

Open letter: The European Union's treaty obligations on international law must be reflected in its foreign policy

Brussels, 9 April 2026

The Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN), representing a broad coalition of civil society organisations across Europe, expresses its deep concern regarding President von der Leyen's [speech](#) at the EU Ambassadors Conference on 9 March 2026, including statements relating to the international rules-based order and the European Union's foreign policy and actions.

Although we acknowledge President von der Leyen's subsequent reaffirmation of the EU's "unwavering commitment" to international law and the principles of the United Nations (UN) Charter, her remarks stating that the EU can "no longer rely" on the rules-based system alone have generated significant concern among [different actors](#). President von der Leyen called for "a more realistic and interest-driven foreign policy" and acknowledged that the EU cannot "perfectly reconcile our values and our interests on each occasion."

We read these declarations as yet another expression of a marked shift towards an interest-driven foreign policy, which might imply that the respect for and promotion of international law and human rights may no longer be counted among such EU interests. This shift undermines the EU's long-standing and self-professed identity and contradicts its [treaty obligations](#) to protect and promote international law and multilateralism, including placing human rights at the very heart of its foreign policy. At a time when multilateralism is under threat, including from major state powers, the EU's respect for and defence of human rights and the international rules-based order must be strong and unambiguous.

But, in addition to that worrisome rhetoric, HRDN is concerned that certain aspects of the EU's external action have become increasingly misaligned with international law, EU fundamental values and binding obligations under the EU Treaties.

Civil society organisations have repeatedly highlighted:

- Inconsistent application of international humanitarian and human rights law, particularly in situations involving key strategic partners.
- Selective accountability and double standards, where violations by some actors are strongly condemned while comparable conduct by others receives ambiguous or no response.
- The subordination of foreign policy to migration-containment objectives in ways that risk violating the rights of refugees and migrants.

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Save the Children
Search for Common Ground
Terre des Hommes international
federation
World Coalition against Death
Penalty
World Organisation Against
Torture
World Vision

Moreover, such inconsistencies risk placing the European Union in contradiction with its own legal framework, in particular:

- Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) enshrines the Union's foundational values, including respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights.
- Article 3(5) of the TEU establishes that the Union shall contribute to peace, security, and the strict observance of international law in its relations with the wider world.
- Article 21 of the TEU requires that the Union's external action be guided by democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the strict observance and development of international law, including respect for the UN Charter.

At a moment when international law is under strain, further questioning its centrality sends a dangerous signal. The strength of international law depends on its consistent and universal application, not selective invocation.

The European Union's global influence has always been based on its ability to position itself as a normative leader, whose rhetoric, actions and policies aim at offering an alternative based on democratic values. Its credibility depends on the consistent application of the principles it is bound to promote. Therefore, the ambiguous narratives and erosion of coherence between the EU's stated values and its external action risk weakening its identity, legitimacy, influence and more fundamentally, contribute to weakening the protection that international law provides to populations affected by human rights violations.

At a time of deep geopolitical uncertainty, the European Union faces a critical choice: to implement its foreign policy in a way that reaffirms and reflects its foundational principles, or to contribute to a global race to the bottom and continue eroding the values that have underpinned the EU's very creation.

In light of the above, HRDN calls on the European Commission and the European Union more widely to:

1. Reaffirm the centrality of human rights, international law and the UN Charter in all EU external action in a coherent, consistent and transversal manner.
2. Ensure coherence between statements and actions, avoiding real or perceived selectivity in the EU's action on human rights and in its application of legal principles.
3. Strengthen internal accountability mechanisms to guarantee that all external policies comply with binding obligations under the EU Treaties, in particular Articles 2, 3(5), and 21 of the TEU.
4. Demonstrate its real commitment to human rights by preserving the Human Rights and Democracy and the Civil Society Organisations thematic programmes in the next MFF, with ring-fenced financial allocations at least matching NDICI levels in constant prices.
5. Ensure genuine, meaningful and regular engagement, including at the highest levels, with civil society, human rights organizations and human rights defenders.

We remain ready to engage on the issues raised in this letter.

The Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN) is an informal grouping of NGOs operating at EU level in the broader areas of human rights, democracy and conflict prevention. Participation in the network is open to non-governmental organizations which engage at EU level in the promotion of human rights, democracy and conflict prevention in and outside the EU.