

Declaration by the High Representative Josep Borrell, on behalf of the European Union, on human rights in the times of the coronavirus pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic impacts every country and region of the world and every aspect of our lives. It has reminded us how interconnected we are. Nobody will be safe in any country as long as the pandemic rages in different parts of the world. Respect for all human rights must remain at the heart of fighting the pandemic and supporting the global recovery.

The pandemic and its socio-economic consequences are having a disproportionate impact on the rights of women, children and elderly persons, and on all persons in vulnerable situations, including refugees, migrants, internally displaced persons, and are deepening pre-existing inequalities. Response measures should take account of the needs of those that are most at risk of marginalisation, stigmatisation, xenophobia and racism and other forms of discrimination. Prevention of, and protection from, all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including through appropriate redress mechanism, and continued access to all essential health services, are particularly important in a time of confinement. All measures and actions taken in response should be inclusive and gender-responsive and ensure the women's full and effective participation in decision-making processes and in all stages of response and recovery. The heavy impact of the crisis on economic and social rights also needs to be addressed.

The European Union reaffirms the need to pay special attention to the growing impact of the pandemic on all human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In emergency circumstances, international human rights law allows states to limit certain human rights provided that the measures are necessary, proportionate, temporary in nature, and non-discriminatory. The coronavirus pandemic should not be used as a pretext to limit democratic and civic space, the respect of the rule of law and of international commitments, nor to curtail freedom of expression, freedom of the press and access to information online and offline. The measures should not be used to restrict the work of human rights defenders, journalists, media workers and civil society organisations. Digital technologies that have the potential to help contain the pandemic should be used in full respect of human rights including the right to privacy.

Protecting the right of everyone to the highest attainable standard of health requires access to reliable information. People must be empowered to protect their own health and those of others. Misleading or false information can put lives in danger. It is therefore crucial to resolutely counter disinformation with transparent, timely and fact-based communication and thus reinforce the resilience of societies.

The European Union recognises that the role of civil society and human rights defenders is more important than ever to encourage solidarity, support those who are most in need, and defend human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic space, and to promote accountability.

This is a time for solidarity and global cooperation through multilateral efforts. The European Union reaffirms its commitment to contribute to the global response to the pandemics. The European Union will promote coordination in all relevant multilateral fora, including working with the UN, WHO, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and other regional organisations. Measures taken at the national level are also of particular importance.

The European Union supports the important role of the UN system in mobilising and coordinating the global response to the pandemic with human rights at the forefront. We strongly support the UN Secretary General's call for an immediate global ceasefire, as well as the call to end gender-based violence, and the work of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and her Office.

The European Union recalls that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. This cannot be forgotten at this time of global crisis. We undertake to ensure that our response upholds the dignity and human rights of all without discrimination of any kind and call on all governments around the world to do the same. No one should be left behind, and no human right ignored.

The Candidate Countries Turkey, Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania^[1], the country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the EFTA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia and Georgia align themselves with this declaration.

[1] The Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

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