





## REPORT


# VOCAL EUROPE

## High Level Conference - 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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## THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

**On 20 November 2018, the European Parliament (EP) held a High-Level Conference to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The Conference launched the EP's Human Right Week, which lasted from 19 to 22 November 2018.**

The aim of the event was for the EP and for representatives from academic and international organizations to reflect on the major principles of human rights. These are, as laid out in the UDHR, **universality, inter-dependence and indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination**. The Conference sought to address, at the same time, the new challenges in a global and digital world.

The conference was an interesting celebration of the UNHR. The speakers provided valuable contributions to the topic – however, a certain level of abstraction was present in all the speeches. Only some of the speakers, such as Mr. Patrick Gaspard, referred and advised concrete solutions and recommendations for the future of human rights.

The High-Level Conference was opened by European Parliament President **Antonio Tajani**. The President called for a return to the UDHR in the context of humanitarian crises, exploitation of minorities and environmental disasters. He reminded of the EP's continuous work in shaping the EU's policies in advancing human rights both within and outside the Union. Reflecting that many countries do not enjoy the same rights and opportunities, he mentioned the need to defend the rights of journalists, the victims of violence, including in countries that have still not ratified the Declaration of Istanbul.

There is a need to not only look at problematic developments abroad, such as in Chile and Venezuela, but especially in our homes. Too many women are still victimized and considered as inferior. By wishing a better future for children and young people “than our present”, he commented that “we live in a world disrupted by populist trends”. In response to this, “we should all be defenders of human rights (...) so we can make a difference”.

Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy **Federica Mogherini** followed with her opening speech. The UDHR, she reminded, recognized that everyone has the right to work, to equal pay, to education regardless of background, to take part in their national government. However, “we have a long way to go”. “Some argue that human rights are outdated, that national security requires the suspension of human rights”. However, she claimed, “the only possible security is one based on human rights”. “Every violation of human rights is a violation of national interest”, she added.

The High Representative warned from making one crucial mistake: to think that the UDHR belongs to the past or only to some countries. The Declaration is indeed universal and concerns everyone. She urged to find that binding spirit again, because

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“when we come together, these principles are at our core existence and in our national interests”.

Secretary-General of the United Nations **António Guterres** contributed to the opening remarks with a short video message, saying that we are witnessing a dangerous erosion of human rights principles. Urging to search for our commitment, he thanked the EU for the stable partnership carried out with the UN in the work towards improved human rights.

## **Panel I: Universality and indivisibility of human rights in today’s global and digital world**

The first panel of the Conference addressed the central role of the UN Human Rights Council, the counter-narrative on universality and reaffirming indivisibility of human rights, the defense of migrants, women, children and LGBTI as targeted rights holders, the needed reinforcement of international accountability and fight against impunity, and good human rights stories and what to learn from them.

**Pier Antonio Panzeri**, Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, chaired the panel. He stressed the problem of inequality, which has diminished in some countries but is still at a high level elsewhere. He argued that reduction of inequality and protection of human rights should go together. EU institutions have been working for a world based on rules, and it is important to promote positive narratives, he concluded, giving the floor to the speakers.

**Michelle Bachelet**, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, speaking on behalf of UN Secretary-General, first mentioned all the positive achievements over the last 70 years following the ratification of the UDHR. Bachelet recognized the adoption of the Declaration has “a truly significant historic event”, which has driven vast improvement of human well-being in the past 70 years, in health, education, peace, sustainability, and less marginalization of minorities.

People affirmed the rights of equality and to live free from tyranny, with fair access to justice, services and economic opportunities. Disputes have been resolved by justice, democracies have been grounded by a solid legal framework and governed by the rule of law. Especially, constitutions around the globe now include provisions defending human rights.

Although there has been progress in the past 70 years, “a rising wind of dividedness undermines peace and the achievement of human rights goals, conflicts are causing suffering and contributing to unprecedented level of displacement”. Part of our challenge is to make this framework understandable to decision-makers”. In conclusion, Bachelet stressed that “we need to show with good stories that upholding to human rights leads to a stronger society, with better, more sustainable development, and more effective conflict prevention”.

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Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) **Fatou Bensouda** began her speech by stressing that the significance of the ICC in protecting fundamental rights cannot be overstated. 70 years on, the UDHR “still works”. Bensouda went on by discussing the origins of the ICC, the need for which became apparent after the genocides in Rwanda and Yugoslavia. The EP “was key in generating political will (...) in support of the Rome Statute”.

The court also benefits from the support of the EU member states. “This is particularly important as along with an independent and permanent ICC, the Rome Statute created an interdependent system of international tribunal justice based on the key concepts of complementarity and cooperation.” Bensouda continued by stating that the ICC is a global project and that all members have advantages from it, as many international crimes are becoming ever more global and digitalized.

**Stavros Lambrinidis**, EU Special Representative on Human Rights, conferred a powerful speech by focusing on the fact that we all have a human dignity as human beings. “We decided we will not build anything unless it’s on the basis of human dignity”. “Is it ok to repress someone in a minority?” By asking this question, Lambrinidis heavily criticized “strong leaders, those who want to bend the will of their citizens. These people cannot tolerate tolerance, the rule of law, and they try to divide us.”

“The moment you have a political majority and decide that you want to take on that, you open the door to hell”.

He reiterated the EU’s commitment to continue working on human rights. The EU Special Representative mentioned that there are people who do not like human rights, but we need to resist these people. He then quoted Nelson Mandela: “no one is born hating – if you can be taught how to hate, you can be taught how to love.” We have been taught how to hate, in all different part of the world. “If we all leave with the commitment to stop that, we can love more.” We should focus on fact that human rights are legal instruments, legal obligations.

European Ombudsman **Emily O’Reilly** commented that “our commercial opportunities do not endanger the human rights of others.” She believes that any lack of transparency in matters of public policy should be seen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a human rights issue. The world is now a much more interconnected place than it was in 1948. O’Reilly continued by saying that she had been involved in investigations into trade agreements between the EU and other parts of the world, making sure that they did not have a bad impact on human rights. For example, she mentioned, she has “worked to ensure that the use of export credit insurance by member states to protect investments in countries considered unstable does not conflict with human rights obligations under the EU treaties.”

Lastly, **Patrick Gaspard**, President of the Open Society Foundations, began his speech by saying that politics in some countries have taken a bad turn, like in the US.

People are rightly disappointed that globalization has failed development. Gaspard argued that international organizations and national government need to show leadership to put the views of civil society in action, in four main ways. First, we need to shine a light on authoritarian governments who get away with repressive behavior in darkness under false pretenses.

Second, we need to extend a protective halo to civil society groups: institutions should use their credibility to help civil society actors who are under siege, name them to advisory councils, create partnership agreements and invite them to speak regularly. Third, we need to have consistent leadership. Fourth, business leaders need to take their seat at this table.

“Responsible business cannot thrive in society where rule of law is threatened, and corruption prospers. Businesses need to speak and act decisively and their interests need to flourish.” Gaspard ended his speech by saying that the human side of human rights is often neglected: “Let’s put the human back in human rights”.

## **Panel II: Synergies in strengthening the global human rights architectures and mechanisms**

The second panel focused on improving prevention, early response and accountability; engaging with emerging states and actors stepping into leadership roles; enhancing national and regional institutions’ monitoring activities on democracy and human rights; reaching out towards broader sections of society on the importance of human rights; and safeguarding human rights in new environments, such as digital technology and climate change.

For both panels, a Q&A session was held with the active participation of UNICEF and EU-NGOs Forum.

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