
Human rights: Comece, updating the EU's guidelines and adding protection for environmental activists and religious actors who "risk their lives"

Updating the guidelines and including protection for new categories of human rights defenders, such as environmental activists and religious actors. This has been asked for by Comece (Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union) in a Document submitted today, in which they provide a few recommendations to the European Parliament in the run-up to the next debate and vote on the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders. Such recommendations – as stated in a notice by Comece – have been worked out jointly and in close consultation with human rights defenders in Latin America. Comece's Document takes its cue from what Pope Francis wrote in April 2021: "Defending fundamental human rights demands courage and determination". With a call to pray for "those who risk their lives while fighting for fundamental rights under dictatorships, authoritarian regimes and even in democracies in crisis". As to this, Comece points out that, according to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), from 2015 to 2019, 1,323 environmental and human rights defenders have been killed in at least 64 countries. Latin America is the region hit the hardest because it is the area of the world in which environmental human rights defenders are targeted the most. The situation is particularly worrying for "those protesting land grabs or those defending the rights of people, including indigenous people, by objecting to Governments that are imposing business projects on communities without free, prior and informed consent". In the light of what has been found by these reports, "it is crucial to strengthen the protection and promotion of human rights and environmental defenders", Comece writes. "The European Union, with its wide range of policy instruments encompassing diplomacy, trade, development cooperation, as well as tools aiming at strengthening human rights and democracy, has a particular responsibility and role to play in this respect". According to the European Bishops' Conferences, while the EU's guidelines provide "a good basis", the guidelines on the defence of human rights all over the world, "in the light of the present challenges", "should be updated", so as to also fill a few gaps that there are in the implementation thereof, and so as to "become a more useful and effective instrument". In such Recommendations, Comece points out that many local activists involved in informal movements are "helpless" and unrepresented in the EU's guidelines. This also applies to environmental activists and religious actors in the defence of human rights.

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