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CHINA: The European Parliament stands with the people of Hong Kong

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By Dr Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (22.01.2022) – On January 20, the European Parliament voted with an overwhelming majority (585 in favor, 46 against, 41 abstentions) in support of an urgency resolution on violations of fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong. The resolution comes in the midst of a complex reality of EU-China relations; views regarding China continue to harden as Beijing doubles down on threats and retaliation against the bloc, just as the Beijing Winter Olympics are scheduled to begin in just a few weeks' time.

Human rights have long been a thorny issue in bilateral relations. But while in 2016 the EU committed to engaging China in a “principled, practical and pragmatic”, and in 2019 even labeled it a “systemic rival”, the EU has thus far failed to hold China accountable for its human rights violations, including for its crackdown on Hong Kong's freedoms. In the meantime, China has become more assertive in deflecting international criticism of its ‘internal affairs’ and more willing to use economic coercion in order to achieve its goals.

Notwithstanding a growing convergence across the EU on the need to rethink its China policy and to increase its strategic capabilities, there is no unified EU-stance on China, as there is no shared approach to a diplomatic boycott of the Olympics. This has emboldened Beijing to use its clout inside the bloc to undermine democracy through influence operations and by weaponizing trade, seeking to ensure that the path the EU takes is favorable to the pursuit of its own national interests.

Against this backdrop, as one of the most vocal institutions of the EU regarding the respect of fundamental freedoms, the

European Parliament has kept human rights on top of its own agenda. It has urged the European Commission and the European External Action Service, as well as member states not to shelve human rights to the benefit of trade with China. The EP has been the leading voice of a conceptual shift inside the EU towards more realism and less naïveté in its engagement of China, including expanding ties with Taiwan, shaping the EU's willingness to pursue strategic interests.

As such, last May Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) voted in support of freezing the legislative process for ratifying the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China until Beijing lifts sanctions against MEPs. For the first time since the EU arms embargo in 1989 following the Tiananmen Square massacre, Brussels imposed sanctions against four Chinese officials for human rights abuses in Xinjiang, accusing them of "arbitrary detentions and degrading treatment inflicted upon Uyghurs and people from other Muslim ethnic minorities, as well as systematic violations of their freedom of religion or belief".

Beijing responded with its own sanctions on European lawmakers, members of the EU's Human Rights committee (DROI), the EU's main foreign policy decision-making body and several think tanks in the EU, including Germany's Mercator Institute for China Studies.

The resolution on Hong Kong "condemns in the strongest terms the fact that freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of the press are as severely restricted in Hong Kong as they are in China". It reiterates solidarity with the people of Hong Kong, deplores the political persecution to which many journalists, who are now in exile or in jail, have

been subjected, and “calls on China to ensure that all journalists can conduct their work freely and without impediments and fear of reprisals”.

The resolution further stresses that the National Security Law, which Beijing imposed in June 2020 bypassing the Hong Kong legislature, “prevents a relationship of trust between China and the EU” and undermines future cooperation as well as leads to a further erosion of Beijing’s credibility on the international stage. Beyond Hong Kong, the text condemns China’s coercion and intimidation against Lithuania and urges the EU to defend the basic principles of the Single Market. The EU is at present in the process of preparing a new anti-coercion instrument to reinforce its resilience by addressing its vulnerabilities so that it can better defend its interests, which is expected to take months.

In the plenary debate preceding the vote, Slovak MEP Miriam Lexmann (EPP), Co-Chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), said the resolution reflects strong cross-party consensus to stand with the people of Hong Kong, but “concrete action” must follow on an EU-level, including on Lithuania, as it faces China’s economic coercion. Lithuanian MEP Petras Auštrevičius (EPP) noted that the EU must take immediate and firm action to prevent the ongoing coercive policy against Lithuanian and international companies. “It is time to react”, he said.

In the words of German MEP Reinhard Bütikofer (Greens/EFA), Chair of the Delegation for relations with the People’s Republic of China, it is important that the EP remains a champion of the defence of democracy and human rights, calling on member states to join forces as China continues to show

willingness to break international rules to pursue its hegemonic goals.

Supported by several colleagues, Belgian MEP Maria Arena (S&D), Chair of DROI, emphasized that there should be no diplomatic representation at the Beijing Olympics. "If we want to protect our friends in Hong Kong or brave Lithuania, we Europeans must more coherently and loudly stand up to Chinese aggression", added Czech MEP Marketá Gregorová (Greens/EFA), who recently visited Taiwan as Coordinator of the EP's Special Committee for foreign interference in all domestic processes in the EU, including disinformation (INGE).

On behalf of the EU High Representative Josep Borrell, Commissioner Stella Kyriakides condemned the National Security Law, saying China uses it to stifle the exercise of fundamental freedoms. While China claims the situation in Hong Kong is an internal matter, the EU rejects this, she said, adding that the EU will continue to stand by the people of Hong Kong.

Although the EP resolution is a legally non-binding document, it contributes to the European Parliament's efforts to champion human rights in the world. It is now time for member states to finally get serious about China.

Zsuzsa Anna FERENCZY Ph.D.

Postdoctoral Fellow, Ministry of Science and Technology of Taiwan

Non-resident Fellow, Taiwan Next Generation Foundation

Research Associate, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Consultant on China, Taiwan, Korea at Human Rights Without Frontiers

Head of Associates Network, 9DASHLINE

zsuzsa@9dashline.com

twitter: @zsuzsettte

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