

Human Rights in the EU's External Relations

“The Presidency will work to strengthen the EU's role as a global actor with a clear agenda for peace, development, democracy and human rights. (...) International law, human rights, democracy and rule of law should permeate work under the EU common foreign and security policy[.]”

- Work programme for the Swedish Presidency of the EU 1 July – 31 December 2009

Human rights are at the centre of the European Union's external action. Promoting the respect for human rights is a priority of the 2009 Swedish Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers.

The Swedish Presidency attaches importance to the implementation and development of the EU's growing portfolio in the area of human rights. Particular focus will be put on effective implementation of the broad range of existing instruments the EU has at its disposal. Carrying out human rights dialogues and consultations, practical implementation of the guidelines and promoting substantive work in multilateral fora such as the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly will all be central tasks. Further efforts will be made to mainstream human rights into in the EU's external action as a whole. Efforts will be made to strengthen the EU's work on democracy-building. The Presidency will seek to achieve greater visibility for EU policy in the area of human rights.

Mainstreaming of human rights and cooperation with civil society

The central importance attached to human rights in the European Union's external action entails that human rights are to be integrated in all aspects of the Union's work in the area, such as crisis management, trade and bilateral relations.

The Swedish Presidency and the European Commission will hold the annual EU NGO Human Rights Forum in Stockholm on 6-7 July, focusing on violence against children, within the broader context of the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU's guidelines on the rights of the child. The conclusions from the forum will be an important input to strengthening the EU's work in the area.

The Swedish Presidency will attach great importance to ensuring full cooperation and information-sharing with civil society on human rights dialogues, multilateral work and human rights guidelines as well as on other aspects of the Union's work in the area.

Multilateral work

The European Union is a committed actor in international multilateral work on human rights. The UN, the Council of Europe and the OSCE are central fora. The Swedish Presidency will continue the EU's efforts in the Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly to uphold respect for established human rights norms. The EU will continue to promote the role of the two fora to address human rights issues in an effective manner, including thematic issues, capacity-building on human rights, as well as to address serious human rights situations, including country-specific situations. At the Human Rights Council, the protection of the independence and effectiveness of thematic and country-specific reporting mandates will be a priority. Promoting cross-regional cooperation will be of key importance.

The Presidency will give special emphasis to important milestones such as 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination against Women and the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Human rights dialogues

The EU has established human rights dialogues and consultations with a large number of countries, including Canada, China, Japan, the Russian Federation and the United States of America. A dialogue has also been initiated with the African Union. The Swedish Presidency will aim to lead those dialogues and consultations that take place during the second half of 2009 toward practical results on the basis of open and forthright discussion.

Human rights guidelines

In order to further direct its work on human rights, the EU has adopted seven sets of guidelines on individual thematic issues:

- death penalty
- torture
- human rights dialogues
- children and armed conflict
- human rights defenders
- rights of the child
- violence against and discrimination of women

The implementation of the guidelines combines the monitoring of individual cases and events with specific strategies on work with regard to individual countries. The Swedish Presidency will maintain a high level of activity in implementing the guidelines, exploring means to add further efficiency.