

by organising a joint event with regional human rights defenders to celebrate International Human Rights Day. The EU carried out demarches on EU priorities and initiatives at the UN General Assembly Third Committee.

Tajikistan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Tajikistan's human rights record did not significantly change in 2021 and remained problematic, with further deterioration in certain areas. Political participation, freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of expression remained highly curtailed. Gender-based discrimination continued to be an endemic phenomenon in the Tajik society, with widespread domestic violence and very few shelters for women available. Domestic violence increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Freedom of the media remained one of the areas of greatest concern and media continued to face scrutiny, closures, and self-censorship. Independent journalists were subject to intimidations and blackmailing, as well as physical attacks. Blockage of news websites continued to be used against independent media. At the same time, the use of social media has increased access to information. Following the protests in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region at the end of November 2021, the authorities blocked internet in the region. In the World Press Index of Reporters without Borders, Tajikistan ranked 162/180 in 2021.

The lack of government transparency has been of particular concern in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In January 2021, President Rahmon publicly declared that Tajikistan had conquered the Coronavirus. For several months, the authorities maintained that no further COVID-19 cases had occurred in the country, although independent media reported that hospitals were treating COVID-19 patients. It was not until late June 2021 that the Ministry of Health admitted that there were new COVID-19 cases.

Serious human rights concerns derived also from the clashes at the border with Kyrgyzstan in April 2021, which led to the death of 55 people and the displacement of more than 40,000 civilians. Equally of concern was the situation at the border with Afghanistan, following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, with several thousand Afghan refugees flowing into Tajikistan.

A positive development was a proposal to criminalise domestic violence introduced in the new draft criminal code, but it is yet to be adopted. Some limited progress could be observed in the field of prevention of torture and ill-treatment, as well as in penitentiary reform. Under an amnesty granted on the 30th anniversary of independence, around 650 prisoners were released. Political prisoners remained excluded from the amnesty.

2. EU action - key focus areas: A number of projects funded by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) focused, *inter alia*, on support to civil society, freedom of expression, torture, conditions in detention centres and the rights of women and girls. On the latter, the EU delegation developed the Gender Country Profile and Country Level Implementation Plan of the Gender Action Plan III. The EU delegation also developed a project to support women shelters. The project "Enhancing Cooperation and Dialogue between Civil Society and Government in the Area of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms", funded by the EU Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), was implemented by the Brussels-based International Partnership for Human Rights, together with two local human rights organisations, *Nota Bene* and *Khoma*. The overall objective of the project was to

strengthen dialogue and cooperation between civil society and the government and to improve access to and the quality of information from government bodies.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the annual human rights dialogue and the cooperation committee could not take place. However, the joint visit of HR/VP Borrell and Commissioner Urpilainen in November 2021, as well as visits of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia provided important opportunities to promote the human rights agenda at the highest level. On the occasion of the visits, dedicated meetings with leading representatives of the Tajik civil society were organised. Human rights and democracy were also raised during the Cooperation Council, which took place online in February.

The EU welcomed the positive discussions taking place between Tajikistan, international NGOs, and the EU on penitentiary reform and the openness to visits of penitentiary facilities.

The EU continued to support Tajikistan's ambition to join the Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance (GSP+), currently at the pre-application process. However, the authorities did not make notable progress in providing substantial answers to many pending questions concerning the state of human rights in the country.

The EU-UN Global Spotlight Initiative provided support to eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls. On 25 November 2021, during the visit of HR/VP Borrell and Commissioner Urpilainen, the EU delegation premises were lit up in orange.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU continued to provide financial support to projects in the field of human rights, mainly funded through the EIDHR. The EU also funded three projects through the EU Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), namely "Enhancing cooperation between civil society and government in the area of Human Rights"; "Stabilisation of Tajikistan's Southern Border"; and "Critical Infrastructure to contribute to stability and peace in Khorog". Civil Society Organisations/Local Authorities (CSO-LA) projects focused on youth employment, rights of persons with disabilities, digital empowerment and climate change awareness.

5. Multilateral context: The EU consistently encouraged Tajikistan to be open to UN human rights scrutiny, including by sending a standing invitation to all UN Special Procedures. Tajikistan underwent its third Universal Periodic Review cycle in November 2021 and received 234 recommendations.

Turkmenistan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2021, the human rights situation in Turkmenistan continued to be difficult. The restrictions introduced in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic affected negatively fundamental freedoms while control of the population remained tight. The restrictions related to the operation of businesses resulted in the worsening of the living standards of the population and were not accompanied by sufficient measures of protection for the groups in the most vulnerable situations. Citizens continued to experience shortages of subsidised food and money, growing unemployment, as well as the lack of reliable information about the epidemiological situation. Serious concerns remained regarding restrictions to the freedom of expression, freedom of association and peaceful assembly, freedom of religion or belief, torture, prevention and enforced