GERMANY LED WAY ON EU HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION

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EU institutions and the German federal government led the way on protection of human rights this year, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), a US NGO.

Their activism came amid "disturbing" and "dark" trends both in Europe and on the world stage, HRW director Kenneth Roth said.

But while "autocrats and rights abusers may capture the headlines, the defenders of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are also gaining strength," he said.

The European Parliament and European Commission won praise in HRW's annual report, published on Thursday (17 January) for launching punitive action against EU member states Hungary and Poland over abuse of rule of law and for putting Romania on notice of the same.

The EU court also won praise for its rulings on Poland and on LGBTI rights.

"Despite shortcomings, the European Union remained a leading actor in promoting human rights globally," the HRW report added.

EU diplomats "persistently called" for the release of peaceful activists in China and and Russia, and "together with Germany, played an important role in securing the freedom of Liu Xia," the widow of late Chinese dissident and Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo.

They also tried to save the Iran nuclear non-proliferation deal after US leader Donald Trump walked out of it.

EU states, acting in concert, also adopted sanctions on abusers in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Venezuela, as well as boosting funds for Palestinians after Trump slashed US aid.

Germany vs Saudi Arabia

Meanwhile, Germany stood out by adopting a unilateral arms ban on Saudi Arabia over its murder of a journalist.

It banned 18 Saudi officials from entering the 26-nation Schengen travel zone.

The German federal government also "continued to play a leadership role in refugee resettlement", taking in 4,600 people in 2018 and accepting 5,600 for 2019 as a contribution toward an EU programme, despite a xenophobic backlash by far-right parties.

Overall treatment of the hot-button issue of migration "undermined the EU's moral standing" on the world stage, however.

"The EU continued to largely mute its position on human rights violations in Turkey, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan because of its cooperation with those countries on preventing migration to Europe," HRW noted.

The EU also "consolidated its partnership on migration control with Libya despite overwhelming evidence of brutality against migrants and asylum seekers there".

Even more liberal governments in Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, the Netherlands, and Spain let down people seeking shelter or a better life in the Europe.

Migrants lived in squalid conditions on Greek islands, where just 15 percent of children were receiving any education.

They also live in "dire conditions" in camps near Paris and near the French city of Calais, HRW noted.

Spain, which saw an increase in numbers, also continued "summary returns", or expulsions without recognising asylum seekers' rights, from its enclaves in Morocco.

That was nothing compared to the hate speech and crackdowns on migrants by leaders in Hungary and Italy, which, along with Malta, closed its ports to people rescued at sea.

With merchant vessels less keen on rescues as a result, the crackdowns coincided with a spike in the death toll in the Mediterranean, from one death per 42 crossings in the first eight months of 2017 to one in 18 in the same period this year.

"Populist extremist parties and ideas again exercised an outsize influence over European politics during the year," HRW noted, amid gains for xenophobes in Austria, Sweden, Slovenia, and in German regional elections.

"There were instances of racist intolerance or violent hate crimes in many EU states including Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, Spain, and the United Kingdom," HRW said.

Hungary and Poland

Migration aside, Hungary and Poland emerged as the main villains in Europe in HRW's survey.

"Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orban implemented his brand of 'illiberal democracy'," HRW's Roth said, amid Orban's antisemitic rhetoric and his expulsion of a leading international university.

"Poland's de facto ruler, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, sought to stack his country's courts with his preferred judges, undermining the judiciary's independence," Roth added.

"Even the world's established democracies have shown themselves vulnerable to ... demagoguery and manipulation," he said.

Roth framed Orban and Kaczynski between Philippino ruler Rodrigo Duterte, who egged on summary executions at home, and India's Narendra Modi, who demonised Muslims, in his essay introducing HRW's 2018 survey.

Roth also took French president Emmanuel Macron, who continued arms sales to Saudi Arabia, to task.

"Macron defended democratic values rhetorically, but too often found reasons to avoid applying those principles when they implicated efforts to curb migration, fight terrorism, or secure commercial opportunities," Roth said.

The "disturbing" and "dark" trends were most on show in China, Russia, and Turkey.

Roth praised Polish judges for refusing to bow to Kaczynski's dictate and praised street protesters for taking Orban to task in Hungary, amid similar scenes in the Czech Republic and Romania over corruption, however.

"New alliances of rights-respecting governments, often prompted and joined by civic groups and the public, have mounted an increasingly effective resistance," he said.

Populists who are spreading hatred and intolerance are spawning a resistance that keeps winning its share of battles," he added.

"The excesses of autocratic rule are fuelling a powerful counterattack," Roth said.

Kaynak/Source: