

07/12/12

EU High Representative fails to publicly denounce rights violations in Central Asia

Civic Solidarity Platform members regret that during her recent visit to Central Asia the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs did not publicly engage on human rights issues in a more substantive manner. This is particularly disappointing as the EU is about to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for its ‘advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights’.

Between 27 and 30 November 2012, Baroness Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, undertook her first official visit to four of the five Central Asian republics: Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. In each of these countries, she held talks with the presidents of the states. In Kyrgyzstan she additionally attended an EU-Central Asia Ministerial meeting, where the Turkmen government also was represented.

Civic Solidarity members believe the visit should have been used as an opportunity to convey more forcefully an EU message of support for human rights and civil society, explicitly linking progress in these areas to strengthened EU engagement with the Central Asian countries.

Official visits on this level are a rare occurrence in Central Asia. Each of the Central Asian republics faces enormous challenges in the sphere of human rights and democracy. While there are considerable differences between the four countries Ashton visited, one aspect shared by all is that their human rights movements are under pressure and greatly anticipated Ashton’s arrival, particularly given the strengthening of EU’s human rights policy in June 2012.

The EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy that was adopted in the summer reinforced treaty obligations for EU institutions to “place human rights at the centre of its relations with all third countries”¹. It also set out an obligation for EU officials to “raise human rights issues vigorously in all appropriate forms of bilateral political dialogue, including at the highest level.”

While Ashton’s discussions with heads of state were closed to the public, the public statements she made afterwards bore witness of a one-sided focus on energy, security and trade during the talks, with little attention given to human rights issues. None of these statements included any degree of detail on the human rights issues covered, and the remarks she made after meeting with the president of Kazakhstan made no mention at all

¹ EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, Council of the European Union, 11855/12: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131181.pdf

that human rights were among the issues discussed, while noting that the talks had “focused on economic and trade issues”. This apparent failure to bring human rights to the forefront of the agenda was met with disappointment by the region’s human rights defenders, in particular in Kazakhstan, where restrictions on freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms have escalated rapidly in the recent period and civil society has come under growing pressure.

Moreover, while human rights issues can be expected to be integrated into behind-the-door discussions the EU conducts with third party governments, it is also crucial that high-ranking EU officials take a strong public stand on pressing human rights problems in countries they visit. This is instrumental as a means of showing that the EU is serious about human rights and of communicating support to civil society actors in these countries in their struggle against injustice and repression. In our view, the commitments set out in the EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights should have prompted High Representative Ashton to give more priority to human rights and to publicly and prominently denounce serious human rights violations during her visit to the Central Asian republics.

The responsibility of the EU to act visibly as a pro-human rights actor in relation to third countries is further highlighted by the EU’s peace and rights legacy for which it received international recognition on 12 October 2012, when it was announced that the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize will be awarded to the European Union. In its announcement, the Norwegian Nobel Committee pointed to the role the European Union has played in the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights.

In the twenty-three years that have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the European Union and its member states have done considerable work to promote respect for human rights and democratic values in Eastern Europe. Now is the time to take these values to those parts of the former Soviet Union that may be geographically distant from Brussels, but which share a common history and culture with Europe and are members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Europe’s values demand that high-ranking European officials dare to ask the difficult questions, on behalf of those few who try every day to raise them on their own at considerable risk to their personal safety and security. The human rights situation in Central Asia is particularly dire, and the following list identifies but a few of the issues that human rights defenders in the region expected to be raised:

- The lack of an independent investigation into the 2005 Andijan events in Uzbekistan;
- The systematic use of torture in Uzbekistani jails;
- Long prison sentences without evidence handed down in unfair trials for ethnic Uzbeks in the south of Kyrgyzstan following the 2010 violent clashes;
- The wrongful imprisonment of human rights defender Azimzhan Askarov on the basis of politically motivated charges linked to violent clashes in the south of Kyrgyzstan in 2010;

- The 7 ½ year prison sentence of Kazakhstani opposition leader Vladimir Kozlov linked to his public support for the Zhanaozen oil worker protests that preceded the December 2011 unrest in this region;
- The lack of a legal base for the initiative made to close independent media in Kazakhstan, the week after it became a member of the UN Human Rights Council;
- The blocking of Facebook and other websites by Tajikistani authorities this month;
- The disproportionate use of force, including the killing of civilians, as part of a police investigation in Gorno-Badakshan in Tajikistan in July 2012;
- Unrelenting persecution of civil society in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; and
- The continued use of bans on travel abroad to punish individuals considered disloyal to the regime in Turkmenistan.

While some of these issues have been the subject of public EU statements in other contexts, we consider that they would have deserved to have been prominently and visibly brought up during the High Representative's visit to Central Asia.

Only through a consistent, no-negotiations approach to human rights will Central Asia reach its true potential, and only when human rights are respected can Central Asia become a reliable counterpart to the EU – in security, in energy, and in partnership.

Analytical Centre for Interethnic Cooperation and Consultation (Georgia)

Article 19 (United Kingdom)

Association of Ukrainian Human Rights Monitors on Law Enforcement (Ukraine)

Belarusian Human Rights House in exile, Vilnius

Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (Bulgaria)

Centre for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)

Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Russia)

Centre for National and International Studies (Azerbaijan)

Charter for Human Rights (Kazakhstan)

Crude Accountability (United States)

Foudation for Parliamentarism Development (Kazakhstan)

Foundation for Regional Initiatives (Ukraine)

Freedom Files (Russia)

Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (Georgia)

Golos Svobody (Kyrgyzstan)

Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (Kazakhstan)

Kharkiv Regional Foundation "Public Alternative" (Ukraine)

Helsinki Citizen's Assembly – Vanadzor (Armenia)

Helsinki Committee of Armenia (Armenia)

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)

Human Rights Club (Azerbaijan)

Human Rights Monitoring Institute (Lithuania)

International Foundation for Protection of Freedom of Speech Adil Soz (Kazakhstan)

International Partnership for Human Rights (Belgium)

Legal Policy Research Centre (Kazakhstan)
Legal Transformation Centre (Belarus)
Moscow Helsinki Group (Russia)
Norwegian Helsinki Committee (Norway)
Nota Bene (Tajikistan)
People in Need (Czech Republic)
Promo LEX Association (Moldova)
Public Verdict (Russia)
United Against Racism (Netherlands)
Tatiana Chernobil, independent Expert (Kazakhstan)
Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan
International Youth Human Rights Movement (Russia)