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To: Delegations

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Delegations will find attached the 2020 EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World, approved by the Council at its 3804th meeting held on 21 June 2021.

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INTRODUCTION

The profound human rights and democracy dimensions to the ongoing global health crisis have become increasingly evident. The COVID-19 pandemic has perpetuated and exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities worldwide. The humanitarian, health and socioeconomic consequences have had a disproportionate impact on the rights of persons in vulnerable situations. In 2020, in line with its commitment to contribute to the global response to the pandemic, the EU has promoted a human rights-based approach, stressing that human rights are universal, interdependent and indivisible and must be fully respected in the response to the pandemic.

In a geopolitical and COVID-19 context in which challenges to human rights, democracy and the rule of law have become more widespread, the EU has increased its efforts to consolidate its role as a principled and reliable global actor for human rights. In November 2020, the **Foreign Affairs Council** adopted the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024),¹ which sets out the EU's ambitions and priorities for action in external relations for the next five years.

The Action Plan demonstrates the EU's renewed commitment to protecting and promoting human rights, empowering people, and building more resilient democracies across the world. The EU annual report on human rights and democracy monitors the implementation of the new EU Action Plan by presenting the progress achieved to date.

Throughout the year, the EU continued to raise its profile and demonstrate global leadership on the human rights and democracy agenda. The new EU Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in EU External Action 2021-2025 (GAP III)², adopted by the Commission in November and welcomed through presidency conclusions by 24 Member States, outlines specific priorities and actions. It sends a clear message on the importance of mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment into all areas of EU external action.

¹ [Council conclusions on the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, 12848/20, 18 November 2020](#)

² EU Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in EU External Action 2021-2025 (GAP III): https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89112/gender-action-plan-iii-towards-gender-equal-world_en

In December, the Council adopted a landmark decision³ and a regulation⁴ establishing the first-ever EU global human rights sanctions regime. This is a milestone achievement. It allows targeting individuals, entities and bodies – including state and non-state actors – responsible for, involved in or associated with serious human rights violations and abuses worldwide. The restrictive measures provide for travel bans for individuals and the freezing of the assets of individuals and entities.

The 22nd EU-NGO Human Rights Forum, held in Brussels on 9-10 December 2020, focused on the impact of new technologies on human rights. This is one of the new Action Plan's key strands of action and the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the relevance of digital technologies in managing the opportunities and risks for human rights both online and offline.

Implementing the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy is more important than ever. The urgency to address the COVID-19 crisis opens up new opportunities to strengthen EU leadership and global collective action. Human rights and democracy are, and should continue to be, at the centre of EU external relations, from Russia and Turkey to Colombia and Hong Kong. EU delegations on the ground are on the frontline of this work and the EU Special Representative for Human Rights will guide the implementation of the new EU Action Plan.

³ Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/1999 of 7 December 2020 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.LI.2020.410.01.0013.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2020%3A410I%3ATOC>

⁴ Council Regulation (EU) 2020/1998 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32020R1998&qid=1615449257978>

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, and placed increased emphasis on promoting the coherence, visibility and effectiveness of the EU's human rights engagement as a core element of the EUSR's mandate. Both internally, through institutional coordination and discussions, and externally, in collaboration with non-EU countries, the EUSR explored the best ways to strengthen and preserve the EU's leading role in supporting human rights in the world.

The EUSR has been closely involved in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024). The EUSR has a central role in guiding the implementation of the Action Plan, which will be the basis of the efforts to address long-standing EU priorities and new human rights challenges in non-EU countries.

The EUSR continued to strengthen the EU's high-level bilateral engagement with countries facing critical human rights challenges, through bilateral visits, virtual meetings and human rights dialogues. Constructive and regular consultations were held, including with Colombia, Egypt, India, Mexico, Pakistan, Qatar, countries in the Sahel, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, the United States (US) and Uzbekistan, on a broad range of issues of mutual concern linked to human rights.

The EUSR further strengthened constructive relations with the US through bilateral visits in February 2020. Prominent issues on the agenda included developments following the death of George Floyd, the EU Action Plan, the US Commission on Unalienable Rights, as well as developments in China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the US withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO). Following the US announcement of restrictive measures on staff of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the EUSR reiterated the EU's firm support for the judicial independence and impartiality of the Court.

On his first visit to the Middle East, the EUSR held a series of meetings in Qatar with senior officials, representatives of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Discussions focused on labour rights, women's rights and freedom of expression. This visit, combined with EUSR's work with Saudi Arabia to advance the proposal for the first-ever EU-Saudi Arabia human rights dialogue, were significant steps paving the way for new avenues of EU engagement with the Gulf countries.

The EUSR followed up on the 15th EU-India Summit held in July 2020, where it was agreed to relaunch the local EU-India human rights dialogue which had been suspended since 2013. Regular dialogue will enable the parties to explore ways to enhance collaboration in bilateral and multilateral fora and pave the way for the first EUSR visit to the country. The EUSR's continued high-level political engagement with Pakistan resulted in regular discussions on a broader human rights agenda.

Another priority for the EUSR was the situation in Belarus, where the political and human rights situation deteriorated in the context of the presidential election of 9 August 2020. The EUSR engaged actively with Belarusian civil society and in regional and multilateral fora to address the issue.

In Africa, the EUSR for Human Rights worked closely with the EUSR for the Sahel on the promotion of human rights and international humanitarian law in the region. In a similar vein, the EUSR collaborated closely with the EUSR for the Horn of Africa to address human rights and IHL concerns about the human rights and international humanitarian law situation in Ethiopia and Eritrea in the context of the crisis in Tigray.

In order to adapt to the new COVID-19 reality, the EUSR substituted bilateral country visits and dialogues with virtual meetings with key international partners and interlocutors in non-EU countries, which broadened the reach of the EUSR's geographic and thematic consultations. The EUSR called on governments in partner countries to put human rights at the heart of their crisis responses and uphold the dignity and human rights of all without discrimination of any kind. His engagement seeks to ensure that no one is left behind and no human right is ignored.

In line with the call from UN High Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, to draw attention to the situation of prisoners, particular emphasis was placed on encouraging several partner countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia, including Central Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East to ensure that the human rights of people deprived of their liberty were protected. The EUSR called for the humanitarian release of prisoners and detainees, including human rights defenders, journalists, and political and vulnerable prisoners.

The EUSR continued to highlight EU priorities by chairing several human rights dialogues, including with Myanmar, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and the African Union, as well as by opening dialogues with Azerbaijan and Ukraine. To encourage more sustained engagement between the dialogues, the EUSR initiated further technical follow-up discussions to identify specific areas for cooperation.

The EUSR continued to step up work at regional and multilateral levels, especially with the UN system, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Special Procedures. He represented the EU at the high-level segment of the 43rd session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva in February and held consultations with relevant UN bodies. He participated in the event held by the Good Human Rights Stories Initiative,⁵ which focused on women's empowerment and gender equality. At the 75th UN General Assembly (UNGA) session in September, the EUSR represented the EU at several virtual high level events on the death penalty, the rights of LGBTI persons and the ICC. The EUSR also worked closely with regional organisations, including the Council of Europe (CoE), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)/Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the African Union (AU), the African Commission on Human and People's Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The EUSR collaborated with relevant civil society organisations. Public diplomacy and media outreach have been central to addressing all major human rights challenges, as well as the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

⁵ Good Human Rights Stories Initiative: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/51241/good-human-rights-stories-coalition-launched_en

Major efforts were dedicated to further promoting compliance with international humanitarian law in armed conflicts, addressing the lack of accountability, and enhancing the coherence and visibility of the EU's engagement in this area. Through joint efforts with the EUSR for the Sahel, substantial discussions were held with the UN and the G5 Sahel Executive Secretariat on protecting human rights and promoting compliance with international humanitarian law in the Sahel.

In order to address the continued attacks on the ICC, the EU indicated its strong support for the Court through the active participation of the EUSR at the 75th UN General Assembly and in bilateral meetings with the US administration. Regular consultations were held with the ICC Principals and key actors, reaffirming the EU's steadfast support for the Court's independence and impartiality. Significant work was conducted to ensure that international humanitarian law and international criminal justice/the ICC remain high on the EU's policy agenda and are reflected in relevant human rights consultations and dialogues with partner countries, e.g. Colombia, Myanmar and Ukraine. This included advocating the ratification of the Rome Statute by the remaining 46 countries.

The EUSR has underlined that human rights can only be respected, protected and fulfilled in settings where there is strong local ownership. A recurring theme of the EUSR's bilateral engagement has therefore been the empowerment of independent human rights voices and institutions and the protection of the space in which they operate. The EUSR has met and engaged with local civil society, parliamentarians, members of the judiciary, ombudspersons, and representatives of national human rights institutions and pursued coordinated follow-up actions to support their work. He increased the participation of local and international civil society in the human rights dialogues which he conducted with key partner countries and regional organisations. Despite the global pandemic, the EUSR continued to regularly engage with local and international civil society organisations and human rights defenders in 2020. The virtual meetings held by the EUSR enabled him to widen the geographic range of his work and engage with a broader scope of civil society and human rights actors, including religious leaders and the private sector.

In order to increase the visibility and reach of the EU human rights policy, the EUSR conducted regular bilateral meetings, speaking engagements and academic interactions and attended international conferences. In particular, the EUSR focused on several key EU thematic priorities, which are reflected in the relevant EU human rights guidelines. These include political prisoners and human rights defenders, racial discrimination, the death penalty, torture and ill-treatment, the full enjoyment of all human rights by women, children and LGBTI persons, freedom of religion or belief, economic, social and cultural rights, business and human rights, as well as the human rights implications of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI).

Throughout the year, the EUSR continued to raise the EU's profile and demonstrate global leadership in human rights by representing the EU and the HR/VP at high level events and international conferences. He participated for example in 'Social Media: Challenges and Ways to Promote Freedoms and Protect Activists' in Qatar, the Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief, the webinar 'Ten years of protecting freedom of assembly and association', 'Political prisoners in Belarus: the perspective of civil society' in New York, and in several high-level events at the 75th UNGA session.

The EUSR continued to actively engage in public diplomacy and media outreach through public lectures, interviews with leading European and international media organisations, e.g. 'Le Monde', 'Deutsche Welle', the Republic of Korea's daily newspaper 'Kyunghyang Shinmun', and video messages in support of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Major efforts centred on promoting the visibility of the new EU Action Plan. The EUSR hosted the formal launch of the Action Plan in November and participated in several high-level events, including with the CoE.

1. PROTECTING AND EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS

1.1 PROTECTING PEOPLE, ELIMINATING INEQUALITIES, DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION

The death penalty

In 2020, working towards the global abolition of the death penalty remained at the heart of the EU's human rights priorities. Throughout the year, the **EU continued to voice its strong opposition to the use, in any circumstances, of the death penalty**, which is a cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment, violating the right to life. The death penalty has no established deterrent effect and it makes judicial errors irreversible.

In 2020, the US provided a good example of the continuous progress towards abolition: Colorado became the 22nd abolitionist state in law in the US and the 10th over the last 13 years. Louisiana and Utah reached 10 years without executions, bringing the number of US states without executions for ten or more years to 34 out of 50 states. Moreover, in 2020, Chad extended the abolition of the death penalty in law from ordinary crimes to all crimes with no exception.

The year was also marked by an unsuccessful call to reintroduce the death penalty in the Philippines and the resumption of executions in the US at federal level, where a de facto moratorium on executions had prevailed since 2003.

The EU consistently raised the issue of capital punishment with countries that still use it, and this topic featured on the agendas of EU political dialogues and human rights dialogues. Based on the minimum standards defined by international law and the EU guidelines on the death penalty, the EU issued a number of public statements deploring the use of the death penalty, and called on those countries that still apply it to consider introducing a moratorium as a first step towards abolition. This was done for instance in the case of Belarus, the only country in Europe and Central Asia that still applies the death penalty. The EU continued to raise its opposition to the death penalty in all relevant multilateral fora, in particular at the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. To mark the European Day against the Death Penalty and the World Day against the Death Penalty on 10 October 2020, the EU and the Council of Europe issued a joint statement reaffirming their opposition to the use of capital punishment in all circumstances, and their commitment to the abolition of the death penalty worldwide. Numerous EU delegations marked this significant date by organising debates, publishing op-eds, and conducting other public awareness activities.

The EU participated actively in the work of the interregional task force that presented in the UN General Assembly the 8th resolution for a global moratorium of the death penalty, which was adopted on 16 December 2020 with a record tally of 123 votes in favour.

The abolition of the death penalty is a thematic priority under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Funds channelled through civil society organisations (CSOs) worldwide contribute to training within the judiciary, public awareness raising, the creation of national networks, the monitoring of the use of the death penalty, advocacy for legal reform and dialogue on specific issues such as counter-terrorism and the fight against drugs. In 2020, projects of this kind continued to be implemented in the following partners: Niger, the Philippines, Taiwan, Uganda, the US, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, China and India. Funds from the 2018 global call for proposals amounted to EUR 8.1 million.

Advocacy against the death penalty in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone retains the death penalty for aggravated robbery, murder, treason and mutiny. Although a de facto moratorium is in place with the last executions taking place in October 1998, death sentences are still routinely pronounced. At the end of 2020, there were 78 persons on death row, an increase of over 50% from August 2019. Recent sentences from the Kabala High Court Criminal session in September 2020 saw one woman sentenced to death. The EU, together with AdvocAid and like-minded partners, is committed to the abolition of the death penalty by advocating improved access to legal representation and effective right to appeal for prisoners on death row, as well as by promoting legal reforms in view of the in law abolition of the mandatory death penalty sentence.

Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

In line with the revised guidelines on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment adopted in September 2019, the EU stepped up its efforts to achieve a torture-free world. Although the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment is absolute under international law, it continued to be practiced in many parts of the world in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated some of the world's major challenges, including violence. It has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable, including people deprived of their liberty. The EU closely monitored the situation of prisoners and other people in places of detention.

On the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture on 26 June 2020, the HR/VP issued a statement reaffirming the EU's strong commitment to combating torture worldwide through a comprehensive approach encompassing prohibition, prevention, accountability and redress for the victims.

The HR/VP recalled that eradicating torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment is a global challenge and should be our global ambition. He stressed the importance of continuously engaging with our partners at international, regional and bilateral level, along with civil society, in order to make a real difference. The HR/VP also called for the universal ratification and effective implementation of the UN Convention against Torture and its Optional Protocol.

The EU continued to make use of all political and financial tools at its disposal. This ranged from the protection of victims and speaking out against abuses through statements and *démarches*, to urging States to comply with their obligations under international law to investigate allegations of torture and bring perpetrators to justice.

In most human rights dialogues, the EU raised torture and/or other ill-treatment, in particular urging countries to ratify and fully implement the Convention against Torture and its Optional Protocol, to comply with recommendations from monitoring mechanisms, and to ensure that all reports of torture and other ill-treatment are properly and impartially investigated, perpetrators are brought to justice, and victims are afforded redress.

The EU continued to promote judicial reform in several countries, seeking to secure an independent justice sector, access to justice and improved prison conditions both through political dialogue and financial support, as well as through the training of law enforcement officials in relevant international standards (such as the Nelson Mandela Rules on the treatment of prisoners).

In November 2020, the EU endorsed the Declaration against the use of arbitrary detention in state-to-state relations, promoted by Canada.

At multilateral level, the EU further supported the Global Alliance for Torture-Free Trade, a cross-regional effort bringing together more than 60 countries committed to ending trade in goods used for torture and capital punishment across the globe, inspired by the EU Regulation.⁶

⁶ Regulation (EU) 2019/125 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 January 2019 concerning trade in certain goods which could be used for capital punishment, torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (OJ L 30, 31.1.2019)

The EU supported the OHCHR in following up on the EU-led UN General Assembly resolution 73/304 on torture-free trade, adopted in June 2019, which paves the way for future work at UN level to establish common international standards in this field. On Human Rights Day, an online event was co-hosted by the EU and Argentina, entitled ‘Towards torture-free trade: opportunities and challenges’ in order to take stock of progress achieved and add further impetus ahead of the UN governmental experts’ work. Powerful presentations by civil society representatives as well as by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the EUSR for Human Rights demonstrated the urgency to move forward.

In 2020, the EU continued to support projects worldwide aimed at eradicating torture and other ill-treatment. Through the EIDHR, 13 new torture and detention-related projects were contracted, for a total amount of EUR 11.1 million. Six of these derived from a global call for proposals targeting single countries or small clusters of countries around the world, while one global project will link the COVID-19 crisis to detention conditions in more than 20 countries. Six more projects provide a tailored response to countries’ needs related to torture and detention (some of these are also linked to the COVID-19 crisis), through the country-based support schemes implemented at local level.

The EIDHR used a range of approaches to focus on the fight against torture, supporting actions to prevent or counter torture in various forms or settings and projects with a focus on torture risks exacerbated by discriminatory practices. For example, in Bolivia and Honduras, the EU supported a new project focusing on women and young people in detention, while in Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, a prevention project aimed at reducing practices that lead to torture and ill-treatment in police custody. COVID-19-related projects sought to reduce the spread of the virus in places of detention, to improve prisoners’ rights (legal counsel, visits and medical care), which were further limited by the crisis response, and to capitalise on the crisis context to push for needed reforms.

Regional cooperation in the fight against torture and the promotion of human rights in Latin American prisons during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the context of COVID-19 pandemic, the project ‘Regional cooperation in the fight against torture’ contributed to transforming 57 Associations for Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APACs), an alternative prison model in Brazil, into mass producers of face masks. From July to December 2020, 500 inmates serving custody sentence in APAC prisons produced 1.7 million face masks that have been distributed in APAC units, elderly people’s homes, hospitals and regular prisons.

In addition to learning a new skill, the inmates collaborated to reduce the spread of COVID-19 by allowing more people to have access to prevention through the use of face masks. This work has improved the socialisation of inmates and will remain a new area of professional formation for them in the future. According to inmate Wellington Nunes, of Minas Gerais State: ‘My effort will benefit all society. I need this work; it makes me feel valued and motivated to help others’.

Along with the production of the masks, the campaign ‘Humanise the penalty, promote life’ publicised the APAC method, a proven model in the recovery of convicts by the penal system, and denounced the mistreatment to which persons deprived of their liberty in the common prison system are subjected.

Human rights defenders

Throughout 2020, the EU continued to support human rights defenders and to denounce the shrinking space for civil society. The EU used its political and financial tools, in line with the EU Guidelines on human rights defenders (HRDs), to support those fighting for human rights. Activities to protect and support human rights defenders were intensified with particular focus on HRDs at risk.

The situation for human rights defenders across the world remained extremely difficult. The number of killings increased. Specific groups such as women human rights defenders, LGBTI human rights defenders, labour human rights defenders (in particular trade unionists), environmental, land and indigenous human rights defenders were targeted, and new threats proliferated (arbitrary digital surveillance, cyber-harassment, reprisals). In order to reverse this critical trend, the EU called upon non-EU countries to implement preventive measures, duly investigate killings and bring perpetrators to justice.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, specific risks for human rights defenders increased, such as the prolongation of incommunicado detentions, the slow-down in judicial processes or the downscaling of state protection measures, as well as a higher degree of digital surveillance. Due to the increased danger for human rights defenders in detention during the pandemic, the EU asked several governments to release human rights defenders who were arbitrarily detained.

Issues relating to human rights defenders were raised in all human rights dialogues, subcommittee meetings and consultations. Lists of individual cases were given prominence in EU human rights dialogues. Human rights defenders issues were also discussed in EU-supported civil society seminars in the context of these human rights dialogues. The EU also continued to make its voice heard with public statements and declarations.

EU delegations and Member States' embassies engaged and met with human rights defenders, monitored trials, and visited human rights defenders in detention. Annual meetings between EU diplomats and human rights defenders have become an established practice in non-EU countries, increasing the visibility of human rights defenders where appropriate and allowing for in-depth analysis of the challenges they face.

To tackle the increasing link between digital issues and human rights defenders, the EU, together with a network of civil society organisations, organised the **22nd EU-NGO Human Rights Forum**. The Forum was held between 9 and 10 December in a virtual format for the first time, which enabled hundreds of human rights defenders from across the world to participate and provided a discussion platform for civil society, UN experts and EU civil servants. Specific recommendations and training on how to improve digital security measures for human rights defenders were provided.

The EU also supported protecting human rights defenders in multilateral fora, in particular at the Human Rights Council, including by supporting the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur (UNSR), and at the UN General Assembly. The EU actively collaborated with Mary Lawlor, the new UNSR on the situation of human rights defenders, and regularly exchanged information on cases and thematic priorities. In November 2020, the EU, together with the UNSR, organised training on human rights defenders protection for 200 diplomats posted in EU delegations. The EU encouraged partner countries to cooperate with the UNSR on the situation of human rights defenders and to respond to issues raised in her annual report. The EU advocated for the recognition of human rights defenders in several UN General Assembly resolutions.

The EU also supported the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Ilze Brands Kehris, in addressing reprisals against those who cooperate with the UN, its representatives and mechanisms, including by organising several events with her office in New York, and by speaking at the Interactive Dialogue at the HRC in September 2020.

The EU remained a major donor in supporting and protection of human rights defenders, most notably under the EIDHR. The instrument funds the EU Human Rights Defenders mechanism ProtectDefenders.eu (EUR 35 million for 2015-2022). The latter has provided support to around 45 000 human rights defenders at risk and their families since 2015, through multifaceted assistance and the combination of short, medium and long-term action. Its activities range from direct support for individuals, groups and organisations, temporary relocation programmes, training, capacity building and outreach to the most vulnerable and marginalised, to advocacy at global, regional and local levels. In the unprecedented situation created by the pandemic, ProtectDefenders.eu continued to provide vital, swift, flexible and practical support to thousands of human rights defenders, local grassroots organisations and groups working in most-at-risk contexts.

Strengthening the EU's position as a key actor in protecting human rights defenders, ProtectDefenders.eu launched a new, mainly regional programme aimed at supporting new relocation and shelter structures for human rights defenders at risk. In 2020, the EU Human Rights Defenders mechanism consolidated its focus on women human rights defenders through a comprehensive gender strategy implemented across all its programmes. Women Human Rights Defenders or LGBTI Human Rights defenders represent 55% of the beneficiaries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the extraordinary resilience of human rights defenders. Requests for material support from defenders and communities have increased significantly, and ProtectDefenders.eu has mobilised flexible, direct assistance for a greater number of human rights defenders, while some activities had to be rescheduled.

The EU emergency fund for human rights defenders at risk, directly managed by the EU since 2010, continued to operate in 2020. The fund has supported over 1 200 human rights defenders and their family members since 2014. This direct financial support contributes to effectively implementing the EU guidelines on human rights defenders and is complementary to political action in protection of human rights defenders. Crucial assistance was provided through small grants, which served to cover costs related to temporary relocation, subsistence, medical and legal support, prison visits, security (increasingly digital), equipment and training. An increasing share of supported human rights defenders work on freedom of expression and the media, governance and anti-corruption issues, the rights of LGBTI persons, and environmental, land and indigenous peoples' rights as set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and in Human Rights Law.

One of the most effective grants that the emergency fund provided in 2020 supported family members of indigenous land and environmental rights activists who were assassinated because of their work to defend land rights. Through this grant, 21 human rights defenders family members were urgently relocated to protect their lives. In addition to the legal costs of seeking justice and protection, their subsistence, education and medical expenses were covered. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, human rights defenders and their families remained safe from the virus in an area with deficient access to health and sanitation services.

The EIDHR Human Rights Crises Facility provides flexible grants to civil society and human rights defenders working in extremely difficult conditions and/or where the publication of a call for proposals would be inappropriate. In 2020, seven facility projects provided support to human rights defenders through re-granting, direct support, capacity building and networking. These actions enabled the work of various human rights defenders groups, such as investigative journalists, indigenous human rights defenders and those defending the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Tackling multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination

The principle of equality is integrated into the planning, design, implementation, and monitoring of the EU's external policies and programmes. Equality is a core value of the EU and guided the EU's internal and external policy development in 2020, embracing the notion that preserving and protecting diversity in line with the EU Treaties and with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union⁷ is an essential part of protecting people. **The European Commission took steps to renew its policy framework on equality, through the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025, and subsequently the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 and the Strategy on the Rights of the Child**, also covering external action. The EU human rights guidelines on non-discrimination in external action also continued to guide all external action, with increased focus on multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination across all actions.

In its COVID-19 response, the EU stressed that ensuring the inclusion of people in vulnerable situations requires both systematic mainstreaming of inclusion and accessibility, and targeted action enabling equality and non-discrimination. For instance, with regard to respecting and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, it was stressed that healthcare needs to be delivered based on non-discrimination and free and equal consent in line with the standards of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Furthermore, the systematic use and collection of, for example, sex and age-disaggregated data, as well as data disaggregated based on disability, was further underlined to ensure that response efforts are inclusive and gender sensitive and encompass intersectionality while highlighting the centrality of discriminatory social norms.

⁷ In accordance with Article 51(1) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union its provisions are addressed to the institutions, bodies, offices and agencies of the Union with due regard for the principle of subsidiarity and to the Member States only when they are implementing EU law: https://ec.europa.eu/info/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/your-rights-eu/eu-charter-fundamental-rights/when-does-charter-apply_en

EU funds such as the European Social Fund and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived were redirected in 2020 and additional budgets were made available to support persons in vulnerable situations. **In its ‘Team Europe’ global response to COVID-19, launched in April 2020, the EU took a human rights-based approach** aimed at ‘building back better’ and supporting fairer, more inclusive and more sustainable societies, and at implementing the 2030 Agenda, anchored on the principle of leaving no one behind. The EU prioritised health and socioeconomic measures, ensuring that support services and shelters remained available to all, and will continue to promote and uphold human rights, equality and non-discrimination and decent work conditions in this context. The package was designed to help the most vulnerable countries, with a focus on the people who are most at risk, including persons with disabilities. It was a meaningful contribution to the international aid system to promote a coordinated multilateral response in partnership with the UN and the international financial institutions, advancing the EU’s values of equality and non-discrimination.

The death of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement officials in the early summer of 2020 in the US brought to light once again the persistence of **racism and discrimination** in our societies and the specific challenges related to the law enforcement agencies’ approach and the relevant legislative framework. The EU expressed serious concerns over these events and joined the call for a prompt and effective investigation encompassing all forms of discrimination.

EU action in this area builds on a solid legal framework to address discrimination, racism, xenophobia and hate crimes in all EU Member States in line with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Throughout 2020, the EU continued to stress that the ICERD is and should remain the basis of all efforts to prevent, combat and eradicate racism. The priority remains the full and effective implementation of the ICERD as it stands.

On 18 September 2020, the EU published its **anti-racism action plan 2020-2025**⁸ to step up action against racism and racial discrimination in the EU. The action plan helped to improve internal-external coherence and recognised that not only individuals can perpetrate racist acts, but that racism can also be structural.

At the UN, the EU continued to engage constructively in the work of the HRC in combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance worldwide by delivering statements during the general debates under item 9 and during the interactive dialogues with the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism and the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent.

The EU actively participated in discussions on the follow-up to the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, in particular in the context of the upcoming 20th anniversary of its adoption. It also actively participated in the negotiations on related resolutions of the HRC and the UNGA, and engaged in the meetings of the Durban follow-up mechanisms.⁹

In June 2020, the EU also participated in the urgent debate on ‘current racially inspired human rights violations, systemic racism, police brutality and violence against peaceful protests,’ organised at the request of the African Group during the 43rd session of the HRC in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd.

⁸ EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025: https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-anti-racism-action-plan-2020-2025_en

⁹ In October, Commissioner Helena Dalli participated via video link in the 18th session of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Effective Implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, to present the EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025. Also speaking was a representative of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency who presented the findings and the recommendations included in the Agency’s 2019 report ‘Being black in the EU’. In November the EU intervened during the 27th session of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent which focused on the group’s report on COVID-19, systemic racism and global protests.

Freedom of religion or belief

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) remained a key priority of the EU's external human rights policy in 2020.

Since the emergence of the pandemic, States have increased restrictions which have had an impact on the full enjoyment of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of religion or belief. The EU monitored closely such restrictions and expressed concern when not in line with international law. The EU condemned in particular the exacerbation of discrimination, hate speech, hate crime and the scapegoating of religious minorities during the spread of the pandemic. Public manifestations of freedom of religion or belief have become more difficult due to the lockdown measures across the world.

The EU consistently raised concerns about violations of freedom of religion or belief in political dialogues with partner countries, including in more than 15 virtual human rights dialogues and consultations with countries of the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, Central Asia and South-East Asia. In particular, the EU consistently raised concerns about the situation of the Uighurs in Xinjiang with the Chinese authorities.

The EU paid specific attention to acts of violence and discrimination against religious individuals as well as humanists and atheists. Concerns were raised about the criminalisation of apostasy and blasphemy and undue restrictions to freedom of expression based on religious grounds, as well as about legislation that hinders official registration for religious groups. Ahead of the human rights dialogues, the EU systematically consulted civil society organisations in order to receive information on the most severe freedom of religion or belief violations in non-EU countries.

The EU unequivocally condemned all acts of violence based on religion or belief including acts committed in the name of religion. The HR/VP paid tribute to the victims of violence on the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. The EU promoted and supported the right of all individuals to have a religion, to hold a belief, or not to believe, as well as the right to manifest and to change or leave one's religion or belief without fear of violence, persecution, or discrimination.

To identify violations and abuses of freedom of religion or belief worldwide, 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 through the EU delegations.

The EU's commitment to protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief is anchored in multilateralism and 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 once again presented a freedom of religion or belief resolution in the HRC and the UNGA Third Committee. Both resolutions were adopted by consensus. The FoRB resolutions urge states to respect, protect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief, while expressing concern about violations thereof and calling on states to step up their efforts to implement the commitments undertaken. The EU continued to work closely with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation on its resolution on 'combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief' to ensure the complementarity of the EU and OIC resolutions and universal ownership. The EU also raised concerns about FoRB violations together with other international partners through statements at the HRC, highlighting shortcomings in China, Russia, the illegally annexed Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Saudi Arabia, Cambodia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Myanmar, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Syria, Iran and elsewhere, as well as abuses committed by the Da'esh terrorist organisation.

On 3 March 2020, during the 43rd session of the HRC, the EU and Canada hosted a side event with the UN Special Rapporteur at which he presented his latest report on freedom of religion or belief and gender equality. During the interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur, the EU emphasised that while remaining fully committed to robustly protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief in all parts of the world, it firmly opposes using FoRB as a pretext to justify human rights violations, including violations affecting women and girls, persons belonging to religious minorities or non-believers, and persons based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. During the interactive dialogue at UNGA on 20 October, the EU welcomed the importance of safeguarding the right to freedom of religion or belief for all for the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, the EU welcomed a proposed set of indicators to operationalise international standards on freedom of religion or belief as a useful tool to identify protection gaps and formulate steps to close such gaps in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The EU underlined its support for the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, engaged actively with him during interactive dialogues, and called upon non-EU countries to issue standing invitations to the mandate holder.

The EU engaged actively with like-minded states during regular meetings of the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (co-chaired by Canada and the US). The EUSR for Human Rights participated in the 3rd Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief, held by Poland on 16-17 November.

The EU continued to engage with the UN Alliance of Civilizations within the UN fora, including through the UN Alliance of Civilizations Group of Friends Ministerial Meeting on 29 September 2020. On the 15th anniversary of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, the EU reassured the Alliance of its staunch support for dialogue aimed at increasing mutual understanding and respect.

The EEAS conducted two diplomatic training sessions on human rights, including on freedom of religion or belief. In June, the focus was on state, citizenship and religious belonging. This session explored the links between active, participatory and inclusive citizenship and religion and faith, in order to reflect on the norms, principles, strategies and actors that are involved in the EU's dealings with religious and faith-based actors alongside other civil society actors in the pursuit of its foreign policy goals.

In September, the EEAS and the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs co-facilitated a pilot training on the challenges of navigating the field of religion and conflict in mediation. Focusing on specific challenges in Southern Thailand, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, it provided a set of conceptual tools to analyse dynamics at the local level, as well as methods to deal with different aspects of religion in mediation. Understanding the place of religion and different worldviews is key to building peaceful and inclusive societies that are resilient to conflict.

Building inclusive and resilient societies is one of the core challenges reflected in the current multilateral agenda (Agenda 2030 and the Istanbul Process) and continues to guide many EU initiatives as well. In 2020, the EU started to unroll its ‘**Global Exchange on Religion in Society**’ project. It provides a platform where religious or faith-based actors and other civil society actors can connect, enabling them to work together to preserve their own societies as inclusive and respectful places for everyone, where shared citizenship underpins a truly inclusive and resilient society.

On the programming side, **the EU continues to finance three regional projects in the Middle East and Africa with more than EUR 5 million from 2018 to 2022.** The projects aim to improve cultural pluralism and intercultural understanding related to religion or belief.

Six civil society projects are being implemented because of the dedicated 2017 global call for proposals on freedom of religion or belief under the EIDHR. The final EU contribution is EUR 5.18 million. The projects address key strategic areas of the 2013 EU guidelines, including the fight against different forms of discrimination and violence on grounds of religion or belief.

Human rights of persons belonging to minorities

The EU continued to call on all states to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of persons belonging to minorities, such as national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities, including in international fora.

On 7 October 2020, the Commission adopted a renewed and strengthened EU Roma¹⁰ Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation¹¹ until 2030. As part of this new initiative, the EU committed to promote Roma equality, inclusion and participation in its external action, in particular as part of its enlargement, neighbourhood, development and humanitarian policies. The EU continued to support the implementation of the Declaration on Roma integration in the EU enlargement process adopted by the leaders of the countries in the region in July 2019. The implementation focused on data collection, Roma-responsive budgeting and the mapping of Roma housing in Western Balkans countries. It will continue to promote the inclusion of Roma through the 2021-2027 Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) – once adopted – and other relevant EU funds, such as those related to COVID-19 recovery or the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). The EU continued to raise concerns over protecting persons belonging to minorities across the globe, for example through statements and political and human rights dialogues.

The 13th session of the Forum on Minority Issues convened virtually on 18-19 November 2020 on ‘Hate Speech, Social Media and Minorities’. The Forum discussed challenges, opportunities and potential solutions to effectively tackle online hate speech against persons belonging to minorities, in line with the principles and rights enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and other relevant international instruments. The EU actively engaged in the discussion and offered substantive perspectives focusing on good practice and highlighting different activities, in particular those undertaken and financed by the European Commission and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA).

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ [EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation, 7 October 2020
https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/new-eu-roma-strategic-framework-equality-inclusion-and-participation-full-package_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/new-eu-roma-strategic-framework-equality-inclusion-and-participation-full-package_en)

Gender equality, sexual orientation and gender identity, eliminating sexual and gender-based violence and continued commitment to sexual and reproductive health and rights as per the New European Consensus on Development

The year 2020 was an important yet challenging year globally for gender equality. The EU's commitment to gender equality was demonstrated through a variety of undertakings, in particular by assuming a higher profile at the multilateral level and in international decision-making fora, developing joint initiatives, and endorsing gender mainstreaming as a key strategy for achieving gender equality.

In 2020, at a critical juncture marked by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality and the growing opposition to women's and girls' enjoyment of human rights globally, the European Commission renewed its policy framework on gender equality. In this context, the **Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 for a gender equal Europe and the Gender Action Plan III 2021-2025 for a gender equal world** (GAP III) were adopted by the European Commission. The new GAP III, adopted by the Commission in November and welcomed through presidency conclusions by 24 Member States, outlines specific priorities and actions. It sends a clear message on the importance of mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment into all areas of EU external action and is based on a gender-responsive, human rights-based and intersectional approach.¹²

The 2021-2027 framework programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon Europe, will contribute to joint solutions for global challenges through international cooperation, by supporting gender studies and intersectional research, women's access to research funding and their participation in research careers.¹³ The integration of a gender perspective in research and innovation content is especially relevant in the context of COVID-19 preparedness.

¹² Joint communication on 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

¹³ A Horizon 2020 - funded project, [Gender STI](#), addresses the challenge of integrating a gender perspective in science, technology and innovation (STI) bilateral and multilateral dialogues between Europe and third countries.

This new policy framework is also part of the EU's contribution to international frameworks such as the full implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), alongside the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, the Programme of Action on the International Conference on Population and Development and the outcomes of their review conferences. Furthermore, it contributes to implementing the 2030 Agenda and achieving all SDGs. The 2017 European Consensus on Development is part of the EU's overall response to the 2030 Agenda, reaffirming the EU's commitment to promote gender equality and women's and girls' rights and their empowerment as a priority across all its policies, initiatives and areas of action.

The year 2020 marked the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 20th anniversary of UNSCR/1325. The EU took every opportunity to ensure that the international community remains united and increases efforts to make the promises of Beijing a reality, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, given that the pandemic has worsened pre-existing gender inequalities and challenges that women and girls face, including those related to political participation, domestic violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The 64th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) took place in March. The CSW session, the high-level meeting at the UN General Assembly in October to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Women's Conference, and the High-Level Panel at the 43rd session of the HRC¹⁴, gave the EU the opportunity to reaffirm the validity of the Beijing+25 agenda as the most progressive blueprint for advancing women's rights ever agreed at the global level. These meetings took place in virtual or hybrid format due to COVID-19, negatively impacting civil society participation and planned side events. The launch events of the Generation Equality Forum in Mexico and France were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Commission, together with the other co-leaders of the Action Coalition on Gender-Based Violence, presented a high-level statement in the UN General Assembly on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on gender-based violence.

¹⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25611&LangID=E>

The EU's work on gender equality and women's protection and empowerment in conflict situations also forms part of the EU's implementation of the WPS Agenda. The EU's policy is based on relevant UN resolutions and is formulated in the 2008 Comprehensive Approach to the EU implementation of the UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 on Women, Peace and Security. The WPS Agenda has gradually become a prominent area of cooperation with partners. In the EU-UN strategic partnership, the WPS Agenda remained a priority for peace operations and crisis management. It is also part of the cooperation with NATO and the OSCE and is increasingly included in security dialogues with non-EU countries.

Gender equality, women's and girl's full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and their empowerment were consistently raised in bilateral political and human rights dialogues and sub-committees, informal working groups and human rights-related discussions and consultations with partner countries, often based on the human rights situation on the ground, and identifying specific actions and deliverables. EU delegations carried out ad hoc activities across the world to promote the full enjoyment of human rights by women and girls, consistent with the human rights and democracy country strategies for 2016-2020, which included gender equality as a main or underlying priority. These activities included, *inter alia*, political *démarches*, public statements, regular consultations with local civil society actors, in particular women's organisations, private foundations, the private sector, awareness-raising campaigns and advocacy events. Furthermore, specific initiatives were undertaken to address existing inequalities and multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against women and girls, which are often entrenched and systemic, to eliminate all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, and to promote women's and girls' full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and their empowerment, active, full, effective, free and meaningful participation.

The Colombian government adopts the EU-sponsored school to unlearn ... machismo!

Traditionally, schools are places to learn... but what if we need to be re-educated about something we learnt incorrectly?

The EU in Colombia launched the National School for Unlearning Sexism, a successful digital campaign to promote gender equality. This National School for Unlearning Sexism was part of a larger campaign called *#IgualdadEs* (Spanish for *#Equality is*), that has been running on EU social media in Colombia since January 2019. This campaign promotes thoughts and discussions about sex stereotypes and gender roles, and at the same time invites people to question themselves about how equality is – or should be experienced – in daily life. This was the major challenge: make people think about equality in daily life and recognise that in many situations, although unconsciously, very many may have sexist attitudes.

For this campaign, the EU collaborated with Colombian celebrities, as Good Will Ambassadors for Gender Equality, who have promoted the campaign by posting their pictures, videos and thoughts on their own social media accounts.

In November 2020, the Colombian Government launched a national strategy against machismo, with the intention of transforming it into a real training programme to be delivered on the ground in cooperation with local authorities. This offers an example of how inspiring the EU can be when it promotes human rights.

Moreover, in March 2020, on the eve of Women's Day, the EU delegation to Montenegro, in collaboration with the EU Info Centre in Podgorica and the Women's Rights Centre, organised a series of educational workshops on women's activism in Montenegrin high schools to raise awareness of key issues related to women's rights.

The Pacific Partnership is a five-year programme (2018-2022) that supports individuals, communities, CSOs and governments to address inequality and prevent violence against women and girls through a transformational, multi-sectoral approach. It focuses on three key areas of work: challenging negative social norms and practices (in formal and informal education); enhancing awareness and practice of respectful relationships and gender equality among women, men, girls and boys; and increasing access to essential services for survivors of violence.

The Pacific Partnership aims to transform the social norms that allow violence against women and girls to ensure survivors have access to quality response service and to support national and regional institutions to meet their commitments to gender equality and prevention of violence against women and girls. Working through partners, it seeks to promote equal rights and opportunities for all Pacific people through innovative approaches to education, access to essential services and policy development.

Some key achievements in 2020 are the adoption of a set of best practice principles to engage men and boys in primary prevention and programming across the region; continued support to sports organisations on how to handle and facilitate the reporting of abuse among young players; and support to the development of the Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls (2021-2026).

The Pacific Partnership targets Pacific Island countries and territories, amongst others, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Preventing and eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls is a prerequisite for the promotion of respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights and the achievement of gender equality in order to create peaceful, just and more resilient societies. **Eliminating sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) remains a key focus of action for the EU.** Its importance has grown due to the unprecedented increase of sexual and gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic including domestic violence. It is a global phenomenon which remains widespread, under-reported, under-addressed and overlooked, including inside the EU. The EU is committed to using all its resources to prevent and combat sexual and gender-based violence, support and protect survivors of such crimes, and hold perpetrators accountable for crime and abusive behaviour. The EU continues to work with its partners across the globe to strengthen legal frameworks and institutions, support development and education, improve services for survivors and access to justice for victims, support women's rights organisations, networks and CSOs, address the root causes of violence and promote women's empowerment. In May 2020, the EU issued a joint statement by HR/VP Borrell and Commissioners Urpilainen and Lenarčič on safeguarding women's rights during the pandemic.

The EU works to strengthen the legal framework, developing comprehensive and integrated implementation policies, introducing practical measures, and allocating gender-responsive resources. The EU also actively engages in various multilateral fora, such as the Human Rights Council and the Commission on the Status of Women, to improve guidance and political commitments related to eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls and to ensure that the human rights mechanisms of the UN mainstream gender equality and eliminating sexual and gender-based violence in their mandates.

As part of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the EU supported participating UfM Members in mainstreaming gender in employment and labour policy. In November 2020, the Women4Mediterranean Conference took stock of the achievements over the past 25 years, as it coincided with the 25th Anniversary of the Barcelona Process.

Foundation for Human Rights unveils the first billboard sign on Masibambisane Gender-Based Violence Free Zones at Tsolo, Tambo District in South Africa

Tsolo village is one of the first sites to unveil a billboard sign on Masibambisane Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF) Free Zones programme of the Foundation for Human Rights. In 2020, a 15-year-old woman was gang-raped by 11 men in Tsolo. In response, the Foundation for Human Rights formed a partnership with a youth-led women organisation 'Indlezana Yezwe', to create a GBVF Free Zone.

The Foundation for Human Rights designed a programme in 2019 called Masibambisane to build the capacity of local stakeholders to deliver on their mandate around Gender-Based Violence and Femicide in South Africa. The programme is currently implemented in 20 sites located in rural and peripheral urban areas of South Africa. Some of the sites are reported as hot spots for GBVF. The model, supported by the EU, uses a multi-sectoral approach that is gender-sensitive and led by those affected by GBVF.

The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November was marked in various ways in Brussels, as well as in EU and Member States missions globally. For instance, in Pristina, the Head of Office/EU Special Representative launched the campaign for 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence and visited a shelter for victims of domestic and gender-based violence financed by the EU. The EU and the Council of Europe organised a joint event on this occasion.

The CoE Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – the Istanbul Convention – which has been ratified by 21 EU Member States, defines a set of standards for preventing violence, protecting victims and ensuring accountability for perpetrators, towards a life free from violence for all women and girls.

The EU continued to prevent and address all forms of violence and threats facing women human rights defenders. In 2020, there was an increased focus on preventing and addressing violence and threats to all women both online and offline, including those working for gender equality and peace and justice, such as politicians, community leaders and women peacebuilders.

During 2020, the EU supported more than 1.5 million women and girls by providing services for protection and care related to female genital mutilation (FGM). Prevention efforts are showing a positive impact; communities in a number of countries have publicly announced that they are abandoning this practice.

EU supporting key legal reforms in Sudan such as the criminalisation of female genital mutilation

In 2020, the Transitional Government of Sudan adopted several important legal reforms such as the criminalisation of female genital mutilation. HR/VP Borrell and Commissioner Urpilainen praised ‘the Government of Sudan in its entirety for taking this bold and historic step towards the full realisation of women's and girls’ rights’ and stated that ‘The European Union stands ready to support Sudan to implement this decision’.

Sudan also approved wide-ranging amendments to its criminal law, including repealing the death penalty for apostasy as well as the movement restrictions on women travelling with children that required them to obtain consent from a male guardian.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Sudan became operational in 2020. It plays a key role in strengthening the capacity of the Transitional Government to advance with the political reform agenda, including legal reforms, transitional justice, ratification of core human rights treaties, as well as in supporting the work of Sudan’s civil society actors. In December 2020, the EU committed core funding to the OHCHR for 2021-2022.

The strategic EU-UN partnership on the Spotlight Initiative continued in 2020. The initiative aims at eliminating all forms of violence against women in partner countries in the broadest sense possible. It covers physical, psychological, sexual, economic and other types of violence and discrimination, harmful practices and exclusion that women suffer in the different areas of their private and public lives: from making decisions freely and independently about their sexual and reproductive life, to participating effectively in the economic and political processes in their countries. There has been a particular focus on domestic and family violence, sexual and gender-based violence, harmful practices, femicide, trafficking in human beings and sexual and economic (labour) exploitation. The Spotlight Initiative is being implemented in five regions: Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific (with funding totalling over EUR 400 million)¹⁵.

The EU deploys continuous efforts to eradicate trafficking in human beings, in cooperation with a wide range of partners, including the United Nations. The EU continues to uphold the standards and principles of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children as the primary international legal instruments to address the crime and contributes to the process of review of the implementation of the Convention and its Protocols.

¹⁵ An allocation of EUR 32 million was managed separately by the EU through a call for proposals dedicated to CSOs. The call targeted countries ‘in forgotten crises’.

In 2019 and 2020, the EU allocated approximately EUR 56 million in humanitarian aid to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence. In 2020, the EU continued to implement its relevant humanitarian policies and tools related to gender and humanitarian aid, including its 2013 Gender policy and the 2014 Gender-Age Marker. In June 2020, the EU published its second assessment report on its Gender-Age Marker, which revealed that for projects starting in 2016 and 2017, 89% of all EU humanitarian aid integrated gender and age considerations ‘strongly’ or ‘to a certain extent’. Throughout the year, the EU also continued to be an active member of the global initiative entitled ‘Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies’ and participated in its annual meeting in June 2020. The new Call to Action Roadmap 2021-2025 was officially launched at the UNGA in September 2020, at an event hosted by Canada, the global lead of the initiative from 2019 to 2020, and attended by Commissioner Lenarčič. The EU subsequently sent its commitments to the Call to Action Roadmap 2021-2025 to Denmark, the global lead of the initiative from 2021 to 2022.

Ending discrimination and violence against women is the focus of a regional programme in the Western Balkans and Turkey, as well as regional and bilateral programmes in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood. For example:

- the programme ‘Ending Violence against Women in the Western Balkans and Turkey: Implementing Norms, Changing Minds’, implemented by UN Women, aims at reducing discrimination and violence against women and girls and supporting alignment with international legal frameworks;
- the programme in the Eastern region, ‘EU4Gender Equality: Together against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence’, implemented jointly by UN Women and the UN Population Fund, aims at combating violence against women and domestic violence through awareness raising and sharing knowledge and good practices on how to conduct evidence-based violence prevention programmes targeting perpetrators of domestic violence; and

- the regional campaign on ‘Zero Tolerance to Violence against Women in the Southern region’, launched by the Euromed Feminist Initiative in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which has set up a regional observatory on gender-based violence.

The EU remains fully committed to the respect, protection and fulfilment of all human rights and to the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Programme of Action on the International Conference on Population and Development and the outcomes of their review conferences, and to **sexual and reproductive health and rights** in this context. In 2020, the EU reaffirmed its commitment to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of the right of every individual to have full control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence.

Universal access to quality and affordable comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and education and services, including comprehensive sexuality education and healthcare services, remained a focus of the EU’s external action and development cooperation. In October 2020, the EU launched a call for proposals totalling EUR 30.5 million for countries with universal coverage of sexual and reproductive health and rights for adolescents in Africa, especially adolescent girls and other adolescents in vulnerable situations. The objective is to improve demand for and access to comprehensive, integrated, affordable, quality, discrimination-free, age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services in African countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected family planning globally. In April 2020, it was estimated that 47 million women in low and middle-income countries could lose access to contraception if the lockdown lasted 6 months, leading to an additional 7 million unplanned pregnancies.¹⁶ In the countries participating in the UN Population Fund Supplies programme, domestic resources were diverted to the COVID-19 pandemic response, leaving a gap in family planning and reproductive health services in 26 countries.

¹⁶ UN Population Fund, Avenir Health, Johns Hopkins University, Victoria University.

Through the UN Population Fund, the European Commission contributed to further strengthening the capacity of national health systems to manage supplies and to provide family planning, maternal health and HIV-prevention services in 46 countries with high maternal death rates, low rates of contraceptive use and a growing unmet need for family planning. The supply of medicines for maternal health and contraceptives had the potential to avert an estimated 8 million unintended pregnancies, 152 000 child deaths, 24 000 maternal deaths and 2.3 million unsafe abortions. Emergency reproductive health kits were deployed in communities affected by humanitarian crises in 18 countries, reaching 2.84 million women and adolescent girls already facing perilous conditions.

On 27 April, the African Regional programme was signed in Addis Ababa with an overall envelope of EUR 30 million. It consists of two different streams:

- Stream 1 will support the overall regional response to addressing SGBV, harmful traditional practices, and SRHR (focusing on support for the AU Commission towards its member states and other stakeholders);
- Stream 2 will support the regional response to prevention of harmful practices focusing on female genital mutilation and child marriage; this programme is the continuation of the two joint programmes with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Population Fund.

The EU continues to stand up for the rights of LGBTI persons and LGBTI rights defenders around the world and is committed to protecting them and enabling them to enjoy all human rights. The EU conducts political dialogues with partner countries to address discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) persons and decriminalise same-gender relations and transgender expression. The EU will lead by example, showing solidarity and building resilience in protecting and advancing the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, intersex and queer persons around the world. The LGBTIQ Equality Strategy¹⁷ adopted by the Commission in November 2020 has a prominent chapter on the EU's external action. It refers to EU activities, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, and cross-references the EU Gender Action Plan III. The EU has also supported UN work in this regard.

In 2020, EU delegations supported initiatives to promote the rights of LGBTI persons. Delegations also marked the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia on 17 May by raising the rainbow flag and conducting communication campaigns. In March, the EU delegation to Montenegro and the Council of Europe, in partnership with the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Freedoms, held a consultative session at the Parliament of Montenegro to support the discussion and adoption of the Draft Law on Civil Partnerships. The Law was eventually adopted in July 2020. The country is the 32nd UN member to recognise civil partnership for same-sex couples.

The EU delegation to Argentina organised a virtual discussion to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia with government officials, health experts, civil society leaders and representatives of EU Member States' embassies and other countries to discuss the rights of LGBTI persons in Argentina, with a special focus on the transgender community. The EU delegation also used social media to share messages supporting the rights of the LGBTI community.

¹⁷ LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-25 https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combatting-discrimination/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-equality/lgbtiq-equality-strategy-2020-2025_en

In Nigeria, the EU delegation hosted a videoconference discussion with interlocutors from the LGBTI community in the country. The representatives presented the impact of COVID-19 on the LGBTI community and project activities. As part of the EU-funded regional programme ‘Out&Proud: LGBTI Equality and Rights in Southern Africa’, implemented in Zimbabwe, Eswatini and Malawi, a conference on the rights of LGBTI persons in the Southern Africa Development Community was held in December. It focused on decriminalisation, including country meetings involving all 11 Southern Africa Development Community countries, as well as a panel discussion on donors’ funding priorities.

Activities on the rights of LGBTI persons were also carried out by some EU delegations on other occasions throughout the year. The EU participated in the Taiwan Pride Week in October 2020. The EU Office coordinated the participation of EU Member States and like-minded countries in the Taiwan Pride parade, which was attended by over 100 000 people. In the same month, the EU Office to Taiwan took part in a panel discussion on LGBTI policies and diplomacy organised by Workplace Pride, discussing how the EU and Member States’ diplomatic services are promoting LGBTI inclusion in the workplace and through public diplomacy. The week of celebration was a highlight in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic: Taiwan was one of the few places where the parade did not take place in a virtual format in 2020.

Advocates in Timor-Leste bring persons in vulnerable situations to the frontlines of the COVID-19 response.

Despite progress made on the rights of LGBTI persons in Timor-Leste, discrimination is still extremely high against LGBTI persons in family, societal and institutional settings. To address this situation, CSOs and human rights activists persistently advocate to ensure that this marginalised group is not left behind.

Human rights activist Laura Afonso de Jesus is a frontline advocate for the rights of LGBTI persons. She is the Executive Director for CODIVA (the LGBTI umbrella network in Timor-Leste) and an active member of EU-UN Spotlight Initiative Civil Society National Reference Group. She has mobilised community activism through her lead role in the Buimau advocacy movement in Timor-Leste and serves as aldeia (hamlet) chief, a role that only a few women across the country have.

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the LGBTI community is much more vulnerable psychologically and financially. “The pandemic has brought on financial issues and affected the ability of LGBTI persons to afford their basic needs, especially for those who live alone and are dependent on others. Those who are isolated and live with their family at home may face increased violence if their identity is not fully accepted. They might be forced to behave in a way that their family expects them to, and if they are against this, it may cause tension and violence.”

Responding to the increased risk of domestic violence as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative with the Civil Society National Reference Group developed messages to acknowledge the violence being faced by the LGBTI community and to promote inclusive responses that will not leave behind LGBTI persons who face abuse by their family and community members. The International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia is providing additional opportunities to strengthen social norms that promote equality and leaving stigma behind.

Rights of the child

In external action, the EU continued to implement the Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child¹⁸, which underline, *inter alia*, the importance of developing quality alternative care for children and providing them with appropriate support to participate in community life and to access mainstream services. In addition, EU delegations identified ways to strengthen child protection systems in countries of operation.

The EU remains committed to addressing social norms and harmful practices. The Commission's new GAP III adopted in November and welcomed through presidency conclusions by 24 Member States addresses girls' rights, particularly by calling for the **elimination of harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, child, early and forced marriage, and gender-biased sex selection**. In April, the Spotlight Africa Regional Programme was signed in Addis Ababa with an overall budget of EUR 30 million. One of the two streams consists in supporting the regional response to prevent harmful practices, focusing specifically on female genital mutilation and child marriage. This component constitutes the continuation of the two joint programmes with UNICEF and the UN Population Fund which were implemented to eliminate female genital mutilation and child marriages. In August, the Commission adopted a decision to support the continuation of the Global Programme to Prevent Son Preference and Gender-biased Sex Selection: Improving the sex ratio at birth in the Caucasus (EUR 2 million). The action will strengthen efforts for evidence-based national policies and programmes to address son preference and gender inequalities resulting in gender-biased sex selection in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Under the operating grant (2017-2020) of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, the EU funded activities to end female genital mutilation. These aim to strengthen engagement and capacity of policy and decision-makers, professionals and other stakeholders to tackle female genital mutilation, to support the implementation of international commitments, and to sustain the EU's role as a key actor in the global movement against female genital mutilation in the context of the 2030 Agenda. The EU developed a EUR 13 million programme for 'Quality alternative care for children and 'deinstitutionalisation'' which implements five projects in Armenia, Burundi, Cambodia, Georgia and Myanmar.

¹⁸ https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_guidelines_rights_of_child_2017.pdf

In 2020, the EU worked with UNICEF in Egypt to implement the EUR 30 million ‘Expanding Access to Education and Protection for Children at Risk’ programme, which aims to improve access to community schools for children in vulnerable situations and to primary schools for children with disabilities, as well as to strengthen the child protection mechanism in general.

In the Republic of Albania, the EU funded the project ‘Strengthening civil society to prevent and protect children from abuse and violence’. Implemented in 7 municipalities, the project supported 15 CSOs through a sub-granting scheme to implement projects related to child protection. The close collaboration between beneficiary organisations and child protection units at local level strengthened local child protection mechanisms, contributing to the monitoring process of the recently approved Law on the Rights and Protection of the Child.

Together with UNICEF, the EU launched a joint programme targeting children on the move entitled ‘EU global promotion of best practices for children in migration’, which aims at strengthening child protection systems in order to provide alternative care options, emphasising community and family-based alternatives in Mexico, El Salvador, South Africa and Zambia. The action will also document and share lessons learned and best practices with a view to using these alternative care options to replace immigration detention, based on empirical evidence and data.

The EU strived to mitigate the harmful impact of COVID-19 on children. In August, the EU signed a EUR 10 million project to address the child protection issues arising from and exacerbated by COVID-19 in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Senegal and Uganda through a programme of the Joining Forces Initiative, a coalition of NGOs. The actions seek to address the immediate protection needs of children by strengthening local protection and response systems; improving the protection of children living in resilient families, communities and institutions; increasing the capacity of children to prevent and respond to violence against them; and increasing the learning and sharing of knowledge related to child protection approaches during the COVID-19 crisis and recovery phase.

In 2020, the Commission allocated approximately EUR 93 million to activities on child protection in humanitarian settings. In addition to general protection activities such as advocacy, capacity building and information sharing, activities included support for child-friendly spaces, psychosocial support, the prevention of and response to violence, support for unaccompanied and separated children or to children associated with armed forces and groups.

The quest of a child left behind in Kyrgyzstan

Aibek is only 15 but has already overcome many challenges in his life. He is one of the 120 000 children left behind by migrating parents. A life without parental care had a huge impact on him: he distanced himself from other people, felt anxious, frustrated and frightened. The COVID-19 crisis put Aibek at further risk. The Centre for the Development and Protection of Vulnerable Populations, supported by UNICEF as part of the EU project ‘Protecting children affected by migration’ stepped in to help Aibek to secure his rights. His status as a child without parental care was identified in communication and cooperation with the Family and Child Support Department and adequate remedies were set in place. In the words of a psychologist working for the project: “When I started working with Aibek, he felt alone, uncertain and bewildered. It took me several calls for him to open up and start talking about his fears and the support he needs. My efforts paid off and Aibek started to trust me and we have recently met in person. Through our support, Aibek became more confident in himself and learned to start trusting people.”

The psychologists were trained to listen, offer support and counselling to children and adolescents like Aibek, help them overcome COVID-19 related difficulties and better integrate into their communities. The guardians and temporary caregivers received guidance on how to engage with children without parental care, recognise possible signs of depression or anxiety, properly respond to such cases and build the right communication channels. The project referred Aibek’s case to the District Department of Social Development to provide him with the help he needed beyond the pandemic, including the registration of official guardianship and access to all services. Thanks to the support of the EU, UNICEF extended its much-needed support to more than 1 200 children to make sure that each of them will have an accountable and responsible adult person ready to stand up for them and protect their best interests.

Migration and mobility – migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

Protecting and upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms remained at the core of EU asylum and migration policies in 2020. The EU continued to advocate for a **human rights-based approach that focuses on persons in vulnerable situations** in line with the Council conclusions on Team Europe Global Response to COVID-19.¹⁹ The EU promotes compliance with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, international human rights obligations under international law and existing policy and legislative frameworks, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In close collaboration with its Member States, partner countries, international organisations, civil society and local communities, the EU continued its work to protect the rights of refugees and internally displaced persons both within and beyond its borders. The EU particularly addressed human rights challenges associated with migrant smuggling, human rights violations related to trafficking in human beings, and the root causes that force persons to leave their homes in the first place. In particular, a regional programme titled ‘Dismantling Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Criminal Networks in North Africa’ implemented by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) includes important components on identifying victims of trafficking and on training judges in protecting victims’ rights in adjudicating cases of trafficking in human beings.

A key element of EU migration policy remained the building of strong partnerships with countries of origin, transit and destination as well as working towards a comprehensive and balanced framework for engagement with partners. Based on this comprehensive approach, on 23 September 2020 the Commission put forward a proposal for a **New Pact on Migration and Asylum**, as a ‘fresh start’ for the EU.

¹⁹ Council conclusions on Team Europe Global Response to COVID-19, 8 June 2020: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44347/team-europe-ccs-200608.pdf>

The proposed pact addresses both the internal and external dimensions of EU migration policy. Externally, the pact proposes to consolidate and strengthen cooperation with non-EU countries, based on tailor-made partnerships with countries of origin and transit, to engage at regional and multilateral levels, as well as to work closely with international organisations and civil society. The pact emphasises that safeguarding fundamental rights is an imperative that calls for an effective migration policy. This implies the need to combat discrimination and labour exploitation.

The pact acknowledges that the risks of trafficking along migration routes are high, notably the risk for women and girls to become victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation or other forms of gender-based violence. Children in migration, in particular unaccompanied migrant children, are also at higher risk of trafficking and exploitation along migration routes towards and within the EU²⁰. Trafficking networks abuse asylum procedures, and use reception centres to identify potential victims. In this respect, the new Pact on Migration and Asylum highlights the need to focus on the early identification of potential non-EU victims.

The EU's continued commitment to providing international protection is deeply rooted in international law and European values. Since 2015, more than 70 000 people in need of international protection have been resettled in the EU under EU-sponsored voluntary resettlement schemes. In response to the Commission's call, EU Member States pledged almost 30 000 resettlement places for 2020. Given the disruptions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission extended the implementation period of the pledge from 2020 to 2021.

During 2020, the EU assisted countries hosting large numbers of refugees and displaced persons by promoting protection and access to basic services and improving access to the jobs market. The 2016 EU-Turkey Statement reflected a deeper engagement and dialogue with Turkey, including supporting its efforts to host around 4 million refugees. The Facility for Refugees in Turkey (EUR 6 billion) continued to respond to the essential needs of millions of refugees. In July 2020, the EU agreed to extend the Facility, with EUR 485 million dedicated to continuing to provide humanitarian support in 2021, helping to meet the basic needs of over 1.7 million refugees and enabling over 600 000 children to attend school.

²⁰ European Commission, Third (2020) Report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings, COM(2020) 661 final, and SWD/2020/226 final.

Since its establishment in 2014, the EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis (the ‘Madad’ Fund) has reached EUR 2.2 billion. It covers programmes on education, livelihoods, health, socioeconomic support, water and waste infrastructure – benefiting both refugees and their host communities. More than EUR 2 billion of this fund was allocated to more than 90 projects to the Trust Fund’s implementing partners on the ground, now reaching more than 7 million beneficiaries.

The EU has continued to support migrants, forcibly displaced persons and host communities in Asia and the Middle East. In August 2020, the EU became a member of the Core Group of the Support Platform for the Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees, launched by Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The EU will chair this platform in 2021. The platform aims to mobilise resources and political support for durable solutions to the Afghan displacement crisis. Since 2017, the EU has mobilised over EUR 600 million for humanitarian and development aid specifically aimed at addressing fundamental needs and finding durable solutions to the 40-year-long Afghan displacement crisis in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. EU support includes child protection, the sustainable reintegration of internally displaced persons and returnees, equal access to basic services, opportunities for individuals, and community empowerment.

Under the protection component of the Regional Development and Protection programme for North Africa and the Horn of Africa, over 50 projects have been approved since 2016 as part of the Asylum and Migration Fund (EUR 94.5 million). Main activities include registration, refugee status determination, identification of durable solutions and direct assistance to asylum seekers and refugees, protection for children on the move, as well as capacity building initiatives in support of national governments, NGOs and civil society organisations. It focuses particularly on human rights standards, international protection and services for vulnerable migrants and refugees.

The project ‘Inclusive Cities, Communities of Solidarity’ started on 6 September 2019 in the cities of Barranquilla and Cúcuta/ Villa del Rosario in Colombia, Lima in Peru, Quito in Ecuador and Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, which served as pilot territories. The project’s implementation was entrusted to UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UN Habitat, in alliance with the EU. Among its activities were implementing migrant information centres, actions against xenophobia and strengthening social organisations.

Struggle during COVID-19: Farhad Ahmad’s story

Farhad Ahmad (28) had been living in Iran as a refugee for 19 years. In February 2020, when Iran went into lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Farhad lost his job and was forced to return to Afghanistan with his family. After registering at the Islam Qala border, he was referred to the IOM’s protection programme, and received financial assistance to buy food and medication to satisfy the family’s immediate needs. He was also informed about the International Organization for Migration’s EU-funded Reintegration Assistance and Development in Afghanistan project. The project’s field staff in Mazar Sharief introduced him to the Bashir Ahmad Sidiqi Shoe Production Company. Farhad, who had only worked as a labourer in Iran, learned the art of shoemaking here: ‘I am happy with the employment opportunity, especially the skills I am learning through the job’. Now Farhad hopes to start his own business.

The Reintegration Assistance and Development in Afghanistan project is being implemented in eight Afghanistan provinces of high return (Baghlan, Balkh, Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunar, Laghman and Nangarhar). It takes into account the economic, social and psychosocial aspects of reintegration at both individual and community levels.

The Rohingya crisis is another case where human rights considerations played an important role in the decision to prioritise EU intervention for forcibly displaced persons. The EU also provided human rights-sensitive technical assistance to governments of partner countries throughout the region on topics such as migration policies and the prevention of and fight against trafficking in human beings and the smuggling of migrants. The EU also supported regional coordination efforts. For example, the EU participated in the interregional dialogue on migration, known as the ‘Budapest Process’.

In March 2020, the Commission's Communication 'Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa' highlighted the significance of partnering with Africa to ensure a balanced, coherent and comprehensive approach to migration and mobility. It recommended that the EU and Africa build on the implementation of actions under the five strands of the Joint Valletta Action Plan (2015), cooperate within the Khartoum and Rabat processes, and expand cooperation with the AU on migration. Africa and the EU need a balanced, coherent and comprehensive approach to migration and mobility, guided by the principles of solidarity, partnership and shared responsibility in accordance with EU and national competences and based on the respect for human rights and international law.

The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, amounting to over EUR 5 billion, allowed the EU and African partners to work together faster and with more flexibility in the Sahel and Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa and in the North African regions, where the human rights of migrants and forcibly displaced people are particularly challenged. By the end of 2020, 256 actions consisting of 689 individual projects had been implemented under the Fund.

EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration

Launched in December 2016 with funding from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration is the first comprehensive programme to save lives, protect and assist migrants along key migration routes in Africa.

Since taking up its activities in April 2017, the EU-IOM Joint Initiative has assisted more than 86 600 migrants, rescued over 26 400 migrants stranded in the Sahara desert and provided reintegration assistance to over 100 400 migrants who have decided to return to their countries of origin, helping them to reintegrate in a safe and dignified way. Co-funded by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, in its first phase the Better Migration Management programme in the Horn of Africa supported over 18 200 trafficked victims and migrants in vulnerable situations, providing them with protection services such as accommodation, basic services, and counselling.

The EU continued to advocate and work for the support of migrants and refugees stranded in Libya, including in the context of the trilateral African Union-European Union-United Nations Task Force. Thanks to the work of the Task Force and the support of the EU Trust Fund for Africa, around 53 000 voluntary humanitarian returns have taken place and over 5 800 people in need of international protection have been evacuated since 2017, including through the Emergency Transit Mechanisms in Niger and Rwanda. Assistance continued to be provided at disembarkation points and in detention centres if access was possible, host communities were supported and alternatives to detention were promoted.

Safe and Fair: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region

In Asia, the project 'Safe and Fair: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region', part of the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative²¹ to eliminate violence against women and girls, has been advocating strongly since 2017 for a human rights-based and gender-sensitive approach to labour migration in the ASEAN region. This EUR 25 million project is implemented through a partnership between the International Labour Organization and UN Women and aims to ensure that labour migration is safe and fair for all women in the ASEAN region. Key results for 2020 included capacity building for 3 200 stakeholders in women migrant workers' rights and the provision of psychological, legal, health and social services to 30 350 women migrant workers throughout the region.

²¹ Spotlight Initiative: <https://spotlightinitiative.org/>

The EU has been at the forefront of the response to the Venezuelan migration crisis. Since 2018, the EU has mobilised over EUR 319 million for humanitarian, peace and development actions addressing the regional impacts of the Venezuelan crisis. On 26 May 2020, the virtual International Donors Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in the Countries of the Region raised more than EUR 2.53 billion, including EUR 144.2 million in grants from EU funds and EUR 400 million in loans from the European Investment Bank. The funds are directed towards food security, livelihoods, health, water and sanitation, and the socioeconomic integration of Venezuelan refugees and migrants (including combating xenophobia). In Venezuela, part of the funds will be used to protect human rights and human rights defenders.

The 2014-2020 EU framework programme for research and innovation, Horizon 2020, has also devoted significant resources through a multiannual call which aims to produce evidence-based recommendations for the global and European migration policy of non-EU nationals as well as innovative (including information and communication technological) solutions for the successful integration of migrants into European host societies while fully respecting EU and national competences. The ongoing projects will also foster improved responses for the international protection of refugees, addressing forced displacement, and the promotion of more fact-based and accurate discourses and adapted strategies to address concerns in host communities. More than EUR 100 million was allocated to 34 projects mobilising over 400 participants²².

The EU aims to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration as part of its internal and external responses to the pandemic. In this context, the EU remains committed to international cooperation and multilateral solutions, and supports the UN Secretary-General's efforts to coordinate the UN-wide response. As part of the EU's global response, amounting to EUR 40.5 billion and implemented through the Team Europe approach, the EU focuses its efforts on already vulnerable populations.

²² All relevant details are available in [CORDIS](#).

1.2 EMPOWERING PEOPLE

Empowering women

It is important to ensure that all women have access to appropriate and adequate social protection on an equal basis with men, including those in non-standard employment and self-employment, for example by promoting the establishment of rights (such as pension rights) over the course of their lives. The EU continued to underline that in order to facilitate women's access to the labour market, discriminatory legislation, negative social norms, and gender stereotypes (e.g. in the choice of education, occupation and sector) must be abolished, along with economic and sociocultural disincentives for women to work, such as the culturally anchored distribution of care and domestic work between men and women. Moreover, the concept of a work-life balance must be promoted. Together with international partners, the EU has also promoted the effective implementation of the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) in line with the principle of equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value.

For example, the EU awarded grants to women's CSOs in the Republic of Serbia for empowering women in the labour market, supporting rural women, and promoting women's entrepreneurship.

Empowering children and youth

The EU is committed to ensuring that children and young people meaningfully participate in decision-making processes on issues that directly affect them. In 2020, the EU involved children in the consultation process to prepare the strategy on the rights of the child, due to be adopted in spring 2021. More than 10 000 children aged 11-18 replied to a dedicated online questionnaire. The 2020 European Forum on the rights of the child, that took place between 29 September and 1 October, contributed to this process. Children from 18 countries around the world contributed and participated in the Forum as moderators, speakers and rapporteurs. Recommendations formulated during the Forum will be taken into account when drafting the strategy.

In 2020, the Erasmus+ programme played a significant role in supporting capacity building, empowerment projects and learning mobility opportunities for young people worldwide, as well as virtual exchanges between youth in Europe and, for instance, in the Southern Mediterranean.

The EU and UNICEF implemented the U-Report online tool a social messaging tool and data collection system to improve public engagement, inform leaders and encourage positive change. Currently, the programme benefits 3 million participants in 41 countries, including in a number of Spotlight countries.

Children and young people were also involved in designing policies related to their safety and well-being online. On Safer Internet Day 2020, a group of youth ambassadors prepared a ‘Youth Pledge for a Better Internet’.²³ This aimed to make online platforms and services more age-appropriate and inclusive for children and young people. A range of consultation processes took place during the year with the active participation of young people and resulted in the implementation of six industry-led projects under the ‘Alliance to better protect minors online’²⁴. Intermediary results were presented at the Safer Internet Forum 2020²⁵, in which children with disabilities actively participated, sharing their experiences and recommendations on how to create an inclusive digital environment for children and young people. Final results of the projects were presented on Safer Internet Day 2021.

²³ Youth Pledge for a Better Internet: <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/policy/youth-pledge-for-a-better-internet>.

²⁴ The ‘Alliance to better protect minors online’ is a self-regulatory initiative designed to improve the online environment for children and young people: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/alliance-better-protect-minors-online>.

²⁵ Safer Internet Forum: <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/en/practice/articles/article?id=6759566>

The EU has been promoting digital literacy to empower children to find reliable information online. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU-funded network of safer internet centres ran an awareness-raising campaign²⁶ through the EU-funded [betterinternetforkids.eu](https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu) platform and continued to provide helplines to support young internet users facing online risks and hotline services for reporting material involving child sexual abuse. The EU-funded project ‘Bridging the digital divide in Serbia for the most vulnerable children’ (EUR 2 million) aims to support the education system in urgently adapting to facilitate distance learning, required due to COVID-19. It includes the development of a distance-learning platform and the legal framework to regulate an inclusive distance learning system and establish a monitoring and quality assurance system. It focuses on Roma children and other children in vulnerable situations.

Since the COVID-19 crisis has brought unprecedented challenges for education, exacerbated inequalities and increased the risk of school dropouts and violence, the EU has continued its key commitment to providing education in emergencies and protracted crises. The EU focused its efforts on keeping children in learning in a protected environment, providing flexible and innovative distance learning opportunities and advocating for integrated and coordinated support for education. In 2020, the EU maintained its target of dedicating 10% of its humanitarian budget to education in emergencies, which translated into an investment of over EUR 109 million.

²⁶ <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/en-GB/practice/articles/article?id=5882569>

Rights of persons with disabilities

The Commission continued to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) through the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020. A key achievement in 2020 was the adoption of the first European standard for ‘accessibility to the built environment’. The strategy was effective in raising disability issues at EU policy level. During 2020, extensive consultations took place with civil society, experts on the rights of persons with disabilities, Member States authorities and other stakeholders to prepare a new strategy after 2020. Under the Web Accessibility Directive²⁷, from 23 September 2020 onwards, all public sector websites in the EU Member States should be perceivable, operable, understandable and robust, an important milestone in digital accessibility.

The 13th session of the **Conference of State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** was held between 30 November and 3 December 2020. Chaired by Ecuador, it featured a mix of in-person meetings (high-level opening and elections to the CRPD Committee) and virtual events with participation from all corners of the world. The three virtual roundtable discussions and an interactive dialogue provided a platform for civil society, UN agencies and UN Member States to engage constructively on key disability issues, with the impact of COVID-19 as an underlying theme.

²⁷ [Directive \(EU\) 2016/2102](#) on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies

The EU submitted a written statement, as there was no general debate due to COVID-19, and intervened during the roundtables. The roundtables dealt with the following topics: i) disability and business: ensure persons with disabilities can exercise their right to work in open, inclusive and accessible environments; ii) addressing the rights and needs of older persons with disabilities: ageing and demographic trends; and iii) promoting inclusive environments to fully implement the CRPD. In its interventions, the EU focused on the increased risk of poverty for persons with disabilities, and the need to guarantee the right to live independently, including for older persons. The age gap in technology use was emphasised, especially in assistive technologies, and information and communication technologies, and it was noted that older persons have been left behind in that regard in the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸

The EU sponsored and participated in the following side events in partnership with the organisers: i) data driven advocacy for policy change; ii) using arts and culture to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities; and iii) taking into account the rights of persons with disabilities in the COVID-19 pandemic recovery plan.

A webinar on persons with disabilities and COVID-19 was organised in April 2020, which focused on how to ensure their inclusion and participation during and after COVID-19. Several webinars on different topics, such as women with disabilities, inclusive communication, and procurement, were also organised by the EU-funded 'Bridging the Gap' project. An online side event during the Conference of State Parties to the CRPD was organised to exchange best practices between the countries participating in the project. Furthermore, the EU supported the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in finalising the development of indicators to help implement the SDGs in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. An online event was held in December 2020 to launch the SDG-CRPD resource package.

²⁸ Conference of State Parties documents / EU statements can be found at:
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/conference-of-states-parties-to-the-convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2/cosp13.html>
<https://journal.un.org/en/meeting/officials/7021bb42-9d12-eb11-9117-0050569e8b67/2020-12-01>
https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89715/european-union-statement-%E2%80%93-united-nations-conference-states-parties-convention-disabilities_en

The EU continued to promote the use of the cross-cutting policy marker of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which tracks development aid for activities that promote the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities. The EU delegations continued to be very active in promoting and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, such as improving their access to justice. In Montenegro, a roundtable on ‘Access to justice for persons with disabilities and equal recognition before the law’ was organised in March 2020 by the Association of Youth with Disabilities of Montenegro, in which the EU delegation and the Ministry of Public Administration participated.

Human rights of older persons

Population ageing constitutes one of the most significant demographic transformations of the 21st century. The EU is fully committed to the human rights of older persons worldwide. The year 2020 marked the 30th anniversary of the International Day of Older Persons. Considering the higher risks faced by older persons during the COVID-19 pandemic, policy and programmatic interventions should take full account of their special needs.

On 9 October 2020, the EU adopted Council conclusions on ‘**Human rights, participation and well-being of older persons in the era of digitalisation**’.²⁹ Specific threats such as those against the right to privacy were underlined and the importance of digital literacy was highlighted. Notably, all human rights and fundamental freedoms must be guaranteed without exception to older persons, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which access to affordable, good quality healthcare is paramount.

²⁹ Council conclusions on Human Rights, Participation and Well-Being of Older Persons in the Era of Digitalisation, 9 October 2020. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11717-2020-REV-2/en/pdf>

The situation for older persons is high on the EU's agenda, and its support for the UN's Madrid International Plan for Action on Ageing continued in 2020. This is a resource to help policymakers, NGOs, and CSOs to change the ways in which communities perceive, interact with and care for all older persons. The UN's Decade of Healthy Ageing (2020-2030) is an opportunity to bring together governments, civil society, international organisations, professionals, academia, the media, and the private sector for 10 years of concerted and collaborative action to improve the lives of older people and the communities in which they live. The UN's 2020 observance – the international day of older persons on 1 October – allowed governments, UN experts, civil society and health professionals to discuss the five strategic objectives of the WHO's global strategy and action plan on ageing and health and take stock of the progress made and challenges in implementing them.

The 11th session of the UN Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing, planned for 6-9 April 2020 in New York, was postponed due to COVID-19. The EU actively participated in developing a set of recommendations identifying possible gaps in the international instruments safeguarding the human rights of older persons and helped to have them applied more effectively. The EU was also active in the UNGA Third Committee, the HRC, and the Commission on Social Development. These fora offered important opportunities to discuss measures and actions devised to improve the situation of older persons.

The EU continued to cooperate with the UN human rights special procedure mandate holders and treaty bodies, ensuring that due attention is given to the rights of older persons within their mandates. Moreover, the Universal Periodic Review process was in some cases used to highlight the human rights challenges faced by older persons. The EU remains committed to addressing the recommendations and exchanging best practices for the promotion in multilateral fora and bilateral dialogues of the human rights of older persons.

Rights of indigenous peoples

The EU policies on support for indigenous peoples date back many decades. Through its policies and financing instruments, the EU is committed to the international 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 (UNDRIP). In 2020, the EU supported the implementation of the UNDRIP at country level, through its programming activities, but also through its political and human rights dialogues. The EU has been advocating for the realisation of indigenous peoples' rights and for indigenous peoples to fully and meaningfully participate in implementing and reviewing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Securing full participation and free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in a meaningful way is a core principle of EU policy.

In February 2020, the EU hosted a roundtable with indigenous peoples' representatives and experts from the seven indigenous socio-cultural regions of the world.³⁰ The roundtable's objective was to identify the most prevalent as well as emerging threats to the enjoyment of human rights by indigenous peoples, in line with recommendations of the UN Permanent Forum. It was an opportunity to gather perspectives on advancing indigenous peoples' rights through EU policy and action. The roundtable gave further recommendations on how EU policy can best protect the rights and interests of indigenous peoples, including FPIC, whether in development cooperation, climate action and biodiversity protection, trade agreements, or political and policy dialogue at national and international levels. The outcome of the roundtable refers to the state of play of EU support for indigenous peoples and contains recommendations on how to improve dialogue and consultation with indigenous peoples and make EU actions more coherent and consistent.

³⁰ The seven socio-cultural regions are Africa, Asia, Central and South America and the Caribbean, The Arctic, Central and Eastern Europe, Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia, North America and The Pacific.

In 2020, the EU extended its contribution (EUR 1 million) to the flagship project, the Indigenous Navigator, an open-source, community-based data collection system and mapping tool led by indigenous peoples for indigenous peoples. This grant was used for worldwide action in support of international advocacy and the building of alliances with strategic partners within the human rights fora. The Indigenous Navigator builds on international human rights instruments, including the UNDRIP. It provides timely global reports on the situation of indigenous peoples, including on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the status of indigenous women.

For the EU, it is very important to reverse the deterioration in human rights experienced by indigenous peoples caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 13th meeting of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples held between 30 November and 4 December 2020, the EU welcomed the focus on COVID-19's impact on indigenous peoples' rights, and raised concerns about the deteriorating situation for many indigenous peoples. Through the EIDHR human rights crisis facility, the EU mobilised special funds to address COVID-19's effect on indigenous peoples, in particular, in Latin America, to i) address the lack of high quality, trustworthy and culturally relevant information on the pandemic (EUR 1 million), and ii) help protect indigenous human rights defenders against the new threats that emerged following the pandemic, such as land grabbing and the seizure of natural resources (EUR 530 000).

The EU continues to address indigenous peoples' rights in its human rights dialogues with non-EU countries. In Africa, EU delegations launched calls for proposals to help indigenous peoples establish FPIC protocols in the protected area of Messok Dja in the Republic of Congo, and improve access to quality healthcare and education for indigenous minority communities in Kenya. In Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, calls were launched to support indigenous peoples and environmental defenders in becoming key actors in promoting social and environmental policies leading to sustainable development.

The EU worked closely with the ILO on promoting indigenous peoples' rights, including in the countries that have not ratified the ILO's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169. The most recent free trade agreements require indigenous peoples to be consulted as part of the impact assessments.

The voices of indigenous peoples are important in informing the EU funding programmes and projects. Securing their full participation and FPIC in a meaningful way is a core principle of EU policy. In December 2020, the EU co-hosted with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) its second technical meeting on the principle of FPIC. The meeting served to share best practices and deal with obstacles encountered in implementation but also to strengthen collaboration on capacity building.

The EU's ProtectDefenders.eu mechanism provides significant support to defenders of indigenous peoples' rights, in particular through the EU's capacity-building programmes and through its fieldwork and accompanying programmes. **Defenders of indigenous peoples' rights represent a consistent 7% of the total number of beneficiaries across all programmes – an estimated 2 000 HRDs every year and around 8 000 since the mechanism was launched.** However, overlaps exist with support provided to other groups of defenders, such as land and environmental rights defenders, or defenders working in isolated areas, who also receive considerable support as a priority group.

1.3 PROMOTING FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS AND STRENGTHENING CIVIC AND POLITICAL SPACE

Freedom of expression

In 2020, the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the importance of freedom of expression and access to information. In times of uncertainty, access to reliable, fact-based information is crucial and contributes to a more resilient society.

Emergency legislation imposed in countries around the world restricted the rights to freedom of expression and of association and raised doubts about the respect of the right to privacy.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about an onslaught of disinformation and misinformation causing disorientation among the public and in some cases inhibiting effective responses.

The spread of disinformation and misinformation on social media has relaunched the debate about the role of private companies and institutions in fighting disinformation. However, the fight against disinformation is used in some cases as a pretext to attack journalists, artists and critical voices in general and to limit their freedom of expression both online and offline.

Upholding the freedom of expression, the EU's response has also focused on promoting trustworthy sources, encouraging social media platforms to take effective measures against disinformation, and tackling illegal content disseminated through their services. The European Commission proposed new rules in its internal market with the Digital Services Act,³¹ to clarify the appropriate obligations on online intermediary services and to set out a balanced governance, with the rule of law and fundamental rights at its centre.

Media freedom and pluralism were significantly prominent in the European Commission's 2020 Rule of Law Report.³²

HR/VP Borrell has been vocal in public statements, high-level meetings and on social media in highlighting the importance of EU engagement on freedom of expression, journalists' safety and the fight against disinformation. A declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU was issued on World Press Freedom Day.³³

Freedom of expression has remained a key point on the agenda in most political and human rights dialogues such as those with China, Algeria, Iraq, the Republic of Moldova, Vietnam and Belarus. The EU emphasised that countries were obliged to uphold, protect and promote the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, including academic and artistic freedom.

³¹ Proposal for a Regulation on a Single Market For Digital Services (Digital Services Act) for ensuring a safe and accountable online environment), 15 December 2020:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act-ensuring-safe-and-accountable-online-environment_en

³² Commission Communication on 2020 Rule of Law Report (COM (2020) 580 final) of 30 September 2020:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication_2020_rule_of_law_report_en.pdf

³³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/05/02/declaration-by-the-high-representative-josep-borrell-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-occasion-of-the-world-press-freedom-day-3-may-2020/>

The EU continued to support the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and to collaborate with the CoE, the OSCE, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and relevant CSOs.

The EU supported the resolution on freedom of expression presented by the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada and others at the HRC. The resolution recalled that access to information is a critical tool to prevent and combat corruption and ensure democratic participation, by enabling the public to have an impact on decision-making and influence legislation. Access to information is central to the work of journalists, media workers, civil society and human rights defenders.

The EU welcomed the statement by international experts on freedom of expression³⁴ in March 2020 on access to and the free flow of information during the pandemic. It called upon governments to i) provide reliable and accessible information about the nature of the threat posed by COVID-19, ii) address disinformation, iii) refrain from blocking internet access and iv) take exceptional measures to protect the work of journalists. The use of surveillance technology to track the spread of the coronavirus should comply with strict limitations and be consistent with international human rights standards.

The EUSR for Human Rights raised issues concerning freedom of expression at political level during i) human rights dialogues (e.g. with Myanmar, Cuba, ASEAN, Azerbaijan), ii) country visits, such as in Qatar (international conference on social media), iii) exchanges with high-level interlocutors, or iv) high-level events and conferences. The EUSR met a number of persecuted journalists and media workers and intervened in specific cases in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Philippines, Ukraine, Bangladesh and Nigeria.

One of the main topics of the 2020 EU-NGO Forum was ‘Fundamental Rights and Freedoms in the Digital Sphere’. The use of technology to improve freedom of expression, fight against internet restrictions and share lessons learned on political activism online were discussed.

³⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25729>

Safety of journalists

Across the world, journalists and media workers are facing intimidation, violence or abuse, which often threaten their life and security. The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the situation, further endangering the work of journalists and restricting space for civil society. Impunity for abuses and crimes against journalists and media workers remained widespread worldwide, reaching 90% of cases of impunity in some countries, according to a 2019 UNESCO report.

During 2020, the EU followed with concern reports of journalists being placed in detention without trial, the closure of media stations, and internet shutdowns in many countries. The EU stepped up its action with other countries and issued clear messages on the key role of independent media and civil society, as well as on the need to protect human rights defenders, many of whom are journalists.

The safety of journalists was at the centre of EU advocacy for media freedom in international fora and bilateral dialogues, such as those with China, Algeria, Vietnam and Belarus. The EU recalled the obligation to protect and promote freedom of opinion and expression, and offered to collaborate. The EU supported the resolution on safety of journalists presented at the 45th session of the HRC. Several statements were published, including on the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists on 2 November.³⁵

A handbook on journalists' safety was distributed to all EU delegations. It helped inform the EU response to attacks against journalists and enabled EU delegations to prepare or coordinate public statements and social media interventions, observe court cases and identify cases requiring special protection. In 2020, the EU supported over 425 journalists with emergency grants, temporary relocation, or support for their respective media outlets.

Dedicated programmes continued to operate in many regions, for example, the 'Safejournalists' programme, run by journalist associations in the Western Balkans.

³⁵ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/87896/journalists-joint-statement-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-and-vice-president_en

New dedicated programmes were finalised in 2020, including ‘COVID-19 response in Africa: together for reliable information’, which brings together organisations such as *Deutsche Welle Akademie* and *Reporters Sans Frontières* to increase the resilience of journalists in Africa. Similar programmes are being prepared for Asia and Latin America.

On World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2020, the EEAS launched a campaign on Facebook,³⁶ Twitter and Instagram³⁷ involving journalists worldwide.

Many of those who featured in the campaign were at risk or had already been harassed and threatened by authorities. The campaign aimed to offer them visibility and protection.

The campaign highlighted the impact journalism has on people’s lives by focusing on the question ‘*What if there was no journalism?*’, asking people to imagine a world without journalism and to reflect on what freedom of expression means for everyone.

The campaign reached about 400 000 people and featured media professionals from 36 countries, including EU Member States (Belgium, France, Greece, Italy and Lithuania).

In 2020, the freedom of artistic expression, a cornerstone of democracy alongside freedom of the press, has declined in the context of the pandemic.³⁸ This is particularly due to misuses of blasphemy, anti-terrorism legislation, and COVID-19 measures as pretexts to silence dissident voices of artists and artworks.

³⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=664944417640166>

³⁷ https://www.instagram.com/tv/B_t3BTLlDvM/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet

³⁸ <https://freemuse.org/news/the-state-of-artistic-freedom-2021/>

1.4 REINFORCING ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND LABOUR RIGHTS

The environment, climate change and human rights

Human rights are increasingly affected by **global environmental challenges** such as environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, pollution and changes in the global water cycle. Sea levels are rising, as are global temperatures. The right to life can also be endangered by the increasing number of natural hazards. For instance, loss of coastal habitats and coral reefs due to floods and hurricanes has increased the risk to the rights to life and property for 100-300 million people worldwide.

Environmental degradation particularly affects the poor and people in most vulnerable situations. It amplifies inequality, violence and discrimination. Therefore, the EU has undertaken policies and measures to uphold human rights. Social and gender equality and the empowerment of women and young people are important prerequisites for environmental conservation and for sustainable development. The EU has also worked with youth organisations across the world to ensure intergenerational equity.

In 2020, the EU continued to protect and support the work of environmental human rights defenders and indigenous peoples who are facing an unprecedented level of threats and attacks.

The COVID-19 crisis has had a detrimental effect on the rights to water, food, health and life. The EU and its Member States, acting together as ‘Team Europe’, launched a support package in April 2020 to i) promote an equitable, sustainable and inclusive recovery and ii) help the most vulnerable countries and the people most at risk in line with the Council conclusions on Team Europe Global Response to COVID-19.³⁹ The EU’s support in response to the COVID-19 pandemic focuses on the actions set out below.

- Responding to the immediate health crisis and the resulting humanitarian needs. This includes supporting the response plans of the WHO and the UN, and providing humanitarian support in affected countries.
- Strengthening health, water and sanitation systems, as well as partner countries’ capacity and preparedness to deal with the pandemic.
- Mitigating the immediate social and economic consequences, including supporting the private sector with a focus on small and medium-sized enterprises, and introducing government reforms to reduce poverty.

The COVID-19 pandemic cannot be isolated from the ongoing climate emergency. Climate change is a threat multiplier to international stability and security and in particular affects the human rights of those in most vulnerable situations, intensifies environmental pressures and disaster risk, exacerbates the loss of livelihoods and causes the displacement of people.

The European Green Deal adopted in December 2019 aims for the EU to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. It embraces a bold and comprehensive environmental agenda, centred on protecting and promoting human rights, and provides for a fair and just transition, leaving no one behind.

³⁹ Council conclusions on Team Europe Global Response to COVID-19, 8 June 2020: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44347/team-europe-ccs-200608.pdf>

In 2020, the EU adopted a broad set of measures to implement the policy objectives of the European Green Deal. In January 2020, the Council adopted conclusions on climate diplomacy.⁴⁰ Together with the Council conclusions on water diplomacy adopted in 2018, these conclusions recalled the existential threat of climate change, underlined the impact of environmental degradation (notably water scarcity and biodiversity loss) on peace, security and human rights, and called for urgent collective responses.

Conscious of the need to ensure respect for human rights, social justice, fairness and inclusiveness, in May 2020, the Commission adopted a new EU biodiversity strategy for 2030⁴¹ together with the ‘Farm to fork strategy’⁴² to make food systems more sustainable. The strategy emphasises that the post-2020 global framework under discussion must respect the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities and enable them to participate fully and effectively in the framework. It also adopts an inclusive approach with the participation of all stakeholders, in particular women, young people, civil society, local authorities, the private sector, academia and scientific institutions, and is in line with the new EU strategy on adaptation to climate change focused on improving resilience of the people in the most vulnerable situations.

The EU further developed its diplomatic tools to promote the priorities of the European Green Deal (climate, biodiversity and circular economy) across the globe. The challenge of recovering from the economic impacts of the pandemic offers an opportunity to deal with long-term climate and environmental challenges in a strategic and socially sustainable way, focusing specifically on protecting and promoting human rights and democracy. In July 2020, the EU made a *démarche* on inclusive green recovery, designed to convince partners of the need to **‘build back better’ in the post-COVID-19 recovery strategy**.

⁴⁰ Council conclusions on Climate Diplomacy:

<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5033-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

⁴¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/actions-being-taken-eu/eu-biodiversity-strategy-2030_en

⁴² https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/actions-being-taken-eu/farm-fork_en

On 28 September 2020, on the margins of the UNGA, the EU co-organised a high-level leaders' event, at which it launched the 'Leaders Pledge for Nature'⁴³. The Pledge, endorsed by 76 countries, contains significant commitments at the highest political level to put nature, climate and the environment at the heart of recovery strategies and decision-making. The Pledge is also a statement of intent in support of the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework to be agreed at the Biodiversity COP15 and in anticipation of the COP26 UN Climate Change Conference in 2021.

Economic, social and cultural rights

The EU is committed to promoting social and economic rights both internally and in its external relations, notably quality employment, universal social protection, access to social services, decent work as well as addressing multidimensional poverty, inequalities and social exclusion.

The year 2020 marked the 10th anniversary of water and sanitation as universal human rights, as well as the first anniversary of the EU's adoption of the human rights guidelines on safe drinking water and sanitation⁴⁴ – the first EU human rights guidelines on economic, social and cultural rights. These guidelines highlighted the EU's commitment to helping ensure the rights to safe drinking water and sanitation worldwide, which are deeply rooted in the indivisible principles of equality and non-discrimination.

Via its bilateral and multilateral cooperation, the EU promoted the rights to water and sanitation through the complementary use of the EU's financial instruments, in collaboration with the UN, national authorities, CSOs and other partners. In 2020, the right to water was a key priority for EU development and emergency support in vulnerable areas, in particular due to the ongoing health emergency.

⁴³ Leaders' Pledge for Nature: <https://www.leaderspledgefornature.org/>

⁴⁴ EU Human Rights Guidelines on Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation adopted by the Council on 17 June 2019: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39776/st10145-en19.pdf>

The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder of the importance of the rights to water and sanitation. At present, 2.1 billion people still lack safe access to water, one in four healthcare facilities lack basic water services, and one in five have no sanitation service. In 2020, the EU promoted the guidelines on safe drinking water and sanitation at multilateral human rights fora such as the annual High-level Political Forum organised ahead of the UNGA, taking stock of the progress made in implementing the SDGs. The guidelines strengthened the EU's development cooperation, humanitarian aid and civilian protection in crisis recovery contexts. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU helped to prevent the health systems in many countries from being overwhelmed and to save lives.

The EU continues to increase partners' capacity to prioritise and integrate interventions to meet demands for quality water and sanitation services and improve measures in healthcare facilities. In addition, the EU is developing activities to promote hygiene targeting households and public spaces in order to reduce exposure to the disease at home, at work, and in communities.

Seawater desalination plant in Gaza

One of the EU's flagship programmes to ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation is in Gaza. Gazans rely on ground water and experience a high level of water contamination. The ongoing crises, including power outages and a lack of sufficient infrastructure and effective water resource management, have led to a critical humanitarian and environmental situation. In the Gaza Strip, only 10% of the water meets international quality standards.

To meet the domestic demand for fresh water in Gaza, the EU is funding the operation and management of a desalination plant, costing approximately EUR 150 million. The desalination plant mixes desalinated seawater with water from the underground tank, doubling the quantity of usable water. To date, EU investments have provided safe drinking water to 205 000 Palestinians in Gaza and 115 000 in the West Bank. Furthermore, safe sanitation services have benefited 550 000 Palestinians in Gaza. Ongoing EU investments will provide a long-term solution for safe drinking water to all of the estimated 2 million people who live in Gaza.

In Gaza, the water-energy nexus is particularly critical, and the EU's work in the water sector is supported by its work in the energy sector, notably through renewable energy projects and the Gas for Gaza project.

In 2020, EU Member States helped in the adoption of several resolutions and initiatives on economic, social and cultural rights at the UNGA and HRC, as in previous years. These included:

- the right to education (sponsored by Portugal);
- adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to non-discrimination in this context (co-sponsored by Brazil, Finland, Germany and Namibia);
- the right to work (co-sponsored by Egypt, Greece, Indonesia, Mexico and Romania);

- human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation (co-sponsored by Germany and Spain);
- extreme poverty and human rights (co-sponsored by Albania, Belgium, Chile, France, Morocco, Peru, the Philippines, Romania and Senegal);
- mental health and human rights (co-sponsored by Brazil and Portugal);
- rights to social security (co-sponsored by Finland, Iceland, Namibia and South Africa);
- protecting human rights through sport and the Olympic ideal (co-sponsored by Brazil, China, Congo, Cyprus, Greece, Japan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Republic of Korea and Russia);
- guaranteeing the rights of the child through a healthy environment (sponsored by the EU/Germany and Group of Latin America and Caribbean Countries (GRULAC)/Uruguay).

Gathering feedback from the rural population on public service delivery in Uzbekistan

The EU-funded project ‘Improved Public Service Delivery and Enhanced Governance in Rural Uzbekistan’ supports the government’s efforts to develop citizen-centric public service and strengthen the local governance system in addressing the social and economic concerns and interests of local citizens more effectively. The project is also designed to support the country’s digitalisation and to facilitate contactless service provision in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

By improving the delivery of public services, this project will contribute to improving the quality of life of people in rural areas, particularly vulnerable groups – such as women, youth and children, older persons, and persons with disabilities – by improving their access to public services and by increasing the quality of service delivery. This project also aims to strengthen citizens’ participation in local decision-making and increase people’s access to information.

The COVID-19 crisis has heavily affected culture. The EU and its Member States remained a close partner of UNESCO as well as its largest donor. They have paid tribute to the role that UNESCO continues to play at the forefront of efforts in the fields of education, science, and culture, and joined forces with UNESCO to ensure that the UN's 'building back better and greener' initiative stays on track.

In 2020, the EU launched the 'Creatives Unite' platform for cultural and creative sectors.⁴⁵ This offers a common space for people looking for information on initiatives in the cultural and creative sector, in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The platform provides access to a multitude of existing resources and relevant networks and organisations. It offers a space to co-create solutions, and upload and share them, and helps to safeguard the freedom of artistic expression. The platform complements the weekly 'Culture & COVID-19: Impact and Response Tracker',⁴⁶ produced by UNESCO as a snapshot of the impact the pandemic is having on the cultural sector worldwide and of the responses at national, regional and local levels.

EU-UNESCO cooperation works towards achieving several of the UN SDGs through culture. It includes projects to mitigate the impact of disasters, prevent and respond to conflicts, and support i) resilience, ii) local development, iii) decent work, iv) gender equality and inclusive societies and v) safe and sustainable cities. Projects signed and implemented in 2020 include:

- 'Reviving Mosul and Basra Old Cities';
- 'Fighting illicit trafficking of cultural property in the Western Balkans';
- 'Protecting silk roads heritage corridors in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran as part of the International Dimension of the European Year of Cultural Heritage'; and
- creating job opportunities for Yemen's youth through restoring cultural heritage sites.

In 2020 alone, the EU supported cultural projects, with over EUR 20 million in funds.

⁴⁵ Creatives Unite: <http://creativesunite.eu/>

⁴⁶ UNESCO [Culture & COVID-19: Impact and Response Tracker](https://en.unesco.org/news/culture-covid-19-impact-and-response-tracker)
<https://en.unesco.org/news/culture-covid-19-impact-and-response-tracker>

Labour rights

The EU is committed to promoting human rights and decent work, labour rights and international labour standards worldwide. It has advocated in particular for the ratification and implementation of fundamental ILO conventions regarding freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, the effective elimination of child labour, and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation. The freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining are particularly important as enabling rights.

The COVID-19 crisis has negatively affected the working and living conditions of workers, in particular for those in the most vulnerable and disadvantaged situations and notably persons with disabilities and older persons. 1.6 billion workers in the informal sector have lost job opportunities; migrant workers have experienced a rising level of xenophobia; food insecurity and an overall worsening of working conditions has become more common; and the ratio of child labour is expected to rise again for the first time in 20 years.

In this context, the EU remained active in various policy areas to promote job creation and decent work in global value chains, striving for a fair, sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

The Commission published a staff working document in October 2020, which provided an overview of the EU's involvement in promoting decent work around the world. It underlined the cross-cutting nature of the decent work agenda, which is relevant to external action, multilateral fora, and other key EU policy areas.

The sustainable development chapters of trade agreements signed by the EU reaffirm the parties' commitment to the decent work agenda, call for the ratification and effective implementation of fundamental ILO Conventions and include provisions on occupational health and safety.

Cooperation on a broad range of trade-related labour topics, and the promotion of responsible business practices in line with relevant international principles and guidelines are also included.

In June 2019, ILO Convention No. 190 was adopted as the first international instrument to set out minimum standards in order to tackle work-related harassment and violence. The European Commission proposed on 22 January 2020 a Council decision to authorise EU Member States to ratify ILO Convention No. 190. The Council in its conclusions⁴⁷ urged the Member States to continue their efforts to ratify and apply up-to-date ILO conventions and to take necessary measures to eliminate violence and harassment at work.

The EU continued to provide funding to several ILO projects aimed at combating forced labour. For example, the ongoing ‘Clear Cotton’ project is dedicated to combating child labour and forced labour in the cotton, textile and garment supply chains in Burkina Faso, Mali and Pakistan. The project ‘Ship to Shore Rights’, concluded in 2020, helped the Thai government to combat forced labour in the Thai fishing and seafood industries, mainly involving migrant workers from Cambodia and Myanmar.

Besides forced labour, the EU provided funding for 53 ILO projects⁴⁸ aimed at improving and effectively implementing labour rights. For instance, in 2020, the project ‘Towards safe, healthy and declared work in Ukraine’ started, aimed at improving compliance with occupational health and safety standards and fighting undeclared work, including by improving the effectiveness of the labour inspection system.

Through its ‘Better Work’ programme implemented by the ILO, the EU seeks to improve working conditions in the garment sector at factory level, addressing issues such as gender equality, sexual harassment, discrimination, wages, reproductive health and maternity protection. This programme proves that respecting labour rights leads to better performance in factories.

In line with its zero tolerance policy on child labour, the EU prolonged its development cooperation measures to help eliminate child labour and ensure a decent living wage and sustainable production practices.

⁴⁷ Council conclusions on the Future of Work: the European Union promoting the ILO Centenary Declaration, 24 October 2019:

<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13436-2019-INIT/en/pdf>

⁴⁸ <https://www.ilo.org/DevelopmentCooperationDashboard/#bd7d4pu>

Through its continuous efforts to eliminate child labour and its cooperation with the ILO, the EU contributed to the universal ratification in 2020 of the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No.182). Despite this achievement, progress on eliminating child labour has slowed down. Therefore, the EU has continued its efforts to combat child labour, including through political and policy dialogue with partner countries.

At the ILO Governing Body meeting in November 2020, the EU called on Bangladesh and Myanmar to effectively eliminate child labour; this issue was also discussed during human rights dialogues, including those with Myanmar and Vietnam.

Under the Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapters of the EU trade agreements, the parties are committed to ratifying and effectively implementing the fundamental conventions of the International Labour Organization. The EU has continued to engage in regular dialogues with partners on these commitments.

The EU has also maintained regular dialogues with countries benefitting from the Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance of the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP+). These countries have committed to ratifying and effectively implementing conventions on human rights, fundamental labour rights, environment and good governance, as a condition for benefitting from unilateral tariff preferences under the GSP+.

The EU is currently reviewing the EU Generalised System of Preferences Regulation. The new GSP Regulation is intended to foster the sustainable economic, social and environmental development of beneficiary countries, including the respect for good governance and human rights, with the primary goal of eradicating poverty.

In Asia, the EU worked closely with Vietnam on fundamental labour rights commitments under the Trade and Sustainable Development chapter of the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement. To this end, Vietnam committed to developing an action plan to mitigate and prevent child labour for 2021-2025. Tackling child labour, alongside other labour rights including in particular freedom of association and collective bargaining, was identified as a priority for GSP+ monitoring for the Philippines and Mongolia. Labour rights are also a key issue in the EU enhanced monitoring of Cambodia and Bangladesh under the Everything-But-Arms trade arrangement.

Child labour and the EU's zero tolerance policy have been raised in bilateral dialogues with a number of other countries.

As regards Central Asian countries, child labour was raised at the human rights dialogue with Kyrgyzstan, for which child labour was also among the priority areas for progress in the GSP+ monitoring report of February 2020. Child and forced labour was a focus of attention with regard to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, including in the context of their interest in the GSP+ regime. At the human rights dialogue with Uzbekistan, the EU acknowledged achievements regarding the eradication of child labour and stressed the need to fully eliminate forced labour.

As regards the Eastern Partnership countries, child labour was discussed during the 2020 Trade and Sustainable Development sub-committee meetings and human rights dialogues with the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. For both countries, child labour has been one of the priority areas for action. Child labour was also among the priority areas for progress identified for Armenia in the GSP+ report published in February 2020.

The rights of the child are raised as a priority in the context of GSP+, and beneficiary countries are required to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ILO Conventions No. 138 (minimum age) and No. 182 (eliminating the worst forms of child labour). In this context, Myanmar ratified ILO Convention No. 138, and the EU requested child labour surveys to be carried out in GSP+ beneficiary countries such as Pakistan and Mongolia.

The EU has recognised the significant legislative progress made by Cape Verde regarding the abolition of the worst forms of child labour in its GSP monitoring. However, it also pointed out certain pertaining shortcomings, which require further improvement.

Ratification of ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age was discussed in the course of Free Trade Agreement negotiations with Australia and New Zealand.

In 2020, the European Commission appointed a Chief Trade Enforcement Officer (CTEO), who will be leading the work. The Commission launched the Single Entry Point under CTEO, with the objective of streamlining internal processes to tackle non-compliance with TSD/GSP commitments. EU stakeholders are now able to directly lodge complaints concerning breaches of commitments in the EU's TSD chapters and under the GSP Regulation, and the Single Entry Point is the central point of contact for submitting complaints.

The Commission also announced that the review of the 15-point TSD Action Plan on improving the implementation and enforcement of Trade and Sustainable Development chapters in EU Free Trade Agreements⁴⁹ would be moved to 2021.

In September 2020, the EU launched its Sustainable Cocoa Initiative. The initiative seeks to improve sustainability in the cocoa sector through a multi-stakeholder dialogue, which brings together representatives of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana – the two main cocoa-producing countries, accounting for 70% of global cocoa production – as well as representatives of the European Parliament, Member States, cocoa growers and civil society. The dialogue aims to provide specific recommendations on increasing sustainability across the cocoa supply chain through collective action and partnerships, as well as to eliminate child labour in cocoa supply chains.

In September 2020, the European Commission proposed the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum,⁵⁰ which includes initiatives in order to work with key partner countries to facilitate cooperation between skilled workers, employers, social partners and labour market institutions in line with the EU's skills and labour market needs, while fully respecting EU and Member States' competencies.

The EU continued to use human rights and other bilateral dialogues to engage with non-EU countries, such as the Thailand-EU labour dialogue held in February 2020, in order to promote respect of labour rights and the uptake and implementation of international labour guidelines and standards.

⁴⁹ http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/february/tradoc_156618.pdf

⁵⁰ Commission Communication on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum, COM(2020) 609 final of 23 September 2020: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:85ff8b4f-ff13-11ea-b44f-01aa75ed71a1.0002.02/DOC_3&format=PDF

In October 2020, the Council Presidency organised a two-day conference on human rights and decent work in global supply chains. In December 2020, the Council adopted conclusions on this topic, calling for an ‘EU Action Plan by 2021 focusing on shaping global supply chains sustainably, promoting human rights, social and environmental due diligence standards and transparency’.⁵¹

1.5 SUPPORTING THE RULE OF LAW AND THE FAIR ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

Human rights and counter-terrorism

In 2020, the EU remained fully committed to providing continued support to its key partners in this area, with due respect for the rule of law, democracy and human rights and the values enshrined in the UN Charter and set out in the Security Union Strategy⁵² and the Counter-Terrorism (CT) Agenda for the EU⁵³.

Through regular political and security dialogues on CT with priority countries, and through multilateral coordination, the EU systematically encourages partners to strengthen their capacity to prevent and respond effectively to radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism, while fully respecting human rights. The EU also emphasises that the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P-CVE), and counter-terrorism policies and measures should not negatively affect, limit or impact women’s rights. Furthermore, CT/P-CVE policy should not be used as a pretext to restrict human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy or the rule of law.

All dialogues and consultations with partners have continuously advocated that human rights and rule-of-law principles be integrated into counter-terrorism policies, by means of, for example, developing an evidence-based criminal justice system. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the sensitivity of the topic of counter-terrorism, only a limited number of consultations took place online with partner countries during 2020.

⁵¹ Council Conclusions on Human Rights and Decent Work in Global Supply Chains, 2 December 2020: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13512-2020-REV-1/en/pdf>

⁵² COM(2020) 605 final, 24.7.2020.

⁵³ COM(2020) 795 final, 9.12.2020.

While engaging with non-EU countries, the EU highlights the importance of prevention as the key pillar of any ‘whole of government’ counter-terrorism strategy, and recommends a national action plan be developed to prevent violent extremism in line with the UN’s call to accord a greater role to civil society. The EU encourages a civilian-led approach to P-CVE by engaging with local authorities and communities, including young people, women and religious leaders. The EU seeks to take the lead in encouraging its partners to take action against hate speech, religious intolerance and divisive rhetoric and all forms of extremism leading to violence, in full compliance with international human rights law.

The EU and the UN conducted the third high-level CT dialogue online in December 2020. 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, international humanitarian law and international refugee law. The EU promotes the prevention of violent extremism as a policy priority and highlights the need to involve civil society in the UN context. In this regard, the 2014-2020 EU framework programme for research and innovation, Horizon 2020, devoted a specific research call to “drivers and contexts of violent extremism in the broader Middle East and North Africa region and the Balkans”. The 3 research projects⁵⁴ being funded with EUR 9 million mobilise more than 40 participants (policymakers, religious leaders, representatives of civil society), to improve the knowledge base on violent extremism in those regions and ensure progress in mutual learning between the EU and partner countries in light of common challenges.

The EU is an active member of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and co-chairs, together with Egypt, the Capacity Building in the East Africa Region Working Group. The Working Group provides a forum for regional exchange and networking, including on best practices for P-CVE. The three GCTF-inspired P-CVE institutions (the Hedayah Centre in Abu Dhabi, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund in Geneva and the International Institute for Justice in Malta), co-funded by the EU, are mainstreaming a human rights-based and ‘whole of society’ approach in supporting the development of P-CVE programmes. The experts from the Radicalisation Awareness Network, created to support EU Member States, has also been - to a limited extent - deployed outside the EU to support prevention efforts.

⁵⁴ An overview of the projects is available in [CORDIS](#).

Furthermore, the EEAS manages the network of regional CT/security experts deployed in EU delegations in 17 priority countries, some of whom have regional responsibilities such as the EU CT/security experts in the Western Balkans, Kenya and Indonesia. Several civilian common security and defence policy (CSDP) missions, including the EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) and the EU Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM Iraq), support the development of local CT/P-CVE capabilities, while observing human rights and rule-of-law principles.

The International Criminal Court

The EU continued its efforts to ensure accountability, in particular for the most serious crimes under international law, and to help victims of atrocities obtain justice. The EU provided political, diplomatic and financial support to the International Criminal Court (ICC)⁵⁵. 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, in particular through EU statements and interventions in support of its independence and integrity and other advocacy activities. The EU also intensified its cooperation and exchange of information with the ICC.

⁵⁵ 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.

The EU continued to promote the **universality of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court**, in particular during its human rights dialogues and through its annual *démarche* campaign encouraging the ratification of, or accession to, the Rome Statute. A specific clause to this effect was included in agreements concluded with non-EU countries. Financial support has been provided to CSOs that advocate the universality of the Rome Statute. The EU supported in particular the work of Parliamentarians for Global Actions, a network of some 1 300 legislators in over 140 elected parliaments around the world, and of the Coalition for the International Criminal Court, a global civil society network of over 2 500 member organisations in 150 countries. Furthermore, CSOs were regularly invited to give presentations at EU meetings on the ICC.

The EU continued to support the ICC in multilateral and regional fora such as the UN Security Council, the UNGA and the HRC, as well as in the context of the African Union.

The EU's financial support to the ICC aimed at broadening understanding of the ICC and the Rome Statute amongst key stakeholders, and strengthening national capacities to deal with crimes under the Rome Statute. The main activities include:

- seminars, events and training aimed at fostering cooperation, sharing expertise and building national capacity;
- placing legal professionals from 'situation countries' in the Court's visiting professionals programme; and
- developing legal tools to assist legal professionals working on core international crimes (genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes).

The EU's support for the ICC is part of wider 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 also provided support to the national criminal justice systems of a number of countries, including Afghanistan, DRC, Myanmar, Georgia, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Guinea, Mali and Uganda.

Furthermore, the **EU continued to support a number of international criminal tribunals and mechanisms**, including:

- the Special Criminal Court in the Central African Republic (CAR);
- the Special Court for Sierra Leone;
- the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia;
- the Special Tribunal for Lebanon; and
- the UN International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals – mandated to carry out essential remaining work of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

In August 2020, the EU adopted a decision to support a ‘Programme on access to justice for children on the move in West Africa’ (EUR 7.89 million). The programme seeks to improve children’s access to child-friendly justice through age and gender-sensitive juvenile justice mechanisms and provide alternatives to detention for migrant children in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria. In the Western Balkans, the EU regularly monitors the situation as regards justice for children, and in the regular political dialogues under the Stabilisation and Association Agreements, it raises concerns on issues such as inadequate healthcare or access to education for children deprived of their liberty.

Enhancing Prosecutors' role in the protection against and the penalisation of gender-based violence in Morocco

During 2020, the new Prosecutor's office, set up in 2017, affirmed strongly its independence and leadership role in the fight against gender-based violence as the 'shadow pandemic' during COVID-19 crisis. The EU has contributed to the reinforcement of Prosecutor's office combining political dialogue and financial mix tools through Justice and Equality programmes (budget support) and technical support with the Council of Europe in order to ensure a rights-based approach aligned with international standards such as the Istanbul Convention.

A monitoring system was deployed to ensure the respect of the rights of the child as regards derogation procedure for early marriage as well as to ensure the criminalisation of gender-based violence. Specific measures were adopted to reflect the pandemic situation in 2020. In addition, an online support system for complaints was developed during the lockdown period. Cases of aggression or violence against women and girls could be reported through a free number (8350) the hotline "Koulna Maak" (All together). These cases were immediately notified to the public prosecutor's office and to the judicial police services.

This initiative which was implemented in close coordination with other institutional services and civil society underlined the Prosecutor's role to maintain accessibility to justice for victims and to ensure that these areas remain a priority.

1.6 CLOSING THE ACCOUNTABILITY GAP, FIGHTING IMPUNITY AND SUPPORTING TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

On 7 December 2020, **the Council adopted a Decision and a Regulation establishing a global human rights sanctions regime**. This is a landmark achievement. For the first time, the EU has a legislative framework allowing it to **target individuals, entities and bodies** – including state and non-state actors – **responsible for, involved in or associated with serious human rights violations and abuses worldwide**, no matter where they occurred.

The restrictive measures provide for **travel bans for** individuals and the **freezing of the funds of** both individuals and entities. In addition, individuals and entities in the EU will be **forbidden to make funds available** to those listed, either directly or indirectly.

The EU global human rights sanctions regime contains a humanitarian derogation, which allows the competent authorities of the Member States to authorise the release or the making available of funds or economic resources to those listed, if necessary solely for the purpose of providing humanitarian aid.

The framework for targeted restrictive measures applies to 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). Other human rights violations or abuses may also fall under the scope of the sanctions regime if they are **widespread, systematic or are otherwise of serious concern** with respect to the objectives of the common foreign and security policy set out in the Treaty (Article 21 TEU).

In 2020, the EU continued to implement its **policy framework on support to transitional justice**. This included raising the topic with non-EU countries, such as Nepal, in bilateral dialogues as well as with regional organisations, such as the African Union. During the last round of the EU-AU human rights dialogue on 8 December 2020,⁵⁶ both sides underlined the importance of continuing efforts to address impunity and the need for complementarity at national, regional and international levels, restating their commitment to organising an expert seminar in 2021. The EU Facility on Justice in Conflict and Transition, financed under the EU Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), continued to provide tailored and high-level technical assistance to selected EU delegations on the ground. The mid-term review of the Facility confirmed its clear benefits, also illustrated by EU delegations' keen interest in using the advisory services provided by the Facility's experts. The EU supported extending the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence⁵⁷.

Promoting civil society scrutiny in justice reform in Bolivia

The EU has been supporting the civil society Platform on Justice, since its creation in 2015, in its role of policy advocacy and monitoring. This has been done through two consecutive EIDHR projects implemented by 'Fundación Construir'⁵⁸ in support of citizens' participation in a justice reform that grants access to justice for all (with a total budget of EUR 1.5 million). Under this longstanding cooperation, the EU has supported the public scrutiny of the judicial elections and the office of the General Prosecutor. The project contributed to the production of crucial reports informing the UN and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the main challenges related to fundamental rights and due process in Bolivia. In 2020, the Justice Observatory, also supported by the project, constituted the main repository of data on justice across state institutions. Finally, this initiative has been instrumental in developing innovative cooperation mechanisms between the state and civil society, and in promoting pro bono legal aid to help the persons in the most vulnerable situations to obtain free justice and reparation.

⁵⁶ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/african-union-au/90470/joint-communic%C3%A9-european-union-%E2%80%93-african-union-hold-16th-human-rights-dialogue_en

⁵⁷ <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/RES/45/10>

⁵⁸ <https://www.fundacionconstruir.org/participacionciudadanaenlareformaalajusticia/#>

During 2020, the EU continued to be a staunch supporter of the **responsibility to protect (R2P)** concept. In close cooperation with EU Member States, EU action focused on promoting continued political commitment to and implementation of the R2P concept by facilitating dialogue and engagement in the UN context and by applying the concept as an analytical tool to specific country situations.

The 15th anniversary of the adoption of the R2P concept offered further opportunities in this regard. At the 44th session of the HRC, the EU supported the resolution on the ‘15th anniversary of the responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, as enshrined in the World Summit Outcome of 2005’, which constituted the first thematic resolution on the R2P concept.

Equally, the EU supported the HRC Resolution⁵⁹ on the ‘contribution of the Human Rights Council to the prevention of human rights violations’ and the resolution on the ‘prevention of genocide’.⁶⁰

On 18 September 2020, all EU Member States voted in favour of including an item on R2P and the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity on the agenda of the 75th session of the UNGA.

The EU and its Member States, working together with the Group of Friends of R2P both in Geneva and New York, continued to strive to enable effective and operational action on R2P at the UN, not least by supporting the French/Mexican initiative on veto restraint if it is determined that a mass atrocity occurred. The EU further strengthened its cooperation with the UN on R2P and continued to support the UN Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on R2P and the UN Joint Office on Genocide Prevention and the R2P, both politically and financially. The EU funded the development of atrocity prevention guidelines based on research assessing how preventive action works and what lessons can be learned to improve future practice.

⁵⁹ A/HRC/45/L.32.

⁶⁰ A/HRC/RES/43/29.

In line with its broad ambition to ‘build back better’ for a green, inclusive, digital and resilient global recovery, the EU’s comprehensive strategic response also aims to prevent mass atrocities. The EU has continued to foster a culture of prevention and early action, based on close collaboration between thematic, geographic and crisis management departments. Furthermore, it has strengthened its capacity to adapt relevant instruments and initiatives to include R2P as a cross-cutting and operational concept in foreign policy, including through internal training. The EU, supported by Member States, has continued to use conflict analysis and its Conflict Early Warning System to identify R2P issues and focus on early action.

2. BUILDING RESILIENT, INCLUSIVE AND DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

2.1 ENHANCING DEMOCRATIC, ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT INSTITUTIONS

For the first time since 2001, autocracies are in the majority and the outbreak of COVID-19 has worsened the already existing challenges to democracy around the world.⁶¹ To tackle democratic backsliding, the EU strives, for example, to support independent media and journalists, to strengthen parliaments and the rule of law, and to work with political parties in a non-partisan manner.

The European Democracy Action Plan⁶² seeks to increase EU democracies' resilience to challenges, addressing the areas where our democratic systems are most exposed. Therefore, it complements and mirrors the new EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy by addressing the risk of interference and manipulation in order to protect democracies within and outside the EU.

Election observation missions (EOMs) are a highly visible demonstration of the EU's commitment to supporting democracy and promoting respect for human rights and the rule of law in partner countries. In 2020, the EU deployed three EOMs: at the beginning of the year to Guyana and Peru, and in October to Ghana – the first deployment of an EU EOM since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight election expert missions were deployed to follow electoral processes in Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Jordan, Mali, Myanmar and Niger.

In addition, the EU spent EUR 73 million on electoral assistance including projects dedicated to preventing election violence and strengthening the role of citizens and local CSOs in observing elections. Capacity building and support were provided to election management bodies in a wide variety of countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, Paraguay, the Central African Republic, Niger and Burkina Faso.

⁶¹ Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Sandra Grahn, Nazifa Alizada, Lisa Gastaldi, Sebastian Hellmeier, Garry Hindle and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2020. [Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows. Democracy Report 2020](#). Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) and V-Dem's Pandemic Backsliding Project.

⁶² European Democracy Action Plan, COM (2020) 790 final of 3 December 2020: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A790%3AFIN&qid=1607079662423>

The EU supported citizen observers during elections in OSCE participating States, notably in Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The EU also provided funds to African NGOs such as the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, to design and carry out, jointly with local CSOs, domestic election observation or peace monitoring, e.g. in Burkina Faso or the Central African Republic.

The role of social media during election campaigns worldwide has further increased during the global health pandemic. While the EU began to develop and pilot its methodology to observe online election campaigning in 2019, observation of the online space became a standard part of the work of EU EOMs in 2020.

All EU EOM final reports since 2016, including missions' recommendations, are available online in the EU Election Mission Database.⁶³

In 2020, the Commission adopted the revised methodology for enlargement, which was endorsed by the Member States. According to the revised methodology, the 'fundamentals', including the functioning of democratic institutions, will become even more central to accession negotiations and will determine their overall pace.

During 2020, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) remained a key EU partner in the enlargement and neighbourhood countries and supported initiatives in several areas, ranging from observation and awareness raising around specific issues such as the need to vote and voters' rights, to the training of inexperienced activists in electoral participation.

Furthermore, the EED supported media monitoring and social surveys, for example, monitoring people's attitudes towards elections. The cooperation with the EED proved particularly responsive during the COVID-19 pandemic, and provided essential assistance to CSOs and media outlets in adapting to the current constraints and safety measures.

⁶³ EU Database on election missions: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/relations-non-eu-countries/types-relations-and-partnerships/election-observation/mission-recommendations-repository/home>

The EU continued to work with the CoE on issues related to the promotion of democracy. For instance, in Ukraine, a joint project on media freedom aimed to ensure balanced and professional media coverage of the 2019-2020 elections.

The EU supports the governance reform in Turkmenistan

The European Union advocates for democratic reform in Turkmenistan. With this purpose in mind, the EU funds a bi-lateral project “Support for Public Administration Capacity Building in Turkmenistan”. The EU project supports development of the Master's degree programme in Public Administration and the administrative reform of the Academy of Civil Service. A series of trainings and workshops for academic staff were conducted to ensure knowledge transfer and promotion of the democratic principles and values in the civil service of Turkmenistan, strengthening their institutional and training capacities to implement international conventions in line with the National Human Rights Action Plan.

During 2020, the EU also provided technical electoral assistance to several countries. For instance, under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), the Central Electoral Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina developed a five-year strategy and corresponding action plan to improve the integrity, transparency and efficiency of the election process. EU funds also allowed the NGO ‘Pod Lupom’ to field more than 2 600 electoral observers at the municipal elections in November 2020.

The Western Balkans remained a priority region with strong political support for its democratic institutions and some in-person activities were organised at the beginning of 2020. The third round of the Jean Monnet Dialogue with the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia was organised in January, as was a follow-up online consultation after the early parliamentary elections. Regarding the Inter-Party Dialogue in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, consultations were conducted in February 2020. Online consultation with political stakeholders from these countries (and others, such as Ukraine) continued throughout the year. A virtual training session to tackle pandemic-related corruption risks was organised for parliamentary officials in the six countries of the region along with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. An information session for parliamentary officials also took place, highlighting the EU's economic support for the Western Balkans.

The EU's flagship project on parliamentary strengthening, INTER PARES | Parliaments in Partnership – **EU Global Project to Strengthen the Capacity of Parliaments**,⁶⁴ went into full swing in 2020. It established partnerships between eight partner parliaments around the world (Malaysia, Bhutan, Maldives, The Gambia, Panama, Malawi, Trinidad and Tobago and Mauritania) and EU Member States' parliaments (including Greece, Denmark, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Spain, Ireland and Sweden).

The project adapted its activities, including seminars, training, dialogues and mentoring, to online and virtual formats. INTER PARES documented parliamentary responses to the COVID-19 crisis, collecting and sharing best practices in order to safeguard and strengthen parliamentary democracy.

The project published a primer on 'Parliaments and Crisis: Challenges and Innovations' in early May 2020. On the International Day of Parliamentarism on 30 June, it released a data-tracking map showing parliamentary responses in 166 countries.

Moreover, the project provided key support for i) the revamping of the AGORA platform, ii) a multi-stakeholder knowledge-sharing online hub on parliamentary development, as well as iii) the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Centre for Innovation in Parliament. It also started to produce a series of e-learning modules on key parliamentary matters.

⁶⁴ EU Global Project to Strengthen the Capacity of Parliaments <https://www.inter-pares.eu/>

2.2 PROMOTING RESPONSIVE, INCLUSIVE, PARTICIPATORY AND REPRESENTATIVE DECISION-MAKING

In 2020, the EU's stand for political pluralism was reflected in its continued support for political party systems, in a multi-party, non-partisan manner.

In this context, the implementation of five projects that were awarded grants under the 'Pilot Programme to Strengthen Political Parties' helped to strengthen the role of women in political parties and to level the playing field of multi-party systems in Malawi, Bolivia, Morocco, Benin, Paraguay, Mongolia, Moldova, Tunisia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

In-person activities under the Young Political Leaders programme - which promotes dialogue and understanding to foster longer-term peace and trust amongst future leaders outside the EU – were suspended. However, a series of online events were held with the programme's alumni during the lockdown: three debates were organised jointly with the Anna Lindh Foundation and an alumna participated in a session of the European Parliament's Sub-Committee on Security and Defence.

In celebration of International Democracy Day on 15 September, a series of online debates on the state of democracy during the COVID-19 pandemic took place between 14 and 17 September. These were co-organised by the European Parliament and the leading associations for promoting democracy in Europe and beyond. An international conference on 'Parliaments and democratic innovations: adapting the capacities of parliaments to changing democracies' was organised in December, jointly with the European Commission and INTER PARES | Parliaments in Partnership. The conference gathered Members of Parliament (MEPs), scholars and parliamentary officials to discuss how representative democracy is changing and how these changes affect parliaments.

The EU funded the ‘Young Mediterranean Voices’ programme across the southern Mediterranean region and Europe, focusing on intercultural dialogue. Its objective is to transform youth-led debate into policy action for inclusive societies. In 2020, the programme co-organised several online high-level policy dialogues, where young delegates engaged with global leaders, including the HR/VP, the EU Ambassador to the UN, the Commissioner and the Director-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, the Vice-President of the European Parliament and other MEPs. In April 2020, alumni from this programme joined the EU Ambassador to the UN in an online conversation around the UN resolution on youth, peace and security, ensuring that their voice is heard in this crucial discussion at the UN Security Council.

The Intercultural Learning Exchange through Global Education, Networking and Dialogue (iLEGEND) joint programme of the EU and the Council of Europe shared similar objectives by fostering intercultural dialogue, participation, capacity building and exchange of good practices.

2.3 SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT AND PLURALISTIC MEDIA, ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND THE FIGHT AGAINST DISINFORMATION

The EU continued supporting independent and pluralistic media, access to information and the fight against disinformation. It condemned and took action against restrictions on the work of journalists and media workers, ensuring the safety and protection of journalists and media workers, and supporting media initiatives. Moreover, the European Democracy Action Plan adopted in December 2020 included a chapter specifically addressing media freedom and media pluralism and highlighting their importance to our democracy. Actions included measures to promote the safety of journalists and address the issue of strategic lawsuits against public participation, and foresee a structured dialogue with relevant international organisations to promote their implementation.

The EU continued to operate programmes supporting media freedom and journalists’ safety in many regions and it launched new programmes in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. The financial support awarded to journalists and media freedom over the past 2 years totalled EUR 50 million.

Both the standard cooperation programmes and the IcSP were used to provide support to areas affected by conflict across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. These programmes aimed to improve the resilience and stability of fragile societies by strengthening independent media and CSOs, and supporting journalists and fact-checkers, in order to increase access to reliable information on COVID-19 and to counter disinformation.

A range of measures were implemented in the EU neighbourhood:

- The EU renewed its support to media freedom in the Southern Neighbourhood (where EUR 14 million was awarded to independent media serving the public interest) and in the six Eastern Partnership countries (where EUR 12 million was awarded in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). In the Western Balkans and Turkey, nearly EUR 20 million was allocated to initiatives designed to support media freedom and pluralism and promote the diversity, effectiveness and sustainability of civic bodies, including media outlets and organisations.
- Through the Horizontal Facility, the EU, in cooperation with the CoE, provided training and other support activities for representatives of the judiciary, the legal profession and civil society, among others, on various aspects of freedom of expression (Chapter 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights), including the safety of journalists.
- Additional grants were provided to programmes in specific countries. For example, the EU supported a project implemented by the Albanian Media Institute in partnership with the International Federation of Journalists. This project aims to increase the ability of media organisations and professional journalists' associations to strengthen professional standards and ethics and to promote and protect the right to freedom of expression. The project also supports CSO initiatives advocating for improved labour standards and laws, and standards and practices that protect freedom of opinion and expression.

Throughout 2020, the EU continued to promote greater consistency and coordination between actions taken in the EU and in partner countries. For example, a number of non-EU countries responded to the EU's resolute approach to disinformation and hate speech and its prominent content regulation measures. The Digital Services Act, proposed by the Commission, and the recently adopted Racism Action Plan are both relevant in this respect, given their intrinsic links to the question of freedom of expression. The European Democracy Action Plan also included actions to protecting election integrity and promoting democratic participation, as well as tackling disinformation.

The following initiatives adopted in 2020 were significant in terms of their effect outside the EU.

- In the Joint Communication 'Tackling COVID-19 disinformation – Getting the facts right', adopted on 10 June 2020, the Commission and the HR/VP announced measures to strengthen media freedom and pluralism in the EU as part the European Democracy Action Plan.
- The European Democracy Action Plan is designed to increase media freedom and media pluralism, to protect free speech and the democratic debate, to promote resilient electoral processes and to combat disinformation. It addresses issues such as protecting the safety of journalists and countering the effect of strategic lawsuits against public participation. It includes measures to support media pluralism in close alignment with the Media Action Plan. It announced initiatives to promote transparency of political advertising and communication, clearer rules on the financing of European political parties, and strengthened cooperation in the EU to ensure credible, inclusive and transparent elections. This will include facilitating cooperation between EU networks and partner countries and international organisations to build capacity and exchange best practices in countering electoral threats and promote high international standards in the use of new technologies.
- Actions against disinformation in the European Democracy Action Plan are complementary to the legislative measures taken by the European Commission through the proposed regulation on the Digital Services Act, which among other things addresses the dissemination of illegal content and disinformation online, while protecting fundamental rights.

The above initiatives will shape the EU's external action on supporting democracy in partner countries. The challenges to democracy within and outside the EU are similar, although are in some contexts considerably exacerbated by additional factors linked to e.g. lack of respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, development, economy or insecurity. This makes EU assistance designed to ensure transparent elections, free media and access to information even more relevant.

A media environment in which a free and pluralistic media, journalists, fact-checkers and other media workers are able to carry out their work safely and independently is key to addressing disinformation and ensuring access to information. In 2020, the EU's efforts to tackle disinformation supported its work towards meeting its objective of strengthening the media environment, not only within the EU but also beyond, including by promoting media freedom and independent media.

The EU reiterated that, as a guiding principle, measures designed to tackle disinformation should remain proportionate to their objective and not undermine fundamental rights and freedoms. In this context, free and pluralistic media are key to addressing disinformation and informing the public.

Following the adoption in 2018 of the EU Action Plan against Disinformation⁶⁵ and the package of measures designed to secure free and fair elections⁶⁶, specific EU initiatives on disinformation were developed and implemented in 2020, in full respect of fundamental rights and freedoms. This included the monitoring of the measures taken by the Member States in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, including measures to combat disinformation, and their impact on democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law. The Commission supported the Member States through the exchange of best practices to support credible, inclusive and transparent elections in this context in the framework of the European Cooperation Network on Elections, which facilitated two such exchanges in 2020.

⁶⁵ https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

⁶⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_18_5681

The EU improved its response to disinformation, including by setting up the **Rapid Alert System**. In 2020, this platform ensured that information between the EU institutions and all EU Member States was exchanged effectively, not only on disinformation, but also on media freedom and media literacy.

The work of the EEAS Stratcom Task Forces continued to focus on the Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia, the Western Balkans and the Southern Neighbourhood, MENA and the Gulf. The Task Forces' objectives include:

- addressing and responding to disinformation activities conducted by foreign state and non-state actors;
- strengthening the media environment in the EU's neighbourhood, the enlargement region and Member States, including by offering support to promote media freedom;
- strengthening independent media; and
- ensuring EU policies are promoted and communicated effectively.

As of November 2020, the East Stratcom Task Force's flagship project,⁶⁷ EUvsDisinfo,⁶⁸ had identified, analysed and exposed over 10 000 examples of disinformation originating in pro-Kremlin media, which have been documented in a publicly accessible database since 2015. The Task Force also conducted a series of interviews with experienced Russian journalists working to investigate and expose disinformation in order to strengthen their voice in the debate.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ The East Stratcom Task Force has a specific mandate to challenge Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. European Council conclusions of 2015:

<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11-2015-INIT/en/pdf>

⁶⁸ www.euvdisinfo.eu

⁶⁹ <https://euvdisinfo.eu/the-information-boomerang-returns/>

The Earth is Flat? Are you sure? Let's discuss ...

'The Earth is Flat – How to Read Media', a joint educational media literacy project of Goethe Institute in Moscow and COLTA.RU, funded by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, recently summed up the results of its three-year work.

The project team held workshops for pupils, trainings for teachers, interactive video lessons for students and public lectures for wide audience, produced media content and supported media literacy initiatives in 16 cities of Russia – from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok.

More than 900 people took part in the workshops with four times more participants than initially foreseen. More than 250 students participated in the interactive video lectures. About 300 teachers attended 14 trainings. Public lectures, two online-discussions with media experts and an online-conference brought together 1800 people.

The experts shared their knowledge of navigating the modern media landscape and distinguishing facts from fiction. They helped teenagers and adults to assess critically what the media offer and stand up for their rights. The discussion tackled also the issues of personal accounts and data protection, online debate ethics, hate speech and dealing with trolls and cyberbullying.

The project supported civil society and dialogue about art and involved Russian and foreign media celebrities, including independent journalists, bloggers, film directors and artists.

All the theoretical and practical materials, produced for almost three years, became part of a tutorial on media literacy. More information on the project and its methodological outputs (educational videos, lectures, interactive tests, etc.) are available at <https://howtoreadmedia.ru/en/>

Targeted activities have been carried out in various regions. The first EU-Western Balkans Media Literacy Conference took place on 29 September 2020, bringing together fact-checkers, young people, journalists and authorities from the Western Balkans, the EU and beyond to discuss media literacy and the fight against disinformation. The HR/VP issued a video statement, in which he addressed and praised fact-checkers in the region.

The EU also supports freedom of expression and media freedom in the Western Balkans through the EU-funded Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey, implemented by the CoE.

As part of the Team Europe response to the pandemic, the EU supported a new project – the Global Monitor of COVID-19’s Impact on Democracy and Human Rights.⁷⁰ The Global Monitor is an online platform that aims to facilitate public access to data and analysis on how measures adopted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic affected democracy and human rights in 165 countries around the world.

The International institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is implementing the project, which is co-funded by the EU under the EIDHR. International IDEA independently collects and analyses the data based on its own democracy measurement framework, which it uses for its biennial Global State of Democracy Report. The EU is not involved in the assessment.

Furthermore, the Global Monitor is an example of strong cooperation across the board, as it also uses information gathered by leading CSOs, think tanks and universities, therefore bringing together all the data and knowledge available to create a ‘tracker of trackers’.

Over 10 000 individuals across the EU neighbourhood benefited from the EU-funded regional OPEN media hub programme. This programme tackles new trends, such as the impact of digitalisation on media, including content and revenue, and the shrinking media freedom in many countries, and offers ways to refute disinformation.

⁷⁰ The Global Monitor of COVID-19’s Impact on Democracy and Human Rights: <https://www.idea.int/news-media/events/global-monitor-covid-19%C2%B4s-impact-democracy-and-human-rights-one-stop-tool-hold>

2.4 REINFORCING A HUMAN RIGHTS AND PARTICIPATIVE APPROACH TO CONFLICT PREVENTION AND CRISIS RESOLUTION

As a global actor, the EU promotes peace through peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and mediation and dialogue. Lasting peace requires human rights being respected and adopting an inclusive approach. It is through multilateralism that we are able to enforce respect for common international norms and mitigate conflictual relations.

In line with the EU guidelines on children and armed conflict, the EU continued to support the UN Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) mandate and the accompanying tools, such as the monitoring and reporting mechanism and the UN Secretary-General's annual report, which lists parties to conflicts who committed grave violations against children. The EU supported the work of the UN Special Representative on CAAC, notably on developing and implementing action plans designed to end and to prevent six types of grave violation against children affected by armed conflict: i) recruitment and use of children; ii) killing and maiming; iii) sexual violence; iv) attacks against schools and hospitals; v) abduction; and vi) denial of humanitarian access.

In 2020, the EU Member States endorsed the list of priority countries with respect to children and armed conflict. This political engagement is strengthened by:

- the implementation of concrete projects focusing on preventing and responding to violence;
- prevention of the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict;
- case management;
- restoration of civil documentation;
- family tracing and reunification;
- demobilisation;
- release and reintegration; and
- psychosocial support and alternative forms of care for unaccompanied and separated children.

In Armenia, for example, the EU launched the ‘Future Today’ project that seeks to increase the uptake of quality early-childhood care and education in rural areas, thereby supporting vulnerable families, women and children, whose difficult circumstances have been further aggravated by COVID-19 and the recent escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The programme includes work with teenage boys (aged 12-18) and men on men’s engagement in childcare and household work, as well as promoting tolerance, problem-solving skills and non-violent conflict resolution.

The issue of CAAC continues to be present in political dialogue. The EU advocates, in particular, ratifying and implementing the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and criminalising grave violations committed against children during conflict. It also takes action to ensure accountability, deliver quality services for children and ensure reintegration of former child soldiers.

The EU contributing to the strengthening of child protection in the Central African Republic

The EU has contributed to the strengthening of child protection in the CAR through supporting UNICEF’s actions in this area, in particular as regards the reintegration of children released from armed groups. This initiative is a part of a national plan to effectively address the needs of children whose lives have been affected by conflicts in the CAR, including children recruited or at risk of being recruited by armed groups. Key results include the release of children (1,757 children in the prefectures of Bamingui Bangoran, Ombella MPoko, Nana Gribizi, Kémo and the capital Bangui), care and support for socioeconomic reintegration (93 % of released children have been included in UNICEF supported reintegration programmes), foster families, psychosocial needs response and protection of children in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Children make up the majority of beneficiaries of EU-funded humanitarian operations. These include, for example, action to support children associated with armed forces and groups, psychosocial support, family tracing and identification, creating child-friendly spaces, preventing and responding to violence (including sexual violence), and supporting unaccompanied and separated children. The EU also funds UNICEF's work on specific projects in Syria, Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan and Chad that offer support to children in armed conflict (e.g. monitoring and reporting of grave violations or reintegration). Advocating and ensuring respect for international humanitarian law remains a necessity.

The EU aims to increase the capacity of CSDP missions designed to mainstream human rights and gender by ensuring that each mission has both a fulltime human rights adviser and a gender adviser, as some missions had only one 'double-hatted' position in the past. This standard set-up was introduced in the revised document establishing the mission model structure. In 2020, the EEAS for the first time employed a human rights expert in its Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC) Directorate.

Both human rights and gender mainstreaming as well as the implementation of the WPS agenda have been regularly addressed in CSDP senior management seminars and meetings, such as the biannual meetings of heads of mission and the meetings of the deputy heads of mission and chiefs of staff. Initial work has started on developing operational guidelines for human rights mainstreaming.

The operational guidelines on gender mainstreaming for mission management and staff continued to guide civilian CSDP missions in their efforts to more systematically mainstream a gender perspective in their daily operations and help implement the UNSC Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security. The guidelines are a step towards further implementing the recommendations of the baseline study, and help promote a more uniform and recognisable approach to gender mainstreaming for the civilian CSDP.

Furthermore, the Upgraded Generic Standards of Behaviour for CSDP Missions and Operations are now being implemented in all CSDP missions and operations. The document specifically addresses sexual exploitation and abuse, harassment, sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. It stresses that all personnel have the right to live and work in an environment free from harassment, abuse, unlawful discrimination, intimidation and bullying. The pre-deployment training followed in Brussels includes a two-hour session on the new Code of Conduct and Discipline, the Generic Standards of Behaviour, and the Guidelines on Ethics and Integrity. Since March 2020, a mandatory e-learning module was made available to everyone who is working in, or will work in, civilian CSDP missions.

In the area of operational planning, the EEAS CPCC Directorate updated and standardised the Human Rights and Gender annex to the Operation Plan (OPLAN). The standardised annex still allows for a description of the local context and mandate-related information to be incorporated.

As regards human resources, the CPCC Directorate introduced the collection of more detailed gender-disaggregated data, allowing for in-depth analyses and comparison of the gender balance, not only between missions but also at different levels and across different functions.⁷¹

In line with best practice, individuals with human rights and gender expertise were part of the core planning team and the technical assessment mission for the EU Advisory Mission in the Central African Republic (EUAM RCA).

Progress was made in implementing the operational guidelines on gender mainstreaming at mission level.

- All missions started to collect gender-disaggregated data in line with instructions from Brussels.
- Eight missions adopted an internal gender action plan.
- Ten missions established a gender focal point structure.

⁷¹ For example, in civilian CSDP missions, female staff account for around 30% of all mission members, both local and international.

- Around 80 individuals served as gender focal points in missions and received specific training. The gender focal point system, coordinated by the mission's gender adviser, plays an important role in civilian missions by ensuring a gender perspective is integrated into the mission's daily activities, including training.
- Three missions conducted in-depth gender analysis to guide implementation of the mission mandate.
- Since 2018, special reports on gender have been produced for five missions (EUMM Georgia, EULEX Kosovo, EUCAP Somalia, EUCAP Sahel Mali and EUBAM Libya).

EUAM Ukraine is working with partners in Ukraine to improve mitigation and response measures in order to tackle domestic violence, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a webinar was organised for the cadets of the Kharkiv National University of Internal Affairs in October. EUAM experts provided the cadets with effective policing techniques for mitigating the consequences of domestic violence, dealing appropriately with victims and aggressors, and taking care of children caught up in domestic violence cases. Children who grow up in a violent environment are inclined to adopt the same models for solving problems when they are adults. The webinar also focused on interview techniques, as it is crucial for police to establish a clear picture and to take into account all circumstances before forming judgements.

The EUCAP Sahel Mali mission works with the internal security forces and other actors in tackling gender-based violence. In particular, EUCAP encouraged the Malian internal security forces to appoint focal points in each force (the police, the gendarmerie and the national guard) and organised several training sessions for the forces focused on gender-based violence and victim support.

In November 2020, EUAM Ukraine organised an online seminar on Roma minorities for 35 cadets and teachers from the National Academy of Internal Affairs in Kharkiv. The training focused on how police officers can take into account community-specific situations in order to maintain law and order effectively and how they can establish a partnership with the local community. The aim is to improve access to police services and enable a more effective response if there is a dispute. The EUAM trainer shared his experience from his hometown, Kyustendil (Bulgaria), which has a significant Roma community.

EULEX Kosovo closely monitors legal cases involving attacks against journalists dealt with by the Kosovo*⁷² police, prosecution and courts. On the ‘International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists’, it honoured journalists who were killed or attacked while doing their job. The mission also paid tribute to the journalists who disappeared or were kidnapped or murdered during and in the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict.

In November 2020, EUCAP Sahel Niger organised a workshop for police, magistrates and representatives of local NGOs in order to improve mutual understanding and trust between the national police and the public. In September 2020, EUCAP Sahel Niger, together with the local security forces in Agadez, organised a workshop for 100 pupils and five directors of a school to teach them about the dangers of unexploded ordnances.

In the autumn of 2020, the EUAM Ukraine teamed up with the National Police Department of Juvenile Protection for an awareness campaign dedicated to the International Human Rights Day on 10 December.

^{72*} 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.

EUAM Ukraine experts came up with the idea of a human rights campaign focusing on the challenges created by the ongoing pandemic. The campaign was held in centres for vulnerable children aged 3-16 who are under the observance of police in the Kyiv region. Before the juvenile police officers visited the children's centres, EUAM experts provided them with key messages and techniques on how to conduct child-friendly meetings and discuss the most relevant human rights topics with children – such as the right to education and the right to personal development – through games and drawings. The idea was not only to explain to children their fundamental rights, but also encourage them to express their understanding of the situation. Children were asked to put their vision of human rights into their drawings, which will later be printed on reusable facemasks.

Child protection aspects are taken into account in the planning and implementation of crisis management operations, in training, in early-warning and preventive approaches, and in the EU's work in peace negotiations and peace agreements. In the CSDP context, child protection aspects are integrated into training and other activities at mission level. At the EU training mission in Mali, for example, the issues of child soldiers and the protection of children are covered as part of a training on IHL provided to Malian armed forces. EULEX Kosovo organised training on forensic interviewing and case management techniques for police working on cases of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Particular attention was given to cases where the victims are children.

The EU recognises and supports the work of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack and supports its initiatives including the promotion of the Safe School Declaration. The EU strongly believes that schools should be safe havens, in line with their protection under IHL.

The EU promoted IHL capacity building through its work with military and security actors. For example, the EU training missions in the Central African Republic, Mali and Somalia continued to provide training modules on IHL to national security and defence forces. Practical and gender-sensitive training on international human rights and humanitarian law and the protection of civilians is included in every training course and is fully streamlined.

The **EU's engagement on gender equality and women's empowerment in conflict situations** also forms part of the EU's implementation of the WPS agenda, which is central to cooperation with partners such as the UN, NATO and the OSCE, and to dialogues with non-EU countries on security. The EU's policy is based on UN resolutions and is formulated in the '2008 Comprehensive Approach to the EU implementation of the UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 on Women, Peace and Security'. The EU-UN strategic partnership on the WPS agenda is one of eight priorities for 2019-2021 relating to peace operations and crisis management.

In 2020, the Council conclusions on Women, Peace and Security and the new EU Strategic Approach to WPS served as a critical compass for all EU policies and actions designed to engage, empower, protect and support women and girls in all areas of peace processes and security work. The new EU Strategic Approach to WPS emphasises the importance of women's leadership and of meaningful and equitable involvement in all aspects of peace and security and in all areas of policy decision-making and programming. It also engages men and boys on the basis that they can act as positive agents for change, emphasising the need to address and transform gender stereotypes and to reconsider the deep-rooted perceptions present in societies.

The EU continues to implement various measures to support the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen. The EU has been funding Deep Root, a specialised organisation that works to increase women's involvement in the Yemeni peace process. This work includes identifying and building consensus around possible solutions and options for the peace agreement and the transitional period, and giving a voice to women's views. Any meeting financed by the EU requires a minimum representation of 30% women; however, most reach 50%. The EU and UN are planning to mainstream women's inclusion in all areas of work: governance, the South of the country, young people, the economy, and community safety. A group of Yemeni and Syrian women visited Brussels and New York for high-profile meetings at the EU and the UN, resulting in their involvement gaining added visibility and credibility.

During 2020, the joint UN-EU-AU peace process analysis on the Central African Republic included an assessment of the specific role women play in implementing the peace process and in selected armed groups. It covered i) factors that either facilitate or prevent women's involvement, ii) differences in rules on access to natural resources and other assets, iii) the inclusivity and legitimacy of government mechanisms, and iv) the role of women ex-combatants in the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process.

The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the central importance of the WPS agenda and of the nexus between security and gender equality for addressing the pandemic more effectively. The pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges that women have already been facing, including political participation, domestic violence and health. In addition, the lockdown and self-isolation measures have limited the ability of peacekeepers to have direct physical contact with communities.

The pandemic also threatens the existence of women-led grassroots organisations, as the operational environment has become even more hostile, and funding is being questioned. Increasing levels of unemployment and the resulting threats to women's economic welfare are major challenges, placing women in an even more vulnerable situation.

For survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and those at risk in fragile and conflict-affected areas, who already face shame, stigma and fear of repercussions, the COVID-19-related challenges, such as quarantines and curfews, together with the fear of contracting COVID-19, are making it even more difficult for them to report cases of SGBV and to access essential services, e.g. justice, shelters, and sexual and reproductive healthcare.

In Myanmar, the EU has supported the Myanmar National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC) through the Joint Peace Fund. This has helped increase WPS expertise in a key institution in the Myanmar peace architecture. Six technical advisers in WPS are being recruited to provide expertise to the NRPC secretariat.

The COVID-19 pandemic is also affecting the role of mediators in peace processes, and notably on women. Holding dialogues and mediation processes online has had both positive and negative effects.

The new concept on EU peace mediation was adopted by the **Foreign Affairs Council** on 7 December 2020. The concept highlights the EU's value-based approach to peace mediation, rooted in respect for the rule of law, democracy and human rights. Drawing on lessons learned over the last ten years and on insights from European and international experts, it outlines the specific features of EU mediation.

It aims to further strengthen the EU's leading role in peace mediation, conflict prevention and peacebuilding worldwide. It sets out an assertive stance and increased level of ambition for the EU, reconfirming its strategic partnership with the UN and regional bodies such as the OSCE and the AU.

Notably, it also factors in new challenges in the field of conflict resolution, such as the impact of climate change and environmental degradation and of digital technologies.

The new concept will be accompanied by a set of EEAS peace mediation guidelines, which will provide guidance on how to apply the spirit of EU peace mediation in practice and will support EU peace mediators and EU mediation bodies in designing and managing the mediation process accordingly.

The adoption of the new concept reflects the particular momentum driving the development of the EU's work in mediation, the increase in its capacity and the revision of its policy. The steps taken to achieve its mandate in this area include creating a gender-balanced pool of EU mediators, which will allow the EU to pursue its foreign policy objectives by drawing on mediation and dialogue as the preferred means of action. In addition, a high-level task force is working to increase attention to strategy and to provide political guidance on mediation opportunities and involvement around the world.

The EEAS Mediation Support Team has specific expertise in WPS. All activities that involve assessing mediation potential, supporting existing mediation efforts or building mediation capacity are gender sensitive.

In 2020, a guidance note was developed on using conflict analysis to support EU external action.

3. PROMOTING A GLOBAL SYSTEM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

3.1 MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

The EU continued to be a leader in the universal promotion and protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in multilateral fora, including in the **UN Human Rights Council (HRC)** and at the **Third Committee of the UN General Assembly (UNGA)**. It supported the process put in place to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the HRC, strengthened the links with the work of the UNGA Third Committee and promoted synergies with other multilateral and regional human rights fora.

The EU has increased its activity in building coalitions with regional and cross-regional groups in order to achieve credible and meaningful outcomes in an increasingly difficult environment that is characterised by trends that undermine human rights, democracy, the rule of law and the effectiveness of multilateral institutions. As a firm supporter of the UN human rights system, the EU used all available tools to address human rights violations and abuses, including through country-specific statements and resolutions and by offering support to commissions of inquiry, fact-finding missions, other Special Procedures and the Universal Periodic Review.

The 75th session of the Third Committee of the UNGA held in October and November 2020 was a success for the EU. Despite the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the session being organised in a hybrid format involving in-person and virtual meetings, over 60 interactive dialogues were held with UN Special Procedures mandate holders and senior officials, and over 50 resolutions were adopted⁷³. The Committee adopted all nine resolutions presented by the EU and its Member States without vote or with comfortable voting tallies. Member States worked closely with the Delegation of the EU to the UN in New York to support EU positions, including by burden sharing on certain resolutions and statements.

⁷³ All resolutions can be found on the UN webpage, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/75/resolutions.shtml>

The EU attaches great importance to country resolutions. As in previous years, the Committee adopted without vote the resolution on the human rights situation in the DPRK tabled by the EU and co-sponsored by 58 countries. The ambitious text of the joint resolution of the EU and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation on the situation of human rights in Myanmar continued to enjoy wide support among all regional groups and remains a good example of cross-regional cooperation. It emphasised a number of important elements, including references to the ICC, the COVID-19 response, the electoral process, and business and human rights. The interactive dialogue with the UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus reaffirmed the strong support for democracy and human rights in this country. The EU-US coordinated joint statement was supported by 52 partners. The outcome of the vote on the resolution on the situation of human rights in Syria, co-sponsored by all 27 EU Member States, is a good example of a human rights-focused, balanced and fact-based text.

Regarding thematic resolutions, the Committee adopted by 120 votes the resolution on the moratorium on the death penalty presented by an interregional task force co-chaired by Mexico and Switzerland, and supported by the EU. The Committee also adopted the resolution on freedom of religion or belief without a vote. The EU maintained unanimity in expressing opposition to the Russian-tabled resolution on combating the glorification of Nazism. Despite challenging negotiations, the Committee adopted a number of gender resolutions. In addition to the usual resolutions on violence against women, child, early and forced marriage, FGM, fistula and trafficking, two new resolutions on women and COVID-19, tabled by Spain and Egypt, were adopted. The adoption of seven resolutions on gender, including four fully negotiated ones, is a very positive outcome. The resolution on violence against women is the first to recognise the impact of the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative. The overwhelming vote in favour of the initiative confirms that support for gender equality remains strong within the UN membership.

The EU also continued to play a leading role at the HRC: it achieved progress on thematic priorities and addressed country-specific situations by putting forward EU-led resolutions and statements, including by working cross-regionally and supporting action initiated by others. Although the session was ultimately suspended in its last week - on 13 March - due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU actively engaged in facilitating the continuation of this 43rd session. In view of the incidents of excessive use of force of which people of African descent had been victim, and the violence used against peaceful protest, the EU supported the African Group and the call by civil society and relatives of victims for these important matters to be discussed at the HRC, and welcomed the adoption of the resolution by consensus. The EU-led resolution on Myanmar addressed ongoing human rights violations and abuses, underlined the importance of the work of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, called for justice and accountability and requested the renewal of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur. The EU resolution on DPRK sent a clear message that there must be an immediate end to human rights violations and an improvement in civil liberties, social and economic rights, and that the DPRK must engage effectively with the UN human rights system. The EU called for support for the mandate of the Special Rapporteur and the accountability project being implemented by the OHCHR Seoul Office.

At the 43rd HRC session, the EU, together with the Group of Latin America and Caribbean Countries (GRULAC), tabled a resolution with a special focus on children in vulnerable situations. It called for the renewal and strengthening of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, receiving cross-regional support. The EU remains fully committed to the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief, and presented a resolution on this issue, urging countries to step up their efforts to ensure that this right is upheld when addressing instances of intolerance, discrimination and violence based on religion or belief. This resolution was presented in parallel with an OIC-led resolution on religious intolerance. The Council adopted both by consensus. The EU also supported the resolution by the African Group on the human rights situation in Libya, calling for the creation of a fact-finding mission: this mission will play a vital role in establishing the facts and circumstances of violations and abuses of human rights law and humanitarian law and in documenting and reporting to the HRC. The EU Member States also co-sponsored the resolution on cooperation with Georgia.

At the 44th session, the EU presented a resolution on the human rights situation in Belarus, which called for the mandate of the Special Rapporteur to be extended by one more year due to the continuing human rights violations in this country. In order for the highly concerning situation in Belarus to be examined in the Council, the EU requested an urgent debate on this matter at the 45th session and introduced a resolution, which the Council adopted on 18 September 2020. The resolution requested that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights present an interim oral update with recommendations to the HRC before the end of 2020, and a comprehensive written report on the human rights situation in relation to the 2020 presidential election at the next session.

The EU strongly supported the resolution on the human rights situation in Eritrea, which included a technical rollover of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur, there being no evidence that the country has made tangible progress on its human rights obligations. The EU reiterated its profound concern about the human rights situation in Venezuela, the worsening of the political crisis and the further shrinking of the democratic and political space. Consistent with the views it had expressed on numerous previous occasions following the imposition of a national security law in Hong Kong, the EU drew attention to the human rights situation in China, including in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and Xinjiang, and reiterated its call for China to uphold its national and international obligations and to respect human rights. The EU-led resolution on the human rights situation in Burundi renewed the mandate of the existing Commission of Inquiry for a further period of 1 year.

The EU was actively involved in a number of discussions on other human rights situations requiring continued attention from the international community, including the interactive dialogue with the fact-finding mission on Libya. It also supported important resolutions on Syria and Venezuela that will ensure continued scrutiny by the Council, and the resolution on Yemen renewing the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts. In a joint statement with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation on the human rights situation in Myanmar, the EU made a strong call for accountability. The EU continued to raise concerns about the deteriorating human right situation in Russia as well as in the illegally annexed autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol.

The EU also supported a resolution on freedom of expression, which included a timely focus on access to information, an essential factor in combating the current global health and economic crisis. The resolution on the realisation of the rights of the child through a healthy environment, tabled by the EU and the GRULAC, is an important contribution to this policy area, as it will guide countries' efforts to strengthen the focus on child rights in their environmental decision-making. It also illustrates the power of cross-regional support.

Strategic cooperation with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was further developed both at central level and with field offices. The EU continued to support and defend the integrity and independence of the mandate of the Office, including its role in addressing thematic issues, supporting the HRC Special Procedures and implementing the compliance framework. In 2020, the EU contributed to several reports by thematic special rapporteurs, including on climate change and human rights, and human rights and the environment.

The 64th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the sessions of the UN Human Rights Council, in particular the June session, and the annual session of the UNGA Third Committee demonstrated the EU's principled leadership on gender equality, women's and girls' rights and women's empowerment. By actively engaging with partner countries in multilateral fora, the EU made a consistent contribution to progress towards achieving these goals. The EU successfully maintained its role as an international actor at a time of global uncertainty and made good use of opportunities to promote an effective rules-based international order. In 2020, the EU continued engaging strongly in negotiations at the UN, in order to strengthen guidance and political commitments on gender equality and women's and girls' rights, and to ensure that UN human rights mechanisms mainstream gender equality into their mandates. Furthermore, the EU placed gender equality at the centre of its working relations with multilateral partners, such as the OSCE, the CoE, NATO, the AU, the Organization of American States, the League of Arab States (LAS), ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the OIC, and with the members of the G7 and the G20.

As part of its engagement with key stakeholders worldwide, the EU is committed to working for the success of the Generation Equality Forum. The Forum was convened in 2019 by UN Women and co-chaired by France and Mexico. Its objective was to organise a series of high-level global gatherings with six action coalitions, to help promote gender equality and speed up the implementation of the 1995 recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action. The Generation Equality Forum is an example of multilateral cooperation and international solidarity, under which the EU is co-leading the Action Coalition on Gender-Based Violence, together with representatives of countries, UN agencies, CSOs, young people's organisations and the private sector. In 2020, it made progress on preparing the blueprints of this Action Coalition.

In 2020, the EU contributed to several reports by thematic special rapporteurs. In the area of climate change and human rights, the EU contributed to a report by the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, titled 'The "just transition" in the economic recovery: eradicating poverty within planetary boundaries'.⁷⁴ The EU also contributed to two reports by the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, David Boyd, on the global water crisis and on healthy ecosystems, respectively.

The EU and its Member States actively engaged on promoting labour rights and decent working in the context of the International Labour Organization's work, including through contributions to the ILO Technical Meeting on Achieving Decent Work in Global Supply Chains (25-28 February 2020), the ILO Global Summit on COVID-19 and the World of Work (1-9 July 2020), the 15th Commission-ILO high-level meeting (13 October 2020) and the 340th ILO Governing Body meeting (2-14 November 2020).

The EU also participated actively at the 58th session of the UN Commission for Social Development (8-19 February 2020), where it co-hosted a side event with China and the ILO on experiences and challenges in building universal social protection systems.

⁷⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/Issues/Poverty/Pages/CallforsubmissionsJustTransition.aspx>

3.2 REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

The EU in the Council of Europe

On 13 July 2020, the **Foreign Affairs Council** adopted the **new priorities for EU cooperation** with the Council of Europe (CoE) for 2020-2022⁷⁵, reaffirming human rights, democracy and the rule of law as the priorities for cooperation. Within these priorities, a number of specific areas were highlighted, including the promotion of effective multilateralism, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, guaranteeing fundamental social and economic rights, digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI), environmental protection, and tackling threats to the rule of law. These new priorities cite the link between human rights and environmental protection as a guiding principle for implementing the European Green Deal. Two areas of action identified as central to creating further links between the work of the EU and the CoE are shaping a European legal framework for environmental protection and countering environmental crimes. The ninth World Forum for Democracy (WFD), organised by the CoE, is dedicated to the role of human rights and democracy in environmental protection. In 2020, the WFD organised a one-year virtual campaign with different themes for each month. The EU contributed to the virtual campaign in December 2020 on the theme of human rights and the environment.

The EU remained fully committed to its **accession to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)** and in September 2020, negotiations resumed in Strasbourg following the 2014 negative opinion by the Court of Justice of the EU on the original draft accession agreement. For the EU, this is not only a treaty obligation, but also an expression of the EU's fundamental values: once the EU becomes the 48th Contracting Party to the ECHR, citizens will be able to challenge the EU's actions before the European Court of Human Rights. To mark the 70th anniversary of the ECHR in November, the EU led a joint communication campaign featuring animation videos that illustrated fundamental rights guaranteed by the Convention by recounting real human rights stories from the Court's case law, thus highlighting the benefits of the Convention for victims of human rights violations.

⁷⁵ Council conclusions on EU priorities for cooperation with the Council of Europe 2020-2022, 13 July 2020. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9283-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

During 2020, the EU addressed a number of issues in the CoE Committee of Ministers, including observing World Press Freedom Day, the International Day against the Death Penalty, and the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. The EU also made statements on individual human rights cases and developments, in particular referring to the situations in Belarus and Russia and the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Although the COVID-19 public health crisis presented major challenges for all areas of cooperation in 2020, it also led to the development of innovative solutions. In April 2020, the CoE Secretary General, Marija Pejčinović Burić, shared with Member States a **toolkit for respecting democracy, the rule of law and human rights during the COVID-19 crisis**.⁷⁶

A clear illustration of the structured cooperation between the EU and the CoE, which is based on their different yet complementary roles, is the first annual Rule of Law Report, which was issued by the Commission in September and presents an assessment of all 27 Member States. The Report based many of its findings on rule-of-law recommendations from CoE bodies such as the Venice Commission and the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO). The EU's commitment to promoting the rule of law also features in the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies: several CoE recommendations were referred to in the 2020 Communication on the EU's Enlargement Policy and the attached reports⁷⁷. Similarly, the close cooperation with the CoE helped the EU to deliver results under its policy on work with the Eastern Partnership countries.

⁷⁶ Respecting democracy, rule of law and human rights in the framework of the COVID-19 sanitary crisis - A toolkit for member states. Council of Europe, 7 April 2020: <https://rm.coe.int/sg-inf-2020-11-respecting-democracy-rule-of-law-and-human-rights-in-th/16809e1f40>

⁷⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package_en

EU-Council of Europe joint programmes

The EU-CoE joint programmes remained instrumental in **supporting justice reform, fighting corruption and promoting human rights, independent media and civil society**. In particular, the Partnership for Good Governance II delivered encouraging midterm results in October 2020, showing its effectiveness in helping to strengthen the rule of law, combat violence against women, provide access to justice for all, protect the human rights of people in vulnerable situations and promote equality and anti-discrimination policies in the Eastern Partnership region. Work under the joint programmes was carried out successfully despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. The fourth phase of the South Programme, which started in March 2020, continues to support the ongoing democratic reforms in the region, with a particular focus on combating violence against women and fighting economic crime. Similarly, the Horizontal Facility II helped deliver progress in the Western Balkans, notably on judicial reform, the execution of judgments from the European Court of Human Rights, non-discrimination, the rights of LGBTI persons, protection of persons belonging to minorities, and the rights of persons in detention. It also provided for a better evaluation of the results of judicial reforms thanks to improved understanding and implementation of the indicators developed by the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ).

The EU in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

The EU continued to engage in **dialogue and cooperation within the ‘human dimension’** of the comprehensive security concept of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The EU actively participated and took the floor in all human dimension events - exceptionally held online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic - including the three supplementary human dimension meetings, Human Dimension Committee meetings and the third Gender Equality Review conference. The annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting - exceptionally cancelled due to the ongoing pandemic - was replaced by a series of webinars on human dimension topics, in which the EU was also actively involved.

In the OSCE Permanent Council, the EU proactively raised several issues relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms, including marking World Press Freedom Day, the International Day against the Death Penalty, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and Human Rights Day. The EU has regularly raised the question of the widespread electoral fraud and human rights violations seen in Belarus during and following the 9 August presidential elections, and in particular in light of the fact-finding mission's report prepared under the Moscow Mechanism, which was invoked on 17 September by 17 participating States (including 12 EU Member States). The report's findings confirmed, in a very substantiated and detailed manner, that the 9 August elections were neither free nor fair, and that they were followed by numerous serious violations of human rights. The EU also highlighted individual human rights cases and developments, in particular in Russia and Turkey.

Taking account of the fact that negotiations were conducted entirely online, the overall outcome of the Ministerial Council of 3-4 December in Tirana was very positive, and included the adoption of a decision on torture prevention, a long standing EU priority in the human dimension. The Ministerial Council also agreed on appointments to the top four positions in the Organisation – OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid (Germany), Representative on Freedom of the Media Maria Teresa Ribeiro (Portugal), High Commissioner on National Minorities Kairat Abdrakhmanov (Kazakhstan), and Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Matteo Mecacci (Italy) – and on the appointment of the Republic of North Macedonia as 2023 Chair, thus giving the Organisation secure leadership for the foreseeable future.

The EU continued to fully support the valuable work of the OSCE's autonomous institutions (the ODIHR, the Representative on Freedom of the Media and the High Commissioner on National Minorities).

The EU also continued to engage actively with CSOs, including by facilitating meetings between the EU Member States and like-minded delegations and representatives of the Civic Solidarity Platform and Human Rights Watch.

The EU and the OSCE share common goals, standards and a similar methodology for the observation of elections. The ongoing efforts to strengthen the methodology for observing the use of new technologies in the electoral process and to encourage the implementation of recommendations from EOMs are examples of effective cooperation to support democracy and promote human rights. In 2020, the EU continued supporting the work carried out by the ODIHR to assist the OSCE's participating States, for example, by funding projects to help implement the recommendations relating to elections in the Western Balkans.

The EU and the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation

The fourth Senior Officials' Meeting between the EU and the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), held on 15 July 2020, reaffirmed the parties' commitment to fighting all forms of incitement to hatred and discrimination and to promoting freedom of religion or belief through all available means including legislation, dialogue and education on human rights. In the area of women's rights, the OIC continued its work to operationalise the Organisation for Women Development, which held its first Ministerial Council in October 2020. This specialised OIC body will prioritise work on implementing the OIC Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women in the Member States.

The EU and the African Union

The 16th human rights dialogue between the EU and the African Union, which took place on 8 December 2020, co-chaired by the EUSR for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, and the AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Minata Samate Cessouma, was the only EU-AU high-level meeting on human rights held in 2020, and it took place in VTC format. This dialogue is part of a long-term strategy designed to ensure consistent progress on the human rights and democracy agenda on both continents. The two parties discussed the situation of human rights and democracy, in particular in light of the COVID-19 crisis, and agreed on measures to strengthen cooperation on specific human rights issues, such as transitional justice, the death penalty, business and human rights, and on the exercise of fundamental freedoms.

3.3 BILATERAL COOPERATION

Human rights dialogues are a key instrument for EU bilateral engagement with governments and partners on human rights. In 2020, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights was discussed during human rights dialogues and consultations held in VTC format with a number of partners. These included Algeria, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Georgia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, the Republic of Moldova, Mongolia, Myanmar, Tajikistan, Taiwan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. Fundamental rights were also discussed with candidate countries and potential candidates for EU accession, notably in the context of meetings under the Stabilisation and Association Process. Informal human rights consultations were also held with Japan and Gulf countries, as were a number of dialogues at local level.

The human rights dialogues explored topics such as cooperation in multilateral fora, gender equality and women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights, freedom of expression and media freedom, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the death penalty, freedom of religion or belief, and the rights of persons belonging to minorities. The situation of human rights defenders featured prominently in the human rights dialogues and a number of individual cases were raised. Business and human rights, the impact of digital technologies on human rights and the fight against disinformation were also discussed. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, dedicated consultations with civil society were carried out prior to human rights dialogues, and briefings were held on the outcomes.

The EU continued to use its **trade instruments**, including unilateral trade preferences under the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP), to promote human rights, core labour standards, environmental protection and good governance in non-EU countries. The question of trade agreements was also raised during bilateral human rights dialogues with non-EU countries. The third biennial GSP report, published on 10 February 2020, confirmed that GSP+ is instrumental in addressing labour and human rights issues as it ensures monitoring in beneficiary countries and offers the prospect of accession for applicant countries. The dialogue on these matters continued in the framework of the current monitoring cycle, which started at the beginning of 2020.

The EU continued to monitor compliance with international human rights and labour rights conventions in countries benefiting from the GSP+ arrangement or undergoing enhanced engagement in the Everything-But-Arms (EBA) schemes. On 12 February 2020, **the EU decided to temporarily withdraw part of the tariff preferences granted to Cambodia under the EBA arrangement due to the serious and systematic violations of principles⁷⁸** enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The EU also continued to develop the chapters of EU free trade agreements on trade and sustainable development, which include binding commitments on international labour standards.

⁷⁸ Article 19 (freedom of expression), 21 (right of peaceful assembly), 22 (freedom of association) and 25 (the right to political participation).

The EU has continuously engaged with Vietnam on the fundamental labour rights commitments of the TSD chapter of the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement, which led Vietnam to ratify two of the three outstanding fundamental ILO conventions and to present a timetable for the ratification of the third one.⁷⁹

On 9 November 2020, the Council and the European Parliament agreed on the modernisation of EU export controls. The new Export Control Regulation will introduce a legal basis for EU controls on trade in cyber-surveillance technologies in order to prevent human rights violations in third countries and for the publication of an ‘EU Watch List’ of technologies and export destinations of concern.

The Commission continued to conduct human rights impact assessments (HRIAs) as a key element of its sustainability impact assessments (SIAs) of the EU’s ongoing trade negotiations, including through *ex post* evaluations of the EU’s existing trade agreements with partner countries. The Commission finalised three SIAs in support of FTA negotiations between the EU and Indonesia and negotiations for the modernisation of the trade part of the EU-Chile Association Agreement and the trade pillar of the Global Agreement with Mexico.

By allocating and contracting EUR 89.8 million under the EIDHR, the EU continued to assist CSOs in becoming an effective force for the protection and promotion of human rights and democratic principles worldwide. The EU supported 160 new initiatives led by civil society organisations, in particular local CSOs, in over 70 partner countries.

In 2020, political agreement was reached between the European Parliament and EU Member States in the Council on the Regulation establishing the **financial instrument for EU external action**. The EU is now equipped with a powerful tool for promoting cooperation with partner countries, rooted in shared values and common interests. Human rights, fundamental freedoms, democratic governance and the rule of law are among the basic principles underpinning the Regulation.

⁷⁹ C87 (on Freedom of Association) by 2023

The new instrument, which consists of three components - a geographic, a thematic and a rapid response component - prescribes as mandatory a **rights-based approach**, encompassing all human rights, whether civil, political, economic, social or cultural. This approach is in line with the gender mainstreaming approach, and will support measures that contribute directly and indirectly to ensuring full respect for human rights and democratic principles.

The Human Rights and Democracy thematic programme, adopted under the new NDICI for 2021-2027, is the successor to the EIDHR. The programme inherits all the strengths of its predecessor, namely: (i) it guarantees **independence of action without reference to the consent of partner countries' governments** or other public authorities; (ii) it has a global nature, and can operate in any country outside the EU, including in middle-, upper- and high-income countries; and (iii) it is first and foremost implemented by local, national, regional or international CSOs, including non-registered organisations and individuals.

3.4 CIVIL SOCIETY AND NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS

During 2020, the EU worked actively on combating threats to civil society organisations across the world and promoted a safe and enabling environment for civil society.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated an existing trend: using the pandemic as a pretext, several repressive governments took excessive measures against human rights, notably the freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

Despite the pandemic and its threats to the survival of many organisations, the EU maintained a meaningful engagement with CSOs, thanks to the use of new technologies. It **continued holding virtual consultations with civil society**, in particular human rights NGOs and human rights defenders in Brussels and in non-EU countries. Consultations were held before human rights dialogues and other high-level political dialogues, before the launching of calls for proposals, and for the purpose of discussing cross-thematic human rights issues, such as the new EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. Consultations on the next multiannual EU budget and programming also brought human rights and development CSOs around the table, as did global and regional virtual meetings of the Policy Forum on Development.

CSOs contributed to safeguarding the space for human rights policy in political and trade agreements by including essential political clauses on human rights. During 2020, provisions continued to be made for social partners and civil society involvement on the sustainable development chapter of new agreements.

Civil society representatives regularly engage with the Council Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM) and are systematically debriefed on its conclusions. In addition, together with the Brussels-based Human Rights and Democracy Network of civil society organisations, the EU organised the 22nd annual EU-NGO Forum on 9-10 December, focusing on digital technologies and human rights.

In the margins of the official EU human rights dialogues with partner countries, CSOs were invited to participate in civil society seminars. Virtual civil society seminars with Mexican, Colombian and Brazilian NGOs were organised throughout the year.

The EU further intensified its efforts to promote NGO involvement in the work of the HRC 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, such as the 75th anniversary of the UN and the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The EU ensured that its events at the UN included and promoted the voice of civil society. A key example was the side event on the situation of political prisoners in Belarus held in the margins of the Third Committee, which provided a platform for grassroots activists to share their analysis and recommendations with UN actors. Moreover, in 2019 the EU and Member States supported a successful referral of decisions on NGO applications to a vote of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which overturned repeated deferrals of NGO applications by the UN NGO Committee. The EU also cooperated actively with the Geneva-based Task Force on Civil Society.

EU support to the role of civil society in the peace process in Syria

The EU has supported the Office of Special Envoy's (OSE) Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), a forum in which Syrian civil society can discuss and formulate messages to influence key stakeholders. The main objective of the CSSR is to render the UN-facilitated political process in Geneva more accessible, inclusive and consultative. CSSR provides a unique space within the peacebuilding architecture for dialogue among Syrian civil society actors across the political, social and geographic divides, and the CSSR itself remains one of the biggest fora for pan-Syrian civil society consultations.

Before the pandemic-related lockdowns started in 2020, the CSSR managed regional consultations in Beirut and Erbil between OSE representatives and Syrian civil society actors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the project resumed its activities online. It helped organising a regional consultation in May engaging Syrian civil society representatives in Jordan, and in June with representatives in Turkey. During the Brussels IV conference in June 2020, the OSE convened a virtual CSSR side event in collaboration with the EEAS that engaged 34 Syrian participants. The participants also recorded a short video with advocacy messages which were played during the opening session of the ministerial conference.

CSOs remained the main recipients of support from the EIDHR and the Civil Society Organisations-Local Authorities (CSO-LA) thematic programme, as well as being a major implementing partner for the EU's bilateral development funding. The 25 framework partnership agreements (FPAs) under the CSO-LA programme supported CSOs' role as key contributors to policymaking at regional and global level. Some of the FPAs (including with the International Federation for Human Rights, CIVICUS and Forum Asia) directly promote an environment supportive to civil society and address the issue of shrinking space. In addition, the priorities of the CSO-LA programme and the EU's work on civil and political rights and governance under the EIDHR both support the promotion of an environment conducive to CSOs' work in partner countries.

Building on its key strength - the ability to operate without the need for host government consent - the EIDHR has for over two decades been able to focus on sensitive issues and innovative approaches, and to cooperate directly with isolated or marginalised CSOs. In particular, the exceptional conditions of the EIDHR Human Rights Crises Facility allow the EU to allocate direct grants to CSOs operating in particularly difficult conditions in terms of human rights and democracy. In 2020, this support was adapted to address the global human rights crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the EIDHR found ways to direct planned spending on priorities such as journalists and child protection towards specific needs created by the crisis. Additionally, a number of specific initiatives were implemented to promote civic and democratic space (e.g. Supporting Democracy, Media4Democracy and Civic Tech 4 Democracy).

The EU also provided financial support to the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of association and peaceful assembly and on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, rights that are fundamental for creating an environment conducive to civil society participation. The EU also promoted this environment by applying methodologies such as gender mainstreaming and the rights-based approach to development cooperation, where participation is a key principle, thus empowering and requiring EU delegations to act on human rights in all sectors of their work. This multifaceted support helped to combat restrictive laws and practices that impeded the work of independent civil society actors, and contributed to the long-term, strategic development of an environment conducive to civil society participation.

EU supporting Syrian women in decision-making in Syria

The aim of the EU-supported project ‘Enhancing women’s participation in decision-making and peacebuilding processes in Syria’, implemented by the Euromed Feminist Initiative, is to develop a common agenda on combating violence against women and girls which is a major barrier to women’s participation in decision-making and peacebuilding processes in Syria.

Participants from over 80 Syrian organisations and grassroots initiatives operating in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Europe took part in six rounds of consultations. The organisations worked collectively to produce recommendations related to prevention, protection and response; to strategically work on engaging men and boys around gender-based violence and societal norms, and to increase networking and alliances among Syrian organisations.

This common agenda is a tool for the Syrian activists to advocate international and national decision-makers for including women and women’s rights defenders in all peace negotiation processes linked to the future of Syria, from local to international level. It is also a tool to raise public awareness on the devastating effects of violence against women and girls for women first, but also on the communities and society as a whole.

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) remained essential actors in promoting and protecting human rights worldwide. The EU is aware that NHRIs are affected by the shrinking of the democratic and civic space for independent human rights action. This is why the EU, as part of its external action, promotes independent NHRIs and the essential role they play in ensuring the protection of human rights around the world.

In most of its human rights dialogues in 2020, the EU called on non-EU 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. Emphasis was placed on ensuring that NHRIs and their staff are protected from threats, harassment and attacks.

To promote the role of NHRIs, the EU worked closely with the European Network of NHRIs (ENNHRI) on developing a guide for EU delegations on how to promote engagement with NHRIs. Training for EU delegations was provided in November. The EU continued to engage with the ENNHRI throughout 2020, including during the ENNHRI annual conference, and worked on developing ways of identifying opportunities for NHRIs stemming from new EU external policies designed to promote the rule of law, democracy and human rights.

The EU supported and engaged with NHRIs in a large number of countries by providing financial assistance. The EU's political commitment to NHRIs is complemented by financial support. Throughout 2020, the EIDHR funded targeted strategic programmes to support NHRIs.

The second phase of the NHRI.EU project, which is due to run for 3 years from its adoption in 2019, and which benefits from an EU contribution of EUR 3.75 million, continued its operations. It aims to develop NHRIs' capacity in core areas of their mandate, including education, communication and awareness raising on human rights, complaints handling, documentation, monitoring and reporting. Another objective of the project is to strengthen cooperation between NHRIs and global and regional networks, in particular the Global Alliance of NHRIs, the Asia Pacific Forum, the Network of African NHRIs, the Network of NHRIs in the Americas and the European Network of NHRIs. The project also aims to strengthen the Global Alliance of NHRIs and the regional networks and to support member NHRIs during the accreditation process. Global and regional networks also developed action plans to protect human rights defenders, with the aim of implementing the Marrakesh Declaration. As lead applicant, the Danish Institute for Human Rights provided technical assistance to other NHRIs so that they could carry out the activities planned within the project, thus increasing the digital literacy of NHRIs, a particularly important competence in view of the pandemic.

Another targeted programme, which included EUR 1 million of funding for the ENNHRI, was completed in 2020, and led to an increase in the capacity of and cooperation between European NHRIs in their role as promoters and protectors of human rights in conflict or post-conflict situations. An online Guide⁸⁰ on NHRIs' role in this area was published, and their work in non-government controlled territories has seen ground-breaking developments. The project also increased awareness and engagement among intergovernmental and civil society actors at national, regional and international level with respect to the work of NHRIs in situations of conflict. It included cooperation with NHRIs beyond Europe. Finally, the project helped increase the ability of the ENNHRI's network and secretariat to support NHRIs operating in conflict situations.

Another example of EU support to NHRI networks is the agreement signed in 2020 with the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions for a period of 2 years, which includes a EUR 750 000 funding contribution by the EU. The purpose of this agreement is to increase the capacity of NHRIs to address, in collaboration and partnership with intergovernmental mechanisms, key identified human rights issues in South-East Asia and the Pacific, including through training courses, small grants programmes and the creation of platforms for dialogue.

In the Western Balkans, the EU helped increase the capacity of independent human rights bodies in the Republic of Serbia, such as the Ombudsman and the Commissioner for Equality, to combat discrimination and hate speech and to protect the rights of national minorities and LGBTI persons, in accordance with the CoE standards. In the Republic of North Macedonia, the EU has systematically discussed the human rights situation with the Ombudsman's office during meetings held under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. In 2020, the EU called for the members of the Commission for the Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (Equality body) to be elected swiftly through a transparent and inclusive process.

⁸⁰ Human Rights in (Post-)Conflict Situations The Role of National Human Rights Institutions - Guide and Resources: <http://ennhri.org/nhris-post-conflict/>

3.5 BUSINESS SECTOR

The EU continued to make progress in implementing the **UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs)** within the EU and through its engagement with non-EU countries. It committed to support global efforts to implement the UNGPs, including through fostering the development and implementation of national action plans, advancing relevant due diligence standards and working on a comprehensive EU framework for the implementation of UNGPs. The EU worked to improve its smart mix of voluntary and mandatory actions in order to promote responsible business conduct (RBC) policies, including analytical and consultative work in policy areas such as environmental and human rights due diligence, non-financial reporting and access to remedy for victims.

The EU published studies on human rights and environmental due diligence requirements in the supply chain and on directors' duties and sustainable corporate governance. The European Commission's work programme for 2021 published on 19 October 2020 includes a legislative initiative on sustainable corporate governance, to be launched in the second quarter of 2021, the stated aim of which is 'to foster long-term sustainable and responsible corporate behaviour'. The inception impact assessment for the initiative was published in July, and in October, the EU launched a public consultation to collect stakeholders' feedback on the initiative. Furthermore, in June 2020, the EU adopted a new Victims' Rights Strategy and the European Parliament and the Council recently reached an agreement on a new Collective Redress Directive focused on consumers.

The EU continued its work on the revision of the Non-Financial Reporting Directive, which requires large listed companies, banks and insurance companies with more than 500 employees to report information on the environment, social and employee issues, human rights, and bribery and corruption. The public consultation on the Directive's revision ran from February to June 2020. A multi-stakeholder task force was created within the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group to carry out preparatory work on possible EU non-financial reporting standards.

Ahead of the full entry into force of the Conflict Minerals Regulation on 1 January 2021, in June 2020, the Commission adopted a delegated regulation laying down import volume thresholds that were missing for certain minerals subject to the obligations of the Regulation.

As part of the implementation of the 2018 EU Action Plan on Financing Sustainable Growth, in June 2020, the EU adopted the Taxonomy Regulation, which requires lists of environmentally sustainable activities to be established by defining technical screening criteria for each environmental objective. Between April and July, the EU carried out a public consultation on a Renewed Sustainable Finance Strategy to collect the views of interested parties on how to better integrate social and environmental risks in the management framework of financial institutions.

In July 2020, the Commission published a collection of good practices on socially responsible public procurement that support initiatives to integrate social considerations into public procurement, including those related to human rights due diligence in the supply chain.

In October 2020, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights published a study setting out the findings of its research on access to remedy mechanisms in EU Member States⁸¹. The study contains detailed data on Member States' current practices relating to redress mechanisms (judicial and non-judicial, state based and non-state based), and identifies problems and gives opinions and recommendations for further initiatives in specific policy areas, with a view to implementing the UNGP's third pillar effectively. To improve transparency and provide better information on existing redress mechanisms, in November 2020 the Commission activated the business and human rights information page on the EU's e-Justice portal.⁸² Moreover, in the field of civil justice, an ongoing study on the application of the Rome II Regulation, which establishes the applicable law for tort cases, is also reflecting upon human rights infringements.

15 EU Member States have developed national action plans on business and human rights to help implement the UNGPs at national level and several are undergoing base line assessment. In addition, several EU Member States have adopted or are preparing legislation establishing mandatory environmental and/or human rights due diligence obligations for companies.

⁸¹ https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-business-human-rights_en.pdf

⁸² https://beta.e-justice.europa.eu/580/EN/business_and_human_rights

The German Council Presidency worked actively to advance the business and human rights agenda, including by organising several events with EU involvement. In July 2020, the Presidency and the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights co-hosted an event to launch the UN project marking the 10th anniversary of the UNGPs, the aim of which was to take stock of achievements to date and prepare a roadmap for the next decade. In September 2020, the Presidency and UNICEF organised a briefing and discussion on children's rights and business responsibility.

The EU also used political dialogues, human rights dialogues, development cooperation and engagement under trade preference schemes with partner countries to promote responsible business practices. The subject of business and human rights has become a standard feature in most human rights dialogues.

Outreach and capacity-building activities in close cooperation with international organisations and civil society are at the core of the implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility/Responsible Business Conduct and business and human rights principles.

The EU has created pilot partnerships with international organisations such as the ILO, the OECD and the OHCHR to provide technical support to develop national action plans in nine Latin American countries, through the Responsible Business Conduct in Latin America and Caribbean project that started in January 2019.

The EU furthermore supported responsible supply chains in six Asian trading partners

(China, Japan, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam) through the 'Responsible supply chains in Asia' project. In January 2020 the EU, together with the UNDP, started a third project in Asia that has the objective to promote the up-take of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in six countries (India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand). In Latin America, the EU supported the development of national action plans in nine countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Panama and Costa Rica) through the 'Responsible business conduct in Latin America and Caribbean' project.

In the context of its cooperation with the ILO and the OECD, the EU enabled national contact points for the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises to be trained on labour issues in RBC by the International Training Centre in September 2019.

Under the EIDHR global call for proposals, the EU awarded EUR 5 million of grants to projects on business and human rights that aim to support and empower rights-holders in due diligence processes and to promote the engagement of civil society with business and state actors.

The EU contributed to the work on business and human rights and responsible business conduct carried out by international organisations such as the UN, the OECD and the ILO. The EU contributed in particular to the work of the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights through its involvement in the project to take stock of the first 10 years of implementation of the UNGPs and through its active participation in the ninth session of the UN Forum on Business and Human Rights held in November 2020.

The EU also engaged at the sixth session of the Intergovernmental Working Group on transnational corporations and other business enterprises with respect to human rights in October 2020, where it continued to promote the development of a realistic approach to a legally binding instrument on business and human rights that could lead to globally accepted standards.

The EU provided further support and guidance by creating a toolkit on business and human rights to raise awareness on these issues with relevant governments and businesses, to empower civil society to promote the UNGPs around the world and to ensure that business and human rights issues are systematically incorporated into development cooperation activities.

3.6 COMPLIANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

The EU continued to advocate for and support initiatives designed to improve compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) and safeguard humanitarian space, in particular reaffirming its strong commitment to the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

In its conclusions on humanitarian assistance and international humanitarian law adopted on 25 November 2019, the Council recalled the obligation to respect and ensure respect for IHL in all circumstances, and reaffirmed its commitment to the humanitarian principles and objectives of humanitarian action as enshrined in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid.

The EU has continued to be active in promoting respect for IHL across the various areas covered in the **EU Guidelines on promoting compliance with international humanitarian law**⁸³. In June 2020, the EU published the third report on the implementation of the guidelines, which highlights the activities that the EU carried out in support of IHL between January and December 2019.

In December 2020, the EU endorsed the Franco-German-led Call for Action to strengthen respect for international humanitarian law and principled humanitarian action. This reaffirms the EU's commitment to promoting compliance with IHL through a variety of measures.

During its dialogues on human rights, political and humanitarian issues, the EU continued to encourage its partner countries to ratify and implement the main instruments of international humanitarian law. For example, an online ministerial meeting was held with Nigeria on 18 November 2020 - the first meeting in 5 years. During the meeting, the EU raised a point on the lack of access to the most vulnerable people in northeast Nigeria and the importance of respecting IHL. A joint communiqué was adopted at the end of the meeting, which included a reference to IHL.

⁸³ EU guidelines on the promotion of compliance with international humanitarian law: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Aah0004>

The EU strongly emphasised IHL during a virtual ministerial roundtable on the humanitarian crisis in the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) held on 20 October 2020, which the EU co-organised with Denmark, Germany and the UN. The final communiqué from this roundtable emphasised the importance of all actors respecting IHL, refugee law and human rights law, and highlighted the need to strengthen reporting mechanisms and to ensure accountability for alleged violations of humanitarian principles.

With regard to the situation in Yemen, the EU continued to play a leading role in coordinating the international response and in advocating for the respect of IHL and for a principled approach to the granting of aid. The EU and Sweden co-hosted two humanitarian senior officials' meetings and a side event during the UN General Assembly ministerial week, which brought together the humanitarian community and defined a constructive approach that sought to increase humanitarian access and improve respect for humanitarian principles.

The EU continued to be vocal on IHL matters as an active member or observer in a range of international organisations and bodies. For example, the EU took part in open debates of the UN Security Council, including the debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, where its statement underlined the EU's commitment to IHL. In the margins of the 2020 Afghanistan conference, the EU also organised a high-level meeting on the role of humanitarian assistance, IHL and the protection of civilians as part of peace negotiations.

The EU also paid particular attention to the protection of humanitarian workers and continued to advocate for the implementation or strengthening of context-specific measures to increase the physical safety of medical personnel and improve infrastructure in armed conflicts, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a main 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 the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), one of the EU's most trusted humanitarian partners, and a key partner in upholding respect for IHL and humanitarian principles. In 2020, the ICRC received approximately EUR 110 million in funding from the EU's humanitarian aid budget. This included funding for advocacy actions on IHL and the protection of civilians. Its aim is to help bring about a change of attitude to IHL on the part of armed actors, to reduce the humanitarian consequences of conflicts, and to increase humanitarian access to areas affected by conflict.

The EU also supported other humanitarian partners in a number of countries, such as DRC, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Palestine*⁸⁴ and Yemen, and in their work on the promotion of respect for IHL. For example, in Libya, the EU supports ongoing work on creating an environment that offers greater protection for conflict-affected populations. This work takes the form of humanitarian dialogue, including with armed actors, on international humanitarian norms, training on IHL, and projects designed to increase the capacity of civil society to promote IHL. During the recent conflict in Iraq, the EU's humanitarian aid budget helped to ensure regular and effective operational coordination with the authorities and with state and non-state armed groups, in order to support humanitarian access and assist with the processing of legacy caseloads relating to people in detention.

In addition, the EU allocated humanitarian aid funds to global policy support designed to improve compliance with IHL.

A key priority of the EU's ongoing role as co-chair of the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative is to focus on the role of donors in promoting and ensuring respect for IHL. This includes ensuring humanitarian access and the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid in the context of COVID-19.

In the areas of international criminal justice and international humanitarian law, the EUSR for Human Rights continued to implement and voice the EU's positions and to contribute to their coherence and consistency.

^{84*} This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue.

4. NEW TECHNOLOGIES: HARNESSING OPPORTUNITIES AND ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

4.1 CAPACITY BUILDING AND EFFECTIVE MONITORING

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a stark reminder of the importance of new technologies in maintaining access to certain services. Over recent years, digital technologies have proven to be a great asset for civil society organisations, as well as for people across the globe, for example in documenting human rights violations. Digital technologies have allowed hundreds of millions of students and children to remain connected to their teachers, while also ensuring ongoing access to health services.

Nonetheless, new technologies have also demonstrated how freedom of association and of expression can be curtailed online, with civil society actors and human rights defenders often arbitrarily targeted for surveillance. Hate speech, cyber harassment and disinformation are spreading on social media platforms, and can lead to hate crime and physical violence. In addition, mass and arbitrary surveillance are increasing and citizens' personal data can be collected and misused. Major new challenges are also emerging with the development of artificial intelligence.

This is why, in 2020, the EU took a stronger stance in favour of regulating the digital sphere, in order to ensure that human rights are respected both online and offline, in particular through the proposed Digital Services Act.

With global policies and frameworks in the field of digital technologies and human rights still in the making, in December 2020, the EU organised the 22nd EU-NGO Human Rights Forum, which focused on digital and human rights.

The EU-NGO Human Rights Forum, held virtually in 2020, brought together human rights defenders, technology and human rights experts, representatives from civil society and social media platforms, UN experts and EU officials from over 110 countries to discuss the impact of new technologies on human rights. The Forum was co-organised by the EEAS, the European Commission and the Human Rights and Democracy Network.

The Forum comprised both high-level plenaries and confidential interactive sessions, where human rights defenders could share their testimonies and recommendations. In his opening speech, HR/VP Borrell stated ‘It is about shaping a digital world where human rights are protected and respected. This is our joint endeavour’.

The Forum addressed four main themes:

- fundamental freedoms in the digital sphere;
- engagement with the private sector;
- combating online surveillance and protecting data privacy;
- ensuring a human rights-based approach to artificial intelligence.

In the opening session, Commissioner Urpilainen emphasised that ‘human rights are universal online and offline’ while UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Bachelet called for a global debate to ‘make the digital space work for everyone’.

The Forum provided a platform for testimonies on how technology is being used by civil society to become more organised, and by individuals to document and share images of human rights violations. Long-term internet shutdowns were, however, also reported, with 213 incidents recorded in 33 countries last year, in addition to ‘digital crackdowns’ against civil society in China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Belarus, the Philippines, Mexico and India. Sharon Hom, Director of the NGO Human Rights in China, highlighted that there is a deep existential threat facing human rights defenders, in the form of two powerful black holes – a digital space that sucks a vast amount of data from us, and a space of mass disinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories.

In the separate interactive sessions, discussions centred on how to combat hate speech, misinformation, fake news and online abuse and surveillance, while protecting freedom of expression.

There was consensus that a multi-stakeholder approach is essential, as is promoting digital rights in multilateral fora, in particular in the UN. The EU highlighted its commitment to promoting human rights in the digital sphere within the UN fora, in particular the HRC and the UNGA Third Committee, while supporting the work of the UN High Commissioner and the UN Special Procedures on these issues.

Participants agreed that companies can and should do more to protect human rights online. They should provide safeguards for users of their platforms and should explore more creatively how to broaden the tools they have at their disposal for doing this. A critical aspect of this is informing the user and providing transparency on the algorithms used. Self-regulation and voluntary commitments by companies are important in addressing the consequences of the digital transformation, but are not sufficient. Voluntary action should be accompanied by regulation and strong governance mechanisms. Among the private sector participants, representatives from Twitter and Facebook contributed to the discussions.

Many participants highlighted the normative power of the EU and the global influence it has on matters such as data privacy as a result of its legislation, including the GDPR, the Digital Service Act and legislation on AI. NGOs and UN experts called on the EU to continue championing human rights both online and offline.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ See also information about the Forum, including the recording of all public sessions, <https://eu-ngo-forum.b2match.io/>, and the HR/VP keynote speech at the Forum: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-199619>

4.2 PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY IN THE USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES, INCLUDING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

As part of the European Digital Strategy, and in order to adapt to the latest trends, in December 2020, the European Commission published the proposal for the Digital Services Act,⁸⁶ a package of measures designed to strengthen the single market for digital services, to promote innovation and to increase the competitiveness of the European online environment. The Commission is also preparing a new legislative proposal on artificial intelligence, with the aim of ensuring a human-rights-based approach to the use of AI and its development. The EU has already developed ambitious legislation and policies to safeguard human rights, in particular online. For example, the GDPR protects data coming from the EU, irrespective of where the data is processed.

The GDPR has become a benchmark and has acted as a catalyst for many partners around the world, which have since modernised their privacy rules. These include Brazil, Chile, the Republic of Korea, Japan, Kenya, India, Tunisia, Indonesia, Taiwan and the state of California, to name but a few. International instruments, such as the Council of Europe's modernised Convention 108, or the Data Free Flow with Trust initiative launched by Japan, are also based on principles found in the GDPR. This trend towards global convergence brings new opportunities for improving data protection worldwide.

As part of the Joint Communication on the EU Cybersecurity Strategy, the Commission and the High Representative underlined the need for the EU to continue to lead on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms online. The Communication called for steps to be taken to provide further practical guidance, promote best practices and prevent the misuse of technologies, where necessary using the EU cyber diplomacy toolbox.

The global reach of technologies makes **multilateral and multi-stakeholder approaches essential**. The EU engaged actively, in particular within UN fora, to share analysis and to identify best practices and recommendations on how to ensure a human-rights-compliant digital sphere.

⁸⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act-ensuring-safe-and-accountable-online-environment_en

The EU contributed to the development of the UN Secretary-General's Roadmap on Digital Cooperation, co-leading the work of the Roundtable on Digital Human Rights. The EU remains committed to implementing the Roadmap, and looks forward to working actively with the first-ever UN Technology Envoy in 2021.

The EU also took part in consultations by the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee ahead of the upcoming HRC report on digital and human rights. The EU also contributed to ad hoc consultations with the UN Special Procedures and the Human Rights Council advisory bodies on a wide range of issues related to human rights and digital technologies.

A number of EU delegations organised public events on human rights and digital technologies. For example, the EU Delegation to the United Nations in New York, in collaboration with UNICEF and Uruguay, hosted an event on children's rights in the digital environment. The event took place following the release of the UN Secretary-General's 2020 report on the rights of the child, and ahead of the publication of the Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment on the topic, with the COVID-19 pandemic - during which millions of children are relying on online tools, systems and platforms, forming the context.

At the International Telecommunications Union, the EU participated actively in discussions with experts to ensure that the facial recognition standards being developed comply with European data protection standards.

The EU has closely followed the development of the new UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. Given AI's growing influence on society and sectors within UNESCO's mandate (e.g. education, social media, human rights and privacy), the aim is for the Recommendation to become the first global standard-setting instrument on the ethics of AI. The EU and its Member States are therefore involved in the process, their aim being, in particular, to ensure that the Recommendation respects, protects and promotes human rights and fundamental freedoms, in compliance with international human rights law. The results of the intergovernmental negotiations will be presented at UNESCO's 41st general conference, to be held at the end of 2021. The EU has also continued to cooperate closely with the Council of Europe in the field of regulating artificial intelligence, in particular in the CoE's Ad Hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence.

Over the past 2 years, the **EU has stepped up bilateral, regional and multilateral dialogue**, promoting a global culture of respect for privacy and ensuring convergence between different privacy systems, to the benefit of individuals and businesses alike. The Commission is committed to continuing this work as part of its broader external action, for example, through the Africa-EU Partnership,⁸⁷ and in its support for international initiatives, such as Data Free Flow with Trust. At a time when violations of privacy rules may affect large numbers of individuals simultaneously in several parts of the world, it is crucial that international cooperation between data protection enforcers be intensified.

Further details of the EU's work and vision in this area can be found in the Communication titled 'Data protection as a pillar of citizens' empowerment and the EU's approach to the digital transition - two years of application of the General Data Protection Regulation'.⁸⁸

The EU increasingly used its political dialogues, including its human rights dialogues, to raise concerns about the spread of internet shutdowns, online censorship and mass arbitrary surveillance.

The EU is aware of the impact of digital technologies on civil society organisations and HRDs. **The EU financed emergency measures in the field of digital security through the EU Human Rights Defenders Mechanism** ProtectDefenders.eu. The measures included in this mechanism aim to address the most pressing threats and risks resulting from attacks on HRDs' communications, hacking of personal and professional information, lack of adequate security equipment, and online surveillance. In 2020, more than 41 emergency grants for digital security were awarded, benefiting 52 HRDs working in countries such as Egypt, Myanmar, Kenya and Brazil. In addition, the Protect Defenders mechanism mobilised at least 31 grants that were used to comprehensively strengthen the digital security structure of organisations operating in very hostile environments, such as in Russia, DRC and Mexico. In addition, more than 450 human rights defenders 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.

⁸⁷ Africa-EU Partnership: <https://africa-eu-partnership.org/en>

⁸⁸ Commission Communication (2020) 264 final of 24 June 2020: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0264&from=EN>

On Safer Internet Day (SID),⁸⁹ the **EU raised awareness of online risks for children and promoted the positive use of digital technology** across the globe. SID 2020 was celebrated in more than 170 countries, with the Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar and Rwanda taking part for the first time, through a variety of activities including awareness sessions, debates and exhibitions. The study⁹⁰ on the implementation of the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children⁹¹ was presented at the Safer Internet Forum 2020, and highlighted how child online safety has become more mature and more firmly integrated into public policy, but also increasingly complex. All 30 countries that took part in the study (EU Member States, Iceland, Norway and the United Kingdom) have incorporated aspects of the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) Strategy in their public policies. The presentation at the Safer Internet Forum made it possible to hold a discussion with an international audience, identifying similarities and differences across continents, and between BIK policy models and trends.

The rapid development and growing availability of technology has contributed to the increase of child sexual abuse online, and the number of reported cases has also increased during the pandemic. In July 2020, the EU adopted a strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse,⁹² setting out concrete actions to tackle the growing threat of child sexual abuse by improving prevention, investigation, and assistance to victims.

⁸⁹ <https://www.saferinternetday.org/>

⁹⁰ Third Better Internet for Kids Policy Map report:
<https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/policy/bikmap>.

⁹¹ Commission Communication on European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children (COM/2012/0196 Final): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2012%3A0196%3AFIN>

⁹² EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse, 24 July 2020:
<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9977-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

International cooperation is a key factor in combating child sexual abuse. In September 2020, the Commission adopted a legislative proposal allowing companies to continue detecting, reporting and removing child sexual abuse online. The EU continued to support the WePROTECT Global Alliance to end child sexual abuse online⁹³ during 2020. Advanced countries are committed to supporting the Alliance in its work to develop both a more coordinated response to the global fight against child sexual abuse, based on global threat assessments, and a model national response. These objectives have helped to clarify the challenges and to assist member countries in setting goals.

The EU also co-funds the European members of the INHOPE network of hotlines,⁹⁴ which allow internet users from 42 countries to anonymously report child sexual abuse material online. The hotlines cooperate internationally with law enforcement agencies and hosting internet service providers for the quick removal of this type of illegal content. INHOPE has indicated that the number of online images of suspected child sexual abuse processed has almost doubled between 2017 and 2019.⁹⁵ Technology is increasingly being used by traffickers for the recruitment, exploitation and control of victims, children being at particular risk⁹⁶. The internet and social media have been used in a number of Member States as one of the most predominant forms of recruitment of victims, children being at specific risk. Information and communication technology is also being used for the organisation of transport and accommodation of victims, the advertisement of services of victims, communication between perpetrators and transfer of criminal proceeds. The EU continued to provide funding to support anti-trafficking projects, including with the objective of making better use of technology to prevent and address trafficking in human beings. The Commission is developing a new strategy on combating trafficking in human beings in relation to the upcoming strategy on tackling organised crime.

⁹³ WePROTECT Global Alliance: <https://www.weprotect.org/>

⁹⁴ <https://inhope.org/EN/the-facts>

⁹⁵ [INHOPE Annual Report 2019](#)

⁹⁶ Commission Third report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings, COM(2020) 661 and SWD(2020) 226 final.

Digital technologies present both opportunities and challenges for mediation, and offer ways to narrow the digital gap and increase inclusivity. For example, women in Yemen can face severe restrictions as regards travel, they are often required to be accompanied by male companions when travelling. When holding meetings online, they can more easily be included in discussions. At the same time, narratives for or against peace are increasingly being shaped on social media. Leaks in social media may jeopardise the confidentiality of peace talks, and misinformation campaigns can disrupt the mediation process. In November 2020, the EEAS organised the first-ever multidisciplinary training on digital mediation, during which experts on cyber mediation, social media, knowledge production, and psychology explored how digital technologies could be used in peace processes.

5. DELIVERING BY WORKING TOGETHER

5.1 PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for 2020-2024 was launched with an online event on 23 November 2020. Of the over 800 participants who registered, around 650 actually attended the webinar. Many more were able to follow it on social media as it was livestreamed on the EEAS Facebook page in English, French and Spanish.

The purpose of the event was to present the strategic priorities of EU external action in the area of human rights and democracy to a wider audience. The event offered an opportunity to:

- launch the Action Plan and outline its main objectives;
- present the EU's roadmap on human rights and democracy for the next 5 years;
- encourage interested parties to make connections and to exchange ideas on how to implement the action plan effectively;
- exchange ideas on the challenges and opportunities involved in coordinating work on the Action Plan's priorities with actors at all levels;
- discuss how the EU can use the instruments and tools at its disposal to effectively address current and future challenges.

The EUSR for Human Rights delivered the opening address, placing the Action Plan in its geopolitical context, and highlighting key priorities.

To increase the visibility and reach of EU human rights policy, the EUSR held regular, dedicated bilateral meetings, spoke at events, engaged in discussions within academic circles and attended international conferences. The EUSR focused on the key EU thematic priorities, which are reflected in the EU human rights guidelines.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ EU Human Rights guidelines: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/6987/EU%20Human%20rights%20guidelines

In 2020, the Good Human Rights Stories⁹⁸ high-level event took place on 24 February in Geneva, during the first day of the HRC. It was dedicated to celebrating women's empowerment and gender equality to mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Beijing+25 Agenda is the most progressive global blueprint for improving women's rights ever agreed by governments at global level. The EU presented a story about work-related harassment and violence. The event was opened by the President of the HRC, Ambassador Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger, who underlined the importance of introducing a fresh and positive narrative on human rights, stating 'We need events such as the Good Human Rights Stories initiative to take stock of where we are. Real change happens on the ground.' In her keynote speech, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, stressed the need to remember what has already been achieved on gender equality.

The EU communicated on human rights and democracy on the relevant UN international days⁹⁹. It published statements highlighting its commitment, provided information about related initiatives and activities, and organised awareness-raising campaigns. EU delegations played an active part in the communication drive on human rights, highlighting issues of particular importance in their host countries and initiating discussions on the challenges and opportunities involved in protecting and promoting human rights.

⁹⁸ <https://goodhumanrightsstories.net/>

⁹⁹ <https://www.un.org/en/sections/observances/international-days/>

On **Human Rights Day**, marked on 10 December, EU delegations shared the Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU¹⁰⁰ and a web feature on their social media and web pages. A range of communication materials including web features, videos, social media campaigns, press releases, blogposts by High Representative Josep Borrell and the action plan booklet,¹⁰¹ were used to highlight the EU's key achievements in promoting and protecting human rights in 2020. These included the adoption of the new Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime.

The adoption of the **EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime** in December was accompanied by a detailed set of 'questions and answers'¹⁰² focusing on the key features of the regime. The European Commission also published guidance on how to implement specific provisions of Council Regulation (EU) 2020/1998 on restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses. The guidance note¹⁰³ includes information on the scope of the financial restrictions set out in the Regulation and their application. It also explains in detail the responsibilities of those who must comply with the Regulation, covering notions such as ownership and control, and the functioning of derogations. Shortly after the adoption of the guidance note, the EEAS organised information sessions with CSOs, international organisations and like-minded partners.

¹⁰⁰ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2020: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/09/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-human-rights-day-10-december-2020/>

¹⁰¹ https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_action_plan_on_human_rights_and_democracy_2020-2024.pdf

¹⁰² EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime Questions and Answers: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/90013/questions-and-answers-eu-global-human-rights-sanctions-regime_en

¹⁰³ Guidance note on the implementation of Council Regulation (EU) 2020/1998 (EU global human rights sanctions regime): https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/201217-human-rights-guidance-note_en