

raised by the European Parliament and the EU Special Representative for Central Asia. The EU drew attention to a number of human rights related individual cases through official diplomatic channels, including in-person dialogues with the authorities.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU included Turkmenistan in its COVID-19 response programme for Central Asia, implemented by the World Health Organization (WHO).

In June 2021, the EU successfully concluded the implementation of the project “Support to Capacity Building of Public Administration”, launched in 2016 with a budget EUR 4.5 million. The project helped Turkmen administration to implement, *inter alia*, human rights laws and conventions, in line with the National Human Rights Action Plan. The State Academy of Civil Servants and the Institute of State, Law and Democracy were among the beneficiaries of the project.

Turkmenistan was included in the new phase of the EU-Central Asia Rule of Law Programme, which helps participating countries to reform the national legal systems, State institutions and the judiciary. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights supported the capacity building of civil society.

5. Multilateral context: The EU delegation coordinated actions in the field of human rights with EU Member States’ embassies, international organisations (UN, OSCE) and like-minded partners.

The EU encouraged Turkmenistan to seek advice of specialised international bodies, to study best practices and to involve civil society in the process of drafting or amending legislation and implementing the human rights instruments. The EU has insisted that Turkmenistan allows visits of UN Special Procedures and thematic Working Groups, as well as the ILO, as soon as the epidemiological situation improves, and that the country resumes cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Uzbekistan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The situation in Uzbekistan presented a mixed picture in 2021, with further incremental progress on a range of issues but also some setbacks. On the positive side, Uzbekistan ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and inaugurated its first two-year mandate at the UN Human Rights Council with an ambitious declaration from the President. In several areas however, the reality lags behind the rhetoric. The promised new NGO Code and Criminal Code are still to be published and their first drafts are not fully in line with international standards. There were also several attacks on freedom of expression, notably in the context of the October presidential election, which saw a number of shortcomings, not least an absence of genuinely independent candidates running against the incumbent. The judicial system maintained the trend of increasing the number of acquittals, but the criminal courts remain under the strong influence of the Prosecutor's Office and law enforcement agencies. Preliminary reports from the 2021 cotton harvest signal further improvements in the fight against child labour and forced labour, and some breaches of the labour law have been sanctioned. Respect for the rights of LGBTI persons remains an area of concern: male homosexuality remains criminalised and the first draft of the new Criminal Code fails to address the issue. In March, amendments to existing legislation were introduced criminalising online commenters and bloggers who share ‘defamatory’ information, leading to significant online self-censorship. Several social

media, including TikTok, Skype and Twitter, have been restricted in the country since April. Several bloggers and journalists were harassed or jailed during 2021. During his inauguration speech in November, President Mirziyoyev promised to strengthen CSOs, but independent NGOs still find it extremely difficult to register. A new Law on Freedom of Religion was adopted in July; however, it fails to address most recommendations from OSCE and the Venice Commission. In conclusion, there is a discrepancy between the legal framework and official pronouncements on human rights and democracy and the reality on the ground.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Human rights issues were discussed in the EU-Uzbekistan subcommittee on Justice and Home Affairs and in the Human Rights Dialogue. Seven demarches were carried out concerning human rights issues, including in support to EU priorities in the UN Human Rights Council. On the International Human Rights Day, the EU delegation, together with the US embassy, organised a roundtable on the rehabilitation of former political prisoners. The event was attended by the main independent human rights defenders and civil society activists and several former prisoners, as well as the National Human Rights Centre, the Prosecutor-General's Office, the Ombudsman's Office and the Ministries of Justice and Home Affairs. As a matter of priority, the EU continued to engage together with like-minded countries in a regular dialogue with the Uzbek government and the ILO/World Bank on the issues of child labour and forced labour. The EU was the main donor to the Third Party Monitoring by ILO for the 2021 cotton harvest.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Despite travel restrictions, the EU remained engaged politically with Uzbekistan at all levels during 2021. In April, Uzbekistan became a beneficiary of the Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance (GSP+), in light of Uzbekistan's performance in ratifying and implementing 27 international conventions including in the field of human rights. GSP+ status allows for improved access by Uzbekistan to the EU market while also providing for a rigorous and regular monitoring process to follow Uzbekistan's performance in implementing its international commitments. The EU-Uzbekistan Human Rights Dialogue was held online in June. In addition, several contacts took place between HR/VP Borrell and Uzbek President Mirziyoyev and Foreign Minister Kamilov.

4. EU financial engagement: The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and Civil Society Organisations/Local Actors (CSO-LA) remain the main EU financial instruments to support human rights and democracy in the country. Most of the projects under EIDHR awarded by a call for proposals in 2020, started implementation in 2021. By the end of 2021, there were eight ongoing projects under EIDHR for a total EU contribution of more than EUR 2.5 million. Two new projects are aimed at i) promoting gender equality through increased access of women and girls to justice and ii) protection of rights and freedoms of marginalised/vulnerable groups in Uzbekistan. Under CSO-LA, there are six ongoing projects with a total EU contribution of EUR 1.9 million. Three projects aimed at mitigating the consequences of COVID-19 became fully operational in 2021, focusing on improving living conditions of youth, women, vulnerable and marginalised groups, enhancing the capacities of civil society and local authorities, promoting sustainable environmental practices, and protecting the rights of teachers, among others.

5. Multilateral context: The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms paid an official visit to Uzbekistan at the invitation of the Government. As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, Uzbekistan supported most

EU-sponsored thematic resolutions but abstained in all country-related votes, in line with its long-standing policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. The ILO continued to play an important role in the elimination of forced labour through the EU-co-funded Third Party Monitoring.

Africa

African Union

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The shrinking of democratic space and the deterioration of the human rights situation worsened by the COVID-19 crisis continued to be a reality in Africa, as demonstrated by the situation in individual African countries. The year was positively marked by successful electoral processes leading to a peaceful transition of power (such as in The Gambia, Niger and Zambia). However, the main areas of concern continued to be elections and democracy, restrictions to political participation (such as those on freedom of movement and political protest put in place due to the pandemic), and cases of impunity, including those connected to police violence. The African Union continued its engagement on election observation and deployed mission to Member States organising elections throughout the continent (e.g. in Ethiopia and The Gambia), and took steps to enhance its work on the implementation of the election observation recommendations through deployment of the first Return Visit (in Zambia). Of great concern is also the growing trend of coups in the continent, marked by three unconstitutional changes of government (Guinea, Mali and Sudan) which led to the suspension from the African Union of the involved Member States, as foreseen on the Lomé Declaration and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.

The African Union continued to work towards the strengthening of the human rights system on the continent, with the main human rights institutions meeting virtually during their Ordinary sessions. Despite the pandemic constraints, some of the organs were still able to conduct field missions and advocacy visits, focussed on specific country situations. The reorganisation of the African Union Commission led to the merger of the departments of Political Affairs (previously in charge of Governance and Human Rights issues) and of Peace and Security, under the leadership of Commissioner Bankole Adeoye, who declared human rights a priority of his first 100 days in office during 2021. The ongoing institutional merger should also lead to a closer intertwining of the African Governance Architecture and the African Peace and Security Architecture, bringing more attention to the relevance of human rights and democracy in the sustainable development in Africa.

The year 2021 marked the 40th anniversary of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights with several celebratory events organised by the AU Commission and the human rights organs, which reflected on the value of the Charter, and on the African human rights system as a whole. Calls for better complementarity and synergy between different organs were made in order to make their work more relevant and visible. An ongoing example of this complementarity is the preparation of a Joint General Comment on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the