



Opinion piece from Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Human rights and democracy key to leaving no one behind in global fight against COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to accelerate the global trends of democratic backsliding and weakening respect for human rights. It is intensifying existing inequalities, hitting those who are already marginalised, subjected to discrimination and living in poverty the hardest.

The Nordic governments advocate international cooperation, solidarity, human rights and democracy in fighting the pandemic. Disproportional response measures may have serious and far-reaching repercussions for human rights and democratic principles. We are concerned that some governments are taking advantage of the pandemic by using it as a pretext for violating human rights, shrinking the democratic space and redrawing the global playing field.

Thankfully, we have seen the international community act. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has led the way by calling for a global ceasefire so the world can focus on fighting the pandemic, and by placing human rights at the forefront. The UN human rights system, the UN humanitarian and development system and the World Health Organization have played leading roles in addressing the important challenges of COVID-19.

In support of such efforts, our five governments are striving to make sure that human rights, democracy, the rule of law and gender equality are at the centre of the immediate and long-term global response. We must build back better and greener, and we are ready to show leadership in strengthening international cooperation in the years to come.

To that end, we need to do four things:

We must mobilise internationally. The COVID-19 pandemic is a human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis. Through the Sustainable Development Goals, the international community has committed to leaving no one behind. We must uphold this commitment and ensure that all measures respect human rights.

We must ensure transparency and access to reliable information. The voices of independent media and civil society, including human rights defenders, must be protected and promoted. Their monitoring and reporting will contribute to holding governments accountable. It is also imperative that we counter disinformation and propaganda, and work closely with the media, tech companies, the private sector and civil society, as well as other stakeholders.

We must ensure a gender transformative perspective in the global response. The pandemic is linked to increased levels of sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices. Also, the full enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – such as access to modern contraceptives, safe and legal abortion and comprehensive sexuality education – has worsened considerably.

The burden that COVID-19 places on health care systems must not be used as an excuse to restrict sexual and reproductive health and rights services for all women and girls. We stand together to remove structural discrimination and will continue to promote women's economic and political empowerment and their full and equal enjoyment of all human rights, including sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Finally, we must remain vigilant to ensure that international standards and principles do not slip. Any action to fight COVID-19 must not undermine international law, democracy or democratic institutions.

Now is the time to mobilise to protect and strengthen the multilateral system and the rules-based international order. The multilateral institutions need political and financial support. And the public's trust in democracy and democratic institutions needs to be reinforced.

Today, we will have a discussion with leading representatives of the United Nations, the European Union, the Council of Europe, UNESCO, the OSCE and civil society. Together, we are backing our words with action, taking the lead in making sure human rights, democracy, the rule of law and gender equality are at the heart of the world's response and recovery.

We are prepared to share the Nordic experience of building trust through combining leadership with transparency, and cooperation between national and local government institutions as well as with civil society. We are also prepared to use our voice and experience whenever human rights, democracy, the rule of law and gender equality come under pressure.

Responding to the pandemic must not come at the cost of weaker democracies or more human rights violations. On the contrary, an approach based on democracy, gender equality and human rights is key to fighting COVID-19 and realising the 2030 Agenda.

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Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Jeppe Kofod

Minister for Development Cooperation, Mr Rasmus Prehn

Finland:

Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Pekka Haavisto

Minister for Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade, Mr. Ville Skinnari

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Government Offices of Sweden

Opinion piece from Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Ministers: Global cooperation should be strengthened

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Opinion piece by Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde, Minister for International Development Cooperation Peter Eriksson and Minister for Foreign Trade and Nordic Affairs Anna Hallberg. Published in Svenska Dagbladet on 20 April 2020.

The coronavirus crisis is not a time for less cooperation, closed doors or protectionism. Now is the time for more international cooperation, write government ministers Ann Linde, Peter Eriksson and Anna Hallberg.

International cooperation is needed to manage the crisis. The spread and impacts of the coronavirus are posing difficult challenges for all of us. The world is in crisis management mode. Country after country is launching stimulus packages. Borders have been closed and flights have been cancelled. International systems are being challenged. We know that international cooperation is required to beat the pandemic and manage its impacts. International efforts must also be maintained to protect democratic and free societies, and to safeguard trade and jobs in Sweden.

The rapid spread of the coronavirus shows how closely interconnected countries are. It is not strange that the world's countries have initially focused on responding to the emergency at home. It is the primary responsibility of every government to ensure the security and well-being of its citizens. But viruses don't care about national borders. What happens in other countries affects us.

There are forces that want to benefit from the situation. We see a risk of anti-democratic forces filling the vacuum as normal, structured international

exchange slows down or is put on hold. Some see an opportunity to weaken international cooperation and redraw the global playing field.

The world is not taking a break. We will push to promote our values and interests – both during and after the coronavirus crisis. Sweden will continue to push for security, democracy and human rights. We will continue to give one per cent of our GNI to development assistance, and we will be at the forefront of free, fair and sustainable trade. The pandemic brings many issues to a head, exacerbates conflicts and creates additional challenges.

Democracy and women's human rights must be protected. To respond to the crisis, many countries have introduced draconian measures. In certain cases, the fight against the pandemic is being used as a pretext to silence political opposition, journalists, civil society and human rights defenders. This is why our Drive for Democracy is even more important than before. We have taken the initiative to bring together high-level representatives of the UN, the EU, the Council of Europe and the OSCE to contribute to the protection of democratic principles and human rights in this new environment. Our embassies are tasked with monitoring how the pandemic is affecting democracy.

International cooperation is required to combat disinformation. We are working together in the EU to strengthen efforts to counter disinformation, and we have stepped up our efforts to deal with coronavirus-related issues. The Swedish Institute and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency are working to counter inaccurate information about our response to the pandemic.

The global security situation is impacted by the pandemic. A worldwide ceasefire is needed to enable a focused response to the pandemic. Sweden therefore backs UN Secretary-General António Guterres' appeal for a global ceasefire. We are actively working with the parties to the Yemen conflict, among others, to urge them to heed the UN's call, as now seems to be happening. Security threats during the pandemic must be taken seriously and we are working closely with others to counter increased threats.

The pandemic will hit poor countries and the most vulnerable. Sweden has already contributed SEK 40 million to the WHO Contingency Fund for Emergencies and SEK 100 million to the UN's major humanitarian response plan to support the world's most vulnerable countries. This is crucial for a rapid and coordinated international response to the impacts of the pandemic. In the EU, we have also worked to increase support to our Eastern

Partnership neighbours, and for EU coordination of the response to Africa's management of the pandemic. Sweden provides support to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, to ensure that the whole world will benefit from new vaccines. We are now looking at how Swedish development cooperation can increase efforts in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

According to an Oxfam report, half a billion people could be pushed into poverty as a result of the pandemic. We must ensure that financial support packages benefit everyone and that we build a more sustainable and equitable economy over the long term. The Government's Global Deal work, international development cooperation and better conditions for trade union activities around the world will be even more important.

Cooperation is needed to help those who are stranded abroad. Many Swedes have managed to return to Sweden on their own, which shows that requiring travellers to take personal responsibility works. However, in some situations this has not been possible, and so far more than 4 900 people have been able to return to Sweden thanks to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs' cooperation with other countries, airlines and tour operators. Close cooperation between the Nordic foreign ministers means we are helping each other bring back home our Nordic citizens around the world. We are also working cooperatively in the EU to help each other's citizens return home.

The EU must be a strong global actor. Amid global concern, the EU needs to take a leading role in pushing for global action. Sweden supports the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borell. By acting together and collectively, the EU can make a big difference.

Trade needs to work even in emergency situations. We cannot possibly produce all healthcare products and medicines here in Sweden. To protect health and jobs, Sweden is working hard to ensure that both the EU single market and world trade work effectively even during the coronavirus pandemic. To increase the supply of essential goods, Sweden has pushed through the proposal to suspend EU tariffs on medical equipment.

Nordic cooperation should be enhanced. As each country is now making decisions to protect its population, we are tackling the challenges through close dialogue – and we are helping to minimise the adverse impacts for each other and our citizens living in border regions. Nordic cooperation plays a major role in the emergency we are in, and it will be crucial to our long-term efforts to manage the impacts of the pandemic.

The coronavirus is presenting us with major new challenges. We are experiencing something unprecedented in modern times. Our strong conviction is that Sweden's international engagement is important both for solving the coronavirus crisis and for contributing to security, sustainability and welfare. This is not a time for less cooperation, closed doors or protectionism. Now is the time for more international cooperation.

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Opinion piece from Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Internet freedom in decline – a threat to our democracy

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The internet must not be a place where hate campaigns and disinformation take over the flow of information. We must have clear requirements for large corporations that dominate social media globally. It is in everyone's interest that we do not leave the responsibility for our public debate and meeting places to companies, write Carin Jämtin, Margot Wallström and Peter Eriksson.

Freedom on the internet has declined for the eighth year in a row. The ability of states to shut down the internet is increasing. Journalists, independent media and human rights defenders are being subjected to physical and digital attacks. Opportunities to openly debate without risking hatred and threats, repression and persecution are being limited. The spread of disinformation is increasing and having a major impact.

On May 16-17 the Stockholm Internet Forum took place, bringing together 500 people from around 100 countries on the invitation of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) to discuss the internet's role and future challenges. The focus was the shrinking democratic space online and internet access. The need for an international dialogue about the internet has never been more urgent.

Serious trend

The fact is that we are in the midst of a negative trend with serious consequences: authoritarian states are using advanced tools to recruit new supporters, polarise opinion, undermine democratic debate, and attack and

silence opponents. Increasingly, automated information flows, increased data collection, disinformation campaigns as well as opportunities and challenges regarding artificial intelligence have gone from being peripheral issues to central issues for society.

This is happening in large parts of the world. The impact of the internet on democracy and society is being discussed across the world, from Bogota and Kigali to Hanoi. In all these places, the internet is of crucial importance to economic development and poverty reduction, and as more and more people become connected, the conditions for positive sustainable development improve. This is an aspect we cannot afford to overlook.

Place demands on social media giants

The disinformation campaigns we see – in some cases led by governments – risk threatening our democracy. The internet cannot be a place where hate campaigns and disinformation take over the flow of information. We must have clear requirements for large corporations that dominate social media globally. It is in our common interest that we do not leave the responsibility for our public debate and meeting places to companies. This is essentially a question of democracy, of the public debate.

The negative trend, with a shrinking democratic space online, is deeply worrying and serious. This must not continue and this is exactly why we need joint action on the future of digital development. Turning this trend requires political awareness and joint, international commitments on issues such as what the internet will be like and how it will be used in the future. Human rights must not be undermined; they must be strengthened through access to the internet. The solutions can only be found in discussions between all stakeholders – states, civil society and companies, as well as everyone who is dependent on the internet in their everyday lives and their work.

The internet can remain a positive force

The starting point for these discussions must be the incredibly important role the internet has played and continues to play in opening up closed societies, creating employment and hope for the future, enabling communication between people throughout the world and promoting knowledge flows and cooperation at a genuinely global level. Despite the problems we are seeing now, technological developments have essentially offered enormous

opportunities and changed our world for the better. We must not allow the digital threats to make us passive. We must act now to ensure that the internet remains a positive force for development and democracy, and to protect access to the internet.

Half of the world's population does not yet have access to the internet, and Sida is working to ensure that more and more people get connected. But what kind of internet they gain access to is up to us. Together with all other actors, who want to work for a free, open and secure internet, we must mobilise for joint solutions. Many of those actors met at the Stockholm Internet Forum. We are proud to live in a free country, which can offer an important meeting place to human rights activists and journalists, who are under threat, to engage in these important discussions.

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Opinion piece from Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Opinion piece by Peter Eriksson, Minister for International Development Cooperation

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Opinion piece by Peter Eriksson, Minister for International Development Cooperation, in the newspaper Dagens Nyheter in connection with the Government's increased support to the countries of Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey. Published on 17 March 2019.

Around the world, democracy is in decline. Today, more people live in countries with authoritarian tendencies than in countries making democratic progress. Democratic processes are being undermined. The rule of law is being scorned.

The objective of Sweden's aid policy is to create better conditions for people living in poverty and oppression. While other countries are cutting back on their support, Sweden is continuing to allocate one per cent of GNI to aid. Apart from democracy and human rights, our focus areas are conflict prevention, the climate, the environment and gender equality. We will therefore increase our democracy assistance and stand up for democracy's defenders and institutions. This will involve providing support and sustenance wherever democracy can grow, and expressing criticism when it is eroded.

Just like the climate, democracy is a defining issue of our time. There is no time to lose. The world's countries have to pull together to reach the sustainable development goals and live up to the Paris Agreement. In the same way, we have to help each other ensure that democracy develops and

that people's trust and confidence in the democratic system grows stronger than populism and trust in authoritarian currents.

Next week, I will be undertaking my first bilateral trip, as Minister for International Development Cooperation, to Georgia and Armenia. Two small and vulnerable, but also hope-inspiring countries in the southern Caucasus, in the eastern neighbourhood of the EU. Two countries in which many people are still living in poverty, above all in rural areas, but which have great potential for development. Sweden has long provided political and economic support to the countries in our eastern neighbourhood; my message as I now visit two of these countries is that the Government is increasing its commitment further, including in the form of expanded support to Armenia.

Through our regional strategy for reform cooperation with Eastern Europe, at present Sweden annually gives about SEK 210 million to Ukraine and about SEK 115–120 each to Moldova, Georgia and Belarus.

One of the main objectives of Sweden's engagement in the region is to provide support to strengthen democracy, increase respect for human rights and more fully develop the rule of law. This is also a matter of improved economic development and closer ties to the EU, as well as an improved environment and strengthened resilience to environmental impacts and climate change. We are working together with civil society and public institutions.

The Government therefore intends to reallocate funds within the budget and thereby increase the total support to the countries in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey by SEK 250 million in 2019, of which SEK 150 million will be earmarked for an initiative for democracy. In light of the positive developments taking place in Armenia over the last year, we also intend to open a bilateral aid window this year.

This year, it is ten years since the Eastern Partnership between the EU and six Eastern European countries was formed through an initiative by Sweden and Poland. This important cooperation has had many positive results, but we can still do more. Each country has special challenges and conditions, but there are also shared regional possibilities for development. The current strategy for Sweden's reform cooperation for Eastern Europe covers the years 2014 to 2020 and the Government will soon review how this cooperation can be developed in the years ahead.

We can already identify some areas of democracy assistance that will be prioritised:

1. Anti-corruption work must be strengthened. We will continue to contribute to functioning institutions and thereby to the conditions for economic and political growth.

Efforts against corruption and for the rule of law are fundamental in discussions about building confidence in democratic institutions. Reforms of the judicial chain are particularly important. Even so, this is basically a matter of poverty reduction. A society characterised by corruption becomes inefficient and does not supply the necessary public services needed to enable positive development.

2. Efforts for human rights must be further strengthened. Citizens' freedoms and rights form the basis of a democratic society. In all partner countries, Sweden has a strong focus on gender equality, human rights and non-discrimination, including dedicated efforts to combat violence against women.

Support to state institutions must be complemented by support for civil society organisations in the region. Unfortunately, threats and violence against both women's rights organisations and LGBTQ organisations are widespread. Sweden always raises these important questions in talks with representatives of governments in our partner countries. We do this to contribute towards the development of a pluralistic civil society.

3. Support to independent and free media will be further strengthened. Propaganda and disinformation, often with Russia as the source, risk undermining the political development of several countries in our vicinity. It is important that their people have access to free and independent journalism. We need to act effectively to expose and address disinformation in Sweden, the EU and our eastern neighbours.

In several countries, all major TV channels and newspapers are controlled by oligarchs with their own economic and political agendas. Our response must be to support independent investigative journalism and thus contribute towards a more pluralistic media landscape. If the countries in the region are to continue to develop towards stable democracies, we must admit that the security situation is difficult. For some time, security has been affected by both ongoing and frozen conflicts in the region, as well as by destructive behaviour, mainly by Russia. Continued reforms, particularly concerning the

rule of law and the fight against corruption, form the most effective countermeasure to Russian destabilisation attempts. Sweden's comprehensive reform support thus makes an important contribution towards strengthening the countries' democratic resilience.

Despite the challenges, progress is being made in several areas in these countries. Closer ties to the EU have played a decisive role in the reform efforts and democratic development; positive reform results have been rewarded with closer EU cooperation. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have entered into association agreements with the EU, including far-reaching free trade agreements. These three countries have also fulfilled the requirements for, and been granted, visa exemption with the EU.

Despite the complex security policy situation, Georgia has continued its development in a democratic direction. We have seen democratic transfers of power and elections in which discussions have been heated and unease has occasionally been substantial over what kind of change may be about to take place, but where much of what has been gained, for example in the form of reduced corruption in daily life, has nevertheless been consolidated. In Armenia, an active democratisation process has been initiated after the 'velvet revolution' and transfer of power of 2018.

There is now a strong political will to carry out necessary reforms and strengthen democracy, as well as freedom of expression and other rights and freedoms. The fact that there is an increased proportion of women in the newly elected parliament is one example among many of the progressive force for change prevailing in the country. This is therefore the right moment for Sweden to increase its support and contribute towards a positive development in Armenia.

The Government is now strengthening its development cooperation with Eastern Europe. A democracy offensive with great chances of making a difference and creating better conditions for positive developments in the region and the whole of Europe.