

COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

DUNJA MIJATOVIĆ

1ST QUARTERLY ACTIVITY REPORT 2023

1 January to 31 March

Presented to the Committee of Ministers
and the Parliamentary Assembly

This report contains a summary of the activities carried out by the Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, between 1 January and 31 March 2023.

1. Visits and Missions

Visit to the Czech Republic

From 20 to 24 February 2023, the Commissioner carried out a [visit](#) to the Czech Republic. The visit focused primarily on the human rights of Roma people and those of people with disabilities. These issues have been a constant focus of the Commissioner's Office since its inception and while there had been some positive developments, the Commissioner was concerned at the persistence of many of the same problems and discrimination that each of her predecessors had identified. She called for concerted efforts to effect a real breakthrough, so that these problems would not linger in the years to come. During the visit, the Commissioner met with Karel Dvořák, Deputy Minister of Justice; Zuzana Freitas Lopesová, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs; Jakub Dvořáček and Josef Pavlovic, Deputy Ministers of Health; Klára Šimáčková Laurenčíková, Government Commissioner for Human Rights; Lucie Fuková, Government Commissioner for Roma Minority Issues; as well as representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of Interior. In addition, she met with the Public Defender of Rights and the Deputy Public Defender of Rights, as well as representatives of civil society. As part of her visit, the Commissioner also visited the Grafická primary school in Prague and the Centre for Social Services in Stod.

On the situation of Roma, the Commissioner found that they continue to face discrimination in virtually every area of life. She also discussed the treatment of Ukrainian Roma, which highlighted existing and deep-rooted prejudices in Czech society. The Commissioner paid particular attention to victims of forced sterilisation. She called for a quick resolution to continuing problems in the compensation mechanism that was established for victims. She also concentrated on inclusive education, addressing different issues that continued to impede progress, including the need for a paradigm shift to move away from a focus on testing, which still acted as a tool of exclusion in the education system.

As regards people with disabilities, the Commissioner noted that many continue to live or undergo long-term treatment in large-scale institutions, and called for the redoubling of efforts to deinstitutionalise the social and health care systems and to fully move to community-based support. She also addressed conditions in institutions, including reported instances of ill-treatment, as well as the need for urgent attention to safeguards in relation to involuntary treatment and deprivation of legal capacity.

The Commissioner found that the authorities were generally very aware of the above-mentioned issues, but that the fragmentation of responsibilities at different levels created significant barriers for the successful and full attainment of policies focused on making Czech society more inclusive.

As regards other issues, the Commissioner welcomed the readiness of her interlocutors to move forward on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and also urged the authorities to take concrete steps to improve the protection of the human rights of LGBTI people. She also discussed the situation of people fleeing Ukraine and welcomed the extraordinary efforts of the Czech Republic in this regard.

The Commissioner's report on the visit is forthcoming.

Visit to Ukraine

From 26 February to 1 March, the Commissioner carried out her second [visit](#) to Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion of the country. The visit focused on the human rights of children who have been separated from their families or legal guardians and transferred to Russia or to Ukraine's territories temporarily occupied by Russia. During her visit, the Commissioner met with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, Iryna Vereshchuk; the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Emine Dzhapparova; the Adviser – Commissioner to the President of Ukraine for Children's Rights and Rehabilitation, Daria Herasymchuk; the Deputy Permanent Representative of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Denys Chistikov; Ukraine's Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights, Dmytro Lubinets; Ukraine's Prosecutor General, Andriy Kostin; and representatives of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis. She also met with representatives of civil society and international organisations.

In a [statement](#) issued on 6 March, the Commissioner condemned Russia's failure to return Ukrainian children separated from their families and legal guardians as a serious violation of those children's human rights. She reviewed the situation of several categories of affected children, including unaccompanied children, orphans, and children in care institutions. She noted that children have often been placed in foster care in Russia, without sufficient efforts having been made to establish contact with their relatives or legal guardians. Moreover, the Commissioner observed that in what appeared to be a deliberate exploitation of the children's vulnerability, some Ukrainian children have been given Russian citizenship and have been adopted by Russian families. She noted that this practice appeared to be supported by Russian public officials, even though children separated from their parents during a humanitarian emergency can never be considered orphans and are therefore not available for adoption.

The Commissioner noted that the reunification of Ukrainian children with their families or legal guardians back in Ukraine or in other countries was a very complex undertaking, rendered particularly difficult by the lack of a special mechanism to that end. She called for concrete mechanisms and solutions to urgently be identified and used to reunite these children with their families. Noting that precise data on the identity and whereabouts of children and their relatives was not available in all cases, she called for unimpeded access to records and information about all affected Ukrainian children, and for the establishing and supporting of a mechanism for reuniting Ukrainian children with their families and legal guardians. Further solutions should include providing more clarity regarding the entities and procedures through which parents, relatives, legal guardians, and children can seek assistance in family reunification. The Commissioner further called on the international community to support reliable organisations and networks of Ukrainian and Russian human rights defenders and civil society actors involved in facilitating the family reunification work, and to assist Ukraine in pursuing a comprehensive deinstitutionalisation reform with a view to creating a nurturing environment in which children are raised in families. Noting the importance of ensuring justice for all victims of violations of the rights of the child, the Commissioner commended the efforts taken to that end by the Ukrainian investigative authorities.

The Commissioner's visit also dealt with the human rights situation of the Crimean Tatars, with a view to issuing a [report](#) on this issue.

Visit to Serbia

The Commissioner carried out a [visit](#) to Serbia from 13 to 17 March 2023. The visit focused on issues pertaining to dealing with the past and transitional justice; women's rights and gender equality; and freedom of expression, assembly and association.

During her visit, the Commissioner met with the Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić; the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić; the Minister of Justice Maja Popović; the Minister for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue Tomislav Žigmanov; and the Minister of Culture and Chair of the Coordination Body for Gender Equality Maja Gojković. In addition, she held meetings with the Ombudsman Zoran Pašalić, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality Brankica Janković, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection Milan Marinović, as well as representatives of civil society organisations.

The Commissioner visited the NGO 'Women in Black' (Žene u Crnom) and paid her respects at the memorial dedicated to the murdered journalist Slavko Ćuruvija (see *Safety of journalists, Freedom of expression and Freedom of media, below*). She also participated in and delivered a speech at the conference "Why women do not report domestic violence?", organised by the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality.

At the end of the visit, the Commissioner observed a need for renewed commitment by political leaders, including in Serbia, for the resolution of the pending cases of missing persons in the region. She further underlined that all the obstacles to the fight against impunity for serious human rights violations committed during the 1990s wars needed to be removed, while war criminals must not be given a public platform in Serbia to promote their views and deny the crimes for which they were convicted.

Stressing that the safety of journalists and human rights defenders remained an issue of serious concern, the Commissioner called for bringing to justice the perpetrators of past cases of killings of journalists, and those who ordered these crimes. Noting the prevalence of smear campaigns, threats and intimidation and the growing problem of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) targeting journalists, human rights defenders and civil society organisations, the Commissioner urged the authorities to spare no effort to create a safe and conducive environment for the work of the media and civil society.

Finally, concerning women's rights and gender equality, the Commissioner stressed the importance of systematic awareness-raising and education about gender equality to counter stereotypes and patriarchal views concerning women's role in society. She also observed the need for a co-ordinated institutional response to effectively protect women from violence and to prosecute and impose dissuasive penalties for such crimes.

The Commissioner's report on the visit is forthcoming.

2. Reports and continuous dialogue

Letter to the Minister of Interior of Italy on NGO search and rescue operations at sea

On 2 February, the Commissioner published her [letter](#) to the Minister of the Interior of Italy, Matteo Piantedosi, calling on the government to consider withdrawing or revising the Decree Law No. 1/2023 whose provisions could hamper NGO search and rescue operations and, therefore, be at variance with Italy's obligations under human rights and international law. She also noted that NGO vessels have been assigned distant ports to disembark persons rescued at sea and that this practice, paired with the Decree's provisions, risked depriving people in distress of life-saving assistance from NGOs. In addition, the Commissioner reiterated her call to suspend co-operation with the Libyan Government on interceptions at sea. Finally, the Commissioner requested further information about the allegations of returns of persons from Italy to Greece on private ships. She recalled that carrying out individual assessments of the protection needs of each person arriving at the border remains a crucial safeguard against refoulement.

The Commissioner's letter is available on her website, along with the reply from Italian authorities.

Letter to the Minister of Interior of Latvia regarding pushbacks

On 6 February, the Commissioner published a [letter](#) to the Minister for the Interior of Latvia, Māris Kučinskis, expressing her concern about the reported continuation of pushbacks at the Latvian-Belarusian border, which had led to severe injuries and death, and the fact that a criminal investigation was initiated against two members of an NGO who went to the border area out of concern for the lives of several Syrians. She stressed the key role of human rights defenders and the duty of states to create an enabling environment for them. She reiterated that all border control had to be exercised in full compliance with a state's obligations under the ECHR and the absolute prohibition of *refoulement*, and that the human rights of those arriving had to be safeguarded even during challenging conditions, including when they attempted to cross in an irregular manner. She also underlined that the continuing state of emergency in the border region since August 2021 remained an obstacle to Latvia meeting its human rights obligations with respect to international protection needs.

The Commissioner's letter is available on her website, along with the reply from the Minister for the Interior.

Letter to the Chairman of the Georgian Parliament regarding the draft law "On transparency of foreign influence"

On 28 February, the Commissioner published a [letter](#) addressed to the Chairman of the Georgian Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, in which she expressed concern that a possible adoption of the draft law "On transparency of foreign influence" would have a serious chilling effect on the work of civil society organisations in Georgia. Noting that such a legislative initiative raised a number of concerns in the light of the Council of Europe standards on freedom of association and of expression, the Commissioner underlined that while transparency may be a legitimate concern, it should not be achieved to the detriment of the effective enjoyment of rights and freedoms by civil society organisations and media outlets and of the exercise of their legitimate activities. She therefore urged members of the Parliament to reject this or any similar draft law and to unequivocally commit

to fostering a diverse and vibrant civil participation in public affairs, as well as a conducive environment for the functioning of civil society organisations and human rights defenders in Georgia.

The Commissioner's letter is available on her website, along with the reply from the Chairman of the Parliament.

Letter to the Parliament of the United Kingdom regarding the 'Illegal Migration Bill'

On 27 March 2023, the Commissioner published her [letter](#) to the Speaker of the House of Commons, Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle, and the Lord Speaker of the House of Lords, Rt Hon the Lord McFall of Alcluith, on the so-called 'Illegal Migration Bill'. In her letter, the Commissioner warned that the Bill's provisions created clear and direct tension with well-established and fundamental human rights safeguards. She highlighted that, by preventing people who arrive irregularly in the United Kingdom (UK) from having their asylum claims assessed, the Bill would strip away one of the essential building blocks of the protection system. This would add to the already significant regression in the protection of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants that the Commissioner signalled in her December 2022 [report](#) following her visit to the UK. The letter addressed, among other issues, the Bill's lack of guarantees that objections to removals would be assessed in compliance with the ECHR, its impact on victims of trafficking, the widespread powers of detention including of children, and the strict limits on judicial challenges. The Commissioner also reiterated the importance of creating safe and legal routes, including across the Channel.

The Commissioner's letter is available on her website.

3. Themes

Observations ahead of the 4th Council of Europe Summit

On 13 March, the Commissioner published her [observations](#) on the 4th Summit of the Council of Europe (Reykjavik, Iceland, on 16-17 May 2023). The Commissioner underlined the importance of the Summit as an opportunity to reaffirm member states' commitment to the values and standards of the Council of Europe and to show strong determination to reverse the current backsliding on human rights.

With Russia's war in Ukraine having caused enormous suffering and widespread human rights violations, the Commissioner emphasized the importance for the Summit to focus on accountability. She also called for a renewed commitment to address other pressing human rights issues through better implementation of the Strasbourg Court judgments, in particular with regard to systemic non-compliance, and the protection of the independence and impartiality of the judiciary. The Commissioner also hoped to see greater emphasis on the human rights dimension of environmental degradation, countering the anti-gender backlash, and strengthening social and economic rights and equality. Finally, the Commissioner saw the Summit as providing an opportunity to better future proof human rights work, notably through enhanced capacity to respond rapidly to developments, an enabling environment for civil society, National Human Rights Structures and human rights defenders and the harnessing of the power of youth.

Impact of the war in Ukraine on human rights

In a [statement](#) marking one year since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Commissioner joined Iceland's Minister for Foreign Affairs and President of the Committee of Ministers Thórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir, President of the Parliamentary Assembly Tiny Kox, Secretary General Marija Pejčinović Burić, and President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities Leendert Verbeek, in reiterating their condemnation of Russia's persisting aggression. The Commissioner and other co-signatories called Russia's military attack against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 a blatant violation of international law and noted that it has claimed countless human lives, causing immense human suffering in Ukraine and serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. They reiterated the imperative of ensuring accountability for all crimes, including the crime of aggression, and called for the restoration of peace based on international law, justice and respect for human rights.

Human rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants

The Commissioner made several country-specific interventions related to the human rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. She wrote several letters to governments and parliaments of member states, including on the situation of search and rescue NGOs in Italy, continuing pushback allegations in Latvia, and legislative changes in the United Kingdom (see *Reports and continuous dialogue*).

Additionally, on 12 January, she published a [statement](#) calling on the Greek authorities to reverse the trend undermining the work of journalists and human rights defenders working with refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, and to ensure that they can work freely and safely by providing an enabling environment for their work and publicly recognising their important role in a democratic society.

Furthermore, on 8 February, the Commissioner issued a [statement](#) ahead of the Special European Council of 9 and 10 February, which dealt, among other things, with questions related to migration. She warned that human rights abuses in the context of migration policies, including pushbacks, denial of access to asylum, the facilitation of interception of people at sea and the criminalisation and harassment of human rights defenders, had proliferated. She called for member states' leaders participating in the Special European Council to express a clear commitment to ending human rights violations, to break the silence over well-documented abuses, and to end support to member state or third country migration control practices that violate human rights.

Safety of journalists, freedom of expression and media freedom

On 16 March, during her visit to Serbia, the Commissioner paid her respects at the memorial dedicated to journalist Slavko Ćuruvija, who was killed 24 years ago. She [stressed](#) that to honour his memory and comply with their human rights obligations, the authorities must hold the perpetrators to account, end impunity and protect journalists.

On 21 March, the Commissioner participated in a [workshop](#) organised by the Council of Europe and the Strasbourg Group of Friends on the safety of journalists and media freedom, which focused on how to increase support for Belarusian journalists in exile. In her speech, the Commissioner expressed support for journalists in Belarus facing repression for their work and called for increased

support from Council of Europe member states, including by denouncing violations of their rights, providing financial support, facilitating relocation and granting stable residence in host countries.

Freedom of assembly

On 24 March, the Commissioner published a [statement](#) expressing concern about the conditions under which freedoms of expression and assembly were being exercised in the context of the social movement against the pension reform in France. Deploring the violent incidents, some of which targeted law enforcement officers, the Commissioner recalled that force to re-establish order should only be used as a last resort and in strict compliance with the requirements of necessity and proportionality. She called for an end to violence, whatever its source, stressing that it cannot on any account be used as a means of solving a social and/or political crisis.

Women's rights and gender equality

On 7 March, ahead of International Women's Day, the Commissioner [stressed](#) that gender-based violence, structural inequality and multiple discrimination impede the full realisation of women's rights, especially during crises. She called on member states to mainstream gender equality and intersectionality in all policies and practices, underscoring the need to support women human rights defenders.

Children's rights

On 31 January, the Commissioner met with the Bureau of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) to exchange views on respective priorities and main concerns regarding the protection and promotion of children's rights in Europe. Topics discussed included the rights and needs of Ukrainian children displaced by the war and in particular vulnerable children, such as those with disabilities, in institutions or unaccompanied. They also discussed the need to focus attention on the mental health crisis among children and youth, to boost the effective participation of children in all matters that affect them, and to strengthen the protection of child human rights defenders.

Human rights of LGBTI people

On 16 January, on the eve of the delivery of the [judgment](#) of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of *Fedotova and Others v. Russia*, the Commissioner [reiterated](#) some of the arguments discussed in her [third-party intervention](#) in this case dealing with the legal recognition of same-sex couples.

On 26 January, the Commissioner [participated](#) in a High-level session of the Council of Europe Conference on Advancing the Human Rights of Intersex People, which launched the work on the drafting of a new Committee of Ministers Recommendation on equality of rights of intersex people. The Commissioner underlined the work of her Office in this area, notably through a 2015 [Issue Paper](#). She welcomed recent positive developments, while noting the many remaining human rights challenges. She further highlighted the key role played by all stakeholders in the field and called for the outlawing of medically unnecessary surgeries on intersex children without consent.

On 1 February, the Commissioner [welcomed](#) Finland's new law on legal gender recognition. The law removed a requirement for sterilisation and introduced self-determination, making Finland the tenth Council of Europe member state to adopt this international human rights best practice. On 16

February, she [congratulated](#) the Spanish parliament on the adoption of a law which, among other measures, introduced self-determination for legal gender recognition procedures, bans conversion therapies against LGBTI people and prohibits non-vital surgeries on intersex children without informed consent.

On 16 February, the Commissioner published a [Human Rights Comment](#) on so-called conversion therapies (practices) for LGBTI people. The Commissioner noted that conversion practices purport to cure or change sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, although being LGBTI is not something that can be or needs to be cured. The Commissioner underscored that these practices cause devastating mental, physical and psychological harm to the victims. She set out some of the human rights violated by conversion practices, including the right to be free from torture and ill-treatment, the right to health, the right not to be discriminated against, and children’s rights. The Commissioner welcomed an increased awareness of conversion practices in Europe and a recent impetus towards confronting them. She stressed that a comprehensive and human rights-based approach is necessary to truly end conversion practices. She urged member states to collect data so that their response is as effective as possible. The Commissioner noted that legal bans must cover conversion practices targeting sexual orientation as well as gender identity and expression. Such bans must be precise, enforceable and respect human rights. Victims should have access to psychosocial support, rehabilitation, justice, and reparations. Finally, it is essential to increase public awareness about the harms caused by conversion practices and to continue to work for the inclusion and equality of LGBTI people in society.

In a statement issued on 21 March, the Commissioner [condemned](#) the violent attack against LGBTI people, human rights defenders and journalists covering an LGBTI event in Banja Luka and called on the authorities to ensure that LGBTI people, like everyone else, are able to assemble peacefully, free from violence and hate speech.

On 31 March, on Trans Visibility Day, the Commissioner [stressed](#) the importance of working to protect the rights and safety of trans people, so that they can enjoy their right to be themselves, free and equal.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and human rights

On 27 January, on the occasion of European Data Protection Day, the Commissioner published a [Human Rights Comment](#) entitled “Highly intrusive spyware threatens the essence of human rights”. The Commissioner observed that 18 months after the disclosure of the leak of over 50,000 phone numbers that had been identified as potential targets for surveillance through the Pegasus spyware, human rights activists, journalists, and opposition politicians continued to be targeted with powerful zero-click hacking tools that granted complete and unrestricted access to their private lives, putting their personal safety and access to basic human rights at risk. While welcoming the ongoing inquiries into the export, sale, transfer, and use of highly intrusive spyware such as Pegasus, the Commissioner called on member states to take action to prevent further abuse, and to put in place a comprehensive and human rights compliant legislative framework for the use of modern surveillance technology. This should provide for meaningful procedural guarantees, robust systems of ex-ante and ex-post oversight, and effective redress mechanisms for victims. The Commissioner further reflected on the need for more public awareness about the rampant threat to human rights, including the rights to privacy, freedom of expression and public participation, stemming from an uncontrolled spyware industry and the opaque operations of national security services.

On 30–31 March, the Commissioner [met](#) with 30 heads and senior representatives of national human rights structures (NHRs) to discuss their experiences as well as challenges and promising practices with respect to the implementation of her 2019 [Recommendation](#) “Unboxing AI – 10 steps to protect human rights” (see *Cooperation with national human rights structures*). The Commissioner welcomed the initiatives taken by NHRs and their European networks to increase their capacities to tackle human rights issues arising from the use of AI systems and raise public awareness on the potential and risks of AI for human rights. She stressed that AI design, development and deployment must be supervised through one or more authorities that were fully independent, adequately resourced, and mandated to handle, investigate, and monitor human rights-related complaints. Supervisory authorities should be required to cooperate closely with NHRs given their role as guardians of human rights at national level.

Rights of persons belonging to national minorities

On 2 February, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the Commissioner [underlined](#) the importance of building diverse and cohesive societies, and calling for states to accelerate progress and rise to challenges which have been exacerbated by recent crises.

Combating racism and intolerance

In a [statement](#) released on 24 January, ahead of the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, the Commissioner stressed that remembering the Holocaust involves a duty to deliver on genocide prevention. Recalling that the warning signs of the Holocaust went unheeded, she emphasised that remembrance and honouring the victims means refusing to be bystanders and taking a firm stand before situations spiral into tragedy. She called on member states to recommit to the common values of humanity, democracy and equal respect for the rights and dignity of all persons and to put them into practice without delay.

On 20 March, on the eve of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Commissioner [called](#) for action to close the gap between the reality of those who experience racism and the promise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Cooperation with national human rights structures

During this quarter, the Commissioner continued to exchange bilaterally with national human rights structures on issues of mutual interest. She met with ENOC, the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children, as well as with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights of Ukraine, Dmytro Lubinets, the Ombudswoman of Catalonia, and representatives of the French National Consultative Commission for Human Rights (see *Children Rights, Other meetings*).

As mentioned above (see *AI and human rights*), at the end of March the Commissioner organised a thematic exchange of views with 30 heads and senior representatives of National Human Rights Institutions, Equality Bodies, and Ombudsman institutions (National Human Rights Structures) of Council of Europe member states. The event focused on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights and followed on a previous meeting with Equality Bodies on algorithmic discrimination in 2019. National human rights structures (NHRs) play an essential role in the supervision and enforcement of the rights enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights at national level and must therefore

be closely involved in all processes related to the use of AI, its possible impact on human rights and its regulation.

4. Other meetings

Meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister, Lord Chancellor, and Secretary of State for Justice of the United Kingdom

On 12 January, the Commissioner met with Dominic Raab MP, the then Deputy Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. They discussed ongoing developments in relation to the war in Ukraine and efforts to ensure accountability. They also followed up on their discussion during the Commissioner's [June 2022 visit](#) to the UK, and the observations in her subsequent [report](#), about the Bill of Rights Bill, including in the context of the UK's policies to address irregular crossings of the Channel in small boats.

10th Annual Meeting of the Secretary General with the Heads of the Monitoring and Advisory Bodies

On 17 January, the Commissioner spoke in the plenary session of the 10th Annual Meeting of the Secretary General with the Heads of the Monitoring and Advisory Bodies in Strasbourg. She focused on the complementarity of the institutions, bodies and mechanisms represented at the meeting, which strived within their respective mandates and with the tools at their disposal for the implementation of common human rights standards, democracy and rule of law. She expressed her intention to continue cooperating with all partners.

Meeting with a member of the Spanish Senate and former members of the parliament and government of Catalonia

On 23 January, the Commissioner met with Laura Castel, Member of the Spanish Senate, Carme Forcadell, former President of the Parliament of Catalonia, and Raül Romeva, former member of the Government of Catalonia. They discussed about recent developments relating to freedoms of expression and assembly, in particular of politicians, human rights defenders and journalists, in Spain.

Meeting with members of the PACE Delegation of Armenia

On 23 January, the Commissioner met with Armen Gevorgyan, Hayk Mamijanyan and Armen Rustamyan, members of the Armenian Parliament and of PACE, and discussed recent developments in the field of human rights in Armenia.

Meeting with the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany

On 24 January, the Commissioner [met](#) with Annalena Baerbock, the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany. The discussion covered issues related to the serious human rights violations occurring in the context of the war in Ukraine, women's rights and respect for human rights in the field of migration.

Meeting with a Delegation of the Ministry of Justice of Finland

On 24 January, the Commissioner met with Johanna Suurpää, Director General of the Department for Democracy and Public Law, from the Ministry of Justice of Finland and her delegation. They discussed a range of human rights issues, including issues relating to the strengthening of human rights structures and to the judiciary in Finland.

Meeting with the President of the Senate of the Netherlands

On 26 January, the Commissioner met with Jan Anthonie Bruijn, President of the Senate of the Netherlands. They exchanged on the Commissioner's work and mandate, wider developments in the Council of Europe, and several issues related to the Netherlands, including asylum and migration in view of the Commissioner's [letter](#) of last year.

Meeting with the Chair of the Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion

On 26 January, the Commissioner met in Strasbourg with Sophie Élizéon, Chair of the Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI). The discussions focused on current human rights challenges, notably in the context of the war in Ukraine, and on specific issues concerning the rights of LGBTI people, including equality of rights of intersex persons and legal gender recognition; combating hate speech and hate crimes; combating discrimination against Roma and Travellers; women's rights; and the human rights impact of the use of artificial intelligence systems.

Meeting with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights of Ukraine

On 1 February in Strasbourg, the Commissioner met with Ukraine's Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman), Dmytro Lubinets, to discuss a wide range of human rights issues in Ukraine, mostly in connection with the consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Meeting with the President of the UN Human Rights Council

On 8 February, the Commissioner had a meeting with the President of the UN Human Rights Council, Ambassador Václav Bálek, to exchange views on a number of topics, including the human rights consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the role of international organisations in ensuring accountability for serious human rights violations committed in this context.

Meeting with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine

On 8 February, the Commissioner met on-line with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Emine Dzhapparova, to discuss the human rights situation of Crimean Tatars with a view to the preparation by the Commissioner of a [report](#) on this topic.

Meeting with the Attorney General of the United Kingdom

On 16 February, the Commissioner met with Victoria Prentis KC MP, the Attorney General of the United Kingdom. They discussed the war in Ukraine and efforts to ensure accountability. They also discussed issues related to refugees fleeing Ukraine, as well as the UK's asylum and migration policy,

including in view of the Commissioner's observations in her December 2022 [report](#) following her country visit.

Meeting with the Ombudswoman of Catalonia

On 16 February, the Commissioner met with Esther Giménez-Salinas i Colomer, Ombudswoman of Catalonia (Spain). They discussed about their respective priorities and recent developments in the field of human rights in Catalonia.

Meeting with the Assistant to the First Vice-President of Azerbaijan on Foreign Affairs

On 22 March, the Commissioner met in Strasbourg with Elchin Amirbayev, Assistant to the First Vice-President of Azerbaijan on Foreign Affairs, to discuss a number of issues related to the situation around Nagorno-Karabakh, including along the Lachin Corridor and the human rights situation of local residents. The Commissioner reiterated her willingness to travel to the region to assess the human rights situation and the crucial importance of ensuring free and unhindered access to international human rights missions to all areas and people, including those residing in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Meeting with the National Consultative Commission for Human Rights of France

On 3 March, the Commissioner met with Jean-Marie Burguburu and Magali Lafourcade, respectively President and Secretary General of the National Consultative Commission for Human Rights of France. Discussions covered the cooperation between the two institutions as well as issues pertaining to surveillance; migration; repatriation, reintegration and rehabilitation of suspected terrorist fighters and their family members; and freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association.

Meeting with European Union's Special Representative for Human Rights

On 9 March, the Commissioner had an online exchange with Eamon Gilmore, the European Union's Special Representative for Human Rights. They discussed issues of common interest including the situation of human rights defenders in Europe and the human rights consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine.

Meeting with the COSCE Working Party of the Council of the European Union

On 23 March, the Commissioner met with the COSCE Working Party of the Council of the European Union in Strasbourg. She informed the Working Party about her priorities, including her work on the human rights consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine; the human rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants; environment and human rights; the human rights situation in the Western Balkans; and the Commissioner's priorities in view of the Council of Europe Summit.

5. Human Rights Defenders

The Commissioner continued to pay close attention to the situation of human rights defenders and civil society in the Council of Europe area during the period under review. On several occasions, she

drew the attention of the relevant authorities and the public in general when their safety, liberty or working environment was being jeopardised. This was the case, for example in connection with undue pressure on journalists and human rights defenders and the criminal prosecution of individuals assisting refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in Greece (see above *Human rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants*); attacks and violence against LGBTI people and human rights defenders in Bosnia and Herzegovina (see above *Human Rights of LGBTI people*); and the examination by Parliament of a draft law “On transparency of foreign influence” with potential chilling effect on the work of civil society organisations in Georgia (see above *Reports and continuous dialogue*). The situation of human rights defenders, civil society organisations and journalists subjected to smear campaigns, threats and intimidation was one of the topics covered by the Commissioner during her visit to Serbia in March (see above *Visits and missions*)

On 3 February, the Commissioner made a [statement](#) on the arrest and detention of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, which she considered illustrated the intolerance of the government of Azerbaijan towards independent civic activism and reprisals against human rights defenders and journalists in the country. Noting that this prominent civil society activist was reportedly not receiving adequate medical care in detention in the context of his rapidly deteriorating health, the Commissioner stressed that his continued detention was unjustified and disproportionate to the charges brought against him. She called on the authorities of Azerbaijan to immediately release him from custody and work towards creating a safe and enabling environment for civil society activists based on genuine dialogue and cooperation.

The Commissioner also continued her action in support of Russian and Belarusian civil societies, including human rights defenders and journalists, in their respective countries and in exile in Council of Europe member states. On 25 January, she issued a [statement](#) drawing attention to the ongoing reprisals and harassment faced by human rights defenders in Russia, illustrated by the shutting down of the Moscow Helsinki Group, the oldest and most reputable human rights group in the country, as well as by previous decisions to liquidate Memorial NGOs, the All-Russia Movement for Human Rights, and many others. She highlighted the need to support human rights defenders in Russia and reiterated her recommendations that Council of Europe member states should adopt to that end.

On 3 March, the Commissioner made a [statement](#) denouncing the criminal conviction of Ales Bialiatski, a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, and other human rights defenders in Belarus, calling the verdict a blatant attack against justice and an attempt to silence independent critical voices and punish them for their legitimate human rights work. She also expressed her sympathy and appreciation for their courageous and devoted work carried out at the risk of their own safety and liberty and reiterated her call to Council of Europe member states to stand in solidarity with and support Belarusian civil society and human rights defenders.

The Commissioner also held a series of in-person and online meetings with representatives of civil society and human rights defenders to discuss a number of human rights issues as well as their situation in various countries. In particular, on 26 January, the Commissioner held a [meeting](#) in Strasbourg with Oleksandra Matviichuk, Head of the Center for Civil Liberties and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, to discuss the need to better support human rights defenders and deliver accountability for the serious human rights violations as a consequence of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. On 14 February, the Commissioner held an online meeting with representatives of the Crimean Tatar people, including civil society activists, human rights defenders, lawyers and citizen journalists, to discuss the situation of Crimean Tatar people in the context of Russia’s

aggression against Ukraine. The exchanges contributed to the preparation of the Commissioner's [report](#) on the human rights situation of Crimean Tatars.

On 23 March, the Commissioner published a [report](#) on the situation of human rights defenders in the Council of Europe area in times of crises following the round-table she held with human rights defenders in Dublin in October 2022. The report highlighted how the prioritisation of national security and public safety concerns over human rights in a context of overlapping crises, such as growing inequalities compounded by the environmental crisis, the pandemic, and the rise of populist governments and anti-rights agendas, has hindered human rights defence and civic activism. It points to a growing gap between the risks and the obstacles they face, on the one hand, and the human rights standards agreed upon by states, on the other. The report includes the Commissioner's recommendations to Council of Europe member states on the need, among others, to refrain from criminal, administrative and judicial harassment and the use of SLAPPs; to allow human rights defenders to participate in public decision-making effectively; and to protect and promote the work of activists defending various groups, such as women, children, migrants, LGBTI people and ethnic minorities. The Commissioner's report also addresses the situation of human rights defenders in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The report is available on the Commissioner's website.

6. System of the European Convention on Human Rights

Solemn Hearing of the European Court of Human Rights for the Opening of the Judicial Year

On 27 January, the Commissioner attended the solemn hearing of the European Court of Human Rights to mark the opening of the judicial year during which the President of the Court, and the President of the Constitutional Court of Italy, addressed representatives from the highest courts of the 46 member states of the Council of Europe and from local, national and international authorities.

7. Communication and information work

More than 380 news items on the Commissioner's work were published by the media during the period under review. The three main topics covered by the media were the human rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, freedom of assembly and human rights defenders.

The Commissioner's work on the human rights of refugees asylum seekers and migrants, and in particular the letter to Italy's Minister of Interior calling for a withdrawal of a Decree Law which could hamper NGO search and rescue operations at sea, was covered by *Il Giornale D'Italia*, *Aargauer Zeitung*, *ABC News*, *ADNKronos*, *Affarin Italiani*, *AFP*, *Agence Europe*, *Agencia Lusa*, *AGI*, *Altalex*, *Anadolu Agency*, *ANSA*, *ANSAMed*, *Appenzeller Zeitung*, *ASI*, *AskaNews*, *Avvenire*, *Basellandschaftliche Zeitung*, *British Bulletin*, *BTA*, *CE Noticias Financieras*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Delfi*, *Demokracija*, *Demokrata.hu*, *DPA*, *DW*, *EADaily*, *EFE*, *Egypt News*, *El Diario*, *EUNews*, *EUObserver*, *EurActiv*, *Euronews*, *Europa Press*, *Europa Today*, *EuroRadio*, *FanPage.it*, *Felvidek*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Gazzetta di Firenze*, *Gazzetta di Mantova*, *Gazzetta di Parma*, *Gazzetta di Reggio*, *Grenchner Tagblatt*, *Hirado.hu*, *Hirkliikk*, *HuffPost Italy*, *Il Corriere Apuano*, *Il Denaro*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Il Foglio*, *Il Gazzettino*, *Il Giornale*, *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, *Il Manifesto*, *Il Messaggero*, *Il Primato*

Nazionale, Il Riformista, Il Secolo XIX, Il Sole 24 Ore, Il Tempo, InfoBae, InfoMigrants, Internazionale, IripMedia, ItalPress, Jornal de Noticias, Knack, La Croix, La Nazione, La Nuova di Venezia e Mestre, La Provincia Pavese, La Repubblica, La Sentinella del Cavanese, La Stampa, La Vanguardia, La Voz del Interior, Libero Quotidiano, Limmattaler Zeitung, Lokalno.mk, LSM.lv, Magyar Hirlap, Messagero Veneto, MSN, MTI, Neue Luzerner Zeitung, Neue Zuger Zeitung, Newsweek, Nieuwsblik.nl, O Minho, Observador, Oltner Tagblatt, Open Migration, ORF, Pestisracok, Politico, Postimees, Prensa Latina, Qué Pasa, RAI News, Redattore Sociale, Reuters, Rodoljub.si, Sargasso.nl, SDA/ATS, SIR, Sofokleousin.gr, Solothurner Zeitung, SOS Mediterranée, St Galler Tagblatt, Süddeutsch Zeitung, SwissInfo, Tagesschau.de, Tanjug, Teleborsa, Teraz.sk, TFNews, The Associated Press, The Canadian Press, The Daily Telegraph, The Financial Times, The Guardian, The Independent, The Local, The Maritime Executive, The Times, Thurgauer Zeitung, Times of Malta, Today.it, TPO.nl, Trend Online, Tsar, UK Times, Zietnam explorer, Vigilio Notizie, Visao Online, Wiler Zeitung, Yahoo News, Yahoo Noticias, and Zeit Online.

The statement on the exercise of freedom of expression and assembly in the context of the social movement against the pension reform in France also received wide coverage by *20 Minutes, ABC Nyheter, ABC.es, ADNkronos, AFP, Agence Belga, Agencia Lusa, AgerPres, Anadolu Agency, ANP, ANSA, APA.az, BBC, BETA, BFM TV, Blick Online, BTA, CNN Greece, Columna Digital, Courrier International, Cumhuriyet, Diario de Avila, Diario de Burgos, Diario de Noticia, Diario Palentina, DNA, Do Rzeczy, Documento.gr, DPA, EFE, Efsyn.gr, El Dia de la Rioja, El Dia de Segovia, El Dia de Soria, El Dia de Valladolid, El Mundo, El Nacional, El Pais, El Punt Avui, ERR, Fanpage.it, France 24, France 3 Régions, France Bleu, France Info, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Gazete Duvar, Göteborgs Posten, Helsingin Sanouat, If Fatto Quotidiano, Jurist, klix.ba, La Jornada, La Libre Belgique, La Republica, La Tribuna de Albacete, La Tribuna de Ciudad Real, La Tribuna de Cuenca, La Tribuna de Talavera, La Tribuna de Toledo, La Vanguardia, Le Figaro, Le Huffpost, Le Monde, Le Parisien, Le Point, Le Soir, Libération, Libertatea, L'Obs, L'Opinion, Mediapart, Naftemporiki, NouvelObs.com, NTB, Nu.nl, O Globo, O tempo, Observador, Ouest France, Postimees, Powergame.gr, Prensa Latina, Proceso, Publico, Q Magazine, Radio Slobodna Evropa, RFI, RTL, RTV Slovenija, Sapo.pt, SDA/ATS, STT, Sud-Ouest, SwissInfo, The Guardian, The Local, The Sunday Times, The Washington Post, Tiroler tageszeitug, TV5 Monde, Visao Online, VOA, Yahoo News, and Zeit Online.*

The work on the human rights of LGBTI people was covered by *20 Minutes, 24 heuresAFP, 7sur7, AFP, Agence Europe, Agencia Lusa, ANSA, APA, Ardina News, BETA, Brasil Economico, CE Noticias financieras, Cromosomax.com, Danas, Der Tagesspiegel Online, Deutschlandfunk, Dezanove, Diario de Pernambuco, Diario Guardiao, Diario Libre, Die Zeit, EFE, Elle, ESS.fr, Europa Today, FENA, Hoy, Irish Legal News, Jornal de Noticias, Kleine Zeitung, La Libre.be, Le Matin, Le Temps, Marianne, MSN, N1 info, Newsweek, Noticias ao Minuto, O Povo Online, OX.se, Pink News, Primeira Edição, QX.fj, RFI, RTBF, RTL, RTP, RTS, Sabado.pt, Sapo.pt, SDA/ATS, Slobodna Bosnia, STT, Tageblatt, The Scotsman, The World News, Tribune de Genève, and Vijesti.ba.*

Many media reported on the work on Human Rights Defenders, including *Le Monde, ABC News, Agence Europe, DW, EFE, EUObserver, Los Angeles Times, MTI, SIR, SwissInfo, The Associated Press, The Canadian Press, 888.hu, AFP, Agencia Lusa, Al Jazeera, Arab News, Athens News Agency, Efsyn.gr, Estonian Free Press, Euractiv, Euronews, France 24, Kathimerini, Krstarica, Tanjug, Le Quotidien, L'express, Magyar Hirlap, Mail Online, Modern Diplomacy, MTI, Newsbreak.com, Oko, Press Agency, Pressenza International, RFI, SDA/ATS, Star Tribune, SwissInfo, Tanjug, TAZ, The Associated Press, The Canadian Press, The Guardian, The Herald Tribune, The National Herald, The Washington Post, TheIntelligencer.com, VoA, and Zeit Online*

Work related to freedom of expression and media freedom was covered by *Agence Europe*, *ANSA*, *Blic Online*, *Civil Georgia*, *Diario de Malloca*, *Al Dia*, *Efsyn.gr*, *El Nacional*, *El Periodico*, *El Periodico Mediterraneo*, *Ekho Kavkaza*, *Evropeiskaya Pravda*, *Faro de Vigo*, *Informacion*, *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, *NewsGeorgia*, *Panorama.am*, *Prime News*, *Srpskainfo*, *The Messenger Online*, *Belapan*, *EFE*, *Radio Sarajevo*, *Reform.by*, *SwissInfo*, *Ukrinform*, and *Prime News*.

Anatomija, *BETA*, *Der Standard*, *Euronews*, *Tanjug*, *N1 Info*, *SIR*, and *VoA* reported on the visit to Serbia.

BETA, *Danas*, *Eurocomunicazione*, *Espresso*, *Felvidek*, *Front News*, *FrontLine*, *Georgia Today*, *Hirado.hu*, *Index.hu*, *KarpatInfo.net*, *Konkurent.ua*, *Modern diplomacy*, *MTI*, *Oslobodenje*, *SardegnaGol*, *SIR*, *Suspilne.media*, and *Ukrinform* covered the Commissioner's work in relation to Russia's war against Ukraine.

The visit to the Czech Republic was covered by *BNE Intellinews*, *BRNO Daily*, *CTK*, *EFE*, *EurActiv*, *Expats.cz*, *Felvidek*, *La Vanguardia*, *MTI*, *Nemzeti*, *PlzenDnes.cz*, *Prague Morning*, *Radio Prague*, *Romea.cz*, *SwissInfo*, *TASR*, and *Teraz.sk*.

Other topics covered by the media were *the situation of children transferred to Russia and Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine* (*Agence Europe*, *Balkan Insight*, *DW*, *The Insider*, *The Irish Times*, *Ukrinform*, *Zmina.info*), *artificial intelligence* (*ANSA*, *DO.se*, *Lawnet.gr*, *La Vanguardia*), *the situation of Crimean Tatars* (*Qirim News*), *Transitional justice* (*The Irish Post*, *Open Democracy*), *the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh* (*Aravot*, *ArmenPress*, *News.am*), *women's rights* (*Nemzeti*, *Times of Malta*) and *the Commissioner's Observations ahead of the 4th Summit of the Council of Europe* (*Agence Europe*).

41 tweets were published, generating 924,700 impressions in total and an engagement rate of 2.9% and boosting the number of followers by 1347 (an increase of 2%). On Facebook, 38 posts reached 33,206 people and garnered 169 new page likes and 144 new subscribers (up 0.9%).

The Commissioner's website registered almost 170 000 page views and more than 87 000 unique visitors in the period under review.