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A Normative Core for a Geopolitical Europe

Policy Recommendation on Human Rights in European Union
External Action

Key Recommendations

As the global geopolitical map is being redrawn and the norms that have guided international relations are being challenged, Europe is changing and adapting. Refocusing attention on economy, security and defence is a necessity, as is ensuring greater flexibility in how EU engages with regional and national partners across the globe.

As of yet, it is unclear how these changes will impact the role of human rights in EU's external action, likely operationalised through the next EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy. While the drafting of the Action Plan has not yet started, we know that it should be aligned with EU's Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034. The draft MFF shared by the European Commission suggests less specified and leaner commitments

on human rights, potentially challenging EU's ability to shoulder its role in upholding and promoting human rights, continued support to established partnerships, including with human rights defenders and building new partnerships to defend human rights and international law.

Drawing on research in the Horizon-funded Human Rights Justification program, following recommendations are made for human rights in EU external action:

- At their core, human rights are about putting limits on state power, allowing critique and ensuring redress when states abuse their power. This core is important in a time when bullying and rule breaking dominate the international agenda. Both regionally and globally, EU plays an important role in defending human rights, and needs to build strong and equitable partnerships in support of human rights and international law.
- In a time of crisis, prioritisation is necessary, in order to defend the core of human rights. For the EU, this will demand a strategic balancing act between, on the one hand, strengthening its agenda on non-derogatory rights, including the right to life, freedom from torture and non-discrimination and, on the other hand, ensuring its commitment to social, economic and cultural rights, high on the agenda of many of its partners in the global south.
- The EU has made a strategic choice to align its fourth Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy with the next MFF 2028-2034. The EU and its Member States then also need to be strategic in how to – without a forward-looking Action Plan – advocate for and ensure space for human rights in the next MFF. That is, how to ensure funding for human rights in the global fund and how to ensure that the increased flexibility in regional funds also can be used to tackle human rights crisis.
- The EU has been a committed, important and stable partner on key human rights struggles worldwide and should continue to play this role, including on combatting the death penalty, ensuring basic freedoms and protection for human rights defenders, including environmental rights defenders, promote equal rights for women and their reproductive rights.

Background and Current Developments

The Horizon Program "Human Rights Justifications" studies how human rights have shifted from being a tool that put limits on state power to becoming a tool of governance. The research has shown that international and regional human rights regimes and human rights defenders are ill-equipped to deal with situations where human rights are distorted to serve governance needs. These shifts are occurring while anti-rights movements are developing their foothold in democracies inside and outside Europe and autocracies are on the rise.

Human rights are at the heart of the European project and its external action (TEU art 2 and 21). Since 2011, the treaty-based commitments have been operationalised into EU external action through the EU Joint Communication "Human Rights and Democracy at the Heart of EU External Action" (COM(2011) 886 final) and subsequent Action Plans for Human Rights and Democracy (2012-2014, 2015-2019 and 2020-2027). A fourth Action Plan is to be adopted for 2028, aligning it with the EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034.

The political practice of human rights has never been perfect, neither in EU nor elsewhere. A normative tool that seeks to ensure checks on power, will inevitably collide with other interests and be challenged. Biases and double standards in implementations are inevitable. This is why already the drafters of the early human rights foresaw the need to equip the human rights regime with safeguards: protection for freedom of opinion and speech and redress for rights infringements.

Today, leading world powers are actively redrawing the geopolitical map, and challenging multilateralism and international law. Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine that brought war to the doorstep of the EU and the current US administration's questioning of basic building blocks of the transatlantic relationship, including NATO security guarantees, have served as a wake-up call for the EU. This is, as European Commission President von der Leyen noted in her [State of the Union address](#) to the European Parliament in September 2025, Europe's "independence moment". An independence moment that comes at a moment when national politics in many EU Member States are also becoming increasingly polarized, and when the role of the EU and its priorities are an integral part of political challenges in many Member States. Consequently, EU foreign policy is currently driven less by a will to change the world and more by a will to protect its citizens and ensure security.

It remains easy to argue that human rights, both civil and political and economic, social and cultural are at the heart of the EU internal project: the survival of the European project is dependent on a functioning social contract in which 'rights' although not always clearly mentioned are inherent and commitment to human rights is also what sets the EU apart on the global stage. However, to ensure this, the EU needs to revitalise its human rights approach, ensure synergies with other priorities, including security and competitiveness, and back it up through strong partnerships.

Negotiations are ongoing for the EU's next budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028-2034. The Commission has proposed a restructured budget where previously seven headings have been condensed into four.¹ In the area of external action, seven current funding instruments, will likely be condensed into one instrument: Global Europe, with significant regional budget lines and a cross-cutting budget line. The

¹ For analysis, see [EU Budget 2028-2034](#), EP Briefing (July 2025)

European Peace Facility through which EU support security and defence in third states, will remain an off budget instrument.

The *leitmotiv* for the budget is flexibility, and in absolute term the proposed budget for external action through Global Europe is considerably higher than in the previous budget. However, several negotiation rounds can be expected before the budget is adopted, most likely in 2026. The increase of the budget is likely to receive pushback from some Member States, including those who are dealing with budgetary challenges and austerity within their own borders and those who view external action itself as a no-go. The flexibility itself, although understandably desirable in a situation of rapid and unpredictable global changes, will raise questions and also redlines with some member states. It risks shifting more power from the EEAS and Member States to the European Commission, and increased flexibility also means less predictability and possibly less transparency.

The proposal of lumping together thematic funding into one and moving to full mainstreaming approach on cross-cutting issues (i.e., abolishing funding targets on climate, gender etc.) may make it more difficult to ensure adequate funding for cross-cutting issues and will make tracking funding for them more complex. Or as noted by Alexei Jones, the new framing includes a “...fundamental strategic dilemma: how to reconcile the pursuit of short-term geopolitical and economic interests with the EU’s long-standing, treaty-based commitment to sustainable development, human rights and democratic governance”.² It is crucial that the EU stays committed to its normative base, also in a shifting global context.

² Jones, Alexei, [A Companion Guide to the Global Europe Instrument Proposal](#), ECDPM Briefing Note No 198 (July 2025).

