



EUROPEAN UNION

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EU Statement on Human Rights in the times of the coronavirus pandemic

We are now living in a time that is described as the largest international crisis in decades. The coronavirus pandemic impacts every region and every aspect of our lives without any distinction. It has reminded us vividly how interconnected we are. It is hard to be safe globally 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.

In this crisis, protecting people's lives and health is the top priority of our governments. We recognize the urgency and necessity of the preventive measures implemented in many countries to effectively fight the pandemic, including within the EU. At the same time, we have to make sure that the current efforts in response to the global crisis do not have far-reaching repercussions on the enjoyment of human rights. We recall the appeals of the OSCE Albanian Chairmanship, Secretary General and OSCE autonomous institutions that these measures should be proportionate, temporary and in compliance with the rule of law and international commitments. They must remain subject to meaningful legislative and judicial oversight, including by parliaments, and be reviewed regularly to ensure they are still necessary, proportionate and adequate to address the threat that led to their introduction.

In Moscow 1991, all OSCE participating States made a binding commitment that recourse to states of emergency "may not be used to subvert the democratic constitutional order, nor aim at the destruction of internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms". Emergency measures should not be used to limit the democratic and civic space, to curtail freedom of expression and access to

information online and offline. They should not be used to restrict the work of human rights defenders, journalists, media actors and civil society organisations. Digital technologies that have the potential to help contain the pandemic should be used in full respect of international human rights standards, as well as of data protection and privacy rights.

Protecting the right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health requires access to information. People must be empowered to protect their own health and the health of others. Free, independent and pluralistic media has an important role in providing the public with relevant and trustworthy information about the pandemic, including through a free, open, reliable, secure and interoperable Internet. 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. We echo the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and IACHR Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, who underlined that journalism serves a crucial function at a moment of public health emergency. We see with great concern an increase in restricting measures taken by States that disproportionately limit the right to freedom of expression and impede journalists and media actors from reporting on the COVID-19 crisis. Governments must make exceptional efforts to protect the work of journalists at a moment of public health emergency and we remain fully committed to protecting media freedom and safety of journalists at this critical time.

The role of civil society and human rights defenders is important as they encourage solidarity, support those who are most in need, and defend human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic space.

The pandemic and its socio-economic implications are having a disproportionate impact on women and girls, as well as on other marginalised groups and on persons in vulnerable situations. For instance, quarantine measures imposed as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic are putting women and children at heightened risk of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and cutting them off from essential support services and social networks. It is important to recognise that anyone can be affected, regardless of gender. Response measures and actions should be inclusive and gender-responsive. They should take account of the needs of those that are most at risk of experiencing any form of discrimination.

Our OSCE Human Dimension commitments are more relevant than ever and we remain committed to implementing them. We welcome the work of the autonomous institutions, according to their mandate, and their efforts in supporting and assisting participating states in these challenging times and we have seen participating States reacting swiftly to the concerns raised.

This is a time for solidarity. Besides national measures, global cooperation through multilateral efforts is important to face this pandemic. The European Union will promote coordination in multilateral fora, including working with the UN, WHO, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and other regional organisations.

The European Union recalls that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. This must not be forgotten also at this time of the 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.

We would like to conclude by echoing the UN Secretary General: “By respecting human rights in this time of crisis, we will build more effective and inclusive solutions for the emergency of today and the recovery for tomorrow.”

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, SERBIA* and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA country ICELAND, member of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE, the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, ARMENIA, GEORGIA, ANDORRA and SAN MARINO align themselves with this statement.

* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.