exchanged views on FoRB with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) during the 6th EU-OIC high-level meeting in June 2023.

The EU unequivocally condemns all acts of discrimination, hatred, violence or persecution based on religion or belief, including acts committed in the name of religion and religious intolerance of those of other faiths and none. The High Representative issued an EU Declaration on the **International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief** with a clear message that *'all around the world individuals at risk should be protected, and the perpetrators of acts of violence must be brought to justice'*.

The EU continued to **engage regularly with religious or non-confessional actors, humanists, and human rights NGOs** working on freedom of religion or belief through meetings in Brussels, and worldwide with EU Delegations.



The EU's **Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU**, Frans Van Daele, met with counterparts within and outside the EU. In June 2023, together with Vice-President Schinas, the Special Envoy travelled to Jerusalem to meet with religious leaders and officials to address the situation of the Holy Sites.

The EU's commitment to protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief is anchored in **multilateralism** - in particular, in its engagement in the UN human rights fora and UN-led initiatives - and is based on the principles of equality, non-discrimination and universality. The EU again presented **resolutions on freedom of religion or belief** in the UN human rights fora in Geneva and New York, which were adopted by consensus. The EU continued to also work closely with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to ensure the complementarity of resolutions. Furthermore, the EU continued to support the mandate of the **UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief**, and contributed actively by delivering EU statements during the Human Rights Council on the topic of countering Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred. The EU also received a visit of the UN Special Rapporteur to Brussels in June 2023 and contributed with specific inputs to her reports. In New York, the EU Delegation and the UN Special Rapporteur co-organised an event on: 'Ensuring access to freedom of religion or belief on the ground: actors, strategies and accountability'.

In Geneva, the EU also participated in FoRB-related events such as the OHCHR annual roundtable on FoRB/religious related issues that took place in November. Participants came from different walks of life and discussed, under Chatham House rules, ways to address religious hatred, following up on the Rabat Plan of Action, the Beirut Declaration and resolutions of the Human Rights Council¹⁹.

19 In particular, resolutions 16/18, 52/6 and 53/1.



In Nigeria, the EU's project Inclusive Religious Engagement in Nigeria Enhanced by Women (I-RENEW), in partnership with Search for Common Ground, the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria and the Centre for Dialogue, Reconciliation and Peace, seeks to empower women religious actors and youth activists to promote freedom of religion or belief and peaceful coexistence within and between religions in the Plateau and Kaduna states. Through the project, women religious leaders and youth activists in the target states have been trained in advocacy and religious engagement. The Faith for Peace project, also; in Nigeria, empowers local actors to promote peace and religious tolerance in Nigeria.

The global call for projects launched in 2023 included one lot for EUR 5.5 million to protect persons belonging to minorities discriminated on religious or belief grounds by (1) reinforcing capacities of civil society and various stakeholders to contribute to repealing discriminatory laws, policies, measures and practices and policymaking in the area of non-discrimination and tolerance; and (2) improving equality, inclusion, respect in all spheres of public and private life.

HUMAN RIGHTS OF PERSONS BELONGING TO MINORITIES

All countries in the world include people belonging to national, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities that enrich the diversity of societies. However, persons belonging to minorities often face multiple forms of discrimination resulting in marginalisation and exclusion.

The EU promotes diversity through the promotion and implementation of international human rights standards with this aim continued to advocate and uphold the rights of national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, in line with the UN declaration.²⁰ On the global stage, the EU has continued to call on all states to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of persons belonging to minorities, and expressing particular concern about persistent cases of violations and abuses of these rights.



A minority ethnic group in Kayin State, Southeast Myanmar/Burma, often facing deprivation of political, civil, and cultural rights. The photographer received a grant from the C4P EU Project

²⁰ <https://undocs.org/A/RES/47/135>

The EU continues to be committed to fostering Roma²¹ equality, inclusion and participation through its external action. Given that Roma people continue to suffer from disproportionate discrimination, antigypsyism and socioeconomic exclusion in their daily lives within and outside the EU, more efforts by the EU, EU Member States and partner countries are necessary to meet the commitments of the 2020–2030 **EU's Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation**.

The EU actively supported Roma inclusion in the Western Balkans and Türkiye with projects supporting public authorities at central and local level and Roma CSOs, in the fields of education, employment and the reintegration of returnees. In February, the EU opened applications for the 5th EU Award for Roma integration in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, dedicated to promoting the Roma inclusion dimension of the digital agenda and the green economy.

The EU continued to promote Roma equality, inclusion and participation in its external action in the enlargement process, as stipulated in the Poznan Declaration objectives. Actions like the third phase of Roma integration project and the second phase of ROMACTED implemented by the Council of Europe supported the recognition of antigypsyism and decrease of the socio-economic gap between the Roma and non-Roma population. EU actions assisted governments and local authorities in the areas of education, employment, housing, health, and civil registration and empowerment of Roma citizens to contribute to design and implementation of policies concerning Roma communities.

Furthermore, the EU continued to support the alignment of Ukraine's legislative framework on the protection of persons belonging to minorities with international standards. In mid-2023, the Commission launched a project managed by the Council of Europe to support this process and on anti-discrimination more generally. In 2023, Ukraine's

21 In line with the terminology of European institutions, the umbrella term 'Roma' is used here to refer to a number of different groups (e.g. Roma, Sinti, Kale, Gypsies, Romanichels, Boyash, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom, Abdal) without denying the specificities of these groups.

Law on National Minorities (Communities) of December 2022 was amended in close consultation with representatives of national minorities, following the recommendations of the **Venice Commission**.

At the UN Forum on Minority Issues to discuss barriers to the social and economic participation of people belonging to minority groups, the EU addressed discrimination and marginalisation, advocating for strengthened checks and balances, institutional frameworks, and a bigger role for independent national human rights institutions and support for human rights organisations. The EU also underlined the importance of rectifying policies that perpetuate inequality, especially for women and girls belonging to minorities.

GENDER EQUALITY

In 2023, the EU played a major role in promoting gender equality beyond its borders. Gender mainstreaming across all policies and activities remained a key priority. The commitments in the **2020-2024 EU human rights action plan and the 2021-2027 EU gender action plan III**²² (GAP III) continued to guide the work of the European Union. Led by such commitments, the EU strives to channel its programming efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment both within the EU and across the globe, including through external action with partner countries.

The **GAP III** applies a policy-driven, context-specific approach, incorporating gender country profiles, which has resulted in 131 country-level implementation plans (CLIPs). Among its key achievements, the GAP III has significantly improved policy-programming alignment, resulting in increased actions and funding for gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment. It has played a pivotal role in integrating a gender perspective into the Global Gateway strategy,

22 Joint communication on the EU Gender Action Plan III, JOIN(2020) 17 final, 25 November 2020 (https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/join-2020-17-final_en.pdf), which has been extended with the adoption of the joint mid-term report on the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan III.

aimed at ensuring that the benefits of investment are fairly and equally accessible, and in Team Europe initiatives. The mid-term independent evaluation, and the joint mid-term report on the implementation of GAP III adopted in November 2023 confirmed the relevance of the approach and extends its implementation period until 2027.²³

The EU has also continued to invest in actions targeting gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment as a principal objective in all policy areas, from the elimination of gender-based violence to social, economic and political empowerment.



In Armenia, as part of the 16-day campaign against gender-based violence, on December 14 as part of the EU funded project titled "Youth against Violence: 16 days Activism."

The EU and Member States launched a Team Europe initiative to step up action against inequalities and to promote inclusive and equal societies in **Latin America and the Caribbean**. With an EU contribution of EUR 60 million, the initiative will support the development of fair and equitable social and fiscal policies, universal and equal access to basic services, and education and skills development for women's and young people's participation in the green and digital transitions.

23 JOIN (2023) 36 final, 20 November 2023: [Joint mid-term report on the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan \(GAP III\) | International Partnerships \(europa.eu\)](#)

In **Malawi**, the EU is implementing a gender-responsive social protection programme (EUR 59 million) which empowers the most vulnerable girls and women. The action aims to improve the effectiveness of the national social support programme and the provision of services, and promote greater diversification in the livelihoods of women and girls.

Partnerships and engagement with civil society, including women's rights organisations, are a key component of these actions. For instance, the **EU-Vietnam** women-led green partnership programme (EUR 18 million) aims to increase the participation of women and girls, in all their diversity, and non-state actors in decision-making processes on climate change adaptation and mitigation. It also aims to improve access to decent jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities in the green economy and the circular economy.

The EU remained a **vocal advocate for women's and girls' full enjoyment of all human rights** in UN multilateral fora, driving key country and thematic resolutions. For instance, in September 2023 the EU called for the integration of a gender perspective in all the work of the Human Rights Council. The EU co-sponsored several resolutions on the elimination of discrimination and violence against women and girls.

European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová speaking on behalf of the European Union at CSW



As a priority, the EU continued to promote the work of women HRDs, women's (rights) organisations and youth-led organisations in various multilateral fora. In March 2023 the EU participated in the **67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)**, which is the world's leading intergovernmental body and largest annual gathering dedicated exclusively to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. This year, the session at the UN Headquarters in New York focused on the theme of 'Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls'. European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová, represented the EU and hosted a series of events with UN and Member States' representatives as well as with other stakeholders, including civil society. Furthermore, the EU organised three side events on gender equality, in cooperation with the Swedish Presidency.

The EU Delegation included Irena Moozova, Deputy Director for Equality and Non-Discrimination in the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, and Stella Ronner-Grubačić, the EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, as well as civil society representatives and youth delegates. The European Parliament was represented by the Chair and Members of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, who played an active role in many of the EU's events and meetings. The session hosted an interactive youth dialogue for the first time, where youth delegates discussed the priority theme. The CSW session coincided with International Women's Day on 8 March, which was celebrated with a major commemorative event by UN Women. The EU actively contributed to preparing the ambitious conclusions agreed²⁴ by the parties of the CSW, which called for renewed efforts to address the risks while leveraging the benefits of digitalisation and new technologies for gender equality.

24 CSW 67 (2023) accessible at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw67-2023>.

The EU engaged with the UN system more broadly, also co-funding major joint programmes, in particular with UN Women, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). In June 2023, EEAS hosted a meeting UNFPA's Director for the Middle East and North Africa region, Laila Baker, to brief EU Delegations on recent developments and challenges related to youth and gender-based violence.

The EU and UNDP are implementing the EU-AGRIN project which promotes innovative solutions and collaborations in agriculture, and established the Forum Empowering Rural Women in Agriculture in 2023, with a special focus on **Uzbekistan**. The forum is meant to enhance the role and engagement of women in the agricultural sector who, despite being significant contributors in the field, face unique challenges both globally and in Uzbekistan.

In 2023, the cooperation between the EU and the Council of Europe had a significant gender component, which was highlighted by the EU's accession to the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (**the Istanbul Convention**), a benchmark for international standards in this field.²⁵ It is the first instrument in Europe to set legally binding standards for the implementation of comprehensive and coordinated policies between national and governmental bodies involved in prevention, prosecution and protection activities. The Convention entered into force for the EU on 1 October 2023 and the EU is now bound by ambitious and comprehensive standards to prevent and combat violence against women in the area of judicial cooperation in criminal matters, asylum and non-refoulement and with regard to its public administration.

25 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/06/01/combating-violence-against-women-council-adopts-decision-about-eu-s-accession-to-istanbul-convention/>

The EU continued to implement the **EU strategic approach to women, peace and security** and its accompanying action plan.²⁶ Playing a key role in highlighting gender equality, the EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity took action to ingrain the gender perspective into EU diplomacy, political dialogue and policy decisions by driving gender mainstreaming across the EEAS and liaising with women's civil society organisations, while separately working on particular country contexts, such as in Ukraine.

Gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment and their enjoyment of all human rights were consistently raised in **bilateral political and human rights dialogues**. These dialogues provided an avenue to support the full implementation of the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** across the world.



Campaign against gender violence with voices of women survivors who are now advocates for women's rights in their canton, Costa Rica

26 EU action plan on women, peace and security (WPS) 2019–2024 accessible at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11031-2019-INIT/en/pdf>

The EU, its delegations across the globe and Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations **prominently celebrated International Women's Day** on 8 March and the **International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women** on 25 November, as well as the ensuing **16 Days of Activism campaign**. Under the global theme 'UNITE! Invest to prevent violence against women and girls', the EU organised various public events, including a discussion on gender-based violence. The EU also promoted communication campaigns on its media platforms to raise awareness of violence against women and of its efforts to prevent violence and protect women in the EU and across the world.



On Women's Day, 8 March 2023, the EU paid tribute to the victims of gender-based violence in Albania. The 'Red Shoes' installation at Mother Teresa Square, in the framework of FemFest showcased worn red shoes, symbolising the tragic loss and suffering endured by women.

The EU strengthened its action to prevent and end **sexual and gender-based violence** (both offline and online) globally with the goals of: (i) supporting and protecting survivors of such crimes; (ii) holding perpetrators accountable; (iii) addressing the root causes of violence; (iv) strengthening legal frameworks, institutions and education; (v) improving services for survivors and access to justice for victims; and (vi) supporting women's rights organisations and CSOs.

Trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation is also a form of gender-based violence, which predominantly affects women and girls with more than half of all victims in the EU being female. The EU directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings²⁷ and protecting its victims sets requirements and measures, including through a strong gender dimension in supporting and protecting victims. The EU strategy on combatting trafficking in human beings (2021-2025)²⁸ follows a gender-sensitive approach focusing on the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking.



As part of the EU's public outreach and diplomacy, the EU Delegation in China used cultural activities and communication activities to promote gender equality and women's empowerment to a broader audience. For example, the Delegation interactively engaged with Chinese audiences on universal values related to gender equality through an online quiz on the occasion of International Women's Day in March, and encouraged a discussion with renowned European and Chinese authors on themes such as gender, identity and sexuality during the 8th EU-China Literary Festival in November.

In 2023, the EU continued to ensure that all EU-funded humanitarian aid is gender-sensitive. The EU mainstreamed gender considerations in its humanitarian assistance in line with the provisions of the European Union's third gender action plan 2021-2025, by carrying out gender-sensitive needs assessments and analyses in its actions

27 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011L0036>

28 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0171>

and by continuing to use a gender-age marker to measure the extent to which EU-funded humanitarian actions integrate gender and age considerations. In addition, the EU's humanitarian aid budget supported targeted actions to prevent, mitigate and respond to gender-based violence with a budget of EUR 48 million. For example, in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, the EU funded 15 partners to provide services to survivors of gender-based violence, including women, girls, men and boys – often through health services and directly with and through communities. The EU has also supported a national NGO working in **Ituri, North Kivu**, to provide holistic response services for women and girls who have experienced sexual violence, either at the hands of armed groups or members of their communities. Survivors can seek confidential medical and psychological support, and get access to legal advice and support should they want to try to bring their perpetrators to justice.

In 2023, the EU adopted two packages under the **EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime**²⁹ against 15 individuals and 3 entities in response to their role in committing **sexual and gender-based violence**. Six individuals were listed as responsible for various forms of sexual and gender-based violence. These include the **acting Taliban Ministers of Education and Justice** and the **acting Taliban Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Afghanistan** because of their role in depriving Afghan girls and women of their right to education, access to justice and equal treatment with men. The measures also target a senior officer of the **South Sudanese armed forces**, a leading figure of the **Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic**, and a commander of the **30th Motorised Rifle Brigade of the Russian armed forces** because they committed widespread attacks against the civilian population in the countries where they operated, which systematically included sexual and gender-based violence, including as a way of terrorising the population.

29 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-sanctions-end-sexual-and-gender-based-violence_en

In Ukraine, the EU is supporting victims of gender-based violence as part its crisis response support. It is allocating EUR 6 million in funding to support victims of conflict-related sexual violence and to improve access to education with partners Ukrainian Women's Fund, Global Rights Compliance and the office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence.

The EU continued to support the **Global Survivors Fund** with EUR 2 million in funding. The fund is a mechanism to facilitate access globally to reparations and other forms of redress to victims and survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. In the three pilot countries (**Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea and Iraq**), it has so far benefitted 2 612 survivors with interim reparative measures. EU-funded allocations have been directed to Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Iraq, Nigeria, and in Türkiye, for Syrian survivors.

In 2023, the EU continued its work with close partners UNFPA and UNICEF to **eradicate female genital mutilation**. The second International Conference on Female Genital Mutilation was held in Tanzania, with about 750 participants from African Union Member States, United Nations, international and regional organisations, civil society and with religious and traditional leaders and youth advocates. The United Nations Joint Programme supported media training for journalists and media scholars, as well as grassroots organisations and campaigners to help amplify messaging on this issue.

To bring an **end to child marriage**, the EU continued working closely with UNICEF and UNFPA to significantly improve the capacities of over 1 000 feminist activists, women-led self-help groups and youth-led groups to engage in this issue and plan programmes. Over 20 million people have been engaged through community platforms in dialogues to promote positive images. Overall, 6 million boys and men have participated in

dialogue and education sessions to prevent harmful practices and empower girls. Over 7 million adolescent girls have actively participated in sessions on life skills or comprehensive education on sexuality.

Ending discrimination and violence against women is a priority in policy dialogues, as well as in the EU's programming efforts worldwide through **regional and bilateral programmes**. For example, the regional programme in the Eastern Neighbourhood, **'EU4Gender Equality: Together against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence'**, implemented jointly by UN Women and the UN Population Fund, ended in July 2023. This programme aimed to change social perceptions and behaviour as regards gender stereotypes and prevent gender-based violence.

The EU also assists candidate countries and potential candidates in their efforts to deliver on their gender equality commitments, including by supporting the adoption and implementation of comprehensive, evidence-based laws, aligned with international commitments. The EU follows up on these efforts with all partners, and at all stages of the EU accession process, by monitoring the transposition, implementation and enforcement of relevant legislation. A relevant project in this area is the regional programme 'Implementing Norms, Changing Minds', aimed at ending gender-based discrimination and violence against women in the **Western Balkans and Türkiye**, and which focuses on the most disadvantaged groups of women.

In addition, the EU continued to put gender equality, women's empowerment and the implementation of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda at the heart of its regional partnerships, such as with the Council of Europe, the African Union, the League of Arab States, the Organisation of American States, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

LGBTI

The EU continued to **stand up for the full enjoyment of human rights by LGBTI persons** and LGBTI human rights defenders around the world and showed strong commitment to protecting and promoting their full enjoyment of human rights. In addition to the action plan, the EU implements the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy.³⁰

At the multilateral level, the EU continued to promote the human rights of LGBTI persons in the UN system. In May 2023, the EU delivered a statement in the UN Security Council on integrating the human rights of LGBTI persons into the Security Council's mandate for peace and security.



EU Delegation Iceland participating in Pride events in Reykjavik May, 2023.

30 LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-25: https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-equality/lgbtiq-equality-strategy-2020-2025_en

'It is essential to go further in our efforts to protect the rights of all persons in the most vulnerable situations, including LGBTI persons. Pushback on their human rights can be a precursor to violence and exacerbates existing vulnerabilities. Violence against LGBTI persons must be prevented and eliminated, so as to deliver on the protection-of-civilians mandate of the United Nations. UN peacekeeping and peace operations must improve their monitoring on threats and violence against human rights defenders, including LGBTI human rights defenders, as well as hate crimes, including with data on discrimination and violence on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion or belief, and disability and any other status'. *EU Statement to the UN Security Council (Arria formula): 'Integrating the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI) Persons into the Council's Mandate for Maintaining International Peace and Security'*.

The EU continued to play an active role in the UN LGBTI Core Group, consisting of NGOs and UN Member States, to advance the rights of LGBTI persons. The EU also addressed the issue of intolerance and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the



EU Delegation in Australia with the EU Commissioner Helena Dalli during the Sydney WorldPride 2023.

OSCE and the Council of Europe. The EU continued to engage with UN Special Procedures under the Human Rights Council, namely the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.



The EU raised the topic of human rights of LGBTI persons in **human rights dialogues** with countries in all regions. The topic was also raised in the context of sub-committee meetings under the Stabilisation and Association Process with the Western Balkans and under the EU-Türkiye Association Agreement. The situation of LGBTI persons is monitored in the context of the EU’s enlargement policy, including through a dedicated section in each of the country reports in the enlargement package, which this year included reports on Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine for the first time.

The Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the **International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia** on 17 May was disseminated around the world. EU Delegations in all regions raised the rainbow flag. EU Delegations in Latin America, North America and Western Europe were very engaged in public activities, largely owing to the more open political atmosphere in these regions. EU Delegations also held seminars and conferences with LGBTI activists

to mark the occasion. The EU also denounced violations of the right to freedom of assembly in countries where Pride events were cancelled or prohibited.

In Guatemala, the EU Election Observation Mission met a transgender rights organisation to understand how the right to vote can be impacted for transgender people. The EU launched the Pride Heroes campaign, which celebrated LGBTI human rights defenders from around the world.

The EU provided **technical and financial assistance to tackle violence, hatred and discrimination against LGBTI persons** in candidate countries and potential candidates for EU accession. Promoting equality and non-discrimination, including for LGBTI persons, is a feature of the EU's joint work with the Council of Europe through the Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye and the Partnership for Good Governance in the Eastern Partnership. In 2023 alone, 8 contracts were signed with civil society organisations under the country allocations of the thematic programme for human rights and democracy to protect the rights of LGBTI persons, including in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Türkiye.

Worldwide, the EU increased support to **civil society organisations and HRDs** in their efforts to protect and advance the rights of LGBTI persons. In particular, EUR 15 million was directed to projects promoting equality, inclusion and diversity.

The EU continues to offer a **rapid response mechanism to protect individual LGBTI human rights defenders at risk**. In 2023, 621 individual LGBTI human rights defenders received support from the Protect Defenders Facility (e.g. emergency grants, temporary relocation, capacity-building and training), and 48 organisations defending the rights of LGBTI persons also received support.

EU **humanitarian aid** is adapted to the needs of different groups, including LGBTI persons, in line with humanitarian principles. For example, the EU has funded safe protection projects and services for LGBTI people in Türkiye, and for host and refugee communities in camps such as Azraq and Zaatari in Jordan.

RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The EU's approach to the rights of the child in its external policy remains steadfastly rooted in the commitments outlined in the EU strategy on the rights of the child³¹ and action plan on human rights and democracy. Throughout 2023, the EU has been a **vocal advocate for children's rights** in various multilateral human rights fora, demonstrating its unwavering dedication to ensuring their well-being and protection from all forms of harm.

Central to this mission is preventing violence against children, promoting child-friendly justice and facilitating universal access to quality education, with a particular focus on improving educational opportunities for girls. Recognising the increasingly digital nature of children's lives, the EU has **prioritised efforts to create a safe and positive online environment for children**, co-initiating a UN General Assembly resolution on the rights of the child in the digital environment, which includes robust measures to combat online violence, exploitation, cyberbullying and exposure to harmful content. During the High-Level Conference on **Education in Emergencies** organised jointly with UNICEF in March 2023, the EU called for strengthened collective engagement and for an increase in public funding to help children caught up in fragile humanitarian settings to stay in, or to return to, learning.



31 https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en



Primary school-aged girls in grades 1–3 attend classes at Tajrobavi High School in Herat, Afghanistan. On 23 March 2022, the Taliban authorities announced that schools would not reopen for girls in grades 7–12.

Throughout the year, the EU continued to collaborate actively with the **Special Representatives of the UN Secretary-General on children and armed conflict**, as well as **violence against children**, reinforcing its commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by children in conflict zones, post-conflict settings and other vulnerable situations. The EU has remained attentive to the needs of those in disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalised circumstances, including indigenous children and those belonging to ethnic or national minorities. Additionally, special consideration has been given to **children with disabilities**, ensuring that they receive the support and resources necessary for their holistic development and the opportunity to thrive in a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment and promoting de-institutionalisation.

The European Union has made progress on the Sustainable Development Goals for children in the EU and supported progress across the world in 2023, in particular on health, nutrition and child protection. In order to **ensure that all children can reach their full**

potential, the EU has implemented policies to reduce poverty among children, invested in education and childcare, and taken steps to promote gender equality.

The EU continued to implement its Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child³² and the Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict.³³ Approximately EUR 162 million was allocated for **education in emergencies**, which supported access to safe and quality learning for 1.78 million children and adolescents affected by crises and humanitarian emergencies. Specific support to children affected by armed conflict also continued in Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Colombia, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Mozambique, Myanmar/Burma, Nigeria, the occupied Palestinian territories, Philippines, South Sudan and Syria. In Ukraine, there was **significant assistance and support** for child trauma-care, foster-care and deinstitutionalisation, education for **conflict-affected children and for children's health**.



© War Child

In Syria, children diligently doing their homework in a classroom of a rehabilitated school in the context of a project covering the access to education for better reintegration in post-war communities.

32 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/10_hr_guidelines_protection_en.pdf

33 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/01_hr_guidelines_children_en_1.pdf

The EU continued its efforts to **eradicate child labour** through projects such as the Clear Cotton project³⁴ and the Sustainable Cocoa programme³⁵. Collaborative initiatives targeting sectors like mining and construction have also been pursued to combat child labour. Maintaining its **funding** for development programmes aimed at reducing child labour, such as the International Labour Organisation's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, the EU continued to **strengthen collaboration and partnerships** with governments, international organisations, social partners, civil society, the United Nations and other international organisations, and joined the Alliance 8.7 global partnership.

Close cooperation with civil society organisations working on the rights of the child and engagement with child HRDs continued. Outreach, advocacy and policy dialogue events included a high-level week in the margins of the UN General Assembly that was co-hosted by the EU and civil society organisations, which emphasised the importance of including children in an inclusive and meaningful way in the formulation of policies to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Implementing the **Better Internet for Kids** strategy³⁶, work continued putting in place the necessary tools and measures to implement the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), a new law that sets rules for digital services such as online platforms operating in the EU. Among its aims are to protect children's privacy, safety and security online, and to ban advertising targeted at children that is based on profiling.

34 https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/stories/clearing-cotton-child-labour_en

35 https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/programmes/sustainable-cocoa-initiative_en

36 A digital decade for children and youth: the new European strategy for a better internet for kids available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0212>

Protecting **children from child sexual abuse remains a key priority for the EU**. In 2023, building upon the EU strategy 2020-2025,³⁷ concrete action was taken to address the growing threat of child sexual abuse, both online and offline. Negotiations continued to shape a new regulation aimed at preventing and combating child sexual abuse. This proposal aims to reduce the prevalence of such crimes and provide support to victims by imposing obligations on online service providers and by creating an EU centre to prevent and combat child sexual abuse.

The proposed rules will oblige providers to prevent, and if needed, detect, report grooming and remove child sexual abuse material on their services. It will also establish a new independent EU centre on child sexual abuse to assist online services with fulfilling the obligations, provide support to victims of abuse and act as a knowledge hub for best practices. Further in line with the EU strategy, in November 2023, the Commission adopted a proposal for an extension of the 2021 interim Regulation, ensuring that providers of online communications services can continue their voluntary practices to detect and report child sexual abuse online and remove child sexual abuse material.

Comprehensive action was also taken to **protect children from dangers arising from trafficking in human beings and migration**. Nearly one in six victims of human trafficking in the EU is a child. The EU intensified its efforts to prevent and combat this crime and to support and protect child victims. The anti-trafficking directive³⁸ provided targeted support and protection measures for child victims of trafficking, while the EU's 2021-2025 strategy³⁹ on combatting trafficking in human beings includes comprehensive protection for victims, focusing on child victims in particular.

37 EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse 2020-2025 accessible at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0607>

38 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011L0036>

39 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0171>

In the framework of the EU accession process, the EU supports candidate countries and potential candidates in the adoption and implementation of comprehensive, evidence-based laws, aligned with international commitments. The EU follows up on these efforts with all the partners, at all stages of the process, by monitoring the transposition, implementation and enforcement of relevant legislation.

Additionally, the EU maintained its comprehensive policy framework for the **protection of migrant children**, including those displaced by conflict, such as those fleeing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Close cooperation with key stakeholders and partners, including civil society organisations and UN agencies, ensured a coordinated and effective approach to protecting children in vulnerable situations.

MIGRATION AND MOBILITY – MIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Development and international cooperation policy contributed to strengthening the EU's migration partnerships with partner countries, ensuring that the challenges and opportunities of migration and forced displacement were addressed as a crucial part of our dialogues and cooperation with key partner countries around the globe.

The EU increased engagement with partner countries in support of comprehensive migration partnerships, including **Bangladesh, Egypt, Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal and Tunisia**, in line with the **EU pact on migration and asylum**. Migration dialogues were accompanied by significant EU funding, taking the needs and priorities of partner countries into account. The EU also provided significant migration-related support to its partners in the enlargement region, notably the Western Balkans, Türkiye and Ukraine and Moldova. This focused not only on supporting them in

effectively managing migration flows but also, in particular in the Western Balkans, aligning their legislative frameworks on migration and asylum with the EU standards.

The EU provided support in a variety of areas, such as humanitarian assistance, international protection, voluntary return and sustainable reintegration, fight against **migrant smuggling** and trafficking in human beings, legal pathways, including to protection and border management. This support also addressed the root causes of irregular migration, in full respect of the human rights of migrants and **forcibly displaced people**. In addition, the EU provided significant support to address situations of forced displacement, with the objective of promoting durable solutions for forcibly displaced people, including in, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Pakistan, Sub-Saharan Africa and Venezuela, and reacted in crises like those in Sudan and Gaza.

By mid-2023, an estimated **110 million people** found themselves forcibly displaced due to natural hazards, persecution, conflict and human rights violations.⁴⁰ This figure surpassed 100 million in the first half of 2022, primarily driven by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and marks the highest number since records began. The increase in internally displaced people in Gaza and Sudan made a significant contribution to the overall increase in displacement in 2023.

In 2022, Ukraine was the second most common non-EU nationality falling victim of trafficking in the EU. In order to address the risks of trafficking in human beings for those fleeing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the common Anti-trafficking plan⁴¹ continued to be developed and implemented under the lead of the EU anti-trafficking Coordinator. While prevention worked, the risk of human trafficking, particularly for women and children, remains high and the situation continues to be monitored.

40 UNHCR mid-year trends report: <https://www.unhcr.org/mid-year-trends-report-2023>

41 https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/anti-trafficking-plan-protect-people-fleeing-war-ukraine-2022-05-11_en



The EU continued to play a leading role as an international donor, channeling most of its EUR 1.7 billion humanitarian budget to addressing the needs of refugees, internationally displaced people and their host communities. **In response to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the EU quadrupled its assistance to over EUR 100 million in 2023 and launched a Humanitarian Air Bridge operation to aid civilians.** Temporary protection was established for the first time in March 2022 and was extended in October 2023 until March 2025, offering more legal certainty to the over 4 million Ukrainian displaced persons fleeing Ukraine currently residing in the EU.

A significant milestone was achieved in December 2023 with the political agreement reached between the European Parliament and the Council on the **new pact on migration and asylum**. This comprehensive set of regulations and policies aims to establish a fairer and more sustainable migration and asylum process in the EU. The pact aims to manage migration effectively and ensure certainty, clarity and decent conditions for people arriving in the EU.

These measures demonstrate the EU's commitment to addressing migration challenges through cooperative and proactive approaches, grounded in solidarity, responsibility and respect for human rights.

In the 2021–2027 budget, the EU has committed to spend indicatively 10% of NDICI-Global Europe's funding on actions supporting the management and governance of migration and forced displacement. This target also includes actions to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement.

Safe, secure and legal pathways for migrants remain critical for ensuring the protection of human rights. In November 2023, the European Commission presented a comprehensive and innovative skills and talent mobility package which included the proposal for a regulation establishing an EU talent pool to connect employers in Europe with job seekers outside the EU. Additionally, the package includes recommendations to facilitate the recognition of professional qualifications acquired outside the EU and promote learning mobility. To enhance legal migration pathways and reinforce cooperation with non-EU countries, the EU is also establishing 'talent partnerships', first with Bangladesh, Egypt Morocco, Pakistan and Tunisia. These partnerships provide direct support for partner country nationals' mobility to study, work or train in the EU, and also ensure capacity building assistance to partner countries in areas, such as labour market or skills intelligence, vocational education and training, integration of returning migrants and diaspora mobilisation.

Additionally, in December 2023, a political agreement was found on the recast of the single permit directive,⁴² which, once adopted, will improve the safeguarding of non-EU workers and their protection from labour exploitation. The inter-institutional negotiations on the Long-Term Residents Directive⁴³ started in November 2023.

42 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2022%3A655%3AFIN&qid=1651221925581>

43 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02003L0109-20110520>

As integration policies are an essential part of migration policies and the comprehensive approach of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Commission continued promoting the inclusion of legally residing third-country nationals as well as EU citizens with migrant background, in line with the action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027.⁴⁴ The Commission supported the efforts of Member States and other stakeholders, such as civil society organisations and social partners, through facilitating the exchange of good practices, building on the momentum of the 2022 European Year of Skills, in particular, to promote sustainable labour market integration of refugees and other migrants.

The EU continues to provide safe and legal pathways to protection for the most vulnerable refugees. The EU continues to underpin Member States' resettlement and humanitarian admission efforts providing financial, operational and political support. In 2023, Member States provided almost 30,000 pledges for resettlement and humanitarian admission.

The EU also took decisive action to **counter migrant smuggling** in 2023. This criminal activity is often linked to serious human rights abuses and fatalities, especially in sea crossings. In November 2023, the EU proposed a **pioneering legislative package to prevent and fight migrant smuggling, and launched a new global alliance to counter migrant smuggling** at an international conference on 28 November 2023 in Brussels. At multilateral level, the EU continued to work with key UN agencies and remained actively involved in UN-led initiatives to safeguard the rights of migrants, refugees and displaced persons. This commitment extends to addressing the critical issue of trafficking in people, with a particular focus on women and children. In 2023 the EU financially supported the evacuation of almost 800 vulnerable migrants from Libya, with the support of the UNHCR, and the assisted voluntary return of almost 10 000 migrants from Libya to their countries of origin.

44 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social committee and the Committee of the Regions Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, COM/2020/758 final.

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Building on the landmark resolution of the UN General Assembly of July 2022 recognising the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, complementing the right of access to clean and safe drinking water and sanitation, the EU **worked to raise awareness about the link between climate change, the environment and human rights**. The triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss has an impact on the enjoyment of many human rights. An increasing number of people are deprived of their right to water due to changing weather patterns, combined with the unsustainable management of water resources. The pollution of air, water and soil has dramatic impacts on health, affecting disproportionately the poor. Climate change and environmental degradation like deforestation destroy the livelihoods of rural populations and are drivers of migration, often to urban areas in which access to water, sanitation, health services and decent shelter is limited.

The EU recognised the need for continued efforts to protect environmental, human and indigenous rights defenders. Considering the need for strong, ambitious and well planned action to mitigate



As part of the Environmental Defenders project, rural and indigenous youth from El Salvador strengthen their knowledge of human and environmental rights and capacities to defend the land, water, and forests.

and adapt to climate change, the EU underlined that the green transition is not only about doing the right thing, but also about doing it right. This means that the public must be informed and consulted; the green transition must be just and equitable, taking into account the different impacts, in particular on vulnerable people, local communities and ecosystems.

The EU and its Member States are actively involved in preparing the Summit of the Future, which will take place in September 2024. During the preparations, the EU has underlined the importance of ensuring that human rights feature prominently in the Pact for the Future and has argued that young people must be closely involved in the run-up, in the summit itself, and in the follow-up to the event. This will ensure, among other things, concerns about climate change and environmental deterioration will feature prominently in the discussions thanks to the participation of people who will experience the effects the most dramatically.

In preparation of COP28, the EU emphasised that climate action must to be in line with human rights obligations, namely the right to health and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and stressed that the public's participation, engagement and access to information are essential for a just and inclusive transition to climate neutrality.



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Building roots together: Green Again Campaign volunteer, funded by the EU, prepares the soil for Qasr Libya's olive trees, nurturing both land and community. (Libya, February 2023)

1.2 Empowering people

Empowering all people so that no one is left behind, involves enabling them to realise their full potential as equal and active members of society. Respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights are the cornerstone of societal cohesion, solidarity and trust, both between the state and citizens, and between citizens themselves.

EMPOWERING WOMEN

The EU continues to empower women economically, politically and in all aspects of life. It remains committed to gender equality and women's empowerment, to preventing and ending sexual and gender-based violence, to addressing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and to guaranteeing and strengthening economic, social and political rights for women.

The EU took every opportunity in 2023 to ensure that the international community remains united and increases its efforts to turn the promises of the **Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action and the programme of action on the International Conference on Population and Development** into reality. There was a particular emphasis on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and on removing barriers to the empowerment of women and girls, including their social, political and economic empowerment.

Efforts were also strengthened to support the **role of women in peace processes** through various forms of capacity-building, networking and mentoring activities. The EU promoted women's political empowerment through actions funded by its programmes, human rights dialogues and activities in multilateral fora.



"I'd like to emphasize, from my own experience, that war has no benefits and I invite young people to protest against those who would lead them in ethnic divisions"; says Lucie Nkurikiye, a beneficiary of the EU-funded project Dukomeze Kunywana "Strengthening reconciliation" in Cibitoke province, Burundi.

In September 2023, the Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, and the Executive Director of UN Women, Sima Bahous, agreed to launch the programme 'ACT – advocacy, coalition-building and transformative feminist action to end violence against women' during the high-level week at the 78th UN General Assembly. The EU initially pledged EUR 22 million in funding for the programme, followed by another EUR 17 million, which builds on the Spotlight Initiative's results and the lessons learnt from it in 26 countries to empower women's organisations at regional and global levels.

The EU continued to monitor the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan. The EU-facilitated **Afghan Women Leaders Forum** convened twice in 2023. It has engaged over 100 Afghan women leaders, both from the Afghan diaspora and within Afghanistan, through a structured ongoing dialogue and aims to ensure that Afghan women can participate in the country's political processes.

Women in peacebuilding - Supporting Arab Women at the Table (SAWT)

Iraq, Libya, the occupied Palestinian territories, Syria, and Yemen are all experiencing different forms and degrees of conflict. The participation of women in peacebuilding processes is essential to building sustainable peace, helping the groups and individuals affected and to rebuilding communities. The meaningful participation of women requires international commitments and frameworks to support it, as well as action on the ground that comes from women's groups and civil society. The EU-supported project SAWT (an acronym that sounds like the word 'voice' in Arabic), **Supporting Arab Women at the Table**, is targeting these important issues in five countries with the primary goal of increasing the meaningful inclusion of women in political and peace processes. In so doing, the project aims to increase their ability to influence the outcomes of those processes, establish post-conflict gender-egalitarian frameworks for further action, and contribute to the long-term success of post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction.

The project **Advancing Women's Participation in the Syrian Political Process** (which receives EU funding of EUR 1.33 million) continued in 2023. Similar to the **Afghan Women Leaders Forum**, it aims to strengthen women's participation in the political process by increasing local mediation and dialogue efforts.

Women's economic empowerment is also a key part of the EU's programming activities to promote reforms to policy and legal frameworks that improve women's access to the labour market and to resources and finance. Our activities also promote an environment that enables women's economic participation, including in the digital and green economy, by tackling structural barriers ranging from harmful gender norms to legal restrictions.

For instance, the EU increased funding for the **Investment Climate Reform Facility**, which works with public and private partners in African, Caribbean and Pacific countries to focus on reforms of the business environment that **support women's full participation in the economy**. To increase the impact of innovative finance on promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment, the EU aims to ensure that investments mobilised through the **European Fund for Sustainable Development** include a gender perspective.

Important sectoral programmes include the flagship Team Europe initiative, '**Investing in Young Businesses in Africa**' which empowers early-stage businesses and young entrepreneurs – especially young women – through financial and technical support. It also provides a platform for innovative finance solutions for women entrepreneurs, and the **Women Entrepreneurship for Africa programme**.

The EUR 20 million **Women Entrepreneurship for Africa programme supports women entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa** with training and access to finance together with GIZ and the Tony Elumelu Foundation. Over 2 400 women entrepreneurs have been supported with entrepreneurship training and with seed finance of USD 5 000 to get their ideas off the ground. Another 100 women entrepreneurs received additional support to accelerate and grow their business, as well as second stage financing.

Women empowerment is a priority for all programmes under NDICI-Global Europe. Under the thematic programme on human rights and democracy in particular, the EU launched 51 new projects on women and girls' empowerment.⁴⁵ Additionally, the EU, under the

45 In Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, China, Congo, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Georgia, Haiti, India, Israel, Libya, Mali, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Namibia, Nicaragua, North Macedonia, Philippines, Serbia, South Africa, Syria, Türkiye, Uganda, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe.

same programme launched 10 projects addressing violence against women Angola, Egypt, Georgia, Honduras, Indonesia, Kosovo*, Nepal, Senegal, and Tajikistan.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ advisory opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

In 2023, the EU continued to promote **gender equality and women's economic empowerment** through its trade policy for example in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), bilaterally through Free Trade Agreements and unilaterally through the Generalised Scheme of Preferences. The EU supported a project with the International Trade Centre looking into how to strengthen the application of a **gender lens to the work of the WTO**. There are dedicated trade and gender equality provisions in the EU's trade agreements with an increasing number of countries. In 2023, the EU signed FTAs with enforceable trade and gender equality provisions with Chile, Kenya and New Zealand. These include a commitment to implement effectively the relevant UN and International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions on women's economic empowerment and gender equality. Under the **EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences**, beneficiary countries need to respect the principles of core international conventions, including those promoting women's rights and gender equality.

EMPOWERING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

In 2023, significant strides were made in implementing the commitment to **fostering the participation and engagement of young people in EU external action**, as outlined in the 2021 EU youth action plan.⁴⁶ Youth sounding boards and youth advisory structures were created within EU Delegations at country level. These structures, which advise the EU on external policy and programmes, serve as vital platforms for young voices to be heard. Furthermore, the **EU Youth Empowerment Fund** was launched.

⁴⁶ Youth action plan accessible at https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/youth/youth-action-plan_en

It is a EUR 10 million pilot initiative designed in collaboration with young people for young people. This fund aims to provide **essential resources** to make it easier for young people to contribute to the sustainable development of their local communities and societies in the EU's partner countries worldwide, aligning with the objectives of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the EU's Global Gateway strategy.⁴⁷



HRVP Borrell on mission to Cuba visiting Litz Alfonso Dance School

To ensure meaningful inclusion and active participation of children and young people from diverse backgrounds, there was closer cooperation in 2023 with the newly established UN Youth Office and with Youth Delegates in partner countries. For instance, cross-regional networks of young peacebuilders were set up, creating channels for young people to influence decision-making and contribute to democratic processes in their countries. The 2023 EU-NGO Human Rights Forum, which took place in Brussels in December under the theme 'Youth as actors of change for human rights', highlighted the work of young human rights defenders, and addressed the struggles and threats they face.

⁴⁷ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-eu-ropeworld/global-gateway_en

The EU maintained its commitment to promoting and implementing the **youth, peace and security agenda** and welcomed the participation of young peace builders who have engaged in peace processes, highlighting good practices, challenges, and the impact of youth-led peacebuilding initiatives. The adoption of a new chapter in the **EU Peace Mediation Guidelines** focusing exclusively on young people highlights the complementarity between the agendas on **children and armed conflict**, on women, peace and security and on youth, peace and security.

In response to the desire expressed by children for increased involvement in democratic processes, the EU has established the EU Children's Participation Platform. This platform serves as a central hub linking various mechanisms for child participation at local, national and EU levels, facilitating their active engagement in decision-making processes within the EU.



Students from four schools of Fe y Alegria, participants of an EU-funded project, made a manifesto calling for the fulfillment of the right to education.

The issue of children's mental and physical health holds a significant place among the EU's health priorities within its global health strategy.⁴⁸ Furthermore, in June 2023, the EU outlined a comprehensive approach to addressing mental health challenges. This initiative concentrates on supporting children and young

⁴⁸ Global health strategy available at https://health.ec.europa.eu/publications/eu-global-health-strategy-better-health-all-changing-world_en

people through various activities. These include establishing a network dedicated to mental health, developing a prevention toolkit, and implementing activities to better protect children in digital environments and on social media platforms.

RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

In 2023, the EU reaffirmed its commitment to protecting the human rights of individuals with disabilities, both within its borders and globally, in line with its 2021-2030 strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities.⁴⁹ Significant progress was made in strengthening accessibility laws and standards, notably in **digital accessibility**, and in advancing labour market opportunities for individuals with disabilities, exemplified by initiatives like the **European Year of Skills 2023** and efforts to ensure equal access to sexual and reproductive rights.

In the ongoing review of the EU's adherence to the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**, the EU submitted reports on its implementation of the Convention. The EU actively engaged in the 16th session of the Conference of States Parties to the CRPD, co-sponsoring events that focused on digital accessibility and independent living.

In September 2023, the Commission proposed a new law to bolster accessibility and equal treatment for individuals with disabilities throughout the EU. This proposed directive would introduce a standard European Disability Card and an improved European Parking Card, simplifying the recognition of a person's disability status and ensuring equitable access to special conditions and preferential treatment for individuals with disabilities during short-term stays in other EU countries. In October 2023, the Commission proposed another directive to extend the benefits of these two cards

49 Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030 accessible at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8376&furtherPubs=yes>

to all non-EU nationals legally residing in the EU. These measures are expected to make it easier for individuals with disabilities to move around the EU, which will promote inclusivity and accessibility.

Furthermore, 2023 saw the continued implementation of the Disability Employment Package, designed to assist Member States in fostering social inclusion and economic autonomy for persons with disabilities through employment opportunities. Additionally, EU guidance was recommended to promote improvements in independent living and inclusion in the community.

The EU continued to **advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities** in its external actions. This included advocating for their rights in discussions with partner countries, supporting the implementation of the CRPD, and encouraging global ratification of the Convention. Through bilateral engagements and political dialogues, the EU underscored the importance of tackling discrimination and promoting equality for persons with disabilities, urging partner countries to take proactive measures to promote social inclusion, including through deinstitutionalisation and the promotion of independent living.



The EU Delegation and EU MS Embassies visited and brought materials to the Special Education Children and Youth Center 'Solidaridad con Panama' in Havana, Cuba.

This advocacy was matched by significant financial support as the EU remained a major donor in supporting and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. For instance, in 2023 the EU allocated EUR 10 million to support the design and implementation of a comprehensive childcare reform to address the challenge of de-institutionalisation of children with disabilities in Ukraine.

HUMAN RIGHTS OF OLDER PERSONS

The EU continued to promote policies tackling age discrimination in the United Nations and has been promoting a better mainstreaming of the human rights of older persons through the work of the UN. To this end, the EU actively participated in the UN Open-ended Working Group on Ageing and in identifying steps to improve the **promotion and protection of older persons' human rights and dignity**. Further, the EU is engaging with partners on the international framework for the protection and promotion of the human rights of older persons and on identifying possible gaps and how best to address them, including by considering the feasibility of further instruments and measures.

Ageing is a key challenge guiding EU social policy. Several approaches, including those harnessing digitalisation, are being pursued to improve access, affordability and quality of social services. The EU also presented the Demography Toolbox in 2023, a comprehensive set of strategies and interventions designed to address demographic challenges. It includes actions to empower older generations and improve their welfare through reforms combined with appropriate labour market and workplace policies. Work continued on the implementation of the 2022 European care strategy⁵⁰ to improve the situation of older people receiving long-term care and their carers, by boosting access to quality, affordable and accessible care services and by improving the working conditions and work-life balance for carers.

50 European care strategy accessible at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_5169



RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The EU is committed to the international recognition and advancement and recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples, as confirmed by the EU's support for the **UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**. In 2023, the EU supported the implementation of the UN Declaration at country level, through its programming activities and through its political and human rights dialogues. The EU also worked closely with the ILO on promoting the rights of indigenous peoples.

The EU took an active part in the 23rd session of the **Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues** in April 2023 under the theme 'Indigenous Peoples, human health, planetary and territorial health and climate change: a rights-based approach'. The EU also delivered a statement for the 16th session of the **Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**, which took place in July 2023.

The voices of indigenous peoples make an important contribution to EU policies and programmes. The **Summit of Barents Euro-Arctic Indigenous Sámi People** took place in the European Parliament in March 2023. It contributed to a closer dialogue between the Sámi community and the EU, and provided an opportunity to exchange



© Raitkinani/European Union

Indigenous Rights Workshop with ethnic leaders in Brus Laguna, Honduras.

knowledge and experiences of sustainable development. The summit also raised awareness among EU decision-makers about the need to include the Sámi people in EU policymaking.

In 2023, the EU took an active part in the negotiations on the UN annual resolution on the rights of indigenous peoples. On the **International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples** on 9 August the High Representative issued a Declaration on behalf of the EU highlighting in particular its efforts to promote the participation of indigenous leaders and human rights defenders, including youth, in development processes and global decision-making forums and paying a particular tribute to the voices and agency of indigenous youth while standing at the frontline of some of the most pressing crises humanity faces, such as the loss of biodiversity and climate change.

The EU continued to fund the **Indigenous Navigator tool**, an open-source, community-based data collection system and mapping tool managed by indigenous peoples for indigenous peoples. It provides timely global reports on the situation of indigenous peoples, including indigenous women, and thereby supports international advocacy.

Through its conflict analysis, the EU has on occasion examined the situation of indigenous peoples, as applicable in the particular context, to address grievances and the risks of conflicts (also in terms of socio-environmental ones, or land-related) and risks of doing harm related to the protection and fulfilment of their rights. The EU's analysis pays particular attention to inequality in indigenous peoples' access to services, in access to means of subsistence and natural resources, in relation to territorial issues and land ownership and in relation to the right to free, prior and informed consent as enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The ProtectDefenders.eu mechanism provides **significant support to defenders of the rights of indigenous peoples**, in particular by providing protection measures and emergency grants. Human rights defenders working on environmental, land and indigenous rights represent more than 25% of the beneficiaries. Seven new projects targeting specifically indigenous peoples' rights were launched in 2023 in Bolivia, Brazil, Congo, Ecuador, Guyana, Philippines and Sri Lanka.



EU Parliament President Roberta Metsola addressing the Summit of Barents Euro-Arctic Indigenous Sámi People in the European Parliament in March 2023.

1.3 Promoting fundamental freedoms and strengthening the civic and political space

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

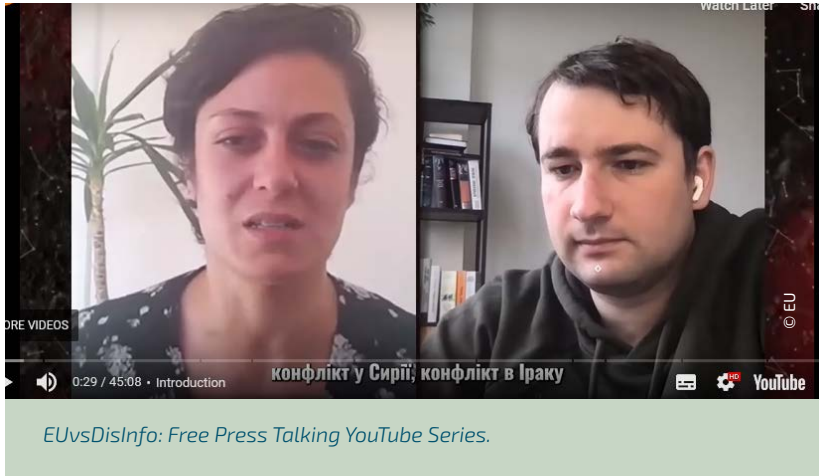
In the context of growing pressure on freedom of expression in many parts of the world, the EU maintained its commitment to actively defend this right in both multilateral forums and in bilateral relations with partner countries. Throughout the year, the EU reinforced its support for journalists and media workers, acknowledging their critical role in providing high quality and reliable information to the public, particularly in times of war and conflict as well as in times of political crises and autocratic involutions in relation to governance.

EU Delegations worldwide strengthened their diplomatic responses to attacks against the media, working closely with CSO partners on the ground. The Delegations and the EU Special Representative for Human Rights consistently raised individual cases of journalists at risk in political and human rights dialogues.

Safeguarding public access to information, promoting a non-discriminatory internet and combating internet shutdowns were also key priorities for the EU's diplomacy activities in 2023. Regular meetings and exchanges with expert organisations were instrumental in advancing these objectives.

In parallel, the European Union took decisive action within the EU to build a **media sector that is pluralistic, independent and resilient to crises**. Political agreements were reached on legislative proposals for the European **Media Freedom Act** and the directive to protect journalists and human rights activists from abusive cross-border civil proceedings, known as strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). These initiatives are likely to have an impact beyond the EU and remain an important topic in dialogues with partner countries.

In 2023, the EU launched 30 projects concerning freedom of expression under its thematic programme on human rights and democracy.⁵¹



SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

Journalists and media workers in **Afghanistan, Gaza, Ukraine and elsewhere** continued to endure significant risks in exercising their profession in 2023. Women journalists were reported in some countries as being particular vulnerable to threats and attacks, **both offline and online**. The safety and protection of journalists remained at the centre of the EU's diplomatic efforts to strengthen media freedom in 2023. Collaborative efforts with key stakeholders, such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE, UNESCO and CSOs, underscored this commitment.

The EU continued to condemn the increasing level of intimidation and violence faced by independent media in many parts of the world and called for an end to impunity for crimes committed against journalists and media workers. EU Delegations continued to give practical support to media actors at risk, including the observation of trials of detained journalists.

⁵¹ Afghanistan, Angola, Argentina, Brazil, Cambodia, Georgia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Laos, Lebanon, Montenegro, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Panama, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Somalia, South Sudan, Ukraine and Zimbabwe.

The safety of journalists, encompassing both the physical and digital aspects, continued to be a central consideration in ongoing media support actions. In Ukraine, emergency funding for media support was directed through CSOs and other trusted partners, including the European Endowment for Democracy, through projects like Emergency Support to Civil Society and Media in Response to the War and Resilient Civil Society and Media Respond to the War. The primary objective of this support is to improve access to independent and reliable media coverage of Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine. Support for independent media, focusing on their sustainability and the safety of journalists, was also extended to **Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia**, and through country allocations under the thematic programme for human rights and democracy and regional projects like EU4IndependentMedia in the Eastern Neighbourhood under NDICI-Global Europe.

Finally, the EU launched a strategic partnership aimed at protecting independent media with 3 consortia of media development organisations and civil society organisations. A resource package of EUR 20 million will be made available to build and consolidate networks, increase the resilience of journalists and media houses at risk, and provide young journalists operating in difficult conditions access to professional development and learning opportunities.



Svitlana Zalizetska, a Ukrainian journalist from Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia region, has been writing about life in her city under Russian occupation. The EU works to support press freedom and journalism.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In 2023, the EU strengthened its efforts to uphold academic freedom across the world and protect academic communities at risk. The academic community is becoming more and more under threat and academics, scholars and students from all over the world are increasingly seeking support and protection through the EU's HRDs mechanism.

As part of the EU's support to Ukraine, the EUR 25 million MSCA4Ukraine scheme under the EU's **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions** has enabled 124 displaced doctoral and postdoctoral researchers from Ukraine to pursue their research in public academic and research institutions in the EU and in other countries associated to Horizon Europe. The EU also continued to support the Global Campus' scholarship programme for Afghan scholars and students at risk. In the course of 2023, the programme supported 25 scholarship recipients in 11 host universities of the Global Campus network across the world.

During the year, the EU has continued discussing with partner countries and organisations, including in the context of human rights dialogues, issues related to academic freedom, such as threats and attacks against the academic community and the autonomy of higher education institutions, as well as initiatives to promote respect for academic freedom and to support human rights education. The EU also strengthened its action on academic freedom within UN human rights fora. All EU Member States signed the joint statement on academic freedom delivered at the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council. At the 53rd session, the EU co-sponsored, together with France, Portugal and Uruguay, the side event '*From Words to Action: Implementing Academic Freedom under UN Human Rights Standards*', which included introductory remarks by EU Special Representative for Human Rights.



From Words to Action: Implementing Academic Freedom Under UN Human Rights Standards

Side event to the 53rd session of the
Human Rights Council

11 July 2023 | 10:00–11:00 (CET)
Palais des Nations Room XXV and virtual
via Webex, [click here](#)

The event will build on the success of the Joint Statement on Academic Freedom delivered at the UN Human Rights Council Session in March this year, and signed by 74 countries, as well as recent progress in support of academic freedom, including the 2020 report on academic freedom by the UN special rapporteur on the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and UNESCO's parallel advancement of the conversation on science and scientific freedom. It is intended to concretise existing progress within the UN, as well as within regional and national systems, and at the institutional level.

Opening remarks: **Mr. Eamon Gilmore**, European Union Special Representative for Human Rights
Ms. Farida Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Education
Mr. Mikel Mancisidor, Member, UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
Mr. Jesse Levine, Senior Advocacy Officer for Scholars at Risk
Mr. Hector Ulloa, President (outgoing), Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH)
Closing remarks: **Ambassador Álvaro Moerzinger Pagani**, Permanent Representative of Uruguay






Event organised in the margins of the 53rd Human Rights Council on academic freedom.

The EU-funded project **Inspireurope+** supports organisations working with scholars at risk. It builds on its successes of a previous project and continues to facilitate transnational cooperation in support of researchers at risk across Europe and beyond, through the regular sharing of expertise and good practices, and training and guidance for researchers.

1.4 Reinforcing Economic, Social, Cultural and Labour Rights

The EU continued to deliver on its commitment to promote economic, social and cultural rights through public diplomacy and by engaging in multilateral human rights fora and human rights dialogues, and to provide support to partner countries to respect, protect and fulfil these rights through development cooperation.

At the multilateral level, the EU and Member States successfully supported initiatives promoting economic, social and cultural rights in the Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly Third Committee. During the Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2023, the EU supported 16 resolutions on economic, social and cultural rights co-sponsored by all or a majority of EU Member States. The EU has continued its efforts to build bridges to other groups and countries in the HRC, namely on issues related to economic and social rights, underlining shared concerns to advance the respect for human rights through international cooperation, despite differences that might persist on other questions.

The EU also remains a staunch advocate of economic, social and cultural rights in the context of multilateral initiatives such as the current preparations for the Summit of the Future, which will take place in September 2024, and the ongoing preparatory work for a potential World Social Summit to be held in 2025. The EU's contribution is guided by the principle that all human rights are interlinked and indivisible.

The EU has put education at the heart of the **post-pandemic recovery**, almost doubling its global spending on education to over EUR 6 billion for 2021-2027. At least 10% of its international partnerships budget for Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia and the Pacific, and 10% of its humanitarian aid budget,

will go towards education. Together with the EU Member States, in a Team Europe approach, the EU provides over half of the official development assistance to education worldwide.

The EU continued to prioritise '**education in emergencies**'. The EU spent over EUR 1 billion on education in emergencies between 2015 and 2023. For 2024 alone, the EU has set earmarked EUR 157 million to support learning for children and young people caught in humanitarian emergencies. Over 21 million girls and boys affected by crises in **63 different countries worldwide** benefited from EU-funded educational projects between 2015 and 2023.



Provided with all the needed education material thanks to the project, children in a rehabilitated school are checking out their new books in Syria.

The EU supports a variety of actions under the education in emergencies policy, with over half of them promoting education for girls. EU funding supports partner countries in their efforts to fulfil their obligations to ensure the right to education for all. Following a human rights-based approach, the EU pays particular attention

to ensuring that education is accessible to people from all parts of society, in particular the poorest and most marginalised, and that access is not discriminatory on any grounds.

The EU human rights guidelines on safe **drinking water and sanitation** continued to be a reference framework and working tool for the EU to advance the right to safe water around the world, by raising awareness and promoting action in multilateral, and through its development cooperation and humanitarian action. In March 2023, the EU signed a contract with UNICEF and Sanitation and Water for All 'beyond pipes and toilets: promoting the human rights to water and sanitation through advocacy, coordination, and accountability'.



About 110 family members in the municipality of Longonjo, commune of Lepi, benefit from access to potable water through an EU-funded project in Luvemba Commune, Candemba village, Angola.

In the run up and during the **UN Water Conference** of March 2023, the EU engaged actively to ensure that equity and non-discrimination in the access to water and sanitation, in particular for vulnerable populations, would feature prominently during the discussions. References to the right to water were figuring prominently in EU

statements during the conference, and notably in the opening of the HRVP⁵² on World Water Day. The EU continues to support the appointment of a UN Special Envoy on Water.

The EU also delivered statements to promote the right to water and sanitation at the yearly UN High Level Forum on progress in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation. **The EU underlined the central role of water in the context of climate change mitigation, impact and adaptation.** The agreed framework for the Global Goal on Adaptation calls for swift action on a large scale and at all levels to significantly reduce climate-related water scarcity, strengthen resilience to water-related hazards, and ensure a climate-resilient water supply.

In 2023, the EU further developed the **Global Gateway** strategy⁵³ with the aim of significantly upscaling investments in partner countries. During the UN 2023 Conference, the EU committed to support the access of **70 million people** to an improved drinking water source and/or sanitation facility by 2030.

CULTURAL RIGHTS

The EU continued to promote respect for **cultural rights**, which ensure the expression of cultural diversity and identity, in particular through EU statements in multilateral fora through public diplomacy and by promoting the preservation of cultural heritage. The EU's own motto, '**Unity in Diversity**', sends a strong message to protect everybody's cultural rights, including people who belong to minorities and indigenous peoples. EU Delegations remain a strong asset for EU's external relations regarding culture. The Delegations implement not only cultural diplomacy activities, aimed

52 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/world-water-day-joint-statement-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-and-commissioner_en

53 [Global Gateway strategy available at https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en)

at showcasing the diversity of the culture within the EU, but also cultural relations activities, aimed at strengthening partnerships with stakeholders and supporting cultural diversity in EU's partner countries. For example, **European film festivals** engage with different audiences worldwide to bridge cultural gaps, to foster creativity, to identify commonalities and promote the diversity of European cinema and cultural production in partner countries. The **EU-UNESCO Expert Facility** provides support to partner countries to improve the design and development of cultural policies. Its approach is mainly based on the **2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression**, which calls for attention to the special circumstances and needs of various social groups, including people belonging to minorities and indigenous peoples. The European Spaces of Culture is an excellent example of how EU's international cultural relations embody the EU values of human rights and democracy. The network of the EU National Institutes for Culture, European Spaces of Culture has supported so



© EU

Women association Raiz de Cultura performs Batuque during the inauguration of a cultural space in the locality of Porto Mosquito, Cape Verde. The association received a direct grant for disseminating their activities under EU Regional programme PROCULTURA.

far the implementation of 33 initiatives in more than 40 countries, involving more than 350 partners: local cultural actors, national cultural institutes and EU Delegations.



One of these projects was the first edition of the International Community Film Festival in Colombia, which took place in Tierra Grata, the first community where FARC ex-combatants laid down the arms and became "the first city of peace." In this place where cultural opportunities were limited or non-existent, the festival aimed to become a reference for cultural initiatives for peace processes not only for the local population, but also for the guests from more than 37 countries amid their own peace processes. The festival featured community films from around the world that give voice to marginalised communities affected by various forms of violence. Behind the scenes of the shooting of documentary series "Somos Historias", premiered at the Film Festival. "Somos Historias" is directed by Chaiñakova Productions, a local community film house, and produced by Historias en Kilómetros in Colombia.

LABOUR RIGHTS

The EU continued to implement the **Decent Work Worldwide**⁵⁴ initiative in 2023 ensuring the EU's commitment to championing decent work both in the EU and around the world. The EU promotes decent work across all sectors and policy areas, in line with a comprehensive approach that addresses workers in domestic markets in non-EU countries and in global supply chains. The main lines of engagement are: (i) in multilateral fora (ii) legislation to ensure the respect of labour standards in supply chains; (iii) EU trade policy; (iv) bilateral and regional dialogues; and (v) development projects.

'Doing business around the world, global trade – all that is good and necessary. But this can never be done at the expense of people's dignity and freedom. [...] Human rights are not for sale – at any price'. *Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, President of the European Commission, State of the Union address, 15 September 2021*

At the **multilateral level**, the EU continued to contribute to setting and guaranteeing labour standards through the ILO. The EU works actively to improve international standards and protect the ILO's supervisory system, which ensures that the application of labour standards is monitored independently. At the **2023 International Labour Conference**, the EU supported the negotiations and actively contributed to a new ILO Recommendation on Quality Apprenticeships (No. 208). The EU also endorsed the new Global Coalition for Social Justice and will actively participate in the coalition in the future.

The EU joined Alliance 8.7 in 2023, a global partnership to eradicate forced labour, modern slavery, trafficking in human beings and child labour, in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goal Target 8.7. The EU also works in the G7 and G20 to eradicate child labour and forced labour in global supply chains. Within the Organisation

⁵⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2022:66:FIN>

of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the EU supports the promotion and implementation of international standards on responsible business conduct to facilitate business' contribution to decent work. The Commission also signed a partnership agreement with the International Trade Union Confederation.



© ILO/Mongkon Duangkiew

A coffee farmer in Salavan Province in Laos, who is one of the beneficiaries from the European Union funded SOLAR project. This action is implemented by the International Labour Organization and Oxfam to promote labour rights and improve access to social protection coverage and occupational safety and health for coffee and tea sectors workers.

The EU made progress on two **legislative initiatives** in the past year, which are expected to make a significant contribution to improving the respect of labour standards worldwide. The Directive on **Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence**, once it enters into force, will lay down rules on obligations as well as penalties for large companies regarding actual and potential adverse impacts on human rights, including labour rights, in their supply chains. Secondly, significant work was completed on the proposed regulation to prohibit products made with forced labour on the EU's single market. Updates on EU trade policy instruments can be found under section 'bilateral cooperation- trade instruments'.

The European Commission promoted international labour rights in its **bilateral dialogues** with non-EU countries and partners in 2023, including dedicated labour rights dialogues with the Canada, China,

Japan, Taiwan, Thailand and United States. Regional dialogues are also held with organisations such as the Union for the Mediterranean and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The EU further promoted the principles of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** in candidate countries. In June 2023, Moldova signed a declaration on its adhesion to the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Furthermore, the Commission funded multi-stakeholder processes, such as the **Global Deal Initiative**, to develop, implement and strengthen international labour standards. As part of the initiative, in 2023 events to promote social dialogue were held in **Kenya** and **Sri Lanka**.

To promote decent work in supply chains, the EU is implementing **projects** such as 'Sustainable Supply Chains to Build Forward Better', which uses supply chains to advance decent work in five sectors in five countries: coffee in **Colombia**, textiles and clothing in **Madagascar**, rubber gloves in **Malaysia**, fisheries in **Namibia** and electronics in **Vietnam**.

THE RIGHT TO THE HIGHEST ATTAINABLE STANDARD OF HEALTH

As provided for in the **EU global health strategy**⁵⁵ of November 2022, the EU has been promoting a **global health agenda** as an essential pillar of its external foreign policy throughout 2023. This includes strengthening health systems as well preventing and combatting health threats, including pandemics. The EU and its Member States are also the largest contributor to the Pandemic Fund to prevent and prepare for potential pandemics in the countries that need this most. The EU's engagement in health also focuses on advancing universal health coverage to ensure that everyone has access to good quality health services without financial hardship. The EU is providing **EUR 6**

55 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7153

billion in funding under 126 health-related cooperation programmes **to strengthen health systems and immunisation capacities worldwide.**

The EU's humanitarian health assistance seeks to limit excess preventable mortality, permanent disability, and disease associated with humanitarian crises. Following the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, the fundamental human right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health is at the core of the EU's humanitarian operations, no matter the difficulty of the emergency context. In 2023, the EU provided funding of **EUR 334 million for humanitarian health interventions**, including for primary and secondary healthcare, medical supplies, and sexual and reproductive health.

1.5 Supporting the rule of law and the fair administration of justice

HUMAN RIGHTS AND COUNTERTERRORISM

Terrorist threats are diverse and geographically diffuse. These threats are significant, complex and unpredictable, and the challenges that demand action by the EU and its partners are numerous. Emerging technologies, increasingly aggressive online terrorist propaganda, and politically-motivated terrorism are leading to **new challenges.**

To effectively counter and prevent the threat of terrorism and violent extremism, the EU takes a whole-of-society approach.

This approach envisions a strong role for civil society and other non-governmental actors in ensuring effective prevention efforts that are based on human rights and respect for the rule of law. In 2023, the EU continued to provide counterterrorism support to its key partners, guided by the EU Strategic Compass for Security and

Defence, the Counter Terrorism Agenda for the EU and by the need to address the external dimension of a constantly evolving threat of terrorism and violent extremism.

The EU action plan on human rights reaffirms the EU's commitment to consistently promote human rights in its counterterrorism efforts. This means that the EU will respond to situations where such measures threaten the civic space or there is a misuse of emergency or exceptional powers and procedures to curtail the exercise of other human rights. Through regular political dialogues with partners on counterterrorism, and through multilateral cooperation, the EU systematically encourages partners to strengthen their capacity to prevent and respond effectively to radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism, while respecting their human rights obligations. **The EU highlights the essential role of civil society in prevention and deradicalisation, hence the need to have regular consultation.** All counterterrorism projects with partner countries promote a criminal justice approach anchored in human rights.

In all dialogues and consultations with partner countries, as well as with international and regional organisations and initiatives and other multilateral platforms, the EU speaks for the integration of human rights and rule of law principles into counter-terrorism policies by, for example, developing an evidence-based criminal justice system. Similarly, as part of its work to counter the financing of terrorism, the EU has sought to safeguard civic space and civil society organisations in its support for partners' efforts to comply with the standards set by the **Financial Action Task Force** to combat money laundering and the financing of terrorism.

The EU radicalisation awareness network for practitioners connects frontline practitioners (youth workers, educators, police officers, prison staff, mental health experts, local authorities) across Europe with one another, to exchange knowledge and approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism in all its forms. Additionally, the network works on policy support bridging the

gap between policymaking and research supporting EU Member States and priority third countries in the prevention and countering of radicalisation, strategic communications, and evidence-based policymaking, through knowledge-sharing and capacity-building. In 2023, the work focused on the risk of online radicalisation (particularly for minors), the link between mental health and security issues and promoting a gendered approach to the prevention of radicalisation.

The EU is committed to **multilateral cooperation** in addressing the global threat of terrorism, in full compliance with the rule of law and international law, including human rights law. As part of this work, the EU is an active member of the **Global Counterterrorism Forum** and, since September 2022, has served as its co-chair together with Egypt. The EU's overarching priorities as co-chair of the forum are to address the terrorist threat in Africa and reinforce education and gender as key aspects of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism policies. The EU has also put oversight and accountability of counterterrorism operations at the centre of the Forum's agenda.

In 2023, the EU continued funding programmes such as the 'Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism Programme' (STRIVE Global) which was renewed for another 3 years. The overall purpose of this programme is to build the capacity of state and non-state actors to effectively challenge radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism, while continuing to uphold human rights and international law.



High Representative Borrell at the Global Counterterrorism Ministerial Forum September, 2023.

THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT

The EU continued to participate in the global fight against impunity, to ensure accountability for the most serious crimes under international law, and to help to provide justice and redress for the victims of atrocities. In that context, the EU provided political, diplomatic and financial support to the International Criminal Court (ICC)⁵⁶.

The EU also supported other international criminal tribunals and ad hoc national tribunals, as well as **truth and reconciliation commissions and redress mechanisms to protect the rights of victims to justice and reparation**. EU action in support of the ICC focused on helping the Court to counter external attacks and disinformation campaigns, in particular following Russia's decision to issue arrest warrants against the ICC Prosecutor and judges involved in examining potential war crimes in Ukraine, through EU statements, demarches and interventions in support of the Court's independence and integrity.

The EU continued to promote **the universality of the Rome Statute** of the ICC through its annual demarche campaign to groups of target countries, encouraging them to ratify or accede to the Rome Statute.

Throughout the year, the EUSR for Human Rights continued supporting the work of the ICC, and promoting the widest possible participation in the Rome Statute. The EUSR repeatedly underlined the EU's unwavering support to bringing the perpetrators of war crimes and other violations of IHL and human rights to justice, and emphasised the EU's steadfast commitment to support the effective functioning of the ICC. At the European Humanitarian Forum in March 2023, the EUSR spoke about the need to step up our commitment to ensure respect for international humanitarian law, the need for accountability and support to the ICC.

⁵⁶ In accordance with Council Decision 2011/168/CFSP and the 2011 action plan on its implementation, as well as part of the implementation of the 2006 Agreement between the ICC and the EU on cooperation and assistance.

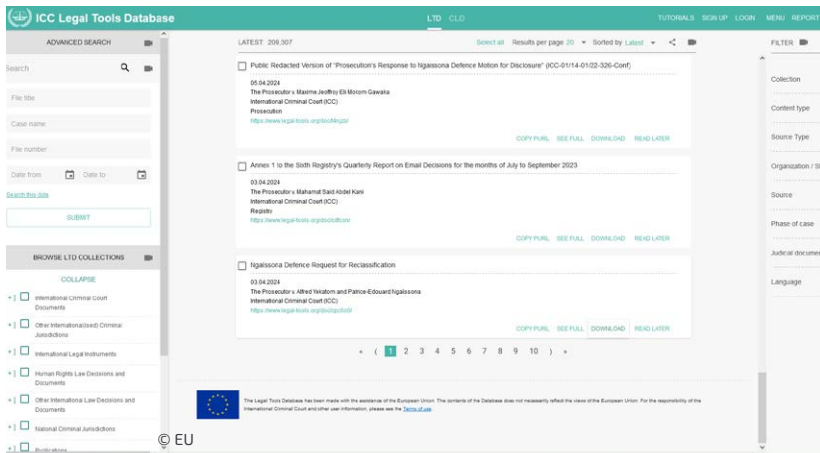
In 2023, the EU joined the celebrations marking the 25th anniversary of the Rome Statute. Events and activities throughout the year highlighted the role of the ICC in efforts to promote peace and security internationally. The issue of support for the ICC, including by ratifying of the Rome Statute, was highlighted in relevant EU human rights dialogues and consultations with partner countries.

Since the beginning of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, there has been increased support for international criminal justice and the ICC. In that context, EU cooperation with the ICC has been considerably enhanced. The ICC has joined the **Joint Investigation Team**, coordinated by Eurojust, which supports the exchange of information and evidence and facilitates investigations into (war) crimes committed in Ukraine. It has also joined the Dialogue Group on Accountability for Ukraine, a platform for dialogue, exchange and coordination between accountability actors.

The EU continued to support the global fight against impunity for the most serious crimes under international law through the funding of a long-standing project at the ICC that aims to increase global knowledge of the Rome Statute and promote its ratification, enhance state cooperation with the ICC, and strengthen national capacities to deal with Rome Statute crimes through, among other activities, the organisation of seminars, trainings and high-level conferences.

The EU's support of the ICC is part of wider EU efforts to ensure that perpetrators of the most serious crimes under international law are held accountable for their actions. In line with the principle of complementarity, the EU provided support for the criminal justice systems of several countries including **Ethiopia, The Gambia, Georgia, Guinea, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria and Rwanda**. The EU has continued to offer technical assistance to countries that required it for domestic implementation of the Rome Statute.

The EU continued to support a number of other international criminal tribunals, hybrid tribunals, and residual mechanisms, including the **Special Criminal Court in the Central African Republic, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and the international Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals**), which is mandated to perform a number of essential functions previously carried out by the **International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia**.



The EU also funds the maintenance and development of the **ICC Legal Tools Database**, a leading digital public resource on international criminal law, which provides free public access to over 200 000 documents related to international crimes and international criminal procedures. The database contains ICC jurisprudence and legal analysis; jurisprudence of other international criminal tribunals; documents related to legislation and prosecution of international crimes in national criminal jurisdictions; and other international criminal law sources. It is available in five languages and receives an average of over 33 million hits and 1.5 million unique visitors yearly (including practitioners, academics and the general public). In 2023, the Database was awarded the 2023 Jus Gentium Research Award for its contributions toward improving open access to legal information resources in international law.

1.6 Closing the accountability gap, fighting impunity and supporting transitional justice

The EU's priorities include closing the accountability gap, fighting impunity and supporting transitional justice. The EU and is committed to supporting initiatives and transitional justice processes to fight the impunity of human rights violations. This includes raising the topic with non-EU countries, in bilateral dialogues and with regional organisations, such as the African Union.

In **Ethiopia**, the EU, accompanied by technical experts on transitional justice, participated in the international Consultative Meeting on Policy Options for Transitional Justice in Ethiopia, co-organised by the African Union and the Ministry of Justice of Ethiopia. As part of the EU's cooperation priorities for Ethiopia, EUR 650 million was allocated to advance Ethiopia's development in a transformative, inclusive and forward-looking manner, for economic and democratic governance, and for peacebuilding. There is also a EUR 47 million programme to strengthen democratic institutions, transitional justice, gender equality and social cohesion. This programme will contribute to the implementation of a comprehensive national transitional justice policy with a focus on accountability.

To uphold its commitment to fight against impunity for serious human rights violations worldwide, the EU agreed to fund a new EUR 20 million project, the '**Global initiative to fight against impunity for international crimes**'. It supports the contribution of civil society to fighting impunity for the most serious crimes. This will complement EU support to the independent accountability mechanisms established by the Human Rights Council and under international criminal law.



The EU is supporting the transitional justice process in The Gambia. Transitional justice is one of the major reforms necessary to successfully consolidate Gambian democracy, along with turning the recommendations issued by the Truth Reconciliation and Reparation Commission into concrete actions. In 2023, the EU and The Gambia signed a budget support contract for EUR 40 million in funding for resilience building, with a particular focus on transitional justice. Additionally, the EU launched the project 'The Gambia's Responsive and Accountable Democratic Transition' in May. This initiative aims to support The Gambia's democratic transition through constitutional and legislative reforms, transitional justice and stronger local governance structures.

As in previous years, the EU continued to be a strong supporter of the **Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and atrocity prevention** both politically and practically, and through its programmes of assistance. The EU has promoted R2P through a wide range of tools, linking strategic foresight with conflict and atrocity prevention such as the EU's Atrocity Prevention Toolkit, the EU conflict early warning system and an internal horizon scanning exercise to flag heightened risks of violence and conflict as well as of mass atrocity.

The EU continued to be an active member of the Group of Friends of the R2P within the UN system. In June 2023, at the annual UN General Assembly Debate on R2P and the 'prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity', the EU

delivered a statement highlighting the importance of prevention and response to conflict and conflict risks, and that it is the responsibility of the Security Council to act in situations of mass atrocities.



In Albania, the EU supports transitional justice initiatives on dealing with the communist past and atrocities of the system that is vital for democratic and prosperous society building. This included installation of the memorial at the former Tepelena internment camp to honour victims of communism. In June 2023, the EU Ambassador Christiane Hohmann visited the site.

In Colombia, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission published its final report in June 2022. The EU supported the dissemination of the report during 2023. Furthermore, the EU Facility on Justice in Conflict and Transition supported the follow-up to the work of the Colombian Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition Commission in two specific aspects: (i) technical support for the transfer of the digital and physical records and archives from the custody of the Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition Commission to the special jurisdiction for peace and the national archives; and (ii) additional methodological support to the Committee for Monitoring, Follow-up and Dissemination (Comité de Monitoreo, Seguimiento y Divulgación).

The EU and the African Union have an active cooperation on **transitional justice**. In 2023, the EU launched the “Initiative for Transitional Justice in Africa” in support of the AU’s transitional justice Policy (AUTJP). The EUR 5 million programme aims to support

the implementation of the AUTJP through technical assistance to AU Member States, knowledge management, and support to civil society and victims' groups. It has a strong focus on empowering women to actively participate in transitional justice processes, fostering redress for victims and preventing future conflicts and abuses, ultimately promoting peaceful, just, and accountable societies throughout Africa. The project's objectives include strengthening relevant AU bodies and member states in implementing the programme, generating knowledge on African transitional justice experiences, and promoting these mechanisms while ensuring broad consultations with affected societies, particularly women and youth.

The fight against impunity and support to transitional justice processes have been a significant feature of the EUSR's work. In his visits to countries transitioning from or still affected by armed conflicts, the EUSR emphasised the EU stance for accountability and against impunity. He consistently inquired about national accountability efforts.

In March 2023, the EUSR conducted a three-day mission to the Philippines. The EUSR inquired about the government's efforts to ensure accountability for extrajudicial killings in the "war on drugs" and about the country's new approach to tackle illegal drugs. Across his engagements, the EUSR underlined the need for the country to take concrete steps ahead of the renewal of the EU "Generalised Scheme of Preferences plus" (GSP+)⁵⁷, in particular in ensuring **accountability for enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings**, addressing "red-tagging", and resolving emblematic individual cases. Taking note of the President's decision to disengage from pending International Criminal Court (ICC) proceedings, the EUSR called on the Philippine government to redouble its **domestic accountability efforts**, to address the expectations of both families of victims and the international community.

57 Since 25 December 2014, the Philippines enjoys enhanced trade preferences with the EU under the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences plus (GSP+). Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 1386/2014 of 19 August 2014 (OJ L 369, 24.12.2014, p. 33).



EUSR Gilmore with Fr Flavie in the Paghilom Centre in Caloocan city, the Philippines where he met families of victims to extra-judicial killings.

The EUSR conducted a three-day visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories in June 2023. With Israeli authorities, the EUSR raised issues related to the occupied Palestinian territories, such as illegal settlement expansion, demolitions and evictions, the extensive use of administrative detention, settler violence and the general lack of accountability. The EUSR inquired about ongoing **investigations** into settler violence instances, in order to promote **accountability**.

The EUSR continued to “double hat” as EU Special Envoy for the peace process in Colombia. He maintained sustained engagement and regular contact at political level and visited the country twice. His engagement formed an essential part of the EU's support to the transitional justice process in Colombia.

02. BUILDING RESILIENT, INCLUSIVE AND DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

A global trend of democratic backsliding persists. The 2023 reports of our partners⁵⁸, International IDEA and V-Dem, reveal a sixth consecutive year of 'net decline' worldwide. The number of countries undergoing democratisation has fallen to 18, the lowest in 50 years. This shift rolls back decades of democratic progress, approaching the same level of global democracy as in 1985. In response to this challenging context, the EU remained committed to defending democracy,⁵⁹ particularly by supporting young people and civil society, recognising their crucial role in safeguarding the principles of democracy.

2.1 Democratic, accountable and transparent institutions

STRENGTHENING PARLIAMENTARY CAPABILITIES FOR EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

In 2023, the EU extended the Inter Pares project within the framework of the **Women and Youth in Democracy Initiative (WYDI)** into a second phase with a stronger focus on young people and women. This phase is providing support to the parliaments of **Botswana, Ukraine and Uruguay**, and is conducting key activities in **Malawi**. Partnerships with **Ivory Coast** and **Guinea Bissau** are ongoing, while a new partnership with **Zambia** is being developed. Inter Pares promotes parliamentary democracy through **peer-to-peer** engagement and a **Team Europe approach**, facilitating exchanges with the parliaments of EU Member States. It follows a demand-driven process whereby beneficiary parliaments identify and articulate their

58 <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-democracy-2023-new-checks-and-balances>; https://v-dem.net/documents/44/v-dem_dr2024_highres.pdf

59 On 12 December 2023 the European Commission adopted a [Defence of Democracy package](#) ahead of the 2024 European elections. It builds on previous Commission initiatives to safeguard European democracy, including the European Democracy Action Plan.

needs. This approach created opportunities in 2023 to improve the inclusion of women and young people in democratic processes and implement democratic reforms.

“ —

The training allowed us to understand the dynamics of the functioning of the Assembly of the Republic in several aspects. First, regarding how the legislative process works, starting with drafting legislation, its debate, approval and monitoring. We also learned about oversight of government activity, especially regarding how standing committees process petitions, and how committees prepare technical and admissibility reports for petitions and draft legislation, how the plenary functions and more. Basically, this internship will prove very useful if the future management of the ANP is available to implement the various reforms that the technical staff will suggest as a result of this training. — ”

© Inter Pares

Guinea Bissau Training Participant - Exit Questionnaire

Inter Pares partnership with Guinea Bissau and the National Assembly of Portugal

In the pursuit of shared goals in 2023, the collaboration between the Assembleia Nacional Popular of Guinea Bissau and the National Assembly of Portugal focused on two key priorities:

1. Parliamentary scrutiny and oversight of government policies
2. Improving the quality of constitutional revisions

The training initiative comprised of a comprehensive one-week session on legislative drafting and amendments for all participants, and a tailor-made internship, with staff from the Assembleia da República committees department. This initiative helped to develop expertise, improve proficiency in legislative matters and broaden the spectrum of knowledge-sharing between parliamentary colleagues.

OBSERVING ELECTORAL PROCESSES TO STRENGTHEN AND DEEPEN DEMOCRATISATION

EU election observation remains a crucial tool for reinforcing democratic governance, promoting human rights, and upholding the rule of law. However, electoral observation activities encounter growing challenges, reflecting the broader trend of attacks on democratic values and institutions. Obtaining invitations for international observation tends to become more difficult and the deployment of international observers faces additional obstacles, such as intensifying disinformation and defamation campaigns attempting to undermine the legitimacy of the findings of the EU's election observation missions (EOMs). In this evolving landscape, it is crucial to recognise the important role that EU EOMs play in safeguarding the integrity of democratic processes, despite the growing complexities they face. The presidential election in **Guatemala** in 2023 underscored the role that election observation can play in supporting credible electoral processes and in countering attacks on their legitimate results, which threaten democracy.



Defending democratic outcomes in Guatemala

The EU election observation mission to the 2023 general election in Guatemala is a vivid example of the key role that the EU plays in supporting democratic processes around the world. The EOM was deployed for almost 4 months and it found that the electoral process had been conducted in a highly professional manner with no evidence of fraud. However, the elections took place in a highly polarised environment and were subject to extensive judicialisation and abuse of legal proceedings, especially by some political parties unsatisfied with the electoral results. The presence of the EU EOM and its active rebuttal of fraud allegations was critical to ensuring that the politically motivated legal proceedings directed by the prosecutor's office did not derail the swearing-in of president-elect Bernardo Arévalo. The determinant role of the EU EOM has been recognised by a wide variety of actors from Human Rights Watch to the Wilson Centre, which awarded the EOM the Woodrow Wilson Award for Public Service in recognition of the important role it played in the defence of democracy.

In 2023, the EU deployed **15 electoral missions:**

Election observation missions were deployed in Guatemala, Liberia, Maldives, Nigeria, Paraguay, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe.

Election expert missions were deployed in Madagascar, Guinea Bissau, Ecuador and Timor Leste as well as a re-reinforced election expert mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Election follow-up missions were deployed in Ghana, Guyana and Honduras.

EU EOM in Liberia: consolidating democracy through peaceful transitions

General elections and two rounds of Presidential elections took place in October and November 2023, resulting in a peaceful transition of power. This process has been efficiently supervised by the National Elections Commission (NEC), contributing to a predominantly peaceful environment. The strengthening of the democratic process will continue, and the recommendations made by the EOM aim to support this process. The recommendations include: (i) further decentralisation of the voter registration process and an increase in the number of voter registration centres; (ii) adoption of temporary special measures to achieve gender equality in the legislature; (iii) empowerment of the NEC by giving it more resources and the capacity to enforce campaign finance regulations. The NEC expressed its commitment to use the recommendations to inform and improve upcoming electoral processes.

In 2023, EU EOMs started to take a more systematic approach to assessing the **participation of young people** in electoral processes. Whilst youth participation was already included in EOMs as a mainstream issue, a study was undertaken to identify key areas for a more thorough assessment that would be grounded in the international and regional standards for election observation. Based

on this study, particular attention was paid to the participation of young people in the EU EOMs in **Nigeria, Paraguay and Sierra Leone**, all of which dedicated separate chapters to young people in their final reports.



© Enrico Sborgi

Voters checking the voter roll to see if they are registered to vote in general elections of 24th June 2023. Freetown, Sierra Leone. The EU has supported with various projects an inclusive and peaceful electoral process.

PROVIDING ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE IN PARTNER COUNTRIES

The independence and professionalism of election management bodies are a crucial factor in transparent and credible election processes. In 2023, the EU supported **electoral management bodies** in many partner countries, including **Ethiopia, Guatemala, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Peru, São Tomé and Príncipe and Sierra Leone**. Election support projects provide capacity-building to electoral management bodies in specific fields.

Civil society monitoring of electoral processes is crucial for credibility and transparency. It complements the efforts of international observers by monitoring the process over an extended period and in

multiple locations, including as regards voter registration, boundary delimitation and party primaries. Citizen observers start collecting and analysing information before the international missions arrive, and often have a larger presence and access to areas where international observers may face limitations. After the departure of international missions, they play a vital role in advocating for electoral reforms based on their recommendations and those of international missions such as the EU EOMs. However, citizen observers are often confronted with challenges. In **Sierra Leone**, five members of the National Election Watch had to leave the country due to threats of arrest following their assessment of the accuracy of official results. In **Zimbabwe**, on election day (23 August 2023), more than 40 citizen observers were arbitrarily arrested and detained. Based on the findings of the EU EOM assessment, which noted that the electoral process was marked by fundamental restrictions on human rights and freedoms, including a crackdown on civil society and the targeting of human rights defenders in the post-election period, the EU voiced serious concerns and suspended funding to institutions responsible for the process. To counter democratic backsliding and support the integrity of elections, financial support to citizen observers is essential to ensure that they can continue to carry out their activities.

In 2023 a meta-evaluation was carried out on more than 20 EU-financed projects supporting citizen observers. The main citizen election observer project took place in **Democratic Republic of the Congo** with the EU and Germany co-funding the coalition of 6 national observation missions. The coalition benefited from the technical expertise brought by Democracy Reporting International. Other citizen election observer organisations were supported in **Central African Republic** by the Réseau Arc en Ciel, in **Mali** by MODELE, in **Liberia** by LEON (Liberian election observer network), and in **Ivory Coast** through INDIGO.

EMPOWERING CIVIL SOCIETY: FOSTERING ACCOUNTABILITY NETWORKS

In **countries undergoing transition**, such as Guinea, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mali, the EU supported initiatives to involve **civil society organisations** in inclusive national dialogues.

In 2023, the EUR 5 million global action SANCUS: **Strengthening Accountability Networks among Civil Society** contributed to democratic accountability processes in 26 countries with expertise and civil society-led initiatives.

Initiatives included the development and application of assessment tools on **parliamentary oversight** and **public participation in budget processes** as well as of a resource kit for civil society to promote the independence of **supreme audit institutions**, the latter jointly with the **INTOSAI Development Initiative**.⁶⁰ These tools enabled civil society in the targeted countries to build working relationships and trust with state institutions and fostered the adoption of legislative, procedural and policy initiatives for more institutional transparency, participation, oversight, accountability and integrity mechanisms.

Concrete achievements can be highlighted in several countries, for example **The Gambia**, where following Transparency International's advocacy and engagement with parliamentarians on their oversight role, a legislative amendment to the constitution was adopted to allow more time for the National Assembly to debate and adopt the national budget. In addition, the government simplified budgetary and audit reports so that citizens could understand them more easily.

Country-specific initiatives include those carried out to **increase the transparency and accountability of the judiciary in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Indonesia**. In **Chile**, a study on young people's perceptions of corruption in the country contributed to the development of the national anti-corruption policy. In **Rwanda**,

⁶⁰ The INTOSAI Development Initiative is a not-for profit, autonomous implementing body. It is mandated to support supreme audit institutions in developing countries to sustainably improve their performance and capacity (<https://www.idi.no/who-we-are-about/about-idi>).

an agreement between Transparency International and local government districts now allows civil society organisations to monitor the public procurement process for infrastructure projects.

ENHANCING IMPACT: COLLABORATIVE DEMOCRACY SUPPORT WITH TEAM EUROPE DEMOCRACY

The **Team Europe Democracy (TED) global initiative** improves coordination between the EU and its Member States, thus helping to boost the impact of the EU's democracy support in the fields of **accountability and rule of law, political and civic participation, and media and digital**. In 2023, activities started including the setting-up of a network of democracy practitioners who can capitalise on the knowledge and experience of around 70 organisations and 14 EU Member States. Furthermore, experts were deployed in several non-EU countries to support coordination activities in a Team Europe approach.

In **Colombia**, experts were deployed to provide an update on progress in putting the recommendations of the 2022 EU EOM into practice. In **Mongolia**, experts supported the design of a project on the effective implementation of justice reforms that will leverage the experience of the EU and its Member states through a twinning project with the justice sector. In Jordan, experts supported the preparation of the mapping of the EU and Member States actions in the areas of civic engagement and media support.

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW: ACCOMPANYING PROGRESS IN THE ENLARGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD REGIONS

Through financial assistance across the **enlargement and neighbourhood regions**, the EU ensured continuity for reforms aimed at strengthening democracy, preventing and tackling corruption, and reinforcing the protection of human rights. In 2023, the EU deepened

its partnership with the **Council of Europe** in these areas. It also supported the work of the Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (the Venice Commission), empowering the institution to respond to a growing number of requests for legal opinions, which have been crucial to guide reforms in partner countries and alignment with European and international standards. This support is channelled by the EU mainly through the **Horizontal Facility with the Council of Europe for the Western Balkans and Türkiye**, as well as through the **Partnership for Good Governance** in the **Eastern Partnership countries of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine**. With a total budget of EUR 41 million and 43 regional and country-specific actions, the Horizontal Facility aims at improving the capacities of the Western Balkan countries and Türkiye to uphold the rule of law, fight discrimination and corruption, and ensure the protection of fundamental rights and freedom of expression.

Since 2014, the Partnership for Good Governance has supported the implementation of the Eastern Partnership countries' domestic reforms in the fields of the judiciary, the fight against corruption and money laundering, and combating discrimination and violence against women. In 2023, this work continued with the launch of phase III of the Partnership for Good Governance. In April 2023 the EU launched the **Governance Progress Board** for the Eastern Partnership countries to improve the monitoring of good governance and rule of law reforms. By December 2023, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova had made use of the **quick response mechanism** developed within the project to send 10 requests for opinion to the Venice Commission.

Throughout 2023, the EU continued to cooperate with the **OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights** in support of **electoral reforms** in the **Western Balkans**, in line with international recommendations and in close coordination with local stakeholders, including civil society. In 2023, the EU supported several electoral reform processes in the Western Balkans, such as the adoption of

the new law on general elections **Kosovo***, the work of the electoral reform working group in **Serbia**, and a new code of conduct for online campaigning and online media coverage of elections in **North Macedonia**.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

2.2 Promoting responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making

STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF POLITICAL PARTIES

In 2023, several EU Delegations supported democratic reforms and more inclusive decision-making processes through political parties. In **Kenya**, through the project SIDPAK, the EU and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) helped the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties in its work to develop more credible and inclusive political parties, notably through financial incentives to parties that field more women candidates. In **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, the EU has helped political parties and other political entities to build their capacity to observe the electoral process through the project 'United for Democracy'.

A new EU-led action, '**Partnership for Democracy and Accountability**', was agreed with the Open Government Partnership organisation to help strengthen democracy and improve people's lives by promoting open, inclusive and accountable government globally as well as in the partner countries of **Colombia, Ghana, Honduras, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria and the Philippines**.

The initiative provides national, regional and global platforms for dialogue, collaboration and exchanges between reformers in government and civil society. It enables coalitions to be formed that drive progress towards open government and greater accountability. The Partnership for Democracy and Accountability supports governments and civil society to promote the inclusive co-creation

and implementation of reforms in a diverse range of policy areas, based on the countries' priorities, as jointly established by state institutions and civil society. At global level, this initiative supports evidence-based knowledge, peer exchanges and coalition-building on key policy aspects of democracy, transparency, civic engagement, accountability and the fight against corruption.

PROMOTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT LOCALLY AND GLOBALLY

In 2023, following the **EU youth action plan** in EU external action adopted in 2022, the EU strengthened its efforts to place young people at the centre of its activities as a prerequisite to building stronger, more legitimate, inclusive, peaceful and democratic societies. The **Women and Youth in Democracy (WYDE)** programme encourages the participation of women and young people in public affairs as citizens, voters, political party members, candidates and elected officials. The WYDE programme's **Democracy Schools in Ethiopia and Uganda**, managed by the European Partnership for Democracy and NIMD, were two major successes in 2023.



© EU

Brainstorming at the first TED network annual meeting which was attended by around 130 representatives of EU institutions, EU Member States and European civil society organisations and practitioners.



Democracy school in Uganda

'Investing in the Uganda Democracy Academy is a deliberate and strategic endeavour aimed at nurturing the next generation of democratic leaders within our country' said Primus Bahiigi, Director of NIMD Uganda. On 21 September 2023, the EU Delegation to Uganda hosted the inaugural graduation of the first cohort of students of the Uganda Democracy Academy. This academy serves as a unique platform, uniting individuals from diverse political backgrounds and regions to hone the skills and knowledge required to become exemplary democratic political leaders. The rigorous 18-day programme began in July and ended in September, with 38 graduates.

EMPOWERING YOUTH VOICES

In synergy with the **Summit for Democracy**, the European Commission teamed up with the governments of Costa Rica, Nepal and Ghana, the European Partnership for Democracy, AfricTivistes, the European Democracy Youth Network and International IDEA to develop the **Cohort on Youth Political and Civic Engagement**.

This initiative brings together more than 200 member organisations from all over the world. EU funding was mobilised to support the participation of youth representatives in Summit for Democracy events hosted in Costa Rica, South Korea and Zambia in March 2023. The Youth Democracy Cohort also provides micro-grants to grassroots organisations so that they can communicate, advocate for, and monitor the commitments undertaken.

2.3 Supporting independent and pluralistic media, access to information and the fight against disinformation

In recognition of the critical role that media freedom plays for democracy, the EU has stepped up its support for **independent and pluralistic media actors**, both within the EU and around the world. In human rights dialogues with partner countries, the EU has consistently advocated for legislative reforms and enabling conditions for independent media. These efforts are closely informed by ongoing and frequent consultations with civil society in Brussels and around the world through the EU's Delegations.

In parallel, the EU has reinforced efforts to combat disinformation, including **foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)**. Initiatives such as **EUvsDisinfo** and the European Digital Media Observatory play a crucial role in developing greater resilience to disinformation, manipulation and propaganda. The guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training⁶¹ promote the development of critical thinking and resilience through disinformation and propaganda in primary and secondary level of education.

In 2023, the EU launched a special financial agreement to protect independent media, allocating up to EUR 20 million over the next 4 years. This partnership with civil society organisations aims to make media outlets that are at risk more resilient, combat hate speech and disinformation and improve journalists' access to professional development and learning opportunities. Particular attention will be given to safeguarding women journalists and those reporting from so-called news deserts.

The EU Delegations further supported initiatives to strengthen

61 <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a224c235-4843-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

independent journalism and free media. A project in **Zimbabwe** improved access to reliable information, countered disinformation and enhanced the **physical and digital protection of journalists** during the election period. In Afghanistan, EU support sustained access to reliable and quality information for the general public, with a specific focus on reaching women and young people.

The EU gives significant financial support to civil society and media in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood's in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. A total of EUR 218.5 million was allocated for 2021-2023, with an additional EUR 132.4 million earmarked for 2024-2025 under the pre-accession instrument. This support is provided in different ways, including grants to civil society organisations and the provision of technical assistance.



© UNESCO

Launched in 2023, the EU-funded project, **Building Trust in Media in South-East Europe: Support to Journalism as a Public Good**, will be carried out by UNESCO in the Western Balkans and Türkiye until 2026. It aims to improve journalists' capacities and strengthen the freedom of expression by reinforcing the rights-based regulation of digital platforms and online media and by integrating media and information literacy into formal education to support critical thinking, especially among young people.

In November 2023, the **EU-Western Balkans Media Literacy Conference** in Podgorica, Montenegro, convened experts to address the challenge of FIMI, focusing on media literacy, transparency and the impact of artificial intelligence (AI). The conference also saw the launch of the EU-funded **Media Ownership Monitor**⁶² for the Western Balkans, which aims to illuminate the risks to media pluralism posed by concentration of ownership across the region.



Antidotes against FIMI

Fighting disinformation and FIMI is a complex process that requires a whole-of-society approach, and vibrant and autonomous civil society and independent journalism are some of the best antidotes against FIMI, was emphasised at the opening of the EU-Western Balkans Media Literacy Conference, 30 November Podgorica, Montenegro.

In the **Eastern Neighbourhood**, significant EU support addresses the challenges faced by independent media.⁶³ The activities financed include training, mentoring and support to improve editorial content, management skills and financial sustainability. The support aims to make media content more diverse and foster a stronger network of independent journalists.

In the **Southern Neighbourhood**, the EU has maintained its commitment to strengthen media independence, plurality and resilience through a comprehensive support programme.⁶⁴ The

62 <https://western-balkans.mediaownershipmonitor.org/>

63 <https://euneighbourseast.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=1736>

64 <https://south.euneighbours.eu/project/core-support-for-independent-media-in-the-southern-neighbourhood/>

programme improves the dissemination of high-quality public interest content to diverse audiences. It also aims to improve the managerial and editorial practices of media professionals, and strengthen business development and collaboration in the region.

THE EUROPEAN ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY: SAFEGUARDING DEMOCRACY ACTORS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND BEYOND

Ten years ago, the EU and its Member States made a visionary decision. In response to the Arab Spring, they established the **European Endowment for Democracy (EED)**, which celebrated its 10th anniversary as a grant-making institution in 2023. The EED's mandate has grown significantly and includes now the European Neighbourhood (Eastern Partnership, Middle East and North Africa), the Western Balkans and Türkiye, as well as Eurasia. The EED continues to foster democracy by responding to the demands of pro-democracy actors, including civil society but also journalists, independent media and social media platforms. The EED's work is vital, for example in **Ukraine**, where it contributes to the institutionalisation of civil society and media organisations, assists activists and journalists reporting from places with a highly precarious security situation, and supports organisations that monitor the planning and use of reconstruction funds, ensuring transparency and accountability in the reconstruction process. In light of the European Commission's 2023 enlargement reports, and the recommendations to begin accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Ukraine and to grant candidate status to Georgia, the EED's work in the EU's neighbourhood will be even more important. In 2023, the EU signed two new action grants to support **media, civil society and the promotion of democracy in 10 Southern Neighbourhood** countries, with a special focus on Algeria, Egypt and Libya (EUR 10 million), whilst the support to Belarus will entail strengthening civil society.

2.4 Reinforcing a human rights and participative approach to conflict prevention and crisis resolution

As a global actor, the EU promotes the prevention and resolution of conflicts as a mean to promote peace and prosperity around the world. The EU takes an integrated approach to conflicts and crises by using the comprehensive toolbox at its disposal - at all stages of a conflict, from prevention to crisis management recovery and peacebuilding - to contribute to sustainable peace.



© Siraj Ahmad/EUBAM Libya

As of today, there are 24 ongoing EU CSDP missions and operations, including 13 civilian, 10 military and 1 civilian and military initiative. In 2023, EUBAM Libya supported the 'One Desert Initiative' (Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Chad and Libya) in Mauritania to develop cross-border cooperation and joint activities to counter regional security threats. During the participatory workshops, local community engagement was flagged as a key to tackle issues such as migrant smuggling and human trafficking.

The EU strives to deliver stability and peace, in close coordination with its Member States, by combining conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding in an effective way, and by promoting conflict sensitive programming. On conflict prevention, the EU aims at addressing structural risks of violent conflicts through all relevant policies, tools and instruments in a timely and sequential manner.

In addition to carrying out conflict analysis screenings for conflict sensitive programming, the EU uses specific tools, such as the EU conflict early warning system and horizon scanning, to identify countries at risk of instability or violent conflict. In September 2023, the EU updated its toolset for EU conflict analysis and conflict early warning⁶⁵ to rationalise its existing tools, better aligning them with EU foreign policy and programming priorities. This will help responding to the changing nature of conflict.

On 6 December 2023, EU Member States endorsed **the EU's human rights and international humanitarian law due diligence policy** on security sector support to third parties. The adoption of this policy is a major step forward in consolidating the EU's long-standing commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) in its external action. The policy provides an overarching risk management framework, which spells out core principles and defines specific actions to manage potential risks to human rights and IHL that could arise from security sector



European Advisory Mission (EUAM) organised a training on the prevention of discrimination and sexual harassment within law enforcement agencies in Ukraine.

65 Joint Staff Working Document – Updated Toolset for EU Conflict Analysis and Conflict Early Warning adopted in September 2023 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12580-2023-INIT/en/pdf>



© EUAM RCA

EUAM Central African Republic supported the Central African Female Police Officers Network in organising awareness sessions on the issue of human trafficking in five different educational institutions in Bangui.

support provided to non-EU countries through the instruments of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) instruments.

The EU's growing security sector engagements in non-EU countries have increased the need for more detailed provisions and guidance on human rights, gender equality and IHL risk management. In this context, EU Member States have reiterated their support for compliance with human rights and IHL by including references to the need to implement human rights due diligence in the Civilian CSDP Compact, issued in May 2023, as well as in the Council conclusions on Civilian CSDP⁶⁶, issued in December 2023.

66 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16129-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

03. PROMOTING A GLOBAL SYSTEM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

Multilateralism remains the most effective means to govern global relations in a way that benefits everyone. Countries must continue to work together to settle disputes and to achieve common goals. In the face of mounting challenges, the multilateral system and its structures are under strain. The EU is committed to leading the reform efforts towards a multilateralism fit for the 21st century. To respond successfully to global crises, threats and challenges, the international community needs an efficient multilateral system, founded on universal rules and values. The EU works closely with the United Nations and regional partnerships such as the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the African Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).



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'Multilateralism matters because it works. But we cannot be "multilateralists" alone. At a time of growing scepticism, we must demonstrate the benefit and relevance of the multilateral system.'
Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

3.1 Multilateral cooperation

2023 marked the **75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights** and the **25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders**, however multilateralism continues to be undermined. The EU continues to work with partners in the UN system as the best way to identify common solutions and to protect and promote human rights and the rules-based order.

The multilateral system provides a platform to address **accountability** for human rights violations and abuses. The EU remains committed to bringing perpetrators of human rights violations to justice, upholding the Rome Statute and supporting the independence and integrity of the International Criminal Court.

The EUSR reinforced the EU's stature as a major supporter of the United Nations system and effective multilateralism. Throughout the year, the EUSR participated in deliberations of the **Human Rights Council** and exchanged with its **Special Rapporteurs**.

Ukraine in the spotlight

The EU stands united in its **unwavering support for Ukraine** in the face of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression. The EU firmly condemns this violation of international law. Since the start of Russia's war of aggression, the EU, Member States and the European financial institutions, in a Team Europe approach, have made available over **EUR 67.7 billion** in financial, humanitarian, emergency and military support to Ukraine.

Together with the resources to help Member States cater for the needs of Ukrainians in the EU who have fled the war, the overall support to Ukraine and Ukrainians amounts, so far, to **EUR 88 billion**.⁶⁷

67 Updated figures can be found at https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/eu-assistance-ukraine_en

The Commission has allocated **EUR 785 million** (including **EUR 300 million** in 2023) for **humanitarian aid** programmes in Ukraine to be implemented by humanitarian partners on the ground. In line with the priorities of the Ukrainian government, the EU's humanitarian assistance provides shelter, multi-purpose cash support, protection, healthcare, food assistance, education in emergencies, and water and sanitation. In addition, over **97 000 tonnes** of in-kind assistance, with an estimated value of over **EUR 796 million**, has been delivered to Ukraine from EU Member States and partners via the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.



**Human Rights Council Side event on
The report on the relationship between human rights and technical standard-
setting processes for new and emerging technologies**

7 July 2023, 14:00 – 15:00, Room XXVII (Hybrid), Palais de Nations

Co-organized by the Republic of Korea, Austria, Brazil, Denmark, Morocco, Singapore and the European Union, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

*HRVP Borrell with
Ukrainian Foreign
Minister Dmytro
Kuleba at Foreign
Affairs Council,
December 2023.*

At the same time, multilateral fora and regional organisations have acted as important public forums to raise and condemn the war and its consequences, adopt clear resolutions, and set up response mechanisms, in particular the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine created by the Human Rights Council with significant support from other bodies.

The **indiscriminate and brutal terrorist attacks by Hamas against Israel** on 7 October 2023, as well as the unfolding war in Gaza has had a devastating effect on human rights. As **the humanitarian situation**

in Gaza deteriorates, the EU will continue to support civilians, and has already earmarked an initial EUR 125 million for humanitarian aid in 2024. Individually, EU Member States have provided financial support amounting to more than EUR 600 million for the occupied Palestinian territories since 7 October 2023. The EU will continue its collective efforts to support the relaunch of a political process for the two-state solution.

In 2023, the EU supported the work of the UN human rights system in addressing human rights violations and abuses, including through country-specific and thematic statements and resolutions, commissions of inquiry, fact-finding missions and special procedures, and the Universal Periodic Review process. The EU actively supports those who defend human rights and the EU speaks out against reprisals faced by those cooperating with the UN in the pursuit of the protection and promotion of human rights

In 2023, together with EU Member States and other like-minded partners worldwide, the EU continued to spearhead thematic and country-specific initiatives in the UN's human rights fora. The EU has actively boosted cross-regional cooperation in these fora to ensure strong results in the increasingly difficult context of challenges to multilateral institutions and many negative trends around the world in human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The EU's leverage in UN human rights fora remained strong, with targeted outreach being the key to success.

The EU worked to **support the efficiency and effectiveness of the UN Human Rights Council**, and better links with the work of the UNGA Third Committee and synergies with other multilateral and regional human rights. Throughout 2023, the EU further developed its **strategic cooperation with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)**, including through dedicated projects and programmes, high-level strategic consultations, joint communication activities, and cooperation and joint actions between EU Delegations and the OHCHR. The EU and the OHCHR

joined efforts throughout 2023 to uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on its 75th anniversary through events and public communication campaigns.

The EU continued to provide steady **financial support to OHCHR**, becoming in 2023 the largest donor to OHCHR with a total contribution of USD 34.5 million. New initiatives in 2023 included a EUR 3.5 million contribution to foster OHCHR's capacity to carry out fact-finding missions and support investigative bodies established by the Human Rights Council and other UN bodies; and a EUR 4 million project on the promotion and protection of digital rights.

UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY THIRD COMMITTEE SESSION

The Third Committee was held from 28 September to 17 November 2023. During the session, there were 8 general debates, in addition to the interactive dialogues with UN mandate holders, special procedures and senior officials, and 62 resolutions were negotiated and adopted. The situation in **Gaza** was dominant in general debate statements and interactive dialogues, and during the adoption of resolutions. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine remained high on the agenda.

Once again, the EU actively **defended the universality of human rights and counteracted attempts to weaken the international human rights system**. It continued to pay particular attention to gender issues. The **resolutions presented by the EU and its Member States** brought positive results, and were all adopted by consensus. The EU-led resolutions on the human rights situation in **North Korea** and, together with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), on Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in **Myanmar/Burma**, were the only two country resolutions that were adopted without a vote, which sent a strong message from the international community on the human rights violations and abuses in those countries.

The EU presented resolution on **freedom of religion or belief** was also adopted without a vote, similarly to the biennial resolution on the **rights of child**, presented together with the Latin American and Caribbean Group focused this year on the digital environment. The EU once again supported the resolutions on the human rights situation in Iran and in Syria, and the resolution on the temporarily-occupied territories of Ukraine, including the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. The EU and its Member States joined a **joint statement on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan** and the **joint statement on reprisals**, both gathering the support of 80 UN Member States.

The **EU Member States** also presented resolutions on many topical human rights issues, including: young people; the challenges of persons living with rare diseases; promotion of the declarations on the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities; the safety of journalists; national human rights institutions; safe drinking water and sanitation; protection from enforced disappearances; human rights in the digital context; and on strengthening the UN's crime prevention and criminal justice programme.

See the EU and its Member States in action in New York. To mark 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, the EU Ambassador to the United Nations in New York, Olof Skoog is with EU Heads of Missions wearing orange. The trainees of the EU, EU Member States and the United Nations pose together.



UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL SESSIONS

Throughout 2023, the European Union strongly supported the **Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva**. As the only UN body that is purely devoted to the promotion and protection of all human rights, the Council, through its mechanisms, has greatly contributed to strengthening the UN's human rights pillar. The HRC, together with the Third Committee of the General Assembly, is where **thematic human rights issues and situations** are discussed, and where the international community calls upon States to deliver on their obligation to respect, protect and fulfil human rights that are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated.

In 2023, the EU continued to play a leading role at the HRC both by advancing thematic priorities and addressing country situations of concern through EU-led resolutions and statements, and by working cross-regionally and supporting action by others. The EU and like-minded countries have also been instrumental in upholding existing reporting mandates and creating ones on country situations, including by initiating new investigative mechanisms.

52ND SESSION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

During the 52nd session of the HRC the EU successfully presented five resolutions on **Belarus, North Korea, Myanmar/Burma, freedom of religion or belief, and on the rights of the child**, in addition to several resolutions presented by EU Member States.

The resolution on **Belarus** addressed the further deterioration of the human rights situation and violations of international human rights law in the country. The resolution renewed the mandate of the High Commissioner to continue to examine human rights violations in the run-up to and following the 2020 presidential elections, so that those responsible may be held fully accountable and to bring justice

for victims of human rights violations. The number of arbitrary detentions and arrests of peaceful protesters in Belarus has reached an unprecedented level.

The resolution on **North Korea** drew attention to the deteriorating human rights and humanitarian situation in the North Korea, and supported for the work on accountability. Furthermore, the resolution renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur for one year, and the capacity of the OHCHR for two years.

At the 52nd HRC, the EU also led a resolution on Myanmar/Burma condemning in the strongest terms the violence inflicted by the military on the people of **Myanmar/Burma**. The resolution renews the mandate of the Special Rapporteur for one year and expresses continued support for accountability processes, including the Independent Investigative Mechanism on Myanmar/Burma set up by the HRC.

The promotion and protection of the right of everyone to **freedom of religion or belief** remained a key priority for the EU. The EU-led resolution on freedom of religion or belief urged States to step up efforts to promote and protect freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief. The EU was pleased to partner again with the Group of Latin American and Caribbean on the resolution on the **sale and sexual exploitation of children**. The resolution renewed and strengthened the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the sale, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children.

The EU also actively supported resolutions led by other States, such as on the situation of human rights in Ukraine stemming from Russia's war of aggression and **human rights in Iran, Syria, Nicaragua, Haiti, Libya or South Sudan**.

During the 52nd session the EU supported the renewal of the critically important mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of **human rights defenders**.



EU Ambassador to the United Nations and other international organisations in Geneva, Lotte Knudsen, delivering a statement on behalf of the European Union at the Human Rights Council.

The EU also welcomed the adoption of several other thematic resolutions, including the **right to food and adequate housing, the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, the resolution on racism** and the resolution of the International Working Group on the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, the resolution on **freedom of opinion and expression** as well as on the absolute **prohibition of torture and ill-treatment**.

The EU delivered and supported several joint statements during the 52nd session. **The joint statement on youth led by the EU and India** galvanised solid cross-regional support and drew attention to the importance of young people. The EU furthermore led a joint statement on **women's and girls' rights in Afghanistan**.

53RD SESSION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

At the 53rd session of the HRC, the EU successfully presented two resolutions on **Eritrea** and on **Belarus**, in addition to a several resolutions presented by EU Member States.

The resolution on the **human rights situation in Eritrea** drew attention to the very dire living conditions of the Eritrean population and renewed the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights. The EU-led resolution on the **human rights situation in Belarus** renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur and called for the immediate and unconditional release of all people who have been arbitrarily detained.

The EU also supported resolutions led by other States: the resolution led by Ukraine **on cooperation with and assistance to Ukraine in the field of human rights**, and the resolution on the human rights situation in **Syria**.

The EU welcomed the resolution on **civil society space**, reaffirming that creating and maintaining a safe and enabling environment, both online and offline, where civil society can operate free from hindrance and insecurity, helps states fulfil their international human rights obligations and commitments.

The EU supported the resolution to end and prevent **child, early and forced marriage**. The EU committed to prevent and eliminate all forms of **violence against women and girls** and supported the resolution to advance the UN Guiding Principles on **business and human rights**. The EU joined the consensus on the resolution on **human rights and climate change** and supported the resolution that renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the **right to education**. The EU welcomed the resolution on **new and emerging digital technologies**, and in particular its focus on AI.

The EU also delivered and supported several joint statements during this session. The **joint statement on internet shutdowns** gained cross-regional support and drew attention to the importance of fostering an open internet and of not imposing shutdowns or restricting civic space online. The EU also led a **joint statement on civil society access to and participation in international climate discussions**.

54TH SESSION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

At the 54th session of the HRC, the EU led two resolutions on **Afghanistan** and on Burundi: the resolution on Afghanistan extended the mandate of the Special Rapporteur. There was a special focus on the situation of women and girls who are denied access to secondary and higher education and removed from all spheres of public life. The resolution on the human rights situation in **Burundi**, also extending the mandate of the Special Rapporteur, aimed to ensure continued monitoring of the human rights situation, support to civil society, and expert recommendations that can help both the government of Burundi and the international community.

The EU also underlined, wherever possible, its strong condemnation of all violations of international human rights law and IHL committed in the context of **Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine**. The EU also led a joint statement on the **human rights situation in Ethiopia**.

The EU also raised at the HRC other urgent human rights situations, including in **Sudan, Myanmar/Burma, Syria, Russia, Belarus, Iran, Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Nicaragua, Yemen and Venezuela**.

The EU actively participated in the annual discussion on gender, underlining once again that gender equality and non-discrimination are two fundamental principles which underpin the realisation of human rights, and essential values and priorities of the EU's internal and foreign policies.

In the Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on **contemporary forms of racism**, the EU stated its commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights for all without discrimination on any ground.

The EU and its Member States **together led 13 resolutions**, including on human rights in Russia and in Sudan, the right to privacy, reprisals, preventable maternal mortality, the human rights of older persons, the right to care, the World Programme for Human Rights Education, enforced disappearances and the death penalty.

3.2 Regional partnerships

THE EU AND THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

During 2023, the EU continued to strengthen its strategic partnership with the Council of Europe to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law as part of the implementation of the 2020-2024 action plan on human Rights and democracy. On 30 January, the EU adopted ambitious new priorities for cooperation with the Council of Europe 2023-2024.

The EU made important progress in its quest to **join the European Convention on Human Rights**. The unanimous provisional agreement of the revised package of accession instruments reached in March 2023 in the '46+1 Group' signifies an essential step forward on the road to the EU's accession to the Convention. The accession would provide an additional layer of protection in the EU, as it would bring the EU under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights.

In May, the 4th summit of Heads of State and Government was held in Reykjavik, with the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission in attendance. The summit placed **accountability for the crimes committed in Ukraine** at its centre. The EU actively supported the creation of a **Register of Damages**, a ground-breaking international agreement. Its creation is a testament to the Council of Europe's commitment to addressing the consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and to fostering international cooperation. The Register, of which the EU is a founding associate member, aims to serve as a basis for potential compensation schemes related to Ukraine.



EU leaders join European show of unity in support of Ukraine and fundamental values at the Council of Europe Summit in Reykjavik, 16-17 May.

In June 2023, the European Union formally acceded to the **Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence**, otherwise known as the **Istanbul Convention**. This marks a significant step forward in the fight against gender-based violence and in the promotion of gender equality. This accession was met with widespread approval, reflecting the commitment of

both the EU and the Council of Europe to effective multilateralism. It will subject the EU to monitoring by the group of experts on action against violence against women and domestic violence.



© Council of Europe

In a ceremony at the Palais de l'Europe, in the presence of Secretary General Marija Pejčinovič Burič, Ambassador Mårten Ehnberg, Permanent Representative of Sweden to the Council of Europe (Presidency-in-office of the Council of the European Union), and Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality, have deposited the instrument of approval of the Istanbul Convention.

Since September 2022, the Committee on Artificial Intelligence set up by the Council of Europe has been working on developing a legally binding instrument (a convention) aiming to address risks posed by AI to human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The convention will be open for signature to Council of Europe members, the European Union and countries around the world that share the same values. The EU is actively participating in the negotiations. Ensuring consistency with EU law is a guiding principle for the EU in the negotiations. The text will open for signature in London in May 2024 on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the London Treaty and the Council of Europe.

The European Union continued to play a crucial role on other issues in collaboration with the Council of Europe, particularly in EU enlargement and rule of law initiatives. With its continued financial support, the EU remains the primary donor to the **cooperation** pillar of the Council of Europe's activities.

New joint programmes, which also benefit EU Member States, were launched, such as the '**All In Plus**' programme, which aims to advance gender equality in sports. Following the success of the previous 'All In' initiative, the new programme focuses on data collection and media collaboration to **raise awareness about gender imbalances**. The project aims to highlight the benefits of greater gender equality in sports through dialogue and engaging with experts.

The third phases of the Horizontal Facility for the **Western Balkans** and **Türkiye** and the Partnership for Good Governance in the Eastern Partnership region were launched in 2023, while the fifth phase of the South Programme continued its implementation started in 2022.

The EU delivered several statements at the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, covering topics such as freedom of expression, the protection of journalists, the rights of LGBTI persons, violence against women, and opposition to the death penalty. Additionally, the EU issued statements on human rights cases and ongoing developments, with specific references to developments in **Belarus, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia and Ukraine**.

THE EU AND THE ORGANISATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE

The OSCE's work in 2023 continued to be guided by the '**no business as usual**' principle and, as regards the human dimension, focused on the human rights impacts of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, including more broadly in the region. The OSCE's workplan in this area focuses on accountability for war crimes, upholding

international humanitarian and human rights law, tackling violence against women in conflicts and safeguarding the rights of children in conflicts. The EU actively participated in all of this work, sending a strong message of solidarity with **Ukraine, calling on Russia to put an end to its aggression and fully respect Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity** within its internationally recognised borders, and underlining the importance of ensuring accountability for all violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed in this context.

Due to Russia's continued obstruction, the most important annual meeting, the consensus-based Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, did not take place for the fourth year in a row. However, the Chairpersonship-in-Office of North Macedonia facilitated a platform for dialogue in the form of the **Warsaw Human Dimension Conference** which took place 2-13 October 2023.

In March 2023, the EU joined the unprecedented number of 45 OSCE delegations **invoking the Moscow Mechanism for the third time** to report on the ongoing human rights and humanitarian impacts of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, this time with a focus on **deportations of children**. The ever-deteriorating human rights situations in Russia and Belarus were also kept high on the agenda, with numerous statements and side events. In 2023, the EU organised the second edition of the annual Senior Officials Meeting on Belarus with the aim of mapping the needs of the people of Belarus and coordinating assistance, as well as the first two editions of the bi-annual Consultative Group as a forum of structured dialogue with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society. At the **OSCE Permanent Council**, the EU proactively raised several issues related to human rights, including marking World Press Freedom Day, the International Day against the Death Penalty, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and the International Human Rights Day.

In March 2023, the EU approved council conclusions⁶⁸ setting out the EU priorities at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe in difficult times marked by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, stressing the key importance of the human dimension.

The EU continues through its various financial assistance instruments to support ODIHR and the implementation of OSCE principles and commitments under the human dimension in particular on democratisation and electoral reforms.

COOPERATION WITH OTHER REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

With the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the **EU is interested in fostering joint efforts** to increase respect, diversity, pluralism and the equal protection of all individuals. **Senior official meetings have been held since 2017**, and there is cooperation with resolutions in the Human Rights Council on topics such as **Myanmar/Burma** and **freedom of religion and belief**. In 2023, the EU-OIC senior official meeting took place in Brussels; the joint priorities of women's rights, election observation, interreligious dialogue and mediation were discussed. The next meeting will be in 2024 in Jeddah. During the high-level week in New York for the UN General Assembly, the EU High Representative and the Secretary General of the OIC held a bilateral meeting.

In 2023, **the EU and the African Union** continued their fruitful cooperation in the field of human rights and democracy. The 18th EU-AU Human Rights Dialogue, which was held on 4 May 2023, served as a useful platform for information-sharing and in-depth discussions on specific human rights topics. It also represented an opportunity to take stock of joint commitments and to agree on a set of concrete deliverables. As a follow-up to the Dialogue, the EU and the African

68 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/03/20/council-conclusions-on-eu-priorities-at-the-organisation-for-security-and-cooperation-in-europe/>

Commission on Human and People's Rights co-organised an event to mark the 21st World Day against the Death Penalty, which took place on 10 October 2023 in Addis Ababa. EU-AU cooperation was also strengthened, inter alia, in the areas of **transitional justice**, with the EU-funded "Initiative for Transitional Justice in Africa" launched in October 2023, and **business and human rights**, with the EU participating in the 2nd Africa Business and Human Rights Forum.



EUSR Eamon Gilmore gave an opening address to the second African Business and Human Rights Forum organised by the African Union and the UN.

The **EU and League of Arab States** holds informal human rights exchanges, in 2023, it took place in June where parties exchanged on the latest initiatives to mainstream human rights in various policy areas as well as on activities in the international fora.

The **EU's engagement with ASEAN**, in line with the existing strategic partnership, continued to stress the importance of a regional architecture which remains open and rules-based and with a strong commitment to the rule of law, human rights and international law. Furthermore, the EU launched in 2023 a new project in support to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The 5th policy dialogue on human rights took place in Brussels in October⁶⁹.

The EU continued providing financial support to the mandate of the **Inter-American Court** and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

⁶⁹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/asean-5th-policy-dialogue-human-rights-european-union-takes-place-brussels_en

3.3 Bilateral cooperation

HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUES

The EU continued to conduct human rights dialogues and consultations with non-EU countries as a key activity to advance the EU's human rights agenda. **Thirty-four human rights dialogues and consultations took place in 2023**, mostly in person, and with some letting people join online to enable wider participation. As in previous years, these dialogues represent a crucial opportunity to engage on human rights issues, especially challenging ones, and to share information and best practices on how the EU and Members States act to address challenges within the EU or work to arrive at coherent and consistent policies.

While no new dialogues were established in 2023, the long-standing human rights dialogue with **China** was resumed in February, after a break of over 3 years, thus giving the EU the opportunity to raise many key concerns and a number of individual cases through a dedicated channel of communication on human rights issues. This was supplemented by an exchange with civil society representatives and a field visit. Several dialogues were held for a second or third year in a row, giving an opportunity to continue and deepen conversations. For instance, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights once again co-chaired the dialogue with **Saudi Arabia** (established in 2021), and opened the 3rd Sub-Committee on Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights with the **Philippines** in October. In July, the Special Representative hosted and co-chaired the third set of Strategic Consultations with the OHCHR in Brussels, providing an occasion for the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, to meet with other EU institutions' key figures and the Member States in a breakfast meeting before the Foreign Affairs Council.

The renewed **EU Guidelines on human rights dialogues with third countries**⁷⁰ of February 2021 guide the conduct of human rights dialogues. The list of dialogues reflects the EU's thematic human rights priorities and its cooperation in multilateral human rights fora as well as recommendations from election observation missions, where applicable. Implementing the guidelines, the EU seeks to conduct the dialogues in a results-oriented manner and to agree follow-up actions, including joint initiatives, expert exchanges and project activities. Wherever possible, joint press releases are issued featuring the main subjects of discussion and future cooperation. Civil society representatives are consulted in the preparation of dialogues and debriefed afterwards. In addition to these dedicated dialogues, the EU raises human rights dialogues in political and other dialogue meetings.

TRADE INSTRUMENTS

Under the **EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP)**, in 2023 the EU continued monitoring compliance with international standards on human rights, labour rights, environmental protection and good governance by countries benefitting from the GSP+ arrangement or undergoing enhanced engagement under the **Everything but Arms** scheme. The EU continued to actively engage in dialogue on these issues with beneficiary countries and various stakeholders including civil society, social partners and Member States. In 2023, EU monitoring missions took place in Bangladesh and Tajikistan. The Commission and EEAS published a joint report⁷¹ on the implementation of GSP in November 2023.

70 Revised EU Guidelines on Human Rights Dialogues with Partner/Third Countries, 22 February 2021: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6279-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

71 https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/access-eu-market-boosts-sustainable-growth-low-income-countries-2023-11-21_en

The European Parliament and the Council continued discussions on the legislative proposal for a **new GSP Regulation for 2024-2034** as the current scheme was set to expire at the end of 2023. As the two institutions did not reach an agreement in 2023, in November 2023 they extended the current GSP scheme until 2027. This extension provides legal certainty both to beneficiary countries and to businesses and operators present in these countries and in the EU. It allows GSP beneficiaries to continue to enjoy tariff preferences and the EU to continue monitoring compliance with international standards.

Guided by the 2022 communication on 'the power of trade partnerships: together for green and just economic growth', the EU continued to implement the **trade and sustainable development (TSD) chapters** of EU trade agreements. In this framework, parties commit to respect, promote and realise the ILO principles on fundamental rights at work, on the freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, on the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, on the effective abolition of child labour, on the elimination of discrimination in employment and on a safe and healthy working environment. Parties also commit to effectively implement ratified ILO conventions, as well their obligations under international agreements addressing gender equality and women's rights, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

EU trade and investment agreements with non-EU countries **include commitments to comply** with international labour standards and promote decent work through national laws and practices, including effective labour inspections. In particular, the trade and sustainable development (TSD) chapters of free trade agreements (FTAs) signed by the EU reaffirm the commitment to high levels of labour protection, and call for the ratification and effective implementation of the ILO fundamental conventions.

In 2023, all TSD committee meetings continued, and progress was achieved in implementation of the commitments made in the different trade agreements. **Moldova** took steps to reform and strengthen the State Labour Inspectorate, giving it the right to conduct unannounced visits in certain cases and allowing the Inspectorate to impose penalties directly for cases of undeclared work and under-declared work. The ILO Convention on the Abolition of Forced Labour entered into force in **Japan** in July 2023, which is now covered by the ILO supervisory mechanisms concerning its implementation. The EU has been supporting Japan in that respect since the launch of the EU-Japan FTA in 2019. On 19 December 2023, **Ecuador** approved the registration of the first sectoral trade union for the country, active in the banana sector. The EU and Ecuador had been working together on this recognition for the previous 2 years. In December 2023, the EU and **Kenya** signed an ambitious economic and partnership agreement, which includes a comprehensive TSD chapter that covers labour, women's empowerment and environmental and climate matters, and offers civil society organisations an active role in monitoring the implementation of the agreement. Once in force, the agreement will directly contribute to the Sustainable Developments Goals and Agenda 2030, and advance joint values and interests, including trade and sustainability and human rights. In July 2023, the EU and **New Zealand** signed a free trade agreement (concluded in 2022), and in December 2023, the EU and **Chile** signed an Advanced Framework Agreement and an Interim Trade Agreement (also concluded in 2022), which modernises the EU-Chile Association Agreement from 2002. The agreements with Kenya, New Zealand and Chile, which are expected to enter into force in 2024, contain ambitious TSD commitments, including on labour rights and gender equality.



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The EU and Chile signed an Advanced Framework Agreement and an Interim Trade Agreement to strengthen political cooperation and foster trade and investment. Photographed are High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell, the Chilean Minister of Foreign Affairs Alberto van Klaveren Stork, and the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation José Manuel Albares on behalf of the Spanish Presidency of the Council.

The 2023 Annual Report on the Implementation and Enforcement of EU Trade Agreements⁷², published by the EU in November 2023, includes information on the implementation of the TSD chapters of FTAs concluded by the EU.

In the field of **export controls**, in 2023 the EU worked closely with EU Member States within the Surveillance Technology Expert Group, to finalise the work on the guidelines to support exporters in applying controls of cyber-surveillance items. The publication of the guidelines is expected in the first half of 2024. This work followed the entry into force of the EU Export Control Regulation⁷³ in 2021. The Regulation reflects the EU's commitment to effectively address

72 https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/access-eu-market-boosts-sustainable-growth-low-income-countries-2023-11-21_en

73 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2021:206:FULL&from=EN>

the risk of cyber-surveillance items being used in connection with internal repression and/or the commission of serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

As a follow-up to meetings of the Trade and Sustainable Development Board created under the Association Agreement between the EU and Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, the European Union organised a conference on labour rights in Bogota, Colombia, in October 2023. The aim of the event was to contribute to strengthening labour rights compliance and promoting decent working conditions in the three countries, with a particular focus on freedom of association, the fight against informal work in rural areas, and the elimination of child labour.

3.4 Civil society and national human rights institutions

Civil society continued to be an indispensable partner for the EU in the implementation of the 2020-2024 action plan on human rights and democracy across all its lines of action and priorities. Civil society is both a partner of the EU and a target for EU action, particularly with regards to protecting civic space and fundamental freedoms.

In the course of the year, civic space continued shrinking around the world. Civil society actors operated in an increasingly restrictive environment, often facing physical and online threats and harassment and attacks, including arbitrary detentions and killings. National security, anti-terrorism, anti-money laundering and countering foreign interference were some of the pretexts used by many governments to curtail fundamental freedoms and civic space.

In 2023, the EU used all the tools at its disposal to continue to protect and promote a safe and enabling space for civil society. The EU condemned threats and attacks against civil society organisations and human rights defenders. It spoke out against legal and administrative measures limiting the activities of civil society. These

include: (i) abusive lawsuits aimed at censoring, intimidating and silencing critics; (ii) strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs); (iii) barriers to the registration of non-governmental organisations (NGOs); (iv) restrictions on access to resources and foreign funding, including from the EU and its Member States; and (v) onerous vetting rules and burdensome reporting requirements. The EU has regularly addressed these issues with the authorities of non-EU countries, including in the context of its human rights dialogues, and often in coordination with like-minded partners.

The EU also continued its efforts to promote NGOs' involvement in the work of the UN General Assembly, the Human Rights Council and other multilateral human rights fora, including by defending NGOs' right to speak and by promoting the open participation of civil society in high-level events held by the General Assembly. The EU also facilitated the exchange of views and sharing of information from civil society with EU Member States, including ahead of the sessions of the Universal Periodic Reviews and of the Human Rights Council.

The EU remains one of the **leading donors** worldwide to CSOs in partner countries. CSOs remained the main recipients of support from NDICI-Global Europe's thematic programmes on human rights and democracy and on civil society with an envelope of EUR 3 billion for the period 2021-2027. For the year 2023, the thematic programme on human rights contributed EUR 144 million to 270 country-specific projects on human rights, mainly working with CSOs in 98 countries. Beyond country projects, the EU collaborated with CSO partners on human rights in the areas of the fight against torture, the fight against the death penalty, the protection of independent media, and protection of the freedoms of peaceful assembly and of association. These strategic partnerships at global level will improve the EU's outreach towards human rights CSOs at grassroots level. A total of EUR 48 million in support will flow through these new partners

in 2023-24, with a substantial proportion delivered as sub-grants to smaller organisations that would otherwise not benefit from EU grants, and to further support civil society space.

EU Delegations continued to develop CSO country roadmaps, which present a comprehensive analysis of the civil society landscape, its enabling environment and the challenges and opportunities faced by CSOs. Over the years, the CSO roadmaps have been a strategic tool for the EU, its Member States and like-minded donors to develop collective responses on how to engage with CSOs at country level. Delegations are currently developing and implementing the third generation of roadmaps, with 95 roadmaps in partner countries adopted as of December 2023.

The EU is particularly concerned by the shrinking of **civic space** across the world, and is providing civic society with means to address this growing concern. EUR 50 million was assigned under the thematic programme for civil society organisations, for an **EU system for an enabling environment for civil society**, with the objective of systematically monitoring and creating an environment for civil society, identifying and coordinating responses to threats and opportunities.

It complements the launch in 2023 of 12 projects under the thematic programme on human rights and democracy addressing the issue of civic space, including in **the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, Uzbekistan and Yemen**. In other assistance to civic space, the programme continued its support to CSOs operating in very difficult environments or on very sensitive topics through the Human Rights Crises Facility, which disbursed EUR 4.5 million in 2023 on projects that help keep human rights movements alive.

In the past year, the EU paid particular attention to the situation of **national human rights institutions (NHRIs)** at risk, including by raising concerns during human rights dialogues or ad hoc meetings when NHRIs were facing legal and administrative barriers to their independence. In

nearly all human rights dialogues held in 2023, the EU called on partner countries to ensure that NHRIs are independent, receive the necessary human and financial resources, and are systematically consulted in all relevant policymaking and legislative processes.

On the same track, in 2023 the EU's emergency fund for Human Rights Defenders provided assistance to people working for independent NHRIs and to legal professionals facing risks for defending human rights.

Furthermore, the EU kept providing financial and technical support to many NHRIs across the world, including through the Global Alliance of NHRIs (GANHRI) and regional networks. Under the thematic programme on human rights and democracy alone, new projects were deployed in 2023 in support to NHRIs in **Burundi, Ivory Coast, and Uruguay.**



The EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, gave a keynote speech on 6 November in Copenhagen at the 14th International Conference of National Human Rights Institutions on the theme '*Torture and other ill-treatment: The role of National Human Rights Institutions*'. During the event, he also participated in a round table discussion with the chairperson, secretary and regional chairpersons and coordinators from Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions. In the margins of the event, EUSR Gilmore also had individual meetings with the heads of the NHRIs of **Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco and Pakistan.**

3.5 Business sector

In 2023, the EU continued to be actively engaged in ensuring that businesses respect human rights, advancing with the adoption and implementation of a 'smart mix' of legislative and non-legislative measures to promote and support the global implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

The **Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive**⁷⁴ entered into force on 5 January 2023, strengthening the rules on social and environmental sustainability reporting for large companies, listed small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs), parent companies of large groups and non-EU companies with substantial activity in the EU. The first set of reporting standards, applicable as from the 2024 financial year, were issued on 31 July 2023 and cover the full range of sustainability issues including environmental, social and human rights, and governance. Companies within the scope of the Directive must report on their impact on their own workforce, on workers in their value chains, on affected communities including indigenous peoples, and on consumers and end users. The new rules ensure that investors and stakeholders have access to the information they need to assess investment risks, including those connected to sustainability issues.

The **Deforestation-free products Regulation**⁷⁵ came into force on 29 June 2023 and aims at eliminating deforestation driven by EU production and consumption of certain agricultural and industrial commodities. The Regulation sets mandatory due diligence rules for any company intending to place the relevant commodities and products on the EU market or to export them from the EU's single market. The 'deforestation-free' requirement aims to ensure that no commodity or product issued from deforestation or forest degradation of the lands inhabited by indigenous peoples enters

74 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022L2464>

75 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32023R115&-qid=1687867231461>

the EU market, irrespective of whether the rights of the indigenous people concerned are enshrined in national law. Due diligence must assess respect for human rights protected under international law and for the principle of free, prior and informed consent. Deforestation and forest degradation have a dramatic impact on the livelihoods of the most vulnerable people, including indigenous peoples, who rely heavily on forest ecosystems.

The legislative process on a **Critical Raw Materials Act**⁷⁶ was completed when co-legislators reached a political agreement on 13 November 2023, before its formal adoption by the European Parliament and then by the Council of the European Union on 18 March 2024. Critical raw materials are indispensable for a wide set of strategic sectors including the net zero industry, the digital industry, aerospace, and the defence sector. It recognises that improving the security and affordability of critical raw materials to support the green and digital transitions in the EU should go together with increased efforts to mitigate any adverse impact, including on human rights, labour rights and the environment. Strategic projects on critical raw material extraction and processing outside the EU must respect high environmental and social standards and bring local added value to partner countries. The Act also refers to creating strategic partnerships with third countries that are underpinned by cooperation to advance socially responsible practices in the extractive sectors.



76 https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/publications/european-critical-raw-materials-act_en



'This Act will bring us closer to our climate ambitions. It will significantly improve the refining, processing and recycling of critical raw materials here in Europe. Raw materials are vital for manufacturing key technologies for our twin transition – like wind power generation, hydrogen storage or batteries. And we're strengthening our cooperation with reliable trading partners globally to reduce the EU's current dependencies on just one or a few countries. It's in our mutual interest to ramp up

production in a sustainable manner and at the same time ensure the highest level of diversification of supply chains for our European businesses.'

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission

The EU also reached a political agreement on the **Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive** in December 2023 in view of its adoption and entry into force in 2024. Building on international standards, the Directive will create due diligence obligations for large companies, on actual and potential negative human rights impacts and adverse environmental impacts, with respect to their own operations, the operations of their subsidiaries, and the operations carried out by their business partners in companies' chains of activities. The Directive also establishes liability for violations of such due diligence obligations. It will apply to large companies based in the EU as well as foreign companies with a significant presence on the EU market, across all sectors. The Directive, once adopted, will contribute to reducing environmental and human rights harms in EU value chains, and to promoting international standards in these areas.

The EU is preparing a range of accompanying measures to help governments, businesses and other stakeholders in non-EU countries to prepare for the entry into force of the new EU legislative requirements, and to mitigate risks such as disengagement and other adverse impacts. The European Commission, together with Germany and a group of other interested EU Member States, launched a dedicated **Team Europe Initiative on Sustainability in global value chains** to increase the visibility and impact of combined EU efforts for the effective implementation of global standards. The initiative provides an opportunity to work in closer partnership with stakeholders in developing countries, in particular SMEs, civil society organisations and public authorities.

The EU participated constructively in the ninth session of the **UN negotiations on an international legally binding instrument on business and human rights**, which took place 23-27 October 2023. The EU welcomed the improvements included in the fourth draft text issued in July 2023, while highlighting remaining concerns with some of the provisions. The EU continued to advocate for an instrument supported by a large number of UN members that can effectively strengthen the protection of victims of business-related human rights violations and abuses, while creating a global level playing field for businesses. The EU also signalled that, once adopted, the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive could provide the basis for the EU's engagement, especially on human rights due diligence and related liability provisions.

The EU also continued promoting business and human rights and implementation of the UN Guiding Principles through bilateral **engagement with partner countries and regions**, notably within the framework of human rights dialogues, and in partnership with international organisations such as the OHCHR, the ILO and the OECD. The EU Special Representative also continued to engage extensively on business and human rights throughout the year and to enhance the dialogue with the private sector, notably with

industry leaders. The Special Representative intervened at the second African Business and Human Rights Forum on 6 September 2023, and in OECD discussions on the targeted update of the science and technology chapter of the OECD's Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct.

3.6 Compliance with international human rights and international humanitarian law

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

The EU continued to support initiatives designed to improve compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) and safeguard the humanitarian space, in particular reaffirming its strong commitment to the protection of civilians in armed conflicts. The EU remained active in promoting respect for IHL across the various areas covered in the **EU Guidelines on promoting compliance with international humanitarian law**.⁷⁷ In July 2023, the EU published the sixth report on the implementation of the Guidelines, which highlights the activities that the EU carried out in support of IHL in the course of 2022.



Commissioner Lenarčič in Lebanon speaking with Syrian refugees.

77 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/eu-guidelines-on-the-promotion-of-compliance-with-international-humanitarian-law.html>



*In March, the second **European Humanitarian Forum** focused on improving accountability for violations of IHL, urban warfare, protecting children in armed conflicts and protecting humanitarian workers from attacks.*

The EU also continued to be vocal on IHL matters as an active member or observer in a range of international organisations and bodies, through high-level dialogues carried out by **Commissioner Lenarčič** and during field missions, bilateral meetings and public communication. For example, the EU took part in open debates of the UN Security Council, including the debates on the protection of civilians in armed conflict and on war in cities, and contributed with a strong statement to the UNSC open debate on conflict-related sexual violence.

The EU remains committed to strengthening the **monitoring of IHL violations**. To that end, in 2023, the EU financed several projects aimed at addressing gaps in the monitoring of IHL violations, strengthening data collection, reinforcing evidence-based advocacy or strengthening monitoring standards. Specific focus was also placed on promoting the meaningful implementation of the **Political Declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas**.

The EU has continued to advocate for and support the **protection of education from attacks** in armed conflicts, including on the occasion of the International Day to Protect Education from Attack (9 September). The EU has also continued to condemn targeted attacks against education and the military use of education facilities, which can constitute violations of international humanitarian law.



The EU supports the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration. Protection of education has been explicitly indicated as a priority in humanitarian assistance in the occupied Palestinian territories, Mozambique, the Greater Horn of Africa region, the Great Lakes region, and in West and Central Africa.

Since the start of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, more than 3 750 educational institutions have suffered bombing and shelling, with more than 1 300 schools completely destroyed. The EU has allocated over EUR 100 million for the rehabilitation of damaged school buildings in Ukraine.

The EU stepped up **action to protect children caught up in armed conflict**, continuing its strong advocacy work, delivering on the commitments made in the EU strategy on the rights of the child⁷⁸ and funding several projects on this theme. These projects include various activities such as the release and reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups, providing general child protection services and psycho-social support. In 2023, the EU continued to fund a project aimed at improving access to justice for children associated with armed conflicts. The review of the EU's Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict was officially launched in November 2023, with adoption of the updated guidelines expected in June 2024.

78 <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c4889a76-a0ee-11ec-83e1-01aa75e-d71a1/language-en>

The relationship between **conflict and hunger** is well known and conflict remains the main cause of food insecurity. Particularly worrying is the use of starvation as a war tactic, a practice that is still being used today. The EU is currently supporting a project with Action Against Hunger Spain to systematically gather evidence on violations to help monitor this practice and inform advocacy efforts. The EU has continued to bring this topic to wider attention through public statements including the strong condemnation of Russia's attacks on Ukraine's grain facilities, and by participating in and organising dedicated events such as humanitarian talks at the European Humanitarian Forum.

In 2023, the EU continued to promote the **protection of humanitarian workers, as well as medical personnel and health infrastructure from attacks**. Projects supported by the EU included research on the current state of measures to protect aid workers, including through reinforced mechanisms to manage security risks, reliable systems to collect and share data, and on ensuring that humanitarian space, IHL, humanitarian principles and medical ethics⁷⁹ are respected. It also funded 'protect aid workers', a new initiative that supports humanitarian workers of national and international NGOs that have experienced a critical incident or are under threat due to their work as a humanitarian.⁸⁰

The EU has been continuously engaged in promoting compliance with IHL through effective **humanitarian civil-military** coordination in all relevant contexts, as a framework to protect the humanitarian space, avoid duplication, minimise inconsistencies and maximise potential synergies with security and defence actors. The EU has remained committed to ensuring IHL due diligence in the provision of military support to non-EU countries.

As a major humanitarian donor, the EU considers that strengthening compliance with IHL is an important factor when disbursing funds from the EU humanitarian aid budget. The EU continued to **support**

79 The EU also supports in some contexts WHO's Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care (SSA) is which systematically collects data on attacks on health care.

80 <https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2024/01/One-Page-Protect-Aid-Workers.pdf>

the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), one of the EU's most trusted humanitarian partners, and a key ally in upholding respect for IHL and humanitarian principles. In 2023, the ICRC received approximately EUR 166 million in funding from the EU's humanitarian aid budget.

The EU has been active in advocating for the respect of international humanitarian law in various conflicts, and is funding humanitarian actions that include the promotion of IHL in several countries, such as **Myanmar/Burma, the occupied Palestinian territories, Sahel, Sudan, Syria and Ukraine**. Some examples of these activities are given below.

Since the **indiscriminate and brutal terrorist attacks by Hamas against Israel**, the EU adopted Council Conclusions on 26 October 2023,⁸¹ recognising Israel's right to defend itself whilst also stating the EU's extreme concern about the catastrophic humanitarian situation that Palestinians are facing, and reiterating the obligation for parties to the conflict to respect international humanitarian law. The Commissioner for Crisis Management, Janez Lenarčič, has on several occasions underlined the need to ensure respect for IHL, including the safety and security of civilians, especially children and women, as well as humanitarian workers. In parallel, the EU has substantially scaled up its humanitarian assistance and support for UN agencies, the ICRC and international NGOs working on the protection of civilians, specifically for children and women affected by the conflict. The EU is also supporting its partners to provide protection services to affected populations, notably UNRWA. In light of the very serious allegations about implication of UNRWA staff in the terrorist attacks of 7 October, the Commission has accordingly assessed its funding decision for UNRWA, and decided to disburse a first tranche of EUR 50 million out of the EUR 82 million foreseen for UNRWA for 2024.

81 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/26/european-council-conclusions-on-middle-east-26-october-2023/>

In **Ukraine**, in 2023, the EU gave support to the ICRC to promote respect for IHL among the parties to the conflict and to urge them to ensure the protection of civilians. The EU also supported general protection services such as legal aid, the accompaniment of vulnerable groups, case management, protection monitoring by mandated agencies and organisations, and the documenting of protection violations. The EU also funds child protection activities through UNICEF and Save the Children, including support to unaccompanied minors, children in institutions and psychosocial and education services for the most vulnerable children.

In the **Sahel**, in addition to the continuous region-specific dialogue with the ICRC and financial support for the ICRC's work on ensuring compliance with IHL, the EU launched an initiative to strengthen humanitarian advocacy in five conflict-affected countries in the region, namely Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria. Under this initiative, in 2023 the EU included in its regional strategic discussions and in its bilateral exchanges with the individual countries on the issue of non-compliance with IHL. The EU also participated in joint advocacy efforts with other humanitarian actors and donors, and worked on reinforcing the dialogue on IHL with key regional stakeholders such as the Economic Community of West African States. Furthermore, a political dialogue between EU and these states on humanitarian issues has been initiated and includes a specific strand of discussion on enhancing compliance with IHL.

Since the start of the conflict in **Sudan** in April 2023, violations of international human rights and IHL are alarmingly high and violence against civilians has been reported. Reports of violence against women and girls, violations of children's rights and child protection concerns are dramatically increasing. According to the available data and at time of writing, 19 humanitarian workers have been killed in the conflict by and attacks against humanitarian aid, including the targeting of humanitarian convoys and the looting of humanitarian warehouses and offices, are on the rise. The EU

stepped up its support to the ICRC in 2023 to help ensure the safety and well-being of civilians, address urgent needs and support access to basic services for internally displaced persons and their host communities, including in active conflict zones. The EU also supports the organisations, Diakonia and Geneva Call to promote IHL knowledge and compliance in Sudan, as well as advocacy on IHL, calling upon the parties to the conflict to respect and adhere to IHL.

Myanmar/Burma remains a protection crisis. The urgent issues include: (i) multiple violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law; (ii) frequent denial of humanitarian assistance and of the supply of essential goods and services to populations in areas not controlled by the government; (iii) the criminalisation of humanitarian assistance through specific laws passed by the military regime; and (iv) the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of weapons against the civilian population. The EU's humanitarian assistance has consistently focused on supporting the promotion of IHL and of a dedicated protection response. This entails promoting the respect of IHL to armed groups, educating internally displaced persons and others affected by the conflict about the risk of mines, and documenting cases of violence against educational and medical services and staff. Advocacy efforts have focused on humanitarian mine action, supporting specialised partners in designing an advocacy strategy that targets all parties to the conflict, through different channels and with balanced messages.

EU GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS SANCTIONS REGIME

The global human rights sanctions regime, created in 2020, enables the EU to sanction individuals or entities that commit acts such as genocide, crimes against humanity and other serious human rights violations or abuses (e.g. torture, slavery, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests or detentions). It underscores the EU's determination to strengthen its role in addressing serious human rights violations and abuses worldwide. In 2023, the EU moved

fast to impose several restrictive measures (sanctions) under the sanctions regime in reaction to serious human rights violations and abuses, in particular in **Afghanistan, Iran, Myanmar/Burma, Russia and South Sudan, as well as against the Wagner Group.**

On 25 February 2023, the EU imposed additional sanctions against individuals and entities linked to the Wagner Group because of the international dimension and gravity of the group's activities, as well as its destabilising impact on the countries where it is active. In particular, eight individuals and seven entities were listed under the EU global human rights sanctions regime as responsible for or involved in serious human rights abuses in the Central African Republic and Sudan.

On 7 March 2023, ahead of International Women's Day, the EU imposed sanctions for serious human rights violations related to violence against women and girls. The EU imposed restrictive measures on nine individuals and three entities because of their role in committing serious human rights violations and abuses, particularly **sexual and gender-based violence**. Those sanctioned included Taliban ministers for education in Afghanistan, Russian armed forces and South Sudanese militias.

'Ahead of International Women's Day, we move from words to action. No matter where it happens, we will combat and eliminate all forms of violence against women. With today's decision, we are enhancing efforts to counter sexual and gender-based violence, to ensure that those responsible are fully accountable for their actions, and to combat impunity.'
Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

On 5 June 2023, the Council imposed restrictive measures against nine individuals for sentencing the Russian opposition politician, democracy activist and outspoken Kremlin critic **Vladimir Kara-Murza** to 25 years' imprisonment on politically motivated charges

and false allegations. The individuals listed include the **Deputy Minister of Justice of the Russian Federation**, several judges and other members of the judiciary are also included, as well as a **senior officer of the Russian penitentiary system**.

On 8 September 2023, six individuals were sanctioned, for being responsible for serious human rights violations in Russia and in the territories of Ukraine that Russia has temporarily occupied, including violations of freedom of opinion and expression. The listed individuals include prosecutors and judges active in courts established by Russia's occupying force in illegally annexed Crimea who took part in the politically motivated court proceedings.

The recently listed individuals and entities are now subject to an asset freeze in the EU. In addition, listed individuals will be subject to a **travel ban** to the EU. Moreover, persons and entities in the EU will be **prohibited from making funds and economic resources available**, either directly or indirectly, to those listed.

Importantly, in December, the EU Member States decided to extend the **EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime** for 3 years, until **8 December 2026**. The listed individuals and entities will continue to be reviewed annually. As of 2023, sanctions are being applied to **67 natural and legal persons and 20 entities**. The EU has also continued to address human rights violations and abuses through its geographical sanctions regimes.

04. NEW TECHNOLOGIES: HARNESSING OPPORTUNITIES AND ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

The global pandemic has underscored the importance of new technologies and their place in our lives. The transition to the digital age has accelerated across the world. While digital technologies can facilitate access to education, work, information and healthcare services, we are also confronted with the spread of disinformation and hate speech online. Surveillance and censorship hamper the work of civil society while the use of AI systems can exacerbate inequalities. Human rights must be protected both online and offline. This requires the engagement of all stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector, and is why the intersection of the digital world with human rights is becoming even more of a priority for the European Union.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Fundamental freedoms and human rights must be upheld in the digital world just as they are in the offline world. The protection and promotion of human rights and the intersection of digital technology continued to be at the centre of the EU's external human rights policies.

With significant developments in the global digital environment, including the rapid spread of generative AI systems and major changes in the governance of online platforms; in 2023 the EU⁸² continued to take a strong stance to promote the rights to privacy and data protection. Furthermore, the EU actively fought to discourage internet shutdowns, online censorship, hate speech online, mass and arbitrary surveillance, online gender-based violence, foreign

82 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11088-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

information manipulation and interference (FIMI), online threats to HRDs, disinformation and cybercrime. The EU continued to promote a human rights-based approach to the design, development, deployment, evaluation and use of AI. For instance, in 2023 the EU ensured a continuous rollout of the Ethical Guidelines on Artificial Intelligence and Data use in teaching and learning for educators⁸³ in order to raise awareness on the opportunities and challenges the new technology brings to education and training.

EXTERNAL DIMENSION OF EU LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

The EU continued to regulate the digital sphere in 2023 through legislative initiatives. In December 2023, the European Parliament and the Council reached an agreement on the **Artificial Intelligence Act**. This Act is the first legal framework on AI. It aims to promote the development of AI and addresses the potential high risks it poses to safety and fundamental rights. The legal framework will apply to both public and private actors inside and outside the EU as long as the AI system is placed on the EU market or its use affects people located in the EU.

While most AI systems will pose low to no risk, certain AI systems create risks that need to be addressed to avoid undesirable outcomes. Recognising the potential threat to rights and democracy posed by certain applications of AI, the new legislation will prohibit a series of uses, including biometric categorisation systems that use sensitive characteristics (e.g. race, sexual orientation or religious, political and philosophical beliefs); social scoring based on social behaviour or personal characteristics; and AI systems that manipulate human behaviour to circumvent a person's free will.

83 <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d81a0d54-5348-11ed-92ed-01aa75e-d71a1/language-en>

The legislation will also regulate so-called high-risk uses of AI which will be subject to a number of requirements concerning, for example, training data, transparency, human oversight and risk management. Before putting a high-risk AI system on the market or into service in the EU, the provider of the system must perform an ex ante conformity assessment. This assessment is aimed at demonstrating that the system complies with the mandatory requirements for trustworthy AI.

Based on the EU's own strong regulatory basis, the EU will actively engage in 2024 in **global efforts to regulate AI**, including discussions at the United Nations in the framework of the Global Digital Compact. The EU also actively follows the work of and engages with the UN High-Level Advisory Board on Artificial Intelligence.

The EU's Digital Services Act (DSA)⁸⁴ entered into force in November 2022 and became fully applicable to designated regulated entities within scope on 17 February 2024. The European Union is committed to enforcing the DSA effectively and to enhancing the fundamental rights of all users, and to improving the safety of digital services in the EU. In 2023, many liberal democracies around the world prepared or finalised regulations, similar to the DSA, to address risks emanating from online platforms. Unfortunately, many autocratic governments also continued to abuse platform regulation to surveil and silence citizens – often under the pretext of combatting disinformation or hate speech. This is why, based on its experience of developing and implementing the DSA, in 2023 the EU stepped up its international engagement on platform governance, promoting effective and balanced platform governance globally that enhances fundamental rights and empowers civil society, as reflected in the UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms.⁸⁵

84 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022R2065>

85 UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms.

As regards **exports of cyber-surveillance technology**, the EU has tightened controls with a view to ensuring that digital technologies are traded legitimately and that they are not misused to violate human rights. In 2023 the EU worked closely with EU Member States within the Surveillance Technology Expert Group, to finalise work on the guidelines to support exporters in the application of controls of cyber-surveillance items. The publication of the guidelines is expected in 2024.

The EU is also funding projects to implement the EU's digital policy such as the '**Multilateralism and Digitalisation**', with EUR 30 million in funding. This promotes the EU's vision of digitalisation in the values-based multilateral system. Advancing the EU's participation and role in a specific range of topics will on the one hand promote the EU's vision and, on the other hand, reduce the risk of propagation of non-democratic and non-human centric developments in the digital domain.

In March 2023, the EU and Denmark launched the Digital Democracy Initiative, with a contribution of EUR 11 million from the EU. This initiative seeks to promote and protect local inclusive democratic space in the digital age by supporting the use of digital technologies to strengthen the capacity and safety of human rights defenders and civil society actors, and to increase civic engagement in restrictive contexts.

BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY

The EU used some of its political dialogues, including **human rights** dialogues, to raise concerns about and discuss possible joint solutions against the spread of internet shutdowns, online censorship and mass and targeted arbitrary surveillance, including the targeting of human rights defenders and journalists by spyware. The EU also condemned internet shutdowns and laws that breached human rights in the digital sphere through public diplomacy.

The global reach of technologies and their daily importance for everybody makes **multilateral and multi-stakeholder approaches essential**. The EU continued to engage very actively, in particular within UN fora, to share analysis and to identify best practices and recommendations on how to ensure a digital sphere that is compliant with human rights.

SAVE THE DATE

CSW67 HIGH LEVEL SIDE EVENT

RETHINKING HOW TO BRIDGE THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

INTERGENERATIONAL PANEL DISCUSSION

8 March 2023
3.00pm-4.15pm EST
CR1 UN HQ

© EU

The EU and the African Union organised a panel discussion on the margins of the CSW67 in New York on bridging the gender digital divide.

The EU submitted its contribution to the UN Global Digital Compact. The EU's contribution builds on the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles and emphasises human rights as the foundation of an open, safe and secure digital future.

In **Geneva, during Human Rights Council** sessions, the EU participated actively in debates on new and emerging digital technologies, the right to privacy, cyberbullying and freedom of expression online. During the 53rd session of the HRC, the EU led a statement on the impact of internet shutdowns that gathered 54 signatories. The EU engaged actively with the International Telecommunications Union to ensure that its work on developing ICT standards takes the human

rights dimension into account, supporting closer cooperation between the International Telecommunications Union and the OHCHR in that respect.



**Human Rights Council Side event on
The report on the relationship between human rights and technical standard-setting processes for new and emerging technologies**

7 July 2023, 14:00 – 15:00, Room XXVII (Hybrid), Palais de Nations

Co-organized by the Republic of Korea, Austria, Brazil, Denmark, Morocco, Singapore and the European Union, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

The EU with partners organised a side event at the 53rd Human Rights Council in Geneva on the intersection of human rights and technical standard setting processes.

Moreover, the EU has been strongly engaged in negotiations in the UN General Assembly on the first UN resolution on artificial intelligence, tabled by the United States in December 2023. The EU and its Member States have proposed substantial language on human rights, to bring the resolution up to EU standards in terms of human rights in the digital environment, in line with the AI Act.

The EU continued to engage regularly with the OHCHR. As part of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the EU pledged EUR 4 million to the OHCHR for the initiative 'Promotion and protection of digital rights: a pathway to the digital future'.

The EU and the United States continued to engage actively within the **EU-US Trade and Technology Council**, which serves as a forum for the United States and EU to coordinate approaches to key global trade, economic and technology issues, and to deepen transatlantic trade and economic relations based on these shared values. Within

the Trade and Technology Council, the EU and the US discuss a wide range of human rights issues in the digital sphere. In bilateral and multilateral settings both sides regularly address the serious threats faced by human rights defenders online (e.g. spyware, online smear campaigns, online threats and incitement to violence), and the issues of internet shutdowns and surveillance. Going beyond raising awareness of these issues, the EU and the US are seeking practical solutions to protect human rights defenders online, and in the first half of 2024 will issue **joint guidance for online platforms on how to foster online protection of human rights defenders**. The EU and the US agreed in 2023 on a common standard for the exchange of information on FIMI threats, which aims to foster a better understanding of how FIMI targets society, democracy and security.



SUPPORT TO HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The EU is very aware of the impact of digital technologies on civil society organisations and HRDs. The COVID-19 pandemic also brought a considerable increase in digital threats, as well as an increase in attacks on the tools and services that HRDs need to do their work, such as online meeting platforms. Not only are some defenders explicitly targeted, but large-scale, corporate data breaches and security incidents have indirectly affected human rights work at the global level.

In 2023, more than 65 emergency grants for digital security and protection measures were awarded, benefiting 182 HRDs working in countries such as **Belarus**, **Russia**, and **Türkiye**. Grants from the ProtectDefenders.eu mechanism to organisations and local communities to reinforce digital security contributed to the security set-up and training of more than 495 local NGOs staff members. This organisational support strengthened the digital security structure of actors operating in sensitive environments, such as in **Honduras**, **Nicaragua** and **Uganda**. In addition, more than 90 HRDs benefited from an extensive capacity-building programme, which provides tailor-made training for HRDs and organisations on a wide array of topics, including digital security and digital risk assessment.



High Representative meeting with Ukrainian civil society representatives active in advancing the reform agenda.

05. DELIVERING BY WORKING TOGETHER

5.1 Public diplomacy and strategic communication

Communicating the role and activities of the European Union has become more important than ever as we see accusations of double standards and a backsliding in the protection and promotion of human rights. The EU has stepped up its communication work to showcase positive stories on human rights around the world through social media, videos, press releases, blogposts and missions of the High Representative. To unmask disinformation and counter FIMI, the EU has increased its fact-checking and myth-busting activities, especially by strengthening its strategic communications in the Eastern Partnership, the Southern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans through its regional communication programmes, and through the work of the EUvsDisinfo project.

The marking of international days relevant to the human rights and democracy agenda is also a central element of the EU's communication activities. The **High Representative issued statements on behalf of the EU** on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, the Day of International Criminal Justice, the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples and the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence based on Religion or Belief. The High Representative also issued statements to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day, International Albinism Awareness Day, and the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. Together with Commissioners, the High Representative marked the International Days against Female Genital Mutilation and against Child Labour, World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, World NGO day as well as World Refugee Day and the International Day to End Impunity

for Crimes against Journalists, Universal Children's Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The High Representative also made a joint statement with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe on the European and World Day against the Death Penalty.

2023 was an important year for anniversaries, including the 75th anniversary of the human rights blueprint and aspirational document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The European Union has been actively engaged with partners to support or the United Nations' year-long Human Rights 75 initiative including through the Stand Up for Human Rights campaign. In addition, there was a targeted youth campaign, Our Voice Our Future, which recognised the crucial role that young people play in safeguarding universal rights. Engaging young human rights activists in non-EU countries and young people at large, the campaign leveraged social media platforms to share narratives of activism, raising awareness of the importance of safeguarding and advancing human rights. The campaign's hashtag resonated in over 100 countries across the world and had an estimated reach of 97.8 million people. Youth engagement for human rights was also prominent in the 25th EU-NGO Forum on Human Rights.



The fifth Young Activists Summit (#YAS23) showcased five individuals aged between 14 and 29 and the remarkable impact of their actions throughout the world. At a time when wars, climate change, biodiversity loss, and human rights violations seem overwhelming, the 2023 Laureates have found concrete ways to advance peace within their communities, and reconcile humans with nature.

Young people as actors of change for human rights: an event by, with and for young people

The EU-NGO Human Rights Forum held in Brussels on 4-5 December brought together 300 participants from over 107 countries, including more than 130 young human rights defenders from all around the world to exchange ideas and best practices with EU officials, UN experts and international NGOs. EU speakers brought attention to existing EU initiatives to enhance the visibility of young activists, notably the campaign Our Voice Our Future. Over the 2 days of discussions, the participants highlighted the shrinking space for civil society across the world, and the need for the EU to strengthen its focus on the situation of young human rights defenders. Some of the key requests made by young people were: increased funds to train young activists, to be included on digital issues; improved access to visas for individuals at risk; more flexible funding mechanisms, and effective international action to regulate the digital sphere, in particular social media. The outcomes were subsequently presented to the UN high-level Forum in Geneva on 11-12 December.



The protection of young human rights defenders and fostering youth participation in policy-making topped the agenda of the 25th edition of the EU-NGO Human Rights Forum, as this year's theme focused on "Youth as actors of change for human rights".

Together with the Spanish presidency of the Council of the European Union, the EU organised a high-level conference on 4 October in Madrid to show that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights remains fit for purpose. It featured opening addresses by the High Representative and Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares, as well as a keynote speech by UN High Commissioner Volker Türk and a talk by youth climate activist Francisco Vera, a leading participant in the Our Voice Our Future campaign. In a session moderated by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, former UN High Commissioner Mary Robinson, Navi Pillay and Michelle Bachelet reflected on key achievements in the creation of the UN human rights office. In a discussion with businesses and civil society representatives, the Brazilian Minister for Indigenous Peoples, Sonia Guajajara, and Rwandan Minister for Digital Technologies, Paula Ingabire, discussed how human rights influence climate action and digital policies.

For human rights day 2023, the United Nations organised a high-level forum in Geneva on 11-12 December where states and partners were invited to pledge their support for human rights politically and financially. The EU Special Representative for Human Rights attended and pledged on behalf of the EU. In 2023, the EU became the largest voluntary contributor to OHCHR.

As every year, High Representative Borrell issued a statement on behalf of the EU's Member States to mark the day. The EU's 150 Delegations around the world also engaged in various activities including public outreach in schools, video screenings and conferences. To highlight some activities, the High Representative's statement was published locally in El Salvador; in The Gambia the Delegation held a discussion with law students to reflect on the meaning of the Declaration and its importance in the Gambian context. In Rwanda, four debates were held with university students on the motion 'To what extent has the declaration successfully established a global framework for human rights?'. In **Mexico**, the Delegation worked with the Colombian band

Aterciopelados to launch the song 'Liberté' to commemorate 75 years of the Declaration. The song's lyrics talk about the defence of human rights on many different fronts. It was released on YouTube⁸⁶ on 11 December 2023.

11 de diciembre de 2023
28 Lunes

DePalabra

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Día de los Derechos Humanos

Por Josep Borrell

Alto representante de la Unión Europea para Asuntos Exteriores y Política de Seguridad



En el Día de los Derechos Humanos, la Unión Europea (UE) celebra, junto con el resto del mundo, el 75.º aniversario de la Declaración Universal de Derechos Humanos (DUDH). Ese documento marcó un hito al sentar las bases de nuestro sistema mundial de derechos humanos, así como de las leyes nacionales y los tratados internacionales que protegen y promueven los derechos humanos, y del Convenio Europeo de Derechos Humanos (CEDH) en Europa. Hoy sigue siendo tan válido y crucial como hace 75 años.

Los derechos humanos trascienden las fronteras y las culturas; son inherentes a cada persona, sin distinción. Aunque en los últimos 75 años se han logrado avances significativos, las crisis siguen multiplicándose y con demasiada frecuencia son las mujeres, los niños y las personas en situaciones vulnerables las que soportan la mayor carga de las consecuencias de

la guerra y los conflictos.

El respeto, la protección y el cumplimiento de los derechos humanos son esenciales para promover la justicia y la rendición de cuentas y poner fin a la impunidad. Ahí radica uno de los valores y principios fundacionales de la UE. El fomento de los derechos humanos es, además, una prioridad clave de la acción exterior de la UE con la que estamos firmemente comprometidos. La UE seguirá condenando las violaciones y los abusos de los derechos humanos, las vulneraciones del derecho internacional humanitario, la discriminación, la reducción del espacio cívico y los ataques a la democracia y a la libertad de los medios de comunicación dondequiera que se produzcan.

Además del 75.º aniversario de la DUDH, conmemoramos el 30.º aniversario de la Declaración y el Programa de Acción de Viena y el 25.º aniversario de la Declaración sobre los defensores de los derechos humanos, reconociendo su papel crucial de agentes de cambio positivo que se aferrarán por el fomento y el pleno disfrute de los derechos humanos. La DUDH sigue teniendo más importancia que nunca —y cabe esperar que siga sirviéndonos, por

lo menos, otros 75 años más— ahora que aplicamos sus principios para superar los retos actuales en un mundo cada vez más digital y en el que nos enfrentamos ya a los efectos del cambio climático.

Es nuestro deber colectivo defender y promover los derechos humanos de todas y cada una de las personas en todas las partes del mundo. Al celebrar este hito, la Unión Europea reafirma su compromiso con la Carta de las Naciones Unidas y su solidaridad con las Naciones Unidas y con la Oficina del Alto Comisionado para los Derechos Humanos, así como con todas las organizaciones multilaterales y regionales, ante la misión de avanzar hacia la plena realización de los derechos humanos en todo el mundo. En consonancia con el objetivo de no dejar a nadie atrás, la UE ratifica también su compromiso de promover un enfoque de la cooperación para el desarrollo basado en los derechos humanos.

Los derechos humanos no son meras palabras escritas sobre el papel, son normas jurídicas de aplicación universal. Son los cimientos de la paz y la senda hacia una sociedad más justa, igualitaria e inclusiva para hoy, para mañana y para las generaciones venideras.

The statement of the HRVP Borrell on behalf of the European Union on the occasion of Human Rights Day 2023 in a local newspaper in El Salvador.

Throughout the year, the EU joined forces with the Global Campus of Human Rights to mark the 75th anniversary of the Declaration, including at the Global Campus annual conference on the global state of human rights (towards a new era for human rights) in July 2023. The EU Special Representative for Human Rights participated side by side with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, and other high-level speakers.

On 9 May, the European Union marks its birthday, and the Schuman Declaration which is the basis of the idea of political and economic cooperation. Every year, Europe Day is celebrated around the world.

86 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=it7Z_BcKRD8



Europe Day 2023, Tbilisi, Georgia

To celebrate Europe Day, the EU Delegation in Georgia held a large exhibition with over 10 000 people in attendance. Throughout the day participants enjoyed a variety of activities, with Member States presenting their cultures and traditions in the 'Eurovillage' pavilion, including performances of singing and dancing. Partners of the European Union showcased the tangible outcomes and benefits for Georgian citizens that have been achieved with the EU's assistance to Georgia. There were also games and interactive activities, while Georgian farmers presented their produce in the 'Unique Georgian Taste' exhibition. There was also a storytelling event entitled 'My Europe' which featured narratives from 12 well-known Georgian celebrities.

FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE

Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) has been acknowledged as a multifaceted threat to society, democracy and security. This activity also includes tactics to suppress independent and critical voices, for example through trolling, harassment and intimidation. In addition to other harmful impacts of FIMI, this can lead to self-censorship and limit the right to freedom of expression.

In October, the EEAS published a report⁸⁷ on FIMI targeting LGBTI people. It aimed to shed light on the nature of FIMI and on the tactics and techniques used to target the LGBTI community across the world. A launch event brought together experts on FIMI and representatives of the LGBTI community together. The analysis contained in the report found that FIMI actors aimed to provoke public outrage and hatred against LGBTI individuals, communities and organisations, and more broadly seek to undermine democratic values and societal cohesion. This specific example of identity-based FIMI activity highlights another dimension of the threat: it uses vulnerable groups as vehicles to promote political agendas, targeting human rights and putting individuals at risk.



On 23 October, EEAS presented its newest report: 'FIMI targeting LGBTIQ+ people: Well-informed analysis to protect human rights and diversity'. The discussions ranged from regulatory aspects by the EU, the role of media, and the contemporary challenges faced by the LGBTIQ+ community, both in the EU, its neighbourhood and beyond.

5.2 Implementation, monitoring and evaluation

As this report shows, the EU has continued to make use of the full range of its human rights and democracy instruments and tools to uphold and promote human rights across the world, implementing the 2020-2024 action plan on human rights and democracy. In the

⁸⁷ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/fimi-targeting-lgbtqi-people_en

face of multiple crises and conflicts, further backsliding on human rights and democracy, and bolder and more coordinated challenges to the universality of human rights, the EU continued to act on all fronts and at all levels, and strengthened the Team Europe approach to mobilise more resources for human rights action.

Together with its Member States, the EU leveraged its role in multilateral human rights fora, doing more outreach than ever before to defend the integrity of the international human rights system and to make sure that it addresses the most egregious violations and abuses around the world. The EU has again conducted more bilateral human rights dialogues than any other actor and engaged with partners from all regions, including through the intense outreach activity of the EU Special Representative for Human Rights.

In 2023, the EU further accelerated its work on particular themes and issues, by bringing together multiple stakeholders (including civil society) in new action coalitions to improve the impact and reach of the fight against torture and the fight against the death penalty, to promote the freedom of the media, the right to freedom of association and assembly. As reported, the EU continued its intensive support for human rights defenders and engaged with business actors, including from the tech sector, to ensure that their activities comply with human rights. Finally, the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was used to step up communication and outreach efforts as well as youth engagement.

These activities continue to be prepared and reviewed with the EU Member States in the Council Working Party for Human Rights (COHOM) to maximise their impact and reach and pursue a unified and streamlined approach around the world. In addition to negotiating and agreeing EU positions and initiatives, COHOM closely follows, from a cross-cutting perspective, the implementation of the action plan and its 2023 mid-term review, the implementation of EU thematic human rights guidelines and the work of the human rights dialogues and consultations.

In the first half of 2023, the EU completed the mid-term review of the implementation of the action plan⁸⁸ after wide consultation and exchanges with stakeholders, including the European Parliament, EU Member States, civil society and relevant UN bodies. The review confirmed that the action plan's flexible and holistic approach to human rights and democracy, as well as its five interconnected lines of action, responded well to the challenging implementation context and should continue to guide the EU's action on human rights and democracy in its external relations. The review also highlighted the importance of ensuring that the action plan aligns with the EU multiannual financial framework for 2021-2027 and in particular the NDICI-Global Europe instrument, including its thematic programme on human rights and democracy, which remains a crucial instrument for its implementation.

In addition, a mid-term review of the NDICI-Global Europe programming, including the human rights and democracy thematic programme was also launched in 2023.

The review will include an assessment of the relevance and progress of the Human Rights and Democracy multi-annual indicative programme 2021-2027. The review will be informed by an external evaluation and by consultations with external stakeholders, as well as by the mid-term review of the action plan on human rights and democracy 2020-2024.

The findings and best practices identified in all these discussions are incorporated in the day-to-day work of EU institutions, EU Delegations around the world, and Member States. To strengthen the impact of our activities and to be more responsive, the EU overhauled its approach to human rights **training** to give colleagues in EU Delegations, EU institutions and Member States a solid basis for their human rights activities, and address new or complex subjects, such as digital technologies or business and human rights.

88 JSWD(2023) 210 final.

The structure of this Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World continues to be fully aligned with the action plan in order to track progress on priority actions and monitor implementation. We have received in-depth feedback on the implementation of the action plan and the need for further action through regular contacts with the European Parliament and frequent meetings with civil society, as well as contact with relevant UN bodies and agencies. Relevant feedback was also received during the consultation on the mid-term review of the action plan's implementation, hosted by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights.

#NoWomen_NoPeace

World Peace Day 2023
Social Media Take-over with
Ghadir Taira
غدير طيرة
يوم السلام الدولي

ARI
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Ghadir Taira, an Yemeni activist, journalist, and 2023 SAWT Project Fellow takes over Arab Reform Initiative on World Peace Day to share her thoughts on the crucial role women can play in peace-building.

Stay in touch

Follow the European Union on social media to stay up to date on all our activities throughout the year.

