

Catherine Ashton

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and
Vice President of the European Commission

Speech to the European Parliament on human rights

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

European Parliament

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Mr President, Honourable Members,

I am glad to have this opportunity to talk about human rights. On many occasions, this House has stated its commitment to this subject. It is a commitment I fully share.

For the EU, human rights matter. They are at the core of our identity and they are at the heart of what we do around the world. Our own history of entrenching human rights, democracy and the rule of law across 27 member states, is a success story and acts as a source of inspiration for others.

So it is logical that we have developed a strong set of mechanisms for promoting these values in different contexts – as the Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World sets out.

To give just one example, over the last 18 months we have provided €235 million in funding for 900 NGO projects in 100 countries. This work is important and must continue.

But we are not the only actor and ours is not the only economic and political success story. Therefore, as the world changes, we need to ask ourselves what we could do better.

While human rights are universal, a "one size fits all" approach does not work. This does not mean we should change the message on the importance of human rights. But there is room to get smarter at how we deliver it.

We will make most progress if we approach the human rights agenda in a focused and realistic way. We need to target our efforts, tackling each case based on a detailed understanding of the country at hand.

We also need a sharper focus on results. Previous resolutions of this House have called for more information to better assess the effectiveness of our policies. I share this concern. We must judge our efforts by outcomes, even if our contributions to improving human rights situations are an investment over the longer term.

The work of the human rights subcommittee and its chair, Mrs Hautala, on human rights defenders is a good example of this. And I welcome this report and its findings.

Let me address some specific aspects by making clear that I will continue to meet civil society actors and Human Rights Defenders both in Brussels and abroad, as I have done in Gaza, in China, and most recently, in Brussels. And I expect colleagues in delegations and here in Brussels to do the same.

A good example of being smart and well-organised has been the EU's work on promoting the ratification of the Rome Statute in the run up to the Kampala conference this year. We have worked with specific countries, offering EU support, at delegation and headquarters levels, working with Member States and the EU Presidency.

To name just one success case: when I visited the Seychelles last month, I discussed a range of issues on which the EU and the Seychelles can strengthen our co-operation, with piracy a top priority. I also raised the ICC and encouraged the President, James Michel, to submit the ratification bill to Parliament. Upon my return to Brussels I was pleased to receive a letter confirming that the government has now launched this process.

Looking ahead, I want to see what more we can do to support the abolition of the death penalty world-wide. I want to assure this House that work on abolishing the death penalty is a personal priority for me. And I will see to it that work advances both bilaterally and in multi-lateral fora, beginning with the UN in September.

As this House knows, the promise of the Lisbon Treaty is a more coherent, more consistent and hence more effective EU foreign policy.

This is also a chance for our work on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. These will run like a silver thread through everything we do externally.

The External Action Service, once in place, will give us the chance to realise our potential. It will strengthen our ability to speak with one voice. And with its integrated structure, the new Service should help to ensure that human rights issues are reflected in all areas of our external action, including CSDP, Development and Trade.

In this respect, let me refer to the oral question on trade in goods used for torture. The EU takes its commitment to the fight against torture very seriously. Any shortcoming in the implementation of EC Regulation 1236 of 2005 must and will be addressed. In that spirit, we have invited Amnesty International and the Omega Research Foundation to present their findings to a meeting later this month of the Regulatory Committee with our Member States.

On human rights, as in other areas, we need to pull together. We need the continued commitment of Member States, of this House and of other EU institutions. We need to review our work regularly. To make sure we make best use of all available instruments – from human rights dialogues to EU guidelines, from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights to our bilateral assistance and our actions in multilateral fora.

Revisiting our overall EU human rights strategy could be a useful exercise, and I intend to launch a consultation process to inform a new EU human rights strategy this year.

Honourable Members, dear friends,

Eleanor Roosevelt used to say:

'It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness'.

This is valid for our human rights policy too. In the EU, we have many tools to help make the world a better place. We need to mobilise and connect them better. This is what I want to do. Maximising the potential of the new Lisbon setup, and counting on your vital support.