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Interview with the EU High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) H.E. Josep Borrell Fontelles



In preparation for our participation at the next European Development Days Village (EDD21), the Press Office of the Global Campus of Human Rights had the privilege to interview the EU High Representative

/ Vice-President (HR/VP) H.E. **Josep Borrell Fontelles** about his views for the future of the European Union, the cooperation with our institution and the importance of human rights education around the world.

Please elaborate on the new EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, which sets out an ambitious roadmap for external action for the next five years, and how will be driving “education” progress in these two areas.

The Plan aims to respond to a tragic reality: human rights and democracy are under severe stress across the world. We are witnessing an increased pushback against the universality and indivisibility of human rights and a backsliding of democracy. Moreover, new challenges such as the digital transition and climate change pose new threats to human rights. This is not an abstract observation. In our own neighbourhood governments are increasingly questioning women’s rights, persecuting journalists, curtailing academic freedoms and freedom of assembly, harassing human rights defenders and generally closing the public space. The COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency sanitary measures have accelerated these trends.

Against this backdrop, the EU must be more than a moral force. We must go beyond declaratory politics and be more assertive and action-oriented. To this end, the Plan sets out a roadmap establishing priorities built on 5 pillars: protecting and empowering individuals; building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies; promoting a global system for human rights and democracy; addressing new technologies’ opportunities and challenges; and delivering by working together.

Ensuring **quality education is a key horizontal priority of the Action Plan**. Paraphrasing Judge Learned Hand: the respect for human rights should lie in the hearts of men and women; while it lies there, it does not really need an institution to help it; but when it dies there, no institution can do much to save it. A quality education that engages young people to cherish human rights, and understand their universality and indivisibility, is essential for their promotion and defence worldwide. On the other hand, **access to education** is also a fundamental right. Thus, the new Action Plan includes several objectives to reinforce such right such as promoting access to distance learning, supporting the protection of academic freedom, the autonomy of education institutions, etc.

It also seeks to **curb inequalities** by combating poverty and social exclusion, which are strong barriers to an inclusive and equitable quality education, for instance by barring many from effective access to digital technologies. In this context, civic education should particularly target women, children, youth, persons with disabilities, persons belonging to minorities, indigenous peoples, and other persons in vulnerable situations.

Through our network of 100 universities, the EU helped fund human rights education. More than 6000 graduates of these universities are now human rights ambassadors and defenders in international, governmental and civil society organisations. What motivates you as EU High Representative to continue supporting the Global Campus of Human Rights activities in the field of human rights education & democratisation around the world? What does the External Action Service hope to achieve through continued support to our rapidly growing academic network? Why advancing democracy and respect for human rights is so central to the external action service?

The European Union’s founders imagined a continent that instead of exporting war would promote peace, democracy and human development within its borders and around the world. These are the founding values of the EU: solidarity, openness, freedom, and respect for the rule of law. As such, they underpin our external action, as established by the Treaties.

Taking action on defending human rights is not only the right thing to do. It is not just moralism *à la européenne* nor a European whim. It is also in our interest: defending human rights around the world means

protecting freedom, prosperity and peace, also for us in Europe. It is part and parcel of defending a rules-based order which recognises the dignity of the weak and defends them from the strong. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has done this for several generations already: it has delivered great results, and we must defend it from current pressures.

Human rights education is a vital instrument to achieve these goals. It is key to foster knowledge, awareness, inclusion and values, to strengthen networks of human rights defenders, to promote international and regional dialogue and inform national human rights and democracy agendas. Education empowers individuals to not only claim and uphold their own rights, but also the rights of others. This is why it is a key priority of the new Action Plan. I am proud that the **EU has supported, for more than 20 years, the Global Campus of Human Rights and its regional Master's programmes across the world.** You contribute to further advancing **universal values** for all.

The EU Action Plan will be implemented at local, national, regional and multilateral level and the EU will work with all stakeholders, especially Civil Society, in realising the goals of the Action Plan and making it a living document. How the Global Campus of Human Rights could be helping you to reach concrete ways to implement it in all levels?

Engagement is the key word. It is crucial to implement the Action Plan at all levels – local, regional, national and multilateral. For this, we want to engage with the whole of civil society, from human rights defenders to legal professionals, journalists and faith-based actors. Surely, this includes the Global Campus as well. Your cross-regional structure places you in a unique position to translate universal human rights into national and local contexts, which is one of the aims of the Action Plan. From advocacy to training, there are many opportunities for the Global Campus to be involved. We also strongly encourage you to engage with civil society, and put your expertise at work in analysing new and future challenges to global human rights.

What are the main challenges you think the EU Commission will need to address in the next years related to Human Rights and Democracy?

First, despite our best efforts, long-standing 'traditional' violations of human rights continue to happen daily. I am referring to slavery, child soldiers, torture, human trafficking, sexual and gender-based violence, limits to online and offline freedom of expression, death sentences, etc. The world is full of examples, and the EU will step-up its action to address them, as we have already done by launching the new Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime.

Regarding human rights violations, there has been a dangerous shift lately. The perpetrators of these violations around the world are much more confident in carrying them out in plain sight. Geopolitical rivalries and competing visions of rules-based multilateralism further weaken the universality and indivisibility of human rights and the global human rights framework. The real fuel behind the narrative is the changing geopolitical landscape, caused by the rise of China and the bandwagoning of other countries. Some of these countries explicitly challenge the global human rights framework as we know it, and this creates a dangerous space for impunity across the world. In order to face this challenge, I am afraid declaratory politics and leadership by example will not suffice. We must clearly communicate what our red lines and expectations are, and what we are willing to do to keep them.

Beyond these traditional 'political' challenges, there are new threats to human rights that we must learn to deal with. These are climate change and digitalisation. Environmental degradation is a direct threat to fundamental right to health, food, water, education and even life itself. The reality is that it is the world's poorest and most vulnerable that will suffer the bulk of the climate crisis, which merits a very special attention. The EU, through its many policies and global engagements, is leading the charge on climate mitigation and adaptation. It is crucial that we increase the resilience of many countries that are already

directly affected by the climate crisis. Likewise, new digital technologies have the potential to be extremely intrusive and to spiral out of control. We must leverage their many benefits, but also minimise the risks they pose to our public spheres and the many rights linked to political participation and non-discrimination as well as cultural and economic rights. The EU, as shown by our new package on Artificial Intelligence, is already taking the lead on building a human-centred digital world.

What are the main topics and tools needed to educate the next generations of Human Rights Defenders?

Having a sound knowledge of international human rights law and their history, including all UN human rights conventions, is vastly important to defend them. Younger people must fully understand how previous generations from across the world contributed to build and construct the complex and vast human rights framework. This knowledge is essential to counter those that consider universal human rights as “cultural relativism”. It is also key to reinforce their knowledge on all the ropes of human rights multilateralism: how the UN human rights fora work in detail, as well as regional organisations like the Council of Europe, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the African Union. This will help them become effective Human Rights Defenders.

It is of course also important to explain how the EU human rights toolbox actually works. This toolbox includes measures to directly protect human rights defenders, but also trade agreements, political dialogues, different funds, and the new sanctions regime mentioned before. The EU is very active across the world in defending human rights, so many of the Global Campus students will probably end up cooperating with EU Delegations in the future one way or another.

The current younger generations will also play a prominent role in addressing the emerging threats I mentioned before: climate change and new digital technologies. Their prominence will only grow, and they must understand their crosscutting effects very well. In fact, they will probably educate us first about these issues!

In a similar vein, the new generations must be aware about the specific threats and vulnerabilities faced by certain groups such as journalists, women, LGBTI people, migrants. Recent improvements made on protecting some of these groups must not be taken for granted.

Finally, let me emphasise that Human Rights education must also address core skills required to be an effective human rights defender such as advocacy strategies, public campaigning, public communication (including social media knowledge, and the fight against disinformation), and digital security training. Similarly, it is essential for students to be aware of how to engage with a whole range of relevant actors, such as the private sector (including social media platforms), National Human Rights Institutions, as well as local, national, and global NGOs and public institutions.

But beyond formal education, it is important that your students maximise peer-to-peer exchange. Often our colleagues are our best teachers. This will also be true when they become practitioners. The solutions of tomorrow will come above all from exchanges of best practices between human rights defenders with different background and experiences.

There is a new EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. What lies ahead for this important milestone?

The establishment of the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime has been a landmark achievement. It signals the EU's strong determination to stand up for human rights wherever they are threatened. It simplifies and streamlines the process to adopt sanctions against violators of human rights wherever they are, without having to adopt cumbersome, specific frameworks for each country, etc. The process to adopt

the EUGHRSR was long and not always easy, but I am very happy we managed to push through the barriers. Indeed, the entry into force of the regime came almost exactly one year after EU Foreign Ministers gave their political endorsement at the very first FAC that I chaired in my capacity as HRVP

In March 2020, I used my right of initiative to propose to the Foreign Affairs Council the first package of human rights sanctions. These included four Russian senior officials sanctioned for their direct link to the arbitrary arrest, prosecution and sentencing of opposition politician Alexei Navalny, as well as their crackdown on peaceful protests. Few weeks later, I complemented this by proposing the addition of 11 individuals and 4 entities from six countries (China, DPRK, Libya, South Sudan, Eritrea and Russia). They had committed a variety of serious human rights violations and abuses, ranging from torture, extrajudicial executions and killings, to enforced disappearance of persons, arbitrary arrests, detentions and the systematic use of forced labour. These individuals are now prevented from travelling to the EU, have had their assets within the EU frozen, and no funds and economic resources can be available to them from within the EU. We will continue to be vigilant and act accordingly to impose costs on the perpetrators of human rights violations across the world.

I would like to underline that these sanctions are one aspect of our broader EU human rights toolbox. Imposing sanctions is a last resort, and we are committed to engaging with all governments around the world to improve human rights standards.

Looking to 2021 and beyond, the European Union commits to working alongside its partners to show leadership on human rights issues and to work to strengthen the protection of human rights in a post-COVID-19 world. Please elaborate on your vision of the future.

Allow me first to highlight that the post-COVID-19 world is still not here. We are still in the midst of the crisis, which is a particularly thorny test for the realisation of all human rights and the respect for democratic principles. The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities and increasing pressure on persons in vulnerable situations. Defending human rights should be our compass to exit the crisis and build back fairer, more resilient and more inclusive societies.

Indeed, human rights, democracy and the rule of law will remain at the heart of the EU's response to and recovery from the pandemic. We are convinced this is essential to ensure a more sustainable long-term recovery. The EU will focus on inclusive policies that mitigate the worst consequences of the pandemic, including by supporting women, girls, youth, and persons with disabilities. To achieve this, we will surely engage with our partners to ensure we coordinate our efforts so that no country is left behind. Special attention should be paid to the worst affected regions, such as Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

We also consider the COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call to the even greater threat of climate change and environmental degradation. This is a generational crisis like no other. In our work, we will continue to be guided by the 2030 Agenda as well as the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal.

Could you give a personal message to students, professors, partners and staff of the Global Campus of Human Rights, a network of 100 Universities around the world supported by the EU, that are our followers and reading this interview? How could they be inspired and encouraged by your work as EU High Representative leading your team of professionals which recently celebrated a decade of EU Diplomacy?

Supporting the Global Campus of Human Rights has been a very important decision. Your global network and different programmes focusing on human rights have never been more relevant than today.

One of the great assets of EU diplomacy and the EEAS is the diversity of its people, coming together from

different backgrounds and working towards a common goal. As a Global Campus, you are all also part of a collective journey, sharing experiences and learning from each other. Try to make the very best of this unique experience!

When you graduate, gain as many different experiences as possible. Learn by being exposed to different realities, on the ground and in different institutions. These lessons will remain with you for your whole life. Over time, you will find the place where you can best contribute to defending human rights across the world. We will always be happy to count you among the EU's ranks and friends. Thank you!

The full programme of the online European Development Days 2021 (15-16 June) is now available at: <https://eudevdays.eu/programme>

For more information contact our [Press Office](#)

Elisa Aquino – Alice D'Este – Giulia Ballarin

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Stay tuned for the third issue of the Magazine coming soon in May in English and Italian!

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