

GLOBAL REALIGNMENT

Recommendations on how to
avoid an adverse impact on human rights

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Powered by Geneva-based Progress & Change Action Lab and Berlin-based Palimpsest GmbH, Human Rights Compass brings together human rights actors to analyse policy changes in real time, coordinate responses, and build the long-term resilience of the wider European and international human rights community.

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GLOBAL POLICY REALIGNMENT IN 2025

The beginning of Donald Trump's second presidency in the United States is creating, and coinciding with, attacks on the global human rights landscape. Since 20 January 2025, the world has witnessed the erosion of the rule of law in the US and the unravelling of a system that has shaped the international order for the past 80 years — the multilateral rules-based order based on the Franklin Roosevelt blueprint of collective security, economic multilateralism and political self-determination.

In barely two months, the new administration has terminated critical humanitarian aid; withdrawn from international organisations, fora and agreements, notably the climate, health and human rights platforms; curtailed long-standing support for human rights and democratisation efforts abroad; and challenged economic, political and security alliances. It rejected the principles of diversity, equality and inclusion, empowered anti-LGBTQ and racist rhetoric, and accelerated the backlash against gender equality and women's rights.

The void left by the Trump administration's approach to democracy, multilateralism, and human rights is immense and requires an urgent response from political leaders and civil society.

The consequences of this political change for Europe are manifold. In addition to the economic and political implications, security issues are of immediate concern. Since the start of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, there has been a paradigm shift: recognising that

Russia poses a major threat to peace and stability, Europe has begun to recalibrate its economic, energy and security strategies.

The new US administration's approach to the war in Ukraine, to its relations to Russia and its transatlantic allies has led European states to prioritise boosting their security and defence, both to continue supporting Ukraine, and to secure their own borders. Strengthening military capabilities and no longer being able to rely on European protection is becoming one of the dominant features of European policy.

Defending human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law globally has become increasingly challenging under the Trump administration's policies. The challenge is compounded by the fact that unlike at the time of US earlier disengagements from human rights mechanisms and institutions, authoritarian governments have since developed sophisticated influence over those institutions. Furthermore, the weakening of fundamental freedoms, civic space, judicial independence and respect for international law in a growing number of European states limits the number of actors who can act with credibility to defend this agenda in the multilateral arena.

New leadership and new frameworks are needed to protect human rights and rule of law in this context. New approaches and new coalitions - on the state and civil society level — should fill the void and human rights must be at the heart of any new order that emerges.



HOW TO AVOID AN ADVERSE IMPACT

» Establish a Cross-Regional Leadership Coalition for Human Rights on the 80th Anniversary of the United Nations Charter

Encourage collective leadership by a broader group of states. Establish “Mission Human Rights” - a formal group of states advancing human rights, a sister initiative to the Coalition of the Willing — with a mandate to defend and promote human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law at home and abroad.

This initiative could be formally launched at the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly, reaffirming shared ownership of these values and countering both their “monopolisation” by any single actor and their distortion by authoritarian states.

» Revitalise Engagement with and Support for Human Rights Institutions and Norms

Defend the value of multilateral human rights mechanisms (the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, the UN Human Rights Council, etc), without ignoring their shortcomings, by engaging within them to promote the universal application of human rights norms, the defence of democratic institutions, and the rule of law at home and abroad. Ensure holistic engagement with human rights mechanisms and procedures; ensure that equality is at the core of this approach.

To promote this agenda, establish a multi-stakeholder exchange platform alongside the Cross-Regional Leadership Coalition for Human Rights (see above). Ensure that government funding to UN and regional human rights and judicial institutions enables them to respond to growing needs on the ground.

» Integrate Human Rights into the Emerging European Security and Defence Frameworks

Ensure that the enhanced development of European common defence capabilities and policy builds on lessons learned (e.g. avoiding the mistakes of securitisation after 9/11, which eroded human rights in the name of security). Ensure that an effective security policy addresses all (hybrid) forms of threat without undermining universal human rights. Ensure that increased defence spending in Europe includes explicit provisions for the protection of human rights, the safeguarding of civil society and the incorporation of democratic oversight mechanisms.

Alongside strengthening its defence capabilities, Europe should invest in human security – ensuring that defence spending does not come at the expense of social security and the protection of economic and social rights - and reinforce its commitment to the Women, Peace and Security agenda. It should enable civil society actors to participate in policy discussions on security and defence, contributing expertise on rights-based governance, transitional justice, and non-violent conflict prevention (for instance, towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the EU Common Security and Defence Policy, and any future formalised European defence framework).



» Develop a Coordinated Narrative Strategy to Rebuild Public Trust

Invest in and support actors who promote public communications that link human rights, democracy, and the rule of law with everyday concerns, such as economic justice, security, and dignity.

The EU must step-up enforcement of the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act. Essential to any coordinated narrative strategy will be a focussed effort to counter anti-rights disinformation and the political and economic forces that fuel them. Combatting discrimination should be at the heart of the EU's initiatives to rebuild trust.

» Protect and Expand Civic Space in Authoritarian and Democratic States Alike

Advocate for a bold, values-driven response to the attacks on civic space — both within the EU and beyond its borders — by opposing restrictive legislation such as foreign agent laws and protecting the right to protest and to free expression and association at home and abroad. Protect media freedom as a key pillar of democracy. Elevate feminist leadership as part of the “anti-trend” to authoritarianism. Support women leaders and human rights defenders, especially in the areas of security and foreign policy.

In the spirit of the 2023 European Council conclusions, ensure that “providing adequate and accessible funding” translates into the new EU multiannual financial framework 2028-2034. Ensure that the newly elaborated EU Civil Society Strategy covers all four areas for enabling civic space: legislation, participation, resources and safe space — and applies to both the European Union and third countries. The European Union and European states must become trusted defenders and champions of civic space.

» Reframe Funding Models and Foster Intersectional Civil Society Resilience

Redesign international funding mechanisms to reduce over-dependence, diversify sources, and ensure resources reach grassroots actors and those in greatest need, including displaced and exiled defenders.

Foster coalitions that connect human rights to other justice struggles—climate, social, and economic—across sectors and regions, enable shared ownership of rights narratives and build long-term resilience.

This Human Rights Compass Policy Brief is the result of a convening of over 30 leading international human rights organisations and experts, which was held on 25 March 2025.

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- » Convening key human rights stakeholders for coordinated policy advice and action.
- » Publishing policy briefs to inform and guide advocacy.
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