In Seoul, the EU monitored developments in the implementation of laws that could affect the overall environment for the exercise of freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, while noting the diverse range of opinions and vibrant political debate in South Korean democracy. Concerns were raised about the continued imprisonment of conscientious objectors to military service (approximately 600 men are serving 18-month prison sentences for refusing to undertake armed military service). The Republic of Korea has not yet ratified the core labour standards conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining. This is addressed in the EU-Republic of Korea meetings under the follow-up of the EU- Republic of Korea Free Trade Agreement. The EU and the Republic of Korea agreed in this framework on a joint cooperation on implementing the core labour standard convention on non-discrimination in employment. The International Labour Conference considered application problems in the Republic of Korea with this convention.

The EU welcomed the long-standing de facto moratorium on the implementation of executions, which has been in place for 17 years, and continued to encourage the legal abolition of capital punishment. The EU was pleased to cooperate with civil society organisations in celebrating the equal rights of LGBTI people at the Pride Festival in the centre of Seoul.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

The EU remains concerned at the reports of serious and widespread human rights abuses in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Improvements in respect for human rights in the country remain at the centre of EU policy towards the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Throughout 2015, the EU continued its efforts to involve the international community at large in addressing these concerns, participating in all relevant key fora and closely cooperating with its partners. It has regularly raised the refoulement of Democratic People’s Republic of Korea citizens from other countries, especially those from countries with a shared border with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, calling for full respect for the principle of non-refoulement.

The EU, together with Japan, co-initiated two resolutions in the Human Rights Council and UN General Assembly which once again reflected the conclusions and recommendations of the UN commission of inquiry's report issued in 2014 and the reports of the UNSG and the Special Rapporteur. They underlined the gravity and urgency of the situation and recommended that the UN Security Council consider referring the situation to the International Criminal Court and impose sanctions on those who appear most responsible for crimes against humanity. A number of EU Member States worked with other partners to facilitate the inclusion of the situation in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in the agenda of the UN Security Council, which discussed the situation for a second time in December 2015.

The EU welcomed the start of activities of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights' field-based structure in Seoul. Its purpose is to strengthen the monitoring and documentation of the human rights situation, to ensure accountability, to provide the Special Rapporteur with increased support, to enhance the engagement and capacity building of the governments of all states concerned, civil society and other stakeholders and to maintain the visibility of the human rights situation in the country.

As part of its critical engagement policy, the EU maintained an open door to dialogue with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Human rights concerns were addressed during the EU-Democratic People's Republic of Korea political dialogue of June 2015. The EUSR for Human Rights remains ready to visit the country if conditions for constructive engagement are there, with the objective of exchanging views and pressing for concrete improvements on the ground. The EU welcomed some positive signals by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (such as the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and preparations to submit a report on its implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to the Committee on the Rights of the Child) and has encouraged it to do much more, including fully implementing the UPR recommendations it accepted back in 2014 and cooperating with the human rights mechanisms of the UN. The EU continued to engage inside the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on a number of projects, mostly focused on food security, health, water and sanitation, that benefit some of the most vulnerable people in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It welcomes ongoing cooperation in these domains between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea authorities and international stakeholders, including the EU's implementing partners.