

# TOWARDS A NEW DEMOCRATIC PACT FOR EUROPE



*Report  
of the Secretary General  
of the Council of Europe*

**2025**

# **TOWARDS A NEW DEMOCRATIC PACT FOR EUROPE**

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of the Secretary General  
of the Council of Europe  
2025*

**French edition**

*Vers un nouveau pacte  
démocratique pour l'Europe*

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Alain Berset  
Secretary General of the Council of Europe

# MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY GENERAL

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This report comes out at a time when too many Europeans are angry and afraid.

Angry as they watch democracy chipped away, crisis after crisis, with nothing but contempt for the rule of law and human rights. They are also afraid because they feel left out of the decisions that will shape the future of their continent. And how could it be otherwise, when the rules-based order that emerged after the Second World War is unravelling before our very eyes?

Today, Europe faces a perfect storm – war, shifting geopolitics, democratic backsliding, rising impunity, climate crisis, disinformation, rapid technological change and a retreat from co-operation into nationalism and protectionism. It threatens to undo the peace, stability and hard-won progress the Council of Europe has helped deliver across an entire continent over the past 75 years.

My priorities are clear: standing with Ukraine in its fight for freedom and justice; revitalising our democracies under strain; and keeping our whole European family strong and united.

This is not a time for double standards. Nor can we afford tactics like “foreign influence” laws that divide us. Now, more than ever, we need the Council of Europe to be the lighthouse in the storm – 46 proud member states, equal in their diversity, uniquely positioned to help shape Europe’s future geopolitical and security architecture.

Real security means resilient institutions people can trust, laws that apply equally to everyone and the kind of stability that allows democracy to grow. As the challenges facing our societies evolve, it also means addressing issues including migration, cybersecurity, terrorism, human trafficking and more.

That is only possible when we have democratic security – one built on free and fair elections, independent courts, free media, anti-corruption frameworks, gender equality, diversity, social justice, inclusive civic space and active participation in public life.

Without democratic security, no defence package is big enough, and no army strong enough, to keep us safe.

Europe’s future and values do not stop at our borders. That is why we need to engage more with the Global South, BRICS countries and our partners outside Europe. The Council of Europe was never just about lines on a map. It is about the values we share – human rights, democracy and the rule of law. If Europe wants to matter, it must stand where those values are on the line.

As this report makes clear, these values are under assault.

We see it at the ballot box.

Electoral integrity is weakening in some states due to rushed legal changes and weak campaign finance rules. Disinformation, foreign interference and misuse of public resources are distorting campaigns. Media restrictions, voter intimidation and limits on observers are raising serious concerns about transparency and fairness.

For too many, safety and dignity are still out of reach.

Violence remains widespread – nearly one in three women face partner violence, and one in six experience sexual violence. Anti-rights movements and digital threats are rising, with online hate increasingly targeting women, especially public figures. Peaceful protesters face excessive force, while arbitrary bans continue to silence politically sensitive demonstrations. Anti-migrant, antisemitic and anti-Muslim rhetoric is spreading in a climate of rising geopolitical tensions.

A free society depends on free voices.

Most recently, some have accused Europe of turning its back on free speech. But freedom of expression is a pillar of our democracies, protected every day by the European Court of Human Rights (the Court).

There is no room for complacency. Journalists face threats, harassment and abusive lawsuits, including in established democracies. Public service media are under growing political and financial pressure.

And we must remain vigilant. So-called foreign influence laws are shrinking civic space in several states. Youth disengagement persists, especially among marginalised groups. Young women face added challenges in politics – even as they lead on climate, equality and human rights.

Justice must be independent to be trusted.

Political interference in judicial appointments and governance remains a major threat in several states. Public attacks on judges and blurred lines between accountability and control are eroding trust.

Technology is transforming society and exposing new vulnerabilities.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital health are reshaping care, raising new concerns around autonomy and trust. Cybercrime is surging, with AI-driven threats undermining privacy and democracy. Online abuse targeting children is on the rise, including AI-generated content, yet many states still lack strong child-protection systems.

Building the Europe of tomorrow will not be easy. But we have been there before.

We cannot meet today's challenges with yesterday's playbook. And we must never forget that democracy is our first line of defence.

What Europe needs is a reset: a New Democratic Pact for Europe.

This is our chance to bring the vision of the 10 Reykjavik Principles of Democracy to life and turn them into action.

This new pact calls for confronting democratic backsliding in all its forms and standing firm against polarisation and disinformation, both online and offline. It means addressing urgent challenges like climate change – where it happens and where it hurts. And it hinges on our ability to restore trust in democracy by making it tangible in people's daily lives through participation, accountability and equal access to rights.

Because what is at stake is nothing less than Europe's security, the values we share and our place in the world.



**Alain Berset**

Secretary General of the Council of Europe

# THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AT A GLANCE

**T**he Council of Europe is Europe's leading organisation in the fields of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Founded in 1949 in Strasbourg, it brings together 46 member states and more than 700 million people, united by the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5, the Convention), adopted in Rome in 1950. The European Court of Human Rights, based in Strasbourg, is part of the Council of Europe and ensures compliance with the Convention. It is composed of 46 judges, one for each member state, and is the only international court where individuals can bring cases directly against states for human rights violations, with judgments that are legally binding. This shared legal space guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms and represents a death penalty-free zone across the continent.

■ The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, made up of foreign ministers or their representatives, is the Organisation's main decision-making body. It has supervised the implementation of over 25 000 judgments from the Court, benefiting people in countless ways. The Organisation is led by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, currently Alain Berset, elected in 2024.

■ The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe includes 306 members of parliament from all member states. It elects the Secretary General, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and judges to the Court, and it serves as a pan-European forum for democratic debate, election observation and the defence of Council of Europe values. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (the Congress) brings together more than 600 elected representatives to promote grassroots democracy. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, with an independent mandate since 1999 to promote and protect human rights, raises awareness and engages with national authorities and civil society.

■ Over the years, the Council of Europe has adopted more than 200 legally binding treaties on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. These include instruments such as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, Istanbul Convention), the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, Lanzarote Convention) and conventions on human trafficking, cybercrime and data protection, now with global reach. The European Social Charter (ETS No. 35, the Charter) protects economic and social rights, with 42 countries as parties and 16 allowing collective complaints. The Council of Europe also works on democratic citizenship, education, youth participation, media freedom, sport integrity and artificial intelligence, including the adoption of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (CETS No. 225) in May 2024, the first legally binding international treaty on AI.

■ Monitoring and advisory bodies of the Council of Europe, such as the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), the Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL), the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) help ensure compliance with European standards. Through its European Programme for Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (HELP) Programme, the Council of Europe provides free online training in human rights for legal professionals and the wider public. The Organisation monitors the rights of national minorities and regional languages. The Council of Europe's Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists (Safety of Journalists Platform) has issued over 2 000 alerts since 2015, spotlighting threats to press freedom. It also supports civil society, including in Belarus, through dialogue and targeted assistance.





\*All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

Map and flags for illustrative purposes – Designed by Latitude Mapping Ltd

# COUNCIL OF EUROPE MEMBER STATES



**Belgium**  
5 May 1949



**Denmark**  
5 May 1949



**France**  
5 May 1949



**Ireland**  
5 May 1949



**Italy**  
5 May 1949



**Luxembourg**  
5 May 1949



**Netherlands**  
5 May 1949



**Norway**  
5 May 1949



**Sweden**  
5 May 1949



**United Kingdom**  
5 May 1949



**Greece**  
9 August 1949



**Iceland**  
7 March 1950



**Türkiye**  
13 April 1950



**Germany**  
13 July 1950



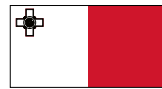
**Austria**  
16 April 1956



**Cyprus**  
24 May 1961



**Switzerland**  
6 May 1963



**Malta**  
29 April 1965



**Portugal**  
22 September 1976



**Spain**  
24 November 1977



**Liechtenstein**  
23 November 1978



**San Marino**  
16 November 1988



**Finland**  
5 May 1989



**Hungary**  
6 November 1990



**Poland**  
26 November 1991



**Bulgaria**  
7 May 1992



**Estonia**  
14 May 1993



**Lithuania**  
14 May 1993



**Slovenia**  
14 May 1993



**Czechia**  
30 June 1993



**Slovak Republic**  
30 June 1993



**Romania**  
7 October 1993



**Andorra**  
10 November 1994



**Latvia**  
10 February 1995



**Albania**  
13 July 1995



**Republic of Moldova**  
13 July 1995



**North Macedonia**  
9 November 1995



**Ukraine**  
9 November 1995



**Croatia**  
6 November 1996



**Georgia**  
27 April 1999



**Armenia**  
25 January 2001



**Azerbaijan**  
25 January 2001



**Bosnia and Herzegovina**  
24 April 2002



**Serbia**  
3 April 2003



**Monaco**  
5 October 2004



**Montenegro**  
11 May 2007





# CHAPTER 1

## DEMOCRATIC VALUES

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### INTRODUCTION

■ Democracy is more than a framework of institutions and processes; it rests on fundamental values and safeguards that ensure those in power uphold human rights and the rule of law. Essential democratic freedoms – such as freedom of expression, access to information, artistic and cultural liberty and the rights to association and assembly – must be protected by law and embraced by society. To sustain democracy, these freedoms, along with the principles of equality, respect, pluralism and justice, should be deeply embedded in education and public policy, particularly in areas affecting youth and culture.

■ Over the past two years, challenges to fundamental freedoms have continued to grow. The weakening of traditional media has made it increasingly difficult to counter disinformation, which has affected electoral and other democratic processes in several member states and contributed to societal polarisation. Efforts to address online disinformation have yet to demonstrate their full effectiveness. Meanwhile, laws criminalising free speech remain in place, abusive defamation lawsuits persist and arbitrary regulatory decisions continue to undermine media independence. Threats and attacks against journalists, both online and offline, coupled with inadequate or delayed responses from authorities, further strain the media landscape.

■ The rights to association and assembly continue to face challenges in several member states. While some positive steps have been taken, restrictive laws and practices persist. Several states have introduced or considered far-reaching foreign influence laws, designating certain organisations as agents of foreign powers. Civil society organisations (CSOs) supporting refugees and migrants face undue restrictions, often through burdensome requirements imposed under anti-terrorism legislation.

■ Restrictions on freedom of assembly, including the excessive use of force to disperse peaceful protests, remain a serious concern. Authorities continue to impose disproportionate sanctions on demonstrators, with mass arrests targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) activists, women's rights defenders, environmental protesters and journalists in multiple countries.

■ Education is a formidable force for developing understanding and adherence to democratic values among young people. Many states have embraced the Council of Europe's Reference Framework for Democratic Culture, which fosters inclusivity in schools and tackles segregation. Language and history education increasingly promote pluralism and critical thinking. At the same time, young people are increasingly disengaged from voting and civic life. Their detachment from politics is deepened by discrimination, economic inequality, mental health struggles, hate speech and polarisation. Efforts to lower the voting age to 16 and amplify youth voices in political debates have so far yielded limited results.

■ Arts and culture offer a vital space for democratic participation, especially for young people. Some governments have bolstered support for the cultural and creative sectors, recognising their role in fostering pluralism, civic engagement and human rights, particularly for minorities and marginalised groups. Challenges persist, from funding cuts to censorship, artist intimidation and political pressure on cultural institutions.



## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

### Key findings

- ▶ Reforms in some countries have strengthened protections for press freedom; however, it remains under strain due to persistent restrictive laws, abusive lawsuits and threats against journalists.
- ▶ Public service media face increased political and financial pressures.
- ▶ Disinformation continues to undermine democratic processes, especially concerning elections and politically sensitive issues. In response, stronger regulatory measures are gaining traction in some member states.
- ▶ Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has severely affected freedom of expression, with journalists facing physical threats and targeted attacks in occupied and conflict areas. The war has fuelled propaganda and censorship, undermining access to reliable information. Ukrainian journalists operate under extreme risk and face threats that include killings, kidnappings and intimidation.
- ▶ Growing repression has forced many journalists into exile, where they face financial hardship, legal obstacles and transnational repression. And yet they continue to play a vital role in informing the public when local media is silenced.

■ Freedom of expression and media pluralism remained under strain across Council of Europe member states in the last two years. Independent assessments depict a mixed picture, with an alarming number of states failing to provide adequate protection for media freedom.<sup>1</sup>

■ Polarisation and information manipulation have eroded trust in the media, with public service media (PSM) remaining the most trusted source, while social media and influencers gain prominence, particularly among younger audiences.

### Legal and institutional reforms

■ Despite constitutional guarantees, freedom of expression remains inadequately protected in many states due to restrictive laws – some longstanding, others newly introduced. The European Court of Human Rights is the judicial body of the Council of Europe. It adopted key rulings on Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, addressing new legal questions related to whistle-blowing, online speech and publications,<sup>2</sup> and depictions of same-sex relationships in children's literature.<sup>3</sup>

■ The European Union adopted its own [European Media Freedom Act](#), which is largely aligned with Council of Europe standards, strengthens legal safeguards and is expected to drive reforms in the 27 European Union member states and beyond. Meanwhile, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has noted progress in defamation laws, judicial practices and other freedom of speech-related regulations<sup>4</sup> but remains concerned about the broad scope of laws criminalising expression and the disproportionate use of criminal sanctions and excessive civil sanctions.

### Threats against journalists

■ The Council of Europe's Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists (Safety of Journalists Platform) issued its first set of systemic alerts on [defamation laws and practices](#) across nine member states. In Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska, legislation [re-criminalising defamation](#) and other forms of expression was introduced, exacerbating concerns over abusive lawsuits designed to silence journalists and

1. See the latest [Europe Press Freedom Report](#) of the Council of Europe's Safety of Journalists Platform.

2. [Sanchez v. France](#) [GC] (Application No. 45581/15, 15 May 2023); [Hurbain v. Belgium](#) [GC] (Application No. 57292/16, 4 July 2023).

3. [Macatè v. Lithuania](#) [GC] (Application No. 61435/19, 23 January 2023).

4. The supervision of execution of the European Court of Human Rights' judgments was consequently closed in: *Simić v. Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2023\)16](#); *Bozhkov v. Bulgaria*, Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2023\)339](#); *Miljević and two other cases v. Croatia*, Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2024\)361](#) and *Stojanović v. Croatia*, Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2024\)66](#); *Eerikainen and Others and Mariapori v. Finland*, Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2023\)321](#); *Baldassi and others v. France*, Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2023\)78](#); *Marcinkevičius v. Lithuania*, Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2024\)35](#); *Rodriguez Ravelo v. Spain*, Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2023\)451](#); *Radio Broadcasting Company B92 AD v. Serbia*, Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2024\)399](#). Additionally, in Greece, the offence of simple defamation was decriminalised, see Article 136 of Law 5090/2024 including with the decriminalisation of the offence of simple defamation.

public watchdogs. The need for structural safeguards against strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) has been underlined in recent Council of Europe instruments.<sup>5</sup>

■ The former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, highlighted persistent challenges to freedom of expression in Türkiye,<sup>6</sup> while the Committee of Ministers has called for clear legal safeguards to ensure that the exercise of this right is not treated as a criminal offence. In Azerbaijan, authorities have been urged to take meaningful steps towards legal reforms and to release individuals imprisoned for expressing dissent,<sup>7</sup> and concerns have been expressed about the arbitrary application of criminal provisions.<sup>8</sup>

## Disinformation

■ Disinformation campaigns have spread false narratives about Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and marginalised groups, including migrants and LGBTI communities. These campaigns increasingly fuel anti-European sentiment, strengthen extremism and undermine democratic values.

■ Disinformation thrives in weak media environments. While traditional media remain central to political news, the rise of social media has intensified the spread of disinformation, including misleading AI-generated content. Elections in 2023 and 2024 in 41 member states highlighted the risks of information manipulation in electoral processes. Russian-linked disinformation has been a notable concern in electoral processes,<sup>9</sup> particularly in the Republic of Moldova.<sup>10</sup> Similar trends were observed in the lead-up to the European Parliament elections and following the annulled presidential vote in Romania.<sup>11</sup>

■ The impact of disinformation requires case-by-case assessment, and responses should be compliant with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Robust legal frameworks governing online political campaigns – including transparency in advertising, campaign financing and platform algorithms – are essential. Independent fact-checking, media literacy programmes, critical thinking campaigns and collaborative initiatives such as the [EU Rapid Response System](#) play a key role in building resilience against disinformation.

## Surveillance, protection of sources and media regulation

■ The protection of journalistic sources, particularly against digital surveillance, remains a pressing issue. While the United Kingdom has amended its legislation on secret surveillance to align with Convention standards,<sup>12</sup> concerns persist<sup>13,14</sup> over spyware abuse targeting journalists and activists in several member states, highlighting the need for stronger legal safeguards.<sup>15</sup>

■ The Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (CETS No. 205, [Tromsø Convention](#)), the first international treaty guaranteeing access to official documents, now has 15 states parties.<sup>16</sup> A first monitoring cycle covering 11 states found that while some improvements are necessary core national legislation is broadly compatible with the Tromsø Convention.<sup>17</sup>

5. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2024\)2](#) on countering the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [Resolution 2531\(2024\)](#) "Countering strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs): an imperative for a democratic society".

6. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, "[Memorandum on freedom of expression and of the media, human rights defenders and civil society in Türkiye](#)", CommHR(2024)16, 5 March 2024.

7. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, [Letter to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan](#).

8. *Mahmudov and Agazade group v. Azerbaijan*, [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1507/H46-3](#).

9. See the [election observation reports](#) of the Parliamentary Assembly from 2023 and 2024.

10. As reported by the [Parliamentary Assembly](#) of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE-ODHIR).

11. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-PI\(2025\)001-e](#), Urgent Report on the cancellation of election results by Constitutional Courts, especially paragraphs 52-59.

12. Two cases against the United Kingdom, Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2024\)429](#), 11 December 2024.

13. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, "[Highly intrusive spyware threatens the essence of human rights](#)", [Human Rights Comment](#), 27 January 2023.

14. Parliamentary Assembly, Resolution 2513 (2023) and Recommendation 2258 (2023) "[Pegasus and similar spyware and secret State surveillance](#)", adopted 11 October 2023.

15. For a summary of relevant case law of the Court, see the Parliamentary Assembly report "[Pegasus and similar spyware and secret State surveillance](#)", Doc. 15825, 20 September 2023, paragraphs 64-72.

16. The Tromsø Convention will also enter into force for North Macedonia, following its ratification on 13 November 2024.

17. Documents are available on the country monitoring pages of [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Estonia](#), [Finland](#), [Hungary](#), [Iceland](#), [Lithuania](#), the [Republic of Moldova](#), [Montenegro](#), [Norway](#), [Sweden](#) and [Ukraine](#). See also the relevant observations of the Council of Europe Group of States against Corruption, [Anti-corruption trends, challenges and good practices in Europe & the United States of America](#), 24th General Activity Report (2023), March 2023.

■ Far-reaching so-called foreign agents' laws and restrictive legislation on peaceful protest continue to threaten the freedom of expression. In Georgia, new legislation limiting the portrayal of LGBTI people appears to be incompatible with the requirements of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>18</sup>

## Journalist safety and impunity for attacks

■ Violence and threats against journalists remain a major concern, undermining their ability to fulfil their democratic role. The Committee of Ministers has called for stronger protection measures and welcomed successful prosecutions of those who have attacked journalists in some cases.<sup>19</sup>

■ Beyond Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, in which journalists have suffered direct violence, threats against media workers persist outside conflict zones. While fatal attacks on journalists declined in 2023 and 2024, with three media workers killed each year, impunity remains widespread. The Safety of Journalists Platform has [documented](#) 24 unresolved cases of murdered journalists in Council of Europe member states and 32 cases across Europe.

■ Serious attacks on media professionals [rose](#) to 77 in 2024, with journalists covering protests and, notably, LGBTI rights facing heightened risks.

■ In 2024, the situation in Georgia worsened significantly,<sup>20</sup> with a threefold increase in alerts on the Safety of Journalists Platform, reflecting in particular a rise in attacks and threats against journalists covering demonstrations.

■ Threats and verbal attacks against journalists, including from politicians and public officials, remain a serious issue. Smear campaigns aimed at silencing journalists in Serbia were condemned by both the former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights<sup>21</sup> and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression.<sup>22</sup>

■ Despite efforts, institutional responses to attacks on journalists remain largely ineffective, leaving press freedom in a fragile state. The Council of Europe's [Journalists Matter](#) campaign, launched in October 2023, has encouraged member states to take [steps](#) in line with the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors.<sup>23</sup>

■ Journalists and media actors continued to be detained in member states, with rising numbers of those arrested while covering demonstrations and protests. As of 15 March 2025, the Council of Europe's Safety of Journalists Platform [recorded](#) 171 journalists in detention in Europe, including 98 in member states of the Council of Europe. Julian Assange was released in the United Kingdom after pleading guilty to one charge of espionage.<sup>24</sup>

## Media pluralism and public service media

■ Despite progress in some countries,<sup>25</sup> media pluralism remains under pressure due to a combination of factors, including concentrated media ownership, the dominance of digital markets by a few major platforms<sup>26</sup> and continued financial struggles within the media sector. While transparency of media ownership is improving, online media remains an area of concern.<sup>27</sup>

18. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)021-e](#), Georgia – Opinion on the draft constitutional law on Protecting Family Values and Minors and a letter from the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, [CommHR/MOF/sf 095-2024](#).

19. *Khadija Ismayilova v. Azerbaijan*, [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1501/H46-3](#) and *Dink v. Turkey*, [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1514/H46-35](#). See also the Safety of Journalists Platform, Alert No. [120/2024](#) (Georgia).

20. [Secretary General concludes visit to Georgia](#), 20 December 2024.

21. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, [Report following her visit to Serbia](#), CommHR(2023)25, 6 September 2023, p. 16.

22. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, ["Serbia: UN expert alarmed by rise in hateful rhetoric after mass shootings"](#), 5 June 2023.

23. Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2016\)4](#) on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors.

24. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 2571 (2024) ["The detention and conviction of Julian Assange and their chilling effects on human rights"](#).

25. See the 2023 Communication on EU enlargement policy, Republic of Moldova 2023 Report, SWD(2023) 698 final, 8 November 2023.

26. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, Media Pluralism Monitor 2024 [MPM 2024](#), p. 5. See also [Euromedia Ownership Monitor](#).

27. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

■ The economic sustainability of journalism<sup>28</sup> is deteriorating, marked by increasing editorial interference and weak regulatory and self-regulatory frameworks.<sup>29</sup> Political influence over the media remains a challenge, particularly due to dependence on public advertising. Strong and independent public service media are essential to ensuring pluralism and accountability.<sup>30</sup> While regulatory improvements were reported in several member states,<sup>31</sup> concerns persist over the independence of PSM, particularly regarding funding, management appointments and editorial autonomy.<sup>32</sup>

■ In Slovakia, a new law replacing the public broadcaster with a new entity,<sup>33</sup> leading to the premature dismissal of its management, has drawn criticism from the Commissioner.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, progress in strengthening the independence of media regulators has been noted in the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Ireland, while reforms are underway in Estonia, Spain and Sweden.<sup>35</sup>

## Journalists in exile

■ The increasing repression of independent journalism in the world has led to a rise in journalists being forced into exile in Europe. Investigative reporters, commentators and media professionals, notably from Russia and Belarus, have faced escalating threats, legal harassment, arbitrary detention and physical violence, leaving them with no option but to flee their homes.

■ Journalists in exile face significant challenges, including financial instability, difficulties in securing work permits and the loss of professional networks. They also face ongoing threats from transnational repression, including online harassment, surveillance and politically motivated legal action under national security or defamation laws. Despite these pressures, exiled journalists play a crucial role in upholding press freedom, as they continue to report from abroad through independent digital platforms and international collaborations.

■ Several member states support exiled journalists through relocation programmes, grants and media hubs that offer legal and professional assistance. However, stronger protections against transnational repression and enhanced international solidarity are needed to ensure their safety, sustainability and continued role in independent journalism.

28. Ibid., p. 6, data referred only to the 27 EU member states.

29. Ibid., pp. 6 and 94-95.

30. EBU Media Intelligence Service, Democracy and Public Service Media, October 2023.

31. See the European Union "Rule of law report", 2023 and 2024.

32. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, "Media Pluralism Monitor 2024", *MPM 2024*, p. 128. See also the Safety of Journalists Platform, Alert Nos. 251/2023 (Georgia), 144/2023 and 190/2023 (Italy), 180/2024 (Belgium) and 211/2024 (Spain).

33. Safety of Journalists Platform, Alert No. 37/2024 "Government proposal challenges independence of public broadcaster RTVS".

34. Letter from the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, "Slovak Republic: new draft laws risk having a chilling effect on civil society and interfering with independence of public service media".

35. European Union, "2023 Rule of law report –The rule of law situation in the European Union".



## FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

### Key findings

- ▶ Some states have made legal reforms to improve protections for demonstrators. Excessive use of force against protesters remains a concern, particularly in cases involving LGBTI activists and environmental protesters.
- ▶ Restrictive protest laws are still in place in several countries, including laws imposing disproportionate sanctions on peaceful protesters. Arbitrary bans on demonstrations continue, notably affecting politically sensitive ones.
- ▶ Some countries have implemented reforms to streamline protest authorisation processes.
- ▶ Efforts to ensure more inclusive participation in assemblies have advanced, with improvements in protecting LGBTI and minority rights demonstrations in some states.

■ The right to freedom of assembly is a fundamental right in a democratic society and one of its essential foundations. As such, it should not be interpreted restrictively. However, this right is not absolute. Organisers and participants who incite or engage in violence fall outside the notion of peaceful assembly or otherwise oppose the principles of a democratic society that are protected by Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights. However, individuals participating in protests where others resort to violence still retain their rights if they remain peaceful in their own intentions or behaviour.<sup>36</sup>

■ States may impose certain restrictions on assemblies, but these must be clearly defined by law<sup>37</sup> and limited to the legitimate aims enumerated in paragraph 2 of Article 11 of the Convention. Authorities may require advance notification of public events and impose sanctions for non-compliance. However, unreasonably denying authorisation or imposing excessive restrictions on the time, place or manner of an assembly risks undermining the right itself.

■ The European Court of Human Rights and the Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) have emphasised that failure to provide prior notification does not grant authorities unrestricted power to disperse assemblies or penalise peaceful participants. Peaceful assemblies should not be dispersed solely because of a lack of authorisation, and participants should not face arrest or prosecution. Laws allowing severe sanctions for non-violent protests have a chilling effect on public participation and political debate.

### Excessive use of force and legislative restrictions

■ While some states have made progress, restrictive laws and practices remain in place in others. Political tensions or specific events continue to trigger disproportionate restrictions on assemblies, including the excessive use of force by law enforcement.

■ In Armenia, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe welcomed judicial developments that allow individuals to challenge restrictions or prohibitions on assemblies and seek compensation.<sup>38</sup>

■ In recent judgments, the Court has found violations of the right to freedom of assembly in Azerbaijan,<sup>39</sup> concerning outright refusals by the authorities to authorise peaceful public assemblies and measures taken to sanction participants in unauthorised but peaceful gatherings, including administrative arrest and detention.<sup>40</sup> The judgments highlight the risk that a restrictive authorisation regime, combined with the use of forced dispersals and administrative arrests of participants, can substantially reduce the possibilities for peaceful protest.

36. See *Laurijsen and Others v. the Netherlands* (Application No. 56896/17, 21 November 2023) and *Shmorgunov and Others v. Ukraine* (Application Nos. 15367/14 and 13 others, paragraphs 490-491), 21 January 2021.

37. *Auray and Others v. France* (Application No. 1162/22, 8 February 2024). In the light of improvements to the legal framework concerning the kettling of demonstrators by the police, the case was closed by the Committee of Ministers in February 2025, Final Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2025\)12](#).

38. *Mushegh Saghatelian group v. Armenia* [CM/Del/Dec\(2023\)1475/H46-3](#).

39. *Mustafa Haji and Others v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 69483/13, 6 October 2022), *Karimli and Others v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 8928/20, 14 November 2024), *Bagirov and Others v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 53360/18), 8 February 2024.

40. *Ahmadli and Others v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 26163/22, 8 February 2024). On 24 July 2023, the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, addressed a [letter](#) to Azerbaijan's Minister of Internal Affairs, Vilayat Eyvazov, expressing concerns over the excessive use of force and arrests in the context of peaceful protests in the village of Soyudlu.

The measures required to implement cases concerning freedom of assembly in Azerbaijan are followed by the Committee of Ministers in the cases of *Gafgaz Mammadov group v. Azerbaijan*.<sup>41</sup>

■ In March 2024, the former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights released a memorandum outlining a hostile environment for freedom of expression, journalists, human rights defenders and civil society in Türkiye. The memorandum highlighted frequent bans, excessive police force, mass arrests and criminal charges against demonstrators, particularly those supporting LGBTI rights, women's rights and environmental activism.<sup>42</sup>

■ The former Commissioner called for investigations into excessive force and expressed regret over the continued eight-year ban on the International Women's Day march in Istanbul.<sup>43</sup>

■ The Committee of Ministers, in a March 2023 interim resolution, noted positive judicial developments in case law, particularly in Türkiye's Constitutional Court. However, it stressed that legislative reform remains necessary to prevent the arbitrary use of blanket bans on peaceful assemblies.<sup>44</sup>

■ During the 2023 pension reform protests in France, the former Commissioner, while acknowledging violent incidents against law enforcement, stressed that isolated acts of violence do not justify excessive force against demonstrators.<sup>45</sup>

■ In Spain, in May 2023, the former Commissioner's report raised concerns over the 2015 Law on Citizens' Safety and the Criminal Code, citing disproportionate use of force, anti-riot weapons and the lack of visible police identification during protests.<sup>46</sup>

■ In a letter to the President of the Italian Senate,<sup>47</sup> the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights urged senators to refrain from adopting the Bill on Public Security unless it is substantially amended to align with Council of Europe human rights standards. The Commissioner expressed concern that its vague provisions could lead to arbitrary and disproportionate penalties for protests, including traffic disruption and passive resistance in detention settings.

■ During his visit to Georgia in December 2024, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe urged the authorities to refrain from the disproportionate use of force and to respect fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of expression and assembly.<sup>48</sup> In December 2024, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe monitoring co-rapporteurs expressed concern<sup>49</sup> over police brutality against peaceful demonstrators.

■ The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, at the end of his visit to Georgia in January 2025, noted the excessive use of force against protesters and the lack of accountability for law enforcement and masked individuals. He regretted the introduction of new protest restrictions, including a ban on face coverings and harsher penalties, which were imposed without consultation. Stressing that such measures should not undermine peaceful assembly, he called for law-enforcement officers to display proper identification to ensure accountability.<sup>50</sup>

## State obligations to protect inclusive participation

■ States have a duty not only to avoid undue interference with assemblies but also to actively ensure inclusive participation in practice, free from discrimination.

■ In the Republic of Moldova, the Committee of Ministers recognised sustained improvements in protecting demonstrations, including LGBTI Pride events, which took place peacefully in 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2022.<sup>51</sup>

41. *Gafgaz Mammadov group v. Azerbaijan* (CM/Del/Dec(2024)1492/H46-2).

42. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, "Memorandum on freedom of expression and of the media, human rights defenders and civil society in Türkiye", 5 March 2024.

43. Ibid., page 11.

44. *Oya Ataman group v. Turkey*, Interim Resolution CM/ResDH(2023)39.

45. Statement of the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, "Demonstrations in France: freedoms of expression and assembly must be protected against all forms of violence".

46. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, Report following her country visit to Spain from 21 to 25 November 2022.

47. Letter addressed to the President of the Senate of Italy, 16 December 2024.

48. Press release, "Secretary General Alain Berset concludes his visit to Georgia".

49. Press release, "PACE monitors express concern at the arrest of opposition leaders and police brutality against journalists and peaceful protesters in Georgia".

50. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, country visit, "Georgia: Protect freedom of assembly and expression, ensure accountability for human rights violations and end stigmatisation of NGOs and LGBTI people".

51. *Genderdoc-M v. the Republic of Moldova* Final Resolution, CM/ResDH(2023)61.

■ In contrast, in December 2023, the Committee of Ministers noted continuing obstacles to the implementation of Court judgments that address the lack of protection from homophobic attacks in the context of freedom of assembly by the LGBTI community in Georgia.<sup>52</sup>

■ The following year, the Committee of Ministers expressed concern that, instead of addressing these issues, Georgia advanced legislation restricting freedom of expression and assembly on LGBTI-related matters.<sup>53</sup>

■ In its opinion on the draft constitutional law on protecting family values and minors in Georgia<sup>54</sup> the Venice Commission considered that by adopting the draft constitutional law, the authorities would risk reinforcing stigma and prejudice and encouraging homophobia, which are incompatible with the notions of equality, pluralism and tolerance inherent in a democratic society.

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52. *Identoba and Others v. Georgia*, [CM/Del/Dec\(2023\)1483/H46-13](#).

53. *Identoba and Others group v. Georgia*, [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1507/H46-9](#).

54. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)021](#).

## FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

### Key findings

- ▶ Restrictive foreign funding laws have expanded, with “foreign influence” legislation negatively affecting civil society – and potentially media outlets – in several member states.
- ▶ Challenges in terms of registering and operating non-governmental organisations continue, with administrative obstacles disproportionately affecting human rights organisations. Positive steps have been taken in some states to simplify registration processes.
- ▶ New relocation programmes have provided essential support to human rights defenders.
- ▶ The number of SLAPPs issued against activists continues to rise, but some countries have introduced measures to prevent these abusive lawsuits.
- ▶ States are improving participation of civil society in policy making, with digital platforms and consultation mechanisms being implemented to enhance civic engagement.

Freedom of association is a cornerstone of democracy, enabling individuals to form and join groups to pursue common objectives and participate in civic and political life. The strength of a democracy is reflected in the extent to which this right is protected in law and applied in practice. The European Court of Human Rights has consistently held that exceptions to the right to freedom of association are to be construed strictly and that only “convincing and compelling reasons” can justify restrictions on this freedom.

Freedom of association is also essential for minorities, including national, ethnic and religious groups, as it enables them to protect their rights, strengthen community ties and participate fully in democratic life. A vibrant civil society also depends on access to adequate resources, making the ability to seek, receive and use funding a fundamental aspect of this freedom.

### Restrictive legislation on foreign funding

The Council of Europe’s European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) has affirmed that the right to seek financial and material resources is integral to freedom of association. However, restrictive foreign funding laws continue to hinder civil society organisations. Despite the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights against Russia’s Foreign Agents Act,<sup>55</sup> more states are introducing or considering similar “foreign influence” laws that label such organisations as agents of foreign powers.<sup>56</sup>

In 2024, Georgia adopted the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, requiring non-profit organisations, media and other entities receiving over 20% of their funding from foreign sources to register as organisations “pursuing the interests of a foreign power”. The law has been widely criticised by the Venice Commission,<sup>57</sup> the Expert Council on NGO Law of the Conference of INGOs (CINGO)<sup>58</sup> and the international community for failing to meet the principles of legality, legitimacy, necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination. The Venice Commission raised concerns as to the compatibility of the law with human rights standards in the areas of freedom of association and assembly, as well as to its chilling effect on the work of media outlets and civil society organisations dealing with human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Hungary’s 2017 Law on the Transparency of Organisations Receiving Foreign Support was repealed in 2021 after being deemed incompatible with European Union law. However, in 2024, new national sovereignty legislation banned foreign funding for electoral campaigns and established the Sovereignty Protection Office, granting it broad powers to investigate civil society, media and other organisations suspected of serving foreign interests. The Venice Commission criticised the law’s vague wording, urged clearer definitions and called for the repeal of provisions related to the Sovereignty Protection Office.<sup>59</sup>

55. *Ecodefence and Others v. Russia* (Application Nos. 9988/13 and 60 others, judgment of 14 June 2022) and *Kobaliya and Others v. Russia*, (Application Nos. 39446/16 and 106 others, judgment of 22 October 2024).

56. In the period from 2023 to 2024, foreign influence laws were introduced in Georgia and considered in Bosnia and Herzegovina; see the CoE Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR *Joint opinion* (2023) on the draft law of the Republika Srpska on the special registry and publicity of the work of non-profit organisations (CDL-REF(2023)016). Ultimately, the Republika Srpska adopted the law in February 2025.

57. CoE Venice Commission, *CDL-AD(2024)020*, Urgent opinion on the Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence.

58. Conference of International Non-governmental Organisations (CINGO), Expert Council Opinion on the Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence (*CONF/EXP(2024)2*).

59. CoE Venice Commission, *CDL-AD(2024)001*, Opinion on Act LXXXVIII of 2023 on the Protection of National Sovereignty (Hungary).

■ National laws on money laundering and the financing of terrorism risk unduly restricting CSOs. The CINGO Expert Council flagged such issues in Türkiye<sup>60</sup> and Croatia,<sup>61</sup> citing Financial Action Task Force (FATF) recommendations.

■ In *Korkut and Amnesty International Türkiye v. Türkiye*,<sup>62</sup> the European Court of Human Rights ruled that imposing an administrative fine for failing to declare foreign funds violated Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights, as the relevant legal provision lacked foreseeability.

## Non-registration and dissolution of associations

■ The right to form associations is fundamental to freedom of association, yet burdensome registration requirements for CSOs remain a recurring issue before the European Court of Human Rights.

■ In 2023 and 2024, the Court found Azerbaijan and Russia in violation of Article 11 of the Convention for refusing to register applicant organisations.<sup>63</sup> Poland was found in breach of Article 11 of the Convention for dissolving an organisation because its name referenced an unrecognised nationality and because of the wording of two provisions of its memorandum of association,<sup>64</sup> while Austria violated Article 9 by failing to register an association as a religious community.<sup>65</sup>

■ For years, refusals to register associations or their dissolution on non-Convention-compliant grounds have hindered the execution of European Court of Human Rights judgments, closely monitored by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Many cases involve minority rights organisations, with Greece and Bulgaria establishing national working groups to find solutions.<sup>66</sup>

■ Challenges also persist for religious associations. In *Bulgarian Orthodox Old Calendar Church and Others v. Bulgaria*,<sup>67</sup> the Committee of Ministers stressed the need for legislative reforms or Convention-compliant judicial practices. The case of the Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese in North Macedonia was closed after the adoption of compliant national case law.<sup>68</sup>

## Harassment and prosecution of civil society

■ Concerns persist over obstacles faced by CSOs assisting refugees and migrants, including registration barriers, public stigmatisation and criminal sanctions in some states.<sup>69</sup>

■ In her 2023 report,<sup>70</sup> former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović highlighted the hostile environment for CSOs and human rights defenders in Serbia and urged authorities to protect their work and avoid inflammatory rhetoric. In December 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's Rapporteur on Serbia raised concerns about allegations of [surveillance](#) of journalists and activists, noting that the use of advanced spyware violated privacy rights and could undermine freedom of association.

■ In *Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea)*,<sup>71</sup> the European Court of Human Rights found multiple violations, including breaches of Articles 10 and 11 of the Convention. The Court established that, since 2014, an administrative practice in Crimea has involved the unlawful detention, prosecution and conviction of Ukrainian political activists for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association.

60. CINGO, Expert Council study "Stigmatisation of non-governmental organisations in Europe" (CONF/EXP(2024)1).

61. Opinion of CINGO Expert Council on the compatibility of amendments to the Croatia Law on Associations and the Law on Foundations with European Standards, 30 March 2023 (CONF/EXP(2023)2).

62. *Korkut and Amnesty International Türkiye v. Türkiye* (Application No. 61177/09, 9 May 2023).

63. *Election Monitoring and Democracy Education Centre and Others v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 70981/11, 12 January 2023) and *Mariya Alekhina and Others v. Russia (No. 2)* (Application No. 10299/15, 28 November 2023).

64. *Association of People of Silesian Nationality (in liquidation) v. Poland* (Application No. 26821/17, 14 March 2024).

65. *Föderation der Aleviten Gemeinden in Österreich v. Austria* (Application No. 64220/19, 5 March 2024).

66. *Bekir-Ousta and Others v. Greece*, CM/Del/Dec(2024)1514/H46-17 and *UMO Ilinden and Others v. Bulgaria*, CM/Del/Dec(2024)1507/H46-7.

67. *Bulgarian Orthodox Old Calendar Church and Others v. Bulgaria*, CM/Del/Dec(2024)1492/H46-5.

68. *Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese (Greek-Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese of the Peć Patriarchy) v. North Macedonia*, Final Resolution CM/ResDH(2024)310.

69. Thematic study of the CINGO Expert Council, "Civil society support to refugees and other migrants in Europe: The need to end the backlash on civil society space", 21 June 2024 (CONF/EXP(2024)3). See also the CINGO Opinion on the compatibility with European standards of Italian Decree Law No. 1 of 2 January 2023 on the management of migratory flows, 30 January 2023 (CONF/EXP(2023)1).

70. See <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-serbia-by-dunja-mijatovic-commissioner-for-human-rights-of-t/1680ac88cc>.

71. *Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea)* ([GC], Application Nos. 20958/14 and 38334/18, 25 June 2024).

## Positive developments

■ Despite persistent challenges, some positive developments have been noted.<sup>72</sup> Countries, including Armenia, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland and Romania, have taken steps to reduce administrative burdens on CSOs.<sup>73</sup> Others, such as Armenia, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Latvia, Poland and Slovenia, have introduced measures to enhance CSO participation in policy making, including through digital platforms.<sup>74</sup>

■ Several states have also established relocation programmes to support human rights defenders fleeing war zones or facing threats, including transnational repression.<sup>75</sup>

■ Access to funding remains a key challenge, particularly in states with foreign agent laws restricting CSOs' financial autonomy. Countries such as Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, the Republic of Moldova and Spain have introduced grant schemes and other support measures to stabilise CSO funding, strengthen advocacy efforts and protect civic space.<sup>76</sup>

■ Civil society activists and journalists increasingly face strategic lawsuits against public participation, aimed at silencing public criticism or investigations into powerful entities. Some member states have responded by strengthening national human rights institutions to protect civic space, including by designating them as SLAPP focal points (for instance Belgium and Romania).<sup>77</sup>

■ Some countries have taken positive steps, such as easing administrative burdens, promoting participation and supporting human rights defenders. Efforts to strengthen freedom of association remain essential to sustaining an enabling environment for civil society organisations, activists and journalists, an important condition for democratic resilience and the protection of fundamental rights across member states.

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72. Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH) [report](#) on its examination of the implementation of Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe.

73. Ibid., p. 4.

74. Ibid., pp. 6-8.

75. Ibid., p. 11.

76. Ibid., p. 12.

77. Ibid., p. 10.



## EDUCATION

### Key findings

- ▶ Education for democracy initiatives have expanded, with citizenship education gaining prominence across member states.
- ▶ Inclusion, equity and diversity have remained central to member states' efforts to ensure quality education for all.
- ▶ Digital citizenship education (DCE) is gaining pace, with the Council of Europe's [2025 European Year of Digital Citizenship Education](#) set to enhance awareness of and collaboration on digital citizenship in schools and universities across Europe, while addressing gaps in digital inclusion and accessibility.
- ▶ Higher education faces political pressures, but new initiatives, such as the Academic Freedom in Action programme, aim to uphold academic independence and democratic values.
- ▶ Students in all countries are facing new phenomena involving fraud in education, fuelled by the extensive use of technology and AI.

■ At the Reykjavik Summit, Council of Europe leaders prioritised education as a pillar of democracy. One of the Reykjavik Principles of Democracy calls on member states to promote youth participation in democratic life through human rights and democratic citizenship education, thus fostering pluralism, inclusion, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability.<sup>78</sup>

■ Building on this, ministers of education from 43 member states met in Strasbourg in September 2023 for the 26th Standing Conference, launching the Council of Europe Education Strategy 2030.<sup>79</sup> This strategy includes the European Space for Citizenship Education (ESCE), the 2025 European Year of Digital Citizenship Education and initiatives to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and protect academic freedom.

### Renewing the democratic and civic mission of education

■ Ministers of education have tasked the Council of Europe with unifying its work on education for democracy under the European Space for Citizenship Education. The two-year co-creation process was launched at a high-level [conference](#) in Berlin (October 2024), bringing together civil society, academia and youth organisations.

■ The ESCE will set common standards for high-quality citizenship education, expanding into areas such as early childhood education and vocational training. It will also provide a collaborative space for member states to exchange best practices and expertise.

■ A review of the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC)<sup>80</sup> found it widely integrated into education policies, curricula, resources and teacher training. More effort is needed to extend its use in vocational training and higher education.

- ▶ Secondary education has the highest integration, with 20 out of 23 surveyed countries incorporating the RFCDC.
- ▶ Primary education follows closely, implemented in 18 out of 23 countries.
- ▶ Lower integration is observed in vocational education and training (13 out of 23), higher education (9 out of 23) and adult education.

■ The *RFCDC Guidance document for vocational education and training*<sup>81</sup> – the first European framework for promoting a culture of democracy in vocational education and training (VET) – was drawn up by the Council of Europe and adopted by member states. It incorporates over 100 [practical examples](#) of democracy learning in VET that have been shared by member states. Further, at the request of member states, work began on developing guidelines for applying the RFCDC to education for sustainable development (ESD).

78. See Appendix III of the *Reykjavik Declaration*.

79. [Council of Europe Education Strategy 2024-2030 "Learners First – Education for Today's and Tomorrow's Democratic Societies"](#).

80. Council of Europe (2024), *Review of the implementation of the Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) 2023*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

81. Council of Europe (2024), *RFCDC Guidance document for vocational education and training*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

Member states continue to integrate the RFCDC into their education systems through Council of Europe programmes and national initiatives. New priorities identified by member states include addressing bullying and peer violence in Serbia, where the first national survey on these issues and student well-being was conducted. In North Macedonia, the RFCDC supports efforts to promote inclusive schools and combat segregation, aligning with the European Court of Human Rights ruling in *Elmazova and Others v. North Macedonia*.<sup>82</sup>

Higher education is key to addressing democratic challenges. In accordance with the Reykjavik Declaration, member states have prioritised protecting academic freedom amid growing political pressures. In response, the Council of Europe launched the Academic Freedom in Action initiative in 2024 to uphold academic freedom and strengthen higher education's role in sustaining democracy.

## Enhancing the social responsibility and responsiveness of education

Inclusion, equity and diversity are key to the second pillar of the “Learners first” education strategy. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture,<sup>83</sup> adopted in February 2022, supports plurilingual and intercultural education, addressing language learning, anti-migrant hostility and populist propaganda which claims that minority or migrant languages harm social cohesion. Despite these narratives, educators and policy makers across member states remain committed to advancing plurilingual and intercultural education.

A growing focus on regional and minority languages reflects this shift. One example is the [Romani Plurilingual Policy Experimentation initiative](#) under the Language Policy Programme, which supports the integration of Roma<sup>84</sup> students into mainstream education and promotes the Romani language as part of Europe's linguistic diversity.

The 2024 European Day of Languages saw exceptional engagement across member states with its theme, “[Languages for peace](#)”, underscoring the role of linguistic diversity and language education in promoting a culture of peace, living together and democracy.

In 2024, the [European Qualifications Passport for Refugees](#) issued its 1 200th passport, supporting displaced individuals to continue their education and careers across member states. Montenegro and Spain became the 23rd and 24th countries to join the programme, further expanding opportunities for refugees.

To enhance education systems' resilience and preparedness in emergencies, Italy and Albania piloted the Resilience Toolbox to ensure the right to education in times of emergencies and crisis. The toolbox aims to encourage inclusive and equitable education systems and to ensure continued learning during crises.

History education also plays an important role in fostering inclusive democratic societies. For 70 years, the Council of Europe has promoted quality history education based on shared values. However, the 2023 [General Report](#) on the State of History Teaching in Europe of the Council of Europe's Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTe) and findings from intergovernmental forums highlight persistent challenges.

While more diverse narratives have emerged, leading to greater recognition of women and minorities, history education remains insufficiently inclusive in many member states. Additionally, the manipulation of history has become a growing issue, amplified by digitalisation and social media. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine illustrates how history can be misused to justify aggression.

## Advancing education through a human rights-based digital transformation

At the 26th Standing Conference in September 2023, ministers of education of the member states designated 2025 as the European Year of Digital Citizenship Education. This initiative aims to raise awareness of and strengthen digital citizenship education in schools and universities. It will bring together public, private and civil society stakeholders to share best practices and resources, shaping a road map for digital citizenship in Europe in line with the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy.

82. *Elmazova and Others v. North Macedonia* (Application No. 11811/20).

83. Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2022\)1](#) on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture.

84. The term “Roma and Travellers” is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term “Gens du voyage”, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.



■ A review of the implementation of the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on developing and promoting digital citizenship education highlights key gaps in digital inclusion and accessibility across member states.<sup>85</sup>

- ▶ 5 countries explicitly reference DCE in their policies;
- ▶ 12 countries have structured teacher training on DCE;
- ▶ 20 countries have adopted digital inclusion plans;
- ▶ 2 countries have translated the DCE recommendation into their national languages.

■ The HISTOLAB Project demonstrates how digital tools help counter hate speech and historical disinformation through digital history education. A network of 184 experts and 49 civil society organisations collaborates via the digital project hub to share best practices. The OHTE general report found that 95% of history teachers see training in digital resources as a top priority, citing a lack of preparation in using digital tools effectively.

■ To uphold ethical standards in digital education, member states have supported a new initiative under the Council of Europe Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education ([ETINED platform](#)) to prevent fraud in education, including the misuse of technology and AI.

■ A survey of 5 333 students across 40 countries explored their views on technology's impact on education fraud.<sup>86</sup>

- ▶ Is technology part of the problem?
  - 37% agree that technology contributes to fraud.
  - 15% strongly agree, while 30% remain uncertain.
  - Only 18% disagree, suggesting that most students see a link between technology and fraud.
- ▶ Can technology help prevent fraud?
  - 39% believe technology can aid in fraud prevention.
  - 9% strongly agree that AI could help detect and verify academic credentials.
  - 41% are unsure, highlighting a need for greater awareness of AI's role in education.

85. "Review of the implementation of Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)10 on developing and promoting digital citizenship education", draft report, Steering Committee for Education, 7th Plenary session (forthcoming).

86. Council of Europe (2024), "Student perception and awareness of education fraud", Discussion document, Steering Committee for Education, 7th Plenary Session (unpublished).

## Key findings

- ▶ Youth participation in democracy is evolving, with new models such as youth councils, participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies gaining traction. Political disengagement remains a concern, particularly among marginalised youth.
- ▶ Voting age reforms have been introduced, with several states allowing voting at 16 or 17 to increase youth participation. Voter turnout among young people remains low in some countries.
- ▶ Economic and social barriers hinder youth engagement, with high unemployment, limited digital access in rural areas and mental health struggles affecting participation.
- ▶ Young women face additional challenges – particularly the chilling effect of digital violence – in political engagement, with fewer seeing themselves in leadership roles. At the same time, they are at the forefront of social movements advocating climate justice, feminism and human rights.

■ Young people are shaping 21st-century European societies amid expanding digital networks, shifting demographics and a rapidly changing environment.<sup>87</sup> The cyber, democratic and physical spaces they navigate are vastly different from those of previous generations. While definitions of youth vary across member states, the Council of Europe engages with young people aged 18 to 30.<sup>88</sup>

■ The [Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030](#) has led many countries to align policies and legislation. Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Ukraine have integrated its priorities into their youth policies. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Monaco and Türkiye have focused on specific aspects of the strategy in their national policies.

■ Following the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Reykjavik in May 2023, member states are prioritising youth participation in democracy. Across Europe, new approaches such as youth citizens' assemblies, local and regional youth councils and participatory budgeting are being tested, often driven by youth organisations.

■ These initiatives respond to demographic shifts, as young people represent a shrinking proportion of the population, with some countries experiencing overall population decline. At the same time, young people are mobilising around issues such as environmental protection, democratic values and the rule of law.<sup>89</sup>

■ However, shrinking civic space has made self-organisation more difficult, with funding for youth-led associations declining over the past three years.

■ Young people and member states are exploring ways to increase youth participation in local, national and European elections. To remove barriers and boost voter turnout, which often drops below 50%, Austria, Germany and Malta lowered the voting age.<sup>90</sup> For the 2024 European Parliament elections, Austria, Belgium, Germany and Malta allowed voting at 16, while Greece set the minimum age at 17.

■ Despite these efforts, factors such as social media algorithms, economic insecurity, limited representation and declining trust in institutions can discourage youth engagement. Vulnerable groups –including young people with disabilities, refugees, migrants, Roma, LGBTI people, young people in rural areas and those from low-income backgrounds – face additional challenges, which member states are [addressing](#) to varying degrees.

■ The [European Youth Work Agenda](#), a joint initiative of the Council of Europe and the European Union, calls for more resources for youth work organisations and authorities. Meanwhile, the [mental health of youth workers](#) has suffered, especially since Covid-19, despite their key role in supporting young people's well-being.

87. United Nations Environment Programme (2024), *Navigating New Horizons – A global foresight report on planetary health and human wellbeing* | UNEP – UN Environment Programme.

88. The broadest range for Council of Europe member states' youth policies is from 12 to 35 years. Most youth policies address young people between 14 and 27.

89. When it comes to the type of social and political issues young people are interested in, the main areas of interest are human rights (79% "very interested" and "rather interested"); health, mental health and well-being (78%); access to education and learning (77%); employment and labour rights (74%); and poverty and inequality (73%). Young people's interests focus particularly on social rights and social rights-related issues.

90. European data, [Understanding youth engagement in Europe through open data](#), 2023.

## Young women's participation in politics and activism

■ Surveys show that most young women see political participation as important, and many are engaged in some way. However, only one in four envisages running for office, and one in five has been discouraged from entering politics.<sup>91</sup> The European Union–Council of Europe Partnership in the field of Youth (Youth Partnership) survey covering 35 countries found that only 23% of young women believe their opinions are considered by their governments, compared to 31% of young men.<sup>92</sup>

■ Digital violence has a particularly chilling effect on the political engagement of young women, many of whom are discouraged from participating in public life because of the threat of abuse online. Online harassment, stalking and threats contribute to a hostile environment that undermines their safety and sense of belonging in political and civic spaces. For young women who are only beginning to form their identities as active citizens, the normalisation of such violence can be especially damaging and deter them from expressing opinions, engaging in debates or aspiring to leadership roles.<sup>93</sup>

■ Despite these challenges, young women play key roles in social movements, leading efforts for feminism, climate justice and racial justice. For example, research shows that over 60% of participants in the Fridays for Future movement are young women.<sup>94</sup>

## Youth, conflicts and digital challenges

■ According to the [Youth Progress Index 2023](#), 65% of young people in conflict-affected areas feel excluded from reconciliation efforts. Economic disparities and systemic discrimination also limit youth participation in peace building, with youth unemployment in marginalised communities averaging 18% higher than national rates in 2023, and little funding available for youth-led initiatives.

■ Digital platforms offer both opportunities and risks. While they foster intercultural dialogue, they also increase polarisation and hate speech. In 2024, Eurostat found that over 50% of young people had encountered online hate speech at least once. Intersectional discrimination remains widespread, disproportionately affecting young women, LGBTI young people and minorities.

■ Despite being digital natives, young people are largely excluded from digital governance and receive little support in navigating the power asymmetry of social media algorithms. Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, present both opportunities and challenges, particularly in education and employment. In 2023, 25% of automated hiring processes were found to exhibit biases against younger applicants.

■ Many young people are hitting structural barriers to accessing education, employment and healthcare. In 2024, youth unemployment rates averaged 16%, exceeding 25% in certain regions, as reported by the [Youth Progress Index 2023](#).

■ Youth [unemployment](#) often affects young women more than young men. In rural areas young people are 1.5 times more likely not to be in education, employment or training than in urban areas.<sup>95</sup> Some 30% of young people in rural areas lack reliable internet access, limiting their participation in the public sphere, access to information, education and employment opportunities.

■ The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe decided to hold the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for youth in October 2025 to expand the Organisation's engagement with young people. The integration of youth perspectives across the Organisation and member states will result in a positive outlook on the contribution young people make to societies and European unity. Youth perspectives will raise the indispensable awareness of the lives of young people and how they, as a social group as well as individuals, approach the world in a new way.

91. Lavizzari A. and Yurttagüler L. (2023), "Contemporary forms of young women's participation: priorities, challenges and ways forward?", Youth Partnership.

92. Yurttagüler L. and Pultar E. (2023), "New forms of political participation, [Statistical survey](#)", Youth Partnership.

93. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, [Human Rights Comments](#), "No space for violence against women and girls in the digital world".

94. Lavizzari A. and Yurttagüler L. (2023), op. cit.

95. Șerban A. M. and Brazienë R., "Young people in rural areas: diverse, ignored and unfulfilled", Youth Partnership.

### Key findings

- ▶ Cultural policies increasingly integrate human rights principles, with a focus on minority and marginalised communities. However, access to cultural participation remains unequal.
- ▶ Freedom of artistic expression remains under pressure, with legal restrictions and political interference affecting artists in some states. At the same time, new protections, such as the [Charter on the Status of the Artist](#) of the European Parliament and basic income programmes for the arts, signal progress.
- ▶ Funding challenges for the cultural sector persist due to economic and political pressures. Innovative mixed-funding models are emerging to support artistic and cultural initiatives.
- ▶ Cultural education is gaining importance, with member states investing in programmes that promote democratic values, critical thinking and media literacy.
- ▶ Cultural heritage continues to play a key role in promoting the Council of Europe's standards through heritage-related activities that engage local communities and youth.

■ In 2024, Europe marked the 70th anniversary of the European Cultural Convention (ETS No. 18), reaffirming its continued relevance. The No Culture ↔ No Democracy [conference](#) in December 2024 emphasised the role of culture in strengthening democracy, shared values and resilience, particularly in the context of the war against Ukraine. The United Nations Pact for the Future, adopted in September 2024, also recognised culture as essential to addressing global challenges such as inequality, climate change and conflict.

■ Tools such as the Council of Europe's Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy (IFCD) and the [Compendium on Cultural Policies and Trends](#), which the Council of Europe developed with other institutions, provide insights into national developments and broader trends. Research<sup>96</sup> shows that member states that prioritise cultural diversity, freedom of expression and inclusive policies not only strengthen their creative sectors but also reinforce democracy.

### Cultural rights and diversity

■ Member states are increasingly framing cultural policies within a human rights perspective, focusing on the rights of minorities and marginalised groups. There is growing recognition that cultural diversity is essential to democratic societies.

■ Countries are also emphasising democratic access to culture, removing economic, social and physical barriers. Many have developed digital platforms to increase participation, particularly since the Covid-19 epidemic. However, digital and non-digital divides remain, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged regions.

■ A key trend is the continued decentralisation of cultural decision making, which provides local and regional authorities with greater control over cultural governance and heritage planning. However, disparities in funding between urban and rural areas remain a challenge.

■ Governments are increasingly investing in cultural education that promotes democratic citizenship, critical thinking and media literacy. Many countries are also testing social protection models for cultural professionals, such as minimum fees or basic income for artists.

■ Funding models for culture are evolving. Many member states are adopting mixed-funding models, which combine public support, private investment, corporate sponsorship and new funding mechanisms. However, economic pressures, political factors and competing priorities continue to challenge the sector. Ensuring transparent and diverse funding remains essential for sustaining a thriving cultural sector and artistic freedom.

■ Key challenges include:

- ▶ ensuring equitable access to culture;
- ▶ protecting artistic freedom while addressing social responsibility;

96. Preliminary results of IFCD updates and cultural policy developments from the Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends were presented to the Steering Committee on Culture, Heritage and Landscape in 2024 and to the high-level conference "No Culture ↔ No Democracy" organised by the Presidency of Luxembourg of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 12 December 2024.

- ▶ managing the impact of the digital transformation on cultural practices;
- ▶ maintaining sustainable funding in difficult economic contexts.

■ The 2024 update of the IFCD, covering 42 Council of Europe member states, confirms a strong and positive relationship between culture and democracy. One key indicator is the level of trust in societies: data show that cultural participation correlates with higher levels of trust, a crucial factor for democratic stability.<sup>97</sup>

## Freedom of artistic expression

■ Protecting freedom of artistic expression remains a core priority. The Free to Create/Create to be Free initiative and its [digital exhibition](#) continue to unite member states in recognising artistic freedom as a fundamental human right.

■ In 2024, the Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape (CDCPP) endorsed the expert report “Free to Create/Create to be Free: defending artistic freedom in times of conflict and crisis”.<sup>98</sup> The report highlights growing restrictions on artistic expression, driven by:

- ▶ misuse of laws, such as national security, anti-terrorism and foreign influence laws, to limit artistic content;
- ▶ government interference in cultural institutions, including pressure to remove leaders critical of authorities;
- ▶ populist rhetoric and social media attacks aimed at marginalising artists;
- ▶ censorship, bans and wrongful arrests, often with financial consequences for artists.

■ Positive developments include Malta’s Charter on the Status of the Artist, securing artistic freedom as a standalone right, and [Ireland’s Basic Income for the Arts Scheme](#), improving financial stability for cultural professionals.

■ The European Heritage Days (EHDs) remain the most widely celebrated participatory cultural event across Europe. In 2024, the EHDs continued to serve as a platform for community engagement, intercultural dialogue and access to heritage, with 39 countries embracing the pan-European theme “[Routes, networks and connections](#)”. In line with the Reykjavik Declaration, the EHDs mobilised tens of thousands of volunteers to support their communities, organising over 50 000 events and attracting more than 20 million visitors.

■ The Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (CETS No. 199, [Faro Convention](#)) continues to promote the involvement of civil society in decision making and management processes related to cultural heritage, while fostering a broader understanding of heritage and its connection to communities and society. The Netherlands and Romania signed the convention in 2024 and 2025, respectively, and San Marino ratified it in 2024. To date, 25 countries have ratified the convention and five others have signed it.

97. See European Commission (2023), *Culture and democracy, the evidence – How citizens’ participation in cultural activities enhances civic engagement, democracy and social cohesion – Lessons from international research*, [Publications Office of the European Union](#), which has found strong evidence that citizens’ participation in cultural activities strengthens democracy and social cohesion in many different ways.

98. [Free to Create/Create to be Free: defending artistic freedom in times of conflict and crisis](#).

# REBUILDING UKRAINE: THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE, RESILIENCE AND RECOVERY

■ The Council of Europe remains steadfast in its support for Ukraine, strengthening its resilience in the face of the ongoing aggression by the Russian Federation. Through legal assistance, capacity building, monitoring and co-operation initiatives, the Council of Europe is helping Ukraine uphold democracy, human rights and the rule of law while reinforcing its capacity to recover and rebuild.

## Justice and accountability

■ The Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, established following the United Nations General Assembly resolution of 14 November 2022, began accepting claims for damage or destruction of residential property. By the end of March 2025, approximately 23 000 claims had been submitted, with just over 5 000 claims officially recorded in the Register. Work is continuing to expand claim categories and improve processing. A future claims commission is being prepared to assess recorded claims and determine compensation.

## Protection of vulnerable groups

■ As a party to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), Ukraine is undergoing an evaluation by the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) in 2025. Council of Europe projects have strengthened Ukraine's gender equality framework by training police, judges, prosecutors and social workers, as well as producing 10 Ukraine-specific publications on violence prevention and victim support.

■ The Council of Europe Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine (CGU) has mobilised 43 member states and multiple organisations to address child-protection challenges. In 2024, a [mapping study](#) on children's access to education and a joint CGU-GRETA [report on child trafficking risks](#) were published, providing guidance for policy improvements. The Council of Europe has also supported Ukraine in combating human trafficking, with the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) third evaluation conducted in May 2024. Findings from this evaluation, to be published in 2025, will help shape future co-operation projects on counter-trafficking measures.

## Governance and integrity

■ Anti-corruption efforts remain a priority, with GRECO recognising Ukraine's progress in judicial and parliamentary integrity. The Council of Europe has supported initiatives that strengthened asset recovery, transparency and financial investigations to prevent the misuse of reconstruction funds. The Council of Europe has also played a key role in Ukraine's decentralisation reform, supporting local governance resilience, post-war multilevel governance planning and citizen participation initiatives, including the country's first-ever citizens' assemblies.

## Judicial reform

■ Despite the challenges of war, Ukraine's courts maintained a "standard" efficiency rating, processing civil cases within an average of 101 days. However, ongoing funding shortages and infrastructure damage are obstacles to judicial operations.

## Cybercrime

■ Through the CyberUA and CyberEast+ projects, the Council of Europe has strengthened Ukraine's ability to combat cybercrime. Between 2023 and 2025, 37 activities have been conducted to align Ukrainian legislation with the Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No. 185) and its second additional protocol, improve the collection of electronic evidence and enhance cross-border co-operation.

### **Youth, education and cultural resilience**

■ The Youth for Democracy in Ukraine project has trained over 2 000 young people, supported the integration of youth perspectives into policy and introduced trauma-informed youth work approaches. The European Youth Foundation has financed 47 projects, benefiting over 3 600 participants.

■ The Council of Europe's education initiatives have helped integrate Ukrainian refugee children into European school systems, while the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe has worked to counter Russian disinformation targeting Ukrainian history.

### **Support for sport and social recovery**

■ The Council of Europe has facilitated sport-based resilience initiatives, including a workshop for Ukraine's U-18 Ice Hockey Team and a photo exhibition on sport during wartime. In collaboration with the Council of Europe Development Bank, financial instruments are being explored to rebuild youth centres and local infrastructure.







# CHAPTER 2

## IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RULE OF LAW

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### A. TRUST IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

#### INTRODUCTION

■ Compared to global trends, the European region continues to perform well on democracy and human rights indices. However, it has not regained the peak scores recorded in the late 2000s, highlighting the challenge of sustaining public trust in democratic institutions over time. Strong institutional frameworks, the rule of law and high governance standards alone are not sufficient to maintain democratic resilience. Even in well-established democracies, institutions and political parties are increasingly perceived as disconnected from the public for populist far-right parties.

■ The *OECD Survey on drivers in trust in public institutions – 2024 results*<sup>99</sup> underscores the difficulties democratic governments face in maintaining public confidence amid environmental and digital transitions, rising political polarisation and economic pressures such as inflation. The survey shows that trust in national governments has declined since 2021, with 44% of respondents expressing low confidence. While public satisfaction with services like health and education remains relatively high, trust in government decision making is significantly lower, with political parties ranking at the bottom. To rebuild trust in public institutions, the survey stresses the need for stronger governance, greater citizen engagement, improved transparency and evidence-based decision making, alongside efforts to address concerns over integrity and corruption.

■ The deepening polarisation among political parties and within society is a growing concern. In many countries, this has fuelled disinformation campaigns that further erode trust in democratic institutions. Hostile exchanges in the public sphere, often dominated by personal attacks and hate speech, have replaced substantive policy debates. This adversarial climate undermines the credibility of political parties and fosters a disconnect between elected representatives and citizens. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has repeatedly highlighted how mutual accusations, inflammatory rhetoric and attacks on vulnerable groups contribute to weakening democratic institutions.

■ Another major challenge is the erosion of checks and balances, and the separation of powers. In some countries, political interference in judicial and parliamentary processes has raised concerns about the independence of key democratic institutions. In other cases, procedural mechanisms meant to ensure parliamentary oversight have been used excessively or selectively, affecting the balance between executive and legislative powers. Strengthening the institutionalisation of parliamentary opposition and guaranteeing its rights in law remain essential safeguards of constitutional democracy, as outlined in the Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) "Rule of law checklist".<sup>100</sup>

■ Local and regional democracy also plays a crucial role in sustaining public trust, as local governments are often the most trusted level of administration. However, recent trends show an increasing centralisation of financial and decision-making powers in some countries, limiting the ability of local authorities to address citizens' needs effectively. In contrast, certain states have made notable progress in decentralisation, implementing reforms to enhance local governance. Ensuring a sustainable financial framework for local and regional authorities remains a challenge, as budgetary constraints continue to affect service delivery and long-term planning.

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99. See *OECD Survey on drivers in trust in public institutions – 2024 results*.

100. See *CDL-AD(2016)007*.

■ The integrity of electoral processes remains a key benchmark for democratic performance. Free and fair elections ensure accountability by allowing citizens to influence decision making. However, the reporting period has seen a deterioration in electoral standards across several member states. Concerns have been raised over frequent and last-minute changes to electoral laws, shortcomings in campaign finance oversight and the impartiality of election administration bodies. Foreign interference, the misuse of administrative resources and the spread of disinformation during election campaigns have further strained electoral integrity.

■ Good democratic governance is increasingly recognised as the bedrock of trust in public institutions, and numerous member states have embraced innovative practices and enforced ethical standards to improve how they govern. Backed by Council of Europe guidelines, countries are adopting measures to make government more transparent, accountable and responsive to citizens.

■ However, good governance reforms remain a work in progress. In some countries, implementation gaps persist – for instance, integrity mechanisms exist on paper but are lacking in practice, or citizen participation is encouraged but civil society space is shrinking.

■ Likewise, the Council of Europe's assessments underscore continuing issues such as over-centralisation, bureaucratic inefficiency and lack of inclusivity in decision making for certain minority groups. A balanced perspective is therefore essential. Europe is home to robust models of democratic governance and trailblazers in transparency and civic engagement, yet there are still clear challenges – corruption, polarisation and public disillusionment – that require persistent attention. The Council of Europe's role in highlighting shortcomings and assisting member states with best practices remains crucial.

## FUNCTIONING OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

### Key findings

- ▶ The erosion of the separation of powers continues, with some governments consolidating control by restricting judicial independence, limiting parliamentary oversight and curbing civil society.
- ▶ Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has reinforced European identity and accelerated democratic reforms in several European Union candidate countries, while democratic backsliding remains a concern in several others.
- ▶ The rise of populist parties has altered political dynamics, raising concerns about changes that may weaken institutional safeguards and affect fundamental rights.
- ▶ Deepening political and societal polarisation has fuelled disinformation, adversarial political discourse and attacks on vulnerable groups, undermining trust in governance.
- ▶ Institutional resilience remains essential, as independent institutions, public broadcasters and regulatory bodies face increasing political interference in some states.

■ The last year has confirmed ongoing trends in the erosion of the separation of powers and persistent challenges to fundamental rights. The functioning of democratic institutions has also been profoundly affected by the return of war to the European continent, a development with far-reaching consequences. While Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has caused widespread devastation, it has simultaneously reinforced European identity and accelerated democratic reforms in several European Union candidate countries. Ukraine, North Macedonia, Montenegro and the Republic of Moldova have swiftly implemented ambitious reforms in response to European Union membership requirements, demonstrating a strong commitment to democratic principles.<sup>101</sup>

■ At the same time, democratic backsliding has continued in several member states, where governments have sought to consolidate power by undermining parliamentary oversight, restricting judicial independence and limiting civil society's ability to operate freely. Some have enacted laws that curtail press freedom or have used emergency powers to bypass democratic scrutiny. These actions threaten the institutional checks and balances essential to a functioning democracy.

■ Populist and "anti-system" parties have gained momentum in several member states. While their electoral success reflects democratic choice, concerns have been raised over legislative and constitutional changes they have proposed, often with the potential to weaken democratic institutions. The European Court of Human Rights has established that a political party may campaign for a constitutional change on two conditions: first, the means used to that end must in every respect be legal and democratic; and second, the change proposed must itself be compatible with fundamental democratic principles.<sup>102</sup>

■ Once in power, some parties have sought to weaken independent institutions by limiting the autonomy of constitutional courts, controlling public broadcasters and interfering with regulatory bodies. In some cases, opposition voices have been marginalised through procedural tactics, such as restricting parliamentary debate or limiting public funding. These trends underscore the need to protect institutional resilience from political interference.

■ Political and societal polarisation remains a significant concern across many European countries, fuelling disinformation campaigns that erode trust in democratic institutions. In highly polarised environments, political debate often gives way to hostility, with public discourse dominated by personal attacks and hate speech rather than substantive policy discussions.<sup>103</sup> This adversarial climate undermines the credibility of political

101. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe "welcomes Ukraine's ambitious reform agenda and progress in its implementation with a view to honouring its obligations and commitments to the Council of Europe and achieving its goal of European Union membership" (Resolution 2534 (2024) "[The progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure \(January-December 2023\)](#)"). With respect to Montenegro, "[i]t welcomes the reforms adopted in a short time period in order to meet the interim benchmarks for accession to the European Union"; "with respect to the Republic of Moldova, the Assembly welcomes the continued implementation of the ambitious reforms needed to further its European integration and to honour its commitments and obligations to the Council of Europe" (Resolution 2580 (2025) "[Progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure \(January-December 2024\)](#)").

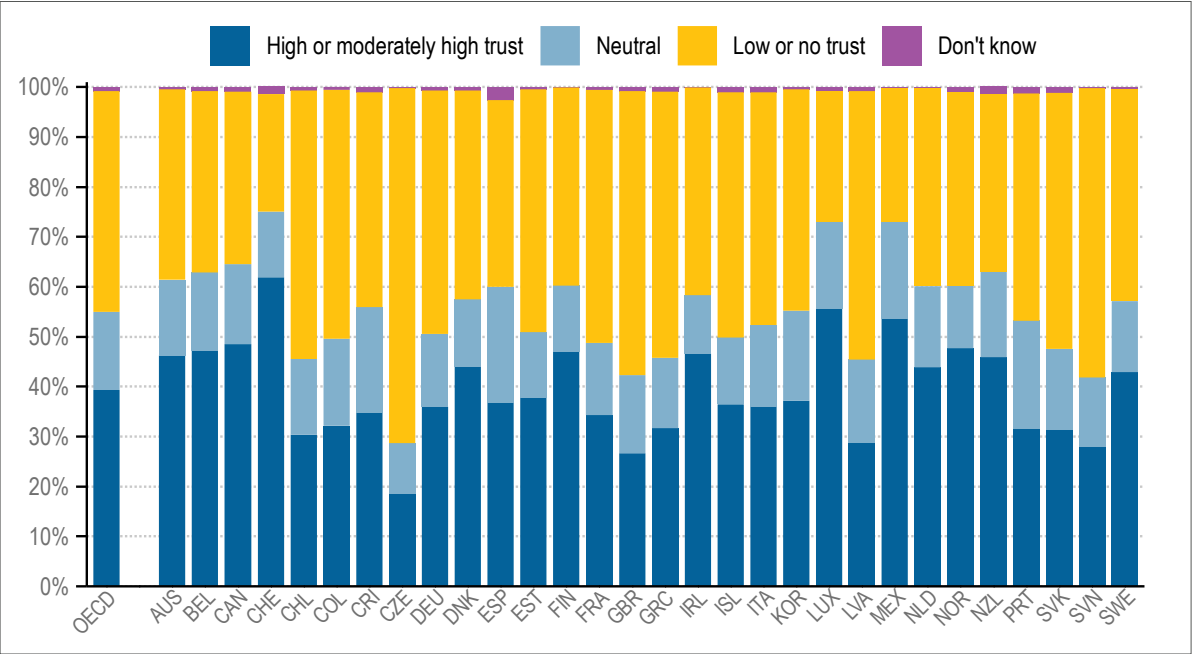
102. European Court of Human Rights, *Yazar and Others v. Turkey* (Application Nos. 22723/93, 22724/93 and 22725/93, 9 April 2002).

103. "The Assembly regrets that, despite some improvement, the political environment in Albania is still very polarised and fragmented, which undermines parliamentary oversight and the proper functioning of the system of checks and balances" (Resolution 2534 (2024) "[The progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure \(January-December 2023\)](#)").

parties and weakens public confidence in governance. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has highlighted that inflammatory rhetoric contributes to deepening social divisions.<sup>104</sup>

■ Polarisation also affects governance, leading to legislative deadlock and reduced institutional co-operation. In some countries, opposition parties have been sidelined through procedural manoeuvres, while in others, governments have used emergency powers or executive orders to bypass parliamentary scrutiny. These tactics not only weaken democratic institutions but also contribute to the erosion of public trust in representative democracy.

**Figure 1 – Share of population who indicate different levels of trust in their national government**



Source: OECD Survey on drivers in trust in public institutions – 2024 results

■ For democratic institutions to function effectively, clearly defined legal rights and guarantees are essential, particularly in ensuring the role of parliamentary opposition. The institutionalisation of opposition rights is a fundamental pillar of constitutional democracy, as recognised by the “Rule of law checklist” of the Council of Europe’s European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). However, concerns have been raised about parliamentary interference and blurred lines between branches of power.<sup>105</sup> This includes issues such as the incompatibility of political mandates and the use of procedural mechanisms to bypass parliamentary debate.

■ In a report adopted in June 2024 on the relations between the parliament and the government,<sup>106</sup> the Venice Commission noted that linking confidence votes to the adoption of specific bills alters the balance of power between the executive and the legislature. Such mechanisms can limit the legislature’s ability to fully deliberate on proposed legislation unless the government loses a confidence vote. In France, the use of Article 49.3 of the constitution, which enables the government to pass legislation without a parliamentary vote, has been a topic of debate regarding its implications for legislative scrutiny.<sup>107</sup>

104. With respect to Armenia: “The Assembly regrets that the political climate remains exceedingly polarised and antagonistic and calls on all stakeholders to improve the relationship between the parliamentary majority and the opposition” (Resolution 2580 (2025) “Progress of the Assembly’s monitoring procedure (January-December 2024)”). With respect to Armenia: “The Assembly urges both the majority and the opposition to refrain from hate speech and stigmatisation, and to contribute to the establishment of a genuine democratic culture based on the recognition by political opponents of each other’s legitimacy” (Resolution 2534 (2024) “The progress of the Assembly’s monitoring procedure (January-December 2023)”).

105. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2023\)029](#), the Netherlands – Joint opinion on the legal safeguards of the independence of the judiciary from the executive power.

106. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)016-e](#), Report on the relations between parliament and the government: confidence and responsibility.

107. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2023\)024](#), France – Interim opinion on Article 49.3 of the constitution.



## Reinforcing checks and balances

■ San Marino's recent reforms to strengthen checks and balances were welcomed by the Parliamentary Assembly as a step towards reinforcing democratic accountability.<sup>108</sup>

■ The Parliamentary Assembly commended Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>109</sup> for the reforms since 2022 that have paved the way for European Union accession negotiations in 2024, including steps to strengthen state institutions. However, the Parliamentary Assembly also noted insufficient progress in areas crucial to the functioning of democratic institutions.

■ The Parliamentary Assembly has also welcomed<sup>110</sup> the reforms undertaken by the Republic of Moldova – notably in the judiciary and the fight against corruption – to consolidate democratic institutions, despite “the difficulties and challenges”, including the crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine, the risk of foreign interference and the energy crisis.

■ Gender inequality remains a major barrier to political representation. Despite gender quotas in some contexts, women continue to face violence and unequal treatment. In Georgia, the abolition of quotas led the Venice Commission to recommend temporary measures to improve women's representation, including reinstating quotas.<sup>111</sup>

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108. Parliamentary Assembly, [Resolution 2534 \(2024\)](#) “The progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure (January-December 2023)”.

109. See “[PACE welcomes reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but highlights ‘insufficient progress’ in areas crucial for the functioning of democratic institutions](#)”.

110. See “[Republic of Moldova: PACE welcomes reforms, while acknowledging the challenges](#)”.

111. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)023](#), Georgia – Opinion on the amendments to the election code which abolish gender quotas.

## DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

### Key findings

- ▶ Electoral integrity has declined in several member states due to, *inter alia*, frequent and last-minute changes to electoral laws, a lack of campaign finance oversight and concerns over election administration.
- ▶ Foreign interference, disinformation and the misuse of administrative resources during election campaigns have become major challenges to fair electoral processes.
- ▶ Voter intimidation, restrictions on media coverage and uneven campaign conditions have raised concerns about election fairness in several countries.
- ▶ The use of social media in election campaigns has amplified disinformation, requiring stronger digital monitoring strategies.
- ▶ In some cases, restrictions on the rights of domestic observers have affected transparency and electoral credibility.

■ For the 12th consecutive year, average voter turnout in both parliamentary and local elections remained low. At the same time, political polarisation has contributed to higher voter turnout in some countries, such as Poland and the Republic of Moldova.

■ Across Europe, electoral processes have benefited from legal reforms and technological innovation, leading to improvements in transparency and integrity in some areas. Many member states are updating election laws in line with Council of Europe guidelines, adopting new tools to enhance transparency and sharing best practices through Council of Europe platforms. However, significant challenges remain.

■ At the Council of Europe, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities have observed a decline in election standards in a growing number of member states. The Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) has highlighted concerns about the lack of stability in electoral law, as outlined in the "Code of good practice in electoral matters",<sup>112</sup> with frequent changes – particularly those made shortly before elections – risking public confidence and the integrity of democratic institutions.<sup>113</sup>

■ Challenges persist throughout the entire electoral cycle, including legislative gaps in election administration, campaign finance oversight, media regulations and electoral dispute resolution. Concerns about the impartiality of election administration bodies,<sup>114</sup> particularly Central Election Commissions, have been reported in many countries. While reforms and innovations are being implemented, ensuring electoral integrity remains an ongoing challenge requiring sustained commitment from member states.

■ In Türkiye, while both the 2023 national elections<sup>115</sup> and the 2024 local elections<sup>116</sup> were assessed as competitive, concerns were raised about the fairness of the campaign environment. In Georgia, reports of voter intimidation and pressure, particularly in rural areas, highlighted challenges to election integrity.<sup>117</sup> In Serbia, allegations of organised voter transportation and mobilisation raised questions about the level playing field in local elections.<sup>118</sup>

■ The growing influence of social media in political discourse has substantially heightened the spread of disinformation during election campaigns. Consequently, monitoring the digital information landscape has become essential for election observers, necessitating strategies to detect and address misleading narratives.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, concerns persist over the misuse of administrative resources to advantage incumbent parties or candidates, a recurrent issue in many observed elections.<sup>120</sup>

112. See "Code of good practice in electoral matters".

113. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, "Observation of the parliamentary elections in Georgia (26 October 2024)", [Doc. 16079](#).

114. Parliamentary Assembly, "Election observation activities of the Parliamentary Assembly in 2023", [Progress report – Doc. 15885 Add. 4](#). Election observation activities of the Parliamentary Assembly in 2024, Summary report and recommendations, [Progress report – Doc. 16096 Add. 3](#).

115. Parliamentary Assembly, "Observation of the presidential and parliamentary elections in Türkiye (14 and 28 May 2023)", [Doc. 15793](#).

116. Congress, "Local elections in Türkiye (31 March 2024)", [CG\(2024\)47-16](#).

117. Parliamentary Assembly, "Observation of the parliamentary elections in Georgia (26 October 2024)", [Doc. 16079](#).

118. Parliamentary Assembly, "Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Serbia (17 December 2023)", [Doc. 15895](#).

119. Parliamentary Assembly, "Election observation activities of the Parliamentary Assembly in 2024 – Summary report and recommendations", [Progress report – Doc. 16096 Add. 3](#).

120. Parliamentary Assembly, "Observation of the presidential election (20 October and 3 November 2024) and constitutional referendum (20 October 2024) in the Republic of Moldova", [Doc. 16074](#); "Observation of the parliamentary elections in Poland (15 October 2023)", [Doc. 15861](#).



Foreign interference, including illicit campaign funding, direct vote-buying and targeted propaganda, has become a pressing issue and a matter of national security. The Council of Europe now closely evaluates the role of external actors, particularly in geopolitically sensitive regions.<sup>121</sup> Foreign interference, particularly from Russia, had a significant impact on a referendum and on presidential<sup>122</sup> and subnational elections<sup>123</sup> in the Republic of Moldova.

Foreign interference and online disinformation remain significant threats, prompting calls for stronger digital oversight and media literacy initiatives.

Despite these challenges, positive developments have been noted.

## Electoral law reforms

Countries have undertaken reforms to their electoral frameworks to promote fairer and more inclusive elections. In this context, Armenia and North Macedonia have revised their election codes ahead of recent polls, contributing to enhanced electoral credibility. Continued efforts to strengthen legislative frameworks, including by addressing outstanding recommendations from the Venice Commission, remain essential to further consolidating electoral integrity.

## Technological advancements for transparency

European states are also leveraging technology to attempt to boost electoral transparency and voter confidence. Several countries have introduced innovations like electronic voter registers, scanning of ballots and even internet voting in line with e-voting guidelines of the Council of Europe. In Yerevan in 2023, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe observed the successful deployment of technology to verify voters' identities and live-stream electoral procedures. These measures were widely seen by polling station officials, observers and voters as important safeguards against potential violations.<sup>124</sup>

The Council of Europe continues to facilitate exchanges on digital tools for elections, helping member states learn from each other's successes.

## Enhanced oversight and observation

States have bolstered electoral oversight mechanisms. Independent election commissions with cross-party representation are becoming the norm, and campaign finance oversight has been tightened in several jurisdictions following Council of Europe anti-corruption standards. In addition, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has reinforced its own election observation capacity to support member states. In 2023 the Assembly convened a special conference entitled "Elections in times of crisis", which underlined the need to tackle threats to election integrity and led to the creation of the [Parliamentary Assembly network of election observers](#) to co-ordinate expertise. Venice Commission legal experts now routinely accompany Parliamentary Assembly observer teams to advise on compliance with European electoral standards.

## Electoral inclusivity

Most member states have taken steps to ensure greater electoral inclusivity by addressing barriers for women, minorities and persons with disabilities. However, discriminatory practices still compromise election fairness and representation in some contexts.<sup>125</sup>

Legal and logistical barriers to election monitoring remain a concern. Domestic observers have faced restricted access to polling stations, particularly in remote or politically sensitive areas, limiting their ability to conduct thorough assessments. These restrictions have raised serious concerns about the fairness and integrity of electoral processes in several countries observed by the Parliamentary Assembly in 2023-2024.<sup>126</sup> Additionally, Azerbaijan introduced restrictions on international election observers.<sup>127</sup>

121. Parliamentary Assembly, "Election observation activities of the Parliamentary Assembly in 2024 – Summary report and recommendations", Progress report – Doc. 16096 Add. 3.

122. Parliamentary Assembly, "Observation of the presidential election (20 October and 3 November 2024) and constitutional referendum (20 October 2024) in the Republic of Moldova", Doc. 16074.

123. Congress, "Local elections in the Republic of Moldova (5 November 2023)", [CPL\(2024\)46-04](#).

124. Congress, "Elections to the Council of Elders, City of Yerevan, Armenia", [CPL\(2023\)45-02](#).

125. Parliamentary Assembly, "Election observation activities of the Parliamentary Assembly in 2024 – Summary report and recommendations", Progress report – Doc. 16096 Add. 3.

126. Parliamentary Assembly, "Election observation activities of the Parliamentary Assembly in 2024 – Summary report and recommendations", Progress report – Doc. 16096 Add. 3.

127. Azerbaijan 2024 early presidential and parliamentary elections: ODIHR [observation missions final reports](#), 5 March 2025.

## LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEMOCRACY

### Key findings

- ▶ Local governments remain the most trusted level of administration, but increasing centralisation of financial and decision-making powers in some states is limiting their ability to serve citizens effectively.
- ▶ Financial instability and high dependence on central government resources restrict the capacity of local and regional authorities to invest in key areas such as climate adaptation, digitalisation and demographic shifts.
- ▶ While some states continue to implement decentralisation reforms, others have recentralised key competences, particularly in financial management and spatial planning.
- ▶ The rise of threats and violence against locally elected representatives, particularly women and young politicians, is undermining democratic participation at the local level.
- ▶ Despite challenges, some states have improved local governance, including measures to increase citizen participation and introduce directly elected mayors.

Strong and effective local and regional governments are a cornerstone of European democracy. As the level of government closest to citizens, and the most trusted, local authorities are best placed to address community challenges and foster peaceful, resilient and inclusive societies.

Strengthening local democracy remains essential for promoting social justice, peace, prosperity and democratic stability across Europe. These efforts are guided by the standards of local self-government enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) and its additional protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207).

In 2023 and 2024, the implementation of the charter was monitored in 14 Council of Europe member states, resulting in country-specific reports and recommendations. These assessments covered administrative-territorial reforms, decentralisation, the financial and organisational autonomy of local authorities, and citizens' participatory rights in local governance.

The third periodic report on recurring issues, based on Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe monitoring and election observation missions,<sup>128</sup> highlighted both challenges and progress in implementing the charter and electoral standards in local and regional elections across member states.

Despite some improvements, the report emphasises the need for stronger efforts to address persistent issues, including:

- ▶ inadequate financial resources for local and regional authorities;
- ▶ limited local self-government, restricting decision-making powers;
- ▶ insufficient consultation of local authorities by central governments on matters of local interest;
- ▶ financial instability, exacerbated by successive crises such as the pandemic, climate change, migration pressures and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

A recentralisation of competences has been observed in some countries, particularly in areas such as spatial planning, as seen in Montenegro.<sup>129</sup>

A more widespread concern, however, is the recentralisation of financial resources in several states. Governments have cited economic decline, limited public finances or efficiency concerns as reasons for reducing local funding, but this has significantly constrained subnational authorities' ability to invest in critical areas such as climate adaptation, demographic shifts, technology development and digitalisation.

In France,<sup>130</sup> the trend towards centralising local and regional government financing has been observed. In the Slovak Republic,<sup>131</sup> a large share of subnational government income is earmarked, limiting financial

128. Congress, Report CG(2024)47-20, "Recurring issues based on assessments resulting from Congress monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and election observation missions (reference period 2021-2024)".

129. See <https://rm.coe.int/rec-506-2024-en-monitoring-of-the-application-of-the-european-charter-/1680af1d3a>.

130. See <https://rm.coe.int/168071a028>.

131. See <https://rm.coe.int/monitoring-of-the-application-of-the-european-charter-of-local-self-go/1680acd751>.

flexibility. In Malta<sup>132</sup> and Ireland,<sup>133</sup> central government grants to local authorities are primarily designated for specific projects, increasing financial dependency and restricting local autonomy.

■ Despite these challenges, some countries have actively pursued decentralisation reforms to strengthen local democracy in line with the charter and relevant recommendations. The efforts of the authorities in Italy<sup>134</sup> to foster decentralisation in recent years have been widely welcomed.

■ In response to a Congress recommendation to introduce directly elected mayors, the city of Limerick (Ireland) voted in June 2024 to hold the country's first direct mayoral election as a pilot project. The Irish Government has also committed to considering these recommendations through post-monitoring mechanisms and ongoing political dialogue.

■ By contrast, concerns have been raised about instances where the will of voters was not respected in mayoral elections, notably in Türkiye following the Statement by the President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe<sup>135</sup> on the dismissals of mayors in Türkiye.

■ An increasing challenge across Europe is the rise of hate speech, disinformation and violence against locally elected representatives, including mayors.

■ In France, there is growing concern over a surge in threats and attacks against mayors and elected representatives, often amplified through social media. In Finland,<sup>136</sup> reports indicate a rising trend of hate speech targeting local officials, particularly women and young politicians. In Norway,<sup>137</sup> young politicians have been especially affected by harassment and intimidation.

■ This trend undermines democratic participation and has led to a decline in the number of candidates willing to run for office in several European countries. The Congress has urged affected member states to strengthen mechanisms to protect elected officials. Positive examples include France's adoption of a national plan to prevent and combat violence against local elected representatives, as well as new legislation aimed at reinforcing their protection.

■ Encouragingly, local and regional associations across Europe have intensified their engagement in democratic processes, while several states have introduced measures to enhance citizen participation in local governance.

■ Italy and Romania ratified the Additional Protocol to the Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority in October 2023 and December 2024, respectively. As of 1 January 2025, 23 member states had become parties to the additional protocol, reflecting a growing commitment to participatory democracy at the local level.

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132. See [CPL\(2024\)47-04](#).

133. See <https://rm.coe.int/rec-499-2023-monitoring-of-the-application-of-the-european-charter-of-/1680ad1bbc>.

134. See [CG33\(2017\)final](#).

135. [Statement by the Congress President](#).

136. See <https://rm.coe.int/recommendation-516-2024-monitoring-of-the-application-of-the-european-/1680b205ac>.

137. See [CG\(2024\)46-14](#).

## GOOD DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

### Key findings

- ▶ Effective governance is critical to sustaining democracy, as weak governance erodes public trust and reduces democratic accountability.
- ▶ Deliberative democracy is gaining traction, but its effectiveness depends on institutionalisation and sustained commitment. While citizen participation mechanisms are widespread, their impact relies on meaningful implementation and follow-through.
- ▶ Strengthening the rule of law at the local and regional levels remains essential, as many human rights violations stem from action or lack of action at the local level.
- ▶ New ethical standards and stronger accountability mechanisms for public officials are being developed or reinforced in many European countries in response to public demand for integrity in governance.
- ▶ The need for resilience in public institutions is increasingly recognised, with efforts to enhance crisis response capacities at all levels of government.

■ The quality of democracy is closely linked to the quality of governance. When democratic processes fail to function effectively, decision makers become less accountable to the public, leading to a decline in the exercise of public authority. Conversely, weakened governance erodes public trust in institutions and, ultimately, in democracy itself.

■ Following the Reykjavik Summit, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers adopted a recommendation on the principles of good democratic governance.<sup>138</sup> While these 12 principles are not entirely new,<sup>139</sup> they have now been established as the benchmark for assessing multilevel governance across Europe.

### Innovative citizen engagement

■ Across Europe, governments are opening decision making through participatory initiatives. Deliberative democracy models – such as citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting and town-hall consultations – are being used to tackle complex policy issues and involve the public between elections. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has strongly endorsed these developments: in June 2024 it unanimously passed a resolution<sup>140</sup> calling on all member states to “adopt participatory and deliberative democracy processes at national, regional and local levels” and even to institutionalise such mechanisms in law.

■ This reflects a growing consensus that engaging citizens in dialogue and co-creation of policy (in accordance with the Committee of Ministers' principles on civil participation) can reinforce democratic legitimacy. Countries like Ireland (with its constitutional citizens' assemblies) and France (local participatory budgeting) have provided interesting models, and the Council of Europe actively helps spread these best practices. The Parliamentary Assembly has encouraged<sup>141</sup> authorities to draw on Council of Europe expertise and training (for example the Schools of Participatory Democracy) to ensure that new participation channels are effective, inclusive and not merely symbolic.

■ Where genuinely implemented, participatory governance has led to policies that better reflect public input and to heightened public confidence in local authorities. However, if not implemented effectively, these mechanisms can fail to meet expectations. Recognising this, the Committee of Ministers adopted a dedicated recommendation in September 2023 to provide clear guidance on best practices in this area.<sup>142</sup>

### Strengthening public ethics and integrity

■ Many European governments have overhauled their integrity frameworks in recent years, heeding Council of Europe anti-corruption and ethics standards. Today, stricter codes of conduct, conflict-of-interest rules and

138. Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2023\)5](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the principles of good democratic governance.

139. They have been updated starting from the “12 European Principles of Good Democratic Governance at Local Level” adopted previously by the Committee of Ministers, which led to the creation of the European Label of Governance Excellence (ELoGE), applied at local level by over 20 European countries.

140. Parliamentary Assembly, Resolution 2552 (2024) “Strengthening democracy through participatory and deliberative processes”.

141. See “[PACE calls for strengthening participatory and deliberative processes](#)”.

142. Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2023\)6](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on deliberative democracy.

financial disclosure requirements for public officials are commonplace, creating a more ethical climate for governance. The 12 Principles of Good Democratic Governance<sup>143</sup> – adopted by the Committee of Ministers – have served as a blueprint in this area, emphasising transparency, accountability and the rule of law as core values.

■ In line with these principles, states have introduced comprehensive ethics regulations: for example, many now have independent anti-corruption agencies or ethics commissioners overseeing officials. Whistle-blower protection laws have been enacted to safeguard those who report misconduct, and clear procedures exist to handle complaints against public servants. GRECO has kept up pressure through evaluations – its 2023 report<sup>144</sup> urges states to fully implement outstanding recommendations on ministerial transparency, lobbying regulation, asset declaration and more.

■ Many countries have responded with reforms (for instance new lobbying registries or stricter gift rules for officials), showing a positive trend towards cleaner governance. Although corruption and ethical lapses have not been eradicated, the frameworks to address them are stronger than a decade ago, reflecting gradual progress in line with European norms.

## Transparency, accountability and local governance

■ Governments are increasingly embracing open governance to rebuild citizen trust. This includes measures like proactive disclosure of public data, e-governance services that reduce petty corruption and stronger parliamentary oversight of the executive. Some states have adopted “open government” action plans under international partnerships, dovetailing with Council of Europe recommendations on access to information and media transparency.

■ There is also a stronger focus on human rights protection at the local and regional levels. Subnational authorities play a key role in delivering essential services, such as policing, social services, housing, emergency response and environmental protection, all of which have direct human rights implications. A significant number of violations ruled by the European Court of Human Rights stem from decisions or negligence at the local level, highlighting the need for greater compliance with human rights standards in local governance.<sup>145</sup>

■ At the local level, the Council of Europe’s Centre of Expertise for Good Governance has been instrumental in spreading best practices. It promotes the [European Label of Governance Excellence \(ELoGE\)](#), which recognises municipalities that achieve high standards of governance. Local authorities in several countries have voluntarily undergone evaluations to benchmark their performance in transparency, service delivery and public engagement. In 2024, 6 local authorities in Finland, 58 in Italy, 5 in Spain and 13 in Türkiye met the criteria and were awarded the ELoGE, encouraging others to follow their example.

■ This peer-learning approach has led to innovations like citizen charters, participatory budgeting at the city level and better financial management practices. The underlying idea is that adherence to principles of accountability, transparency and responsiveness directly translates into better services and greater public trust.

■ Where local governments have improved in these areas, citizen satisfaction has risen. The Council of Europe continues to support such initiatives through toolkits and training, helping to mainstream good governance across all layers of government.

■ Accountability mechanisms for elected representatives continue to evolve, with clearer legal provisions for procedures such as recall (removal of an official by popular vote), revocation (withdrawal of a mandate by another body) and destitution (sanction following a legal violation). The 2019 report<sup>146</sup> by the Council of Europe’s European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) outlines the democratic principles that should guide such mechanisms, while the Committee of Ministers’ recommendation on democratic accountability at local and regional levels provides further guidance on implementing these safeguards.<sup>147</sup>

143. See “12 Principles of Good Democratic Governance”.

144. See “Stricter regulation is needed to prevent corruption in top executive functions of central governments, says the Council of Europe’s GRECO”.

145. See, for example, *Öneryıldız v. Turkey* (Application No. 48939/99, 30 November 2004); *López Ostra v. Spain* (Application No. 16798/90, 9 December 1994); *Moreno Gómez v. Spain* (Application No. 4143/02, 16 November 2004); *Dzemyuk v. Ukraine* (Application No. 42488/02, 4 September 2014); *Branduse v. Romania* (Application No. 6586/03, 7 April 2009 (in French only)); *Di Sarno and Others v. Italy* (Application No. 48939/99, 10 January 2012); *Locascia and Others v. Italy* (Application No. 35648/10, 19 October 2023).

146. CoE Venice Commission, *CDL-AD(2019)011*, Report on the recall of mayors and local elected representatives.

147. Recommendation *CM/Rec(2022)2* of the Committee of Ministers to member States on democratic accountability of elected representatives and elected bodies at local and regional level.

■ Another trend in most European countries is the development of resilience strategies for public authorities at all levels, aimed at ensuring rapid and effective responses to crises – whether natural or human-made.

■ The importance of efficiency, sound financial management and economic governance has grown in the current context of slow economic growth, high public deficits and rising debt levels across Europe. In response, the Council of Europe, in co-operation with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has developed key recommendations for local and regional authorities to strengthen financial sustainability and accountability.<sup>148</sup>

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148. Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2011\)11](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the funding by higher-level authorities of new competences for local authorities.



# DEMOCRATIC SECURITY: THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN EUROPEAN PEACE AND STABILITY

■ European unity and the creation of the Council of Europe were based on the “never again” promise. Winston Churchill’s speech of August 1949 – just after the creation of the Council of Europe – encapsulates this ideal:

Throughout our long history we have triumphed over the perils of religious wars, of dynastic wars; after thirty years of conflict, I am confident that we have now reached the end of nationalist wars. After all our victories and all our suffering are we now to founder in ultimate chaos, in ideological wars triggered by barbarous lawless oligarchies, orchestrated by subversives in the fifth column who infiltrate and conspire in so many countries?

No! I am convinced that it is within our power to navigate the dangers we have yet to face – if our will is strong. Our hopes and our labour steer us towards an era of peace, prosperity and plenty where Europe’s abiding wealth and spirit will make her once again the very source and inspiration of life the world over.

■ Europe now faces mounting internal challenges – from democratic backsliding to growing public distrust in institutions – making a robust, pan-European approach to security more urgent than ever. This new architecture must be grounded in democratic governance, human rights and the rule of law to preserve cohesion and resilience from within. At the same time, deeper alliances are needed to confront external threats and defend the values that define Europe’s community of states. Central to this vision is the concept of “democratic security”. First articulated at the Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe (Vienna, 8-9 October 1993) and reaffirmed in the recent 2023 Reykjavik Declaration, democratic security is based on the idea that democratic states are less likely to go to war with one another and are more resilient to internal conflicts.

■ Over time, democratic security has come to encompass dimensions traditionally associated with “hard security”. The Council of Europe addresses a broad range of issues that are essential to Europe’s peace and stability, including terrorism, migration and the smuggling of migrants, human trafficking, cybersecurity, intelligence and policing. Its judicial body – the European Court of Human Rights – plays a key role by providing legal oversight of member states’ external military actions. This broader understanding was affirmed at the 2nd Summit of Heads of State and Government (Strasbourg, 10-11 October 1997), where leaders pledged to “give [their] full support to the Council of Europe with a view to intensifying its contribution to cohesion, stability and security in Europe”. At the 3rd Summit (Warsaw, 16-17 May 2005), this commitment was further specified with reference to countering terrorism, corruption, organised crime (including money laundering and financial crime), human trafficking and cybercrime.

■ In an era marked by war on European soil, rising authoritarianism and democratic backsliding, democratic security – the protection and reinforcement of institutions and mechanisms that uphold democracy, human rights and the rule of law – remains a vital foundation for peace, social cohesion, prosperity and long-term stability across the continent.

■ Through its standards, monitoring mechanisms and intergovernmental co-operation, the Council of Europe supports member states in building the societal resilience necessary to meet today’s most pressing challenges.

■ The process towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe is a step in building democratic resilience. New realities demand innovative ways to protect democracy – not only as a system of governance, but as a living, responsive project that serves people’s needs. This is especially true for younger generations, who must be inspired to believe in democratic institutions and to see their future within them. Revitalising that belief is essential for the long-term strength and legitimacy of democracy in Europe.

■ There can be no lasting peace without democratic security. The Council of Europe ensures that defending European democracies is a daily responsibility, founded on shared European values and upheld by the case law of the European Court of Human Rights.

## B. EFFICIENT, IMPARTIAL AND INDEPENDENT JUDICIARIES

### INTRODUCTION

■ Judicial independence, impartiality and efficiency are fundamental to an effective justice system. Several member states have continued efforts to strengthen these principles by introducing reforms or repealing previously adopted laws, in line with European standards, policy documents and recommendations from advisory and monitoring bodies. These efforts have often been supported by Council of Europe co-operation and capacity-building projects. In most member states, judicial independence is satisfactory: judges can deliberate impartially, remain free from undue influence in their career progression and benefit from appropriate oversight of judicial conduct. Reforms aimed at modernising and digitalising the judiciary have yielded some positive outcomes.

■ However, judicial systems across Europe continue to face significant challenges, including delays in proceedings, concerns over political interference, particularly in the appointment and governance of judges and prosecutors, and disparities in access to justice. While efforts to modernise and strengthen judicial institutions have yielded positive results in many states, persistent issues such as lengthy trials, inconsistent enforcement of judicial decisions and risks to judicial independence highlight the need for sustained reform. Addressing these challenges requires a co-ordinated approach involving legislative changes, institutional safeguards and capacity-building initiatives.

■ Statements by government representatives targeting individual judges or the judiciary as a whole can erode public trust and respect for the courts, ultimately affecting judicial independence. To address these challenges, greater transparency in recruitment processes, stricter conflict-of-interest regulations and robust training in judicial ethics are needed. Safeguarding career progression, evaluation and disciplinary mechanisms against undue influence remains essential.

■ These elements are closely interrelated, and maintaining a balance between them is a sensitive issue. Accountability mechanisms in the judiciary are crucial for upholding the rule of law and public confidence in the justice system, but they must not compromise judicial independence. Similarly, the increasing use of digital technologies in judicial systems has also brought both opportunities and challenges. While information and communication technology (ICT) tools and AI-based solutions can enhance efficiency, transparency and accessibility, their impact on judicial decision making and procedural fairness requires careful consideration. The successful integration of digital justice solutions depends on clear legal frameworks, effective training for judicial professionals and measures to safeguard fundamental rights.

■ In 2024, several Council of Europe Programme on Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (HELP) training courses on judicial independence and impartiality, judicial reasoning and human rights, and ethics for judges, prosecutors and lawyers were launched. National justice training institutions in 17 member states have integrated these courses into their initial or continuous training programmes.<sup>149</sup>

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149. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Finland, France, Italy, Latvia, the Republic of Moldova, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Türkiye and Ukraine.

## JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

### Key findings

- ▶ Political influence over judicial appointments and governance remains the biggest threat to judicial independence. While some states have introduced positive reforms, others continue to experience political control over judicial selection, career progression and decision making.
- ▶ Public statements by government officials against judges and courts can erode judicial independence and public trust in the judiciary.
- ▶ Effective judicial councils, with balanced representation and peer-elected judicial members, are key to safeguarding judicial independence.
- ▶ Executive control over judicial governance remains a major concern in some states, highlighting structural shortcomings.

Judicial independence remains a cornerstone of democratic governance and the rule of law. It requires not only structural safeguards but also the functional autonomy of judges and judicial bodies, protecting them from undue influence. This principle is essential for maintaining public confidence in the judiciary and ensuring its ability to operate impartially and effectively.<sup>150</sup>

Judicial councils play a crucial role in safeguarding judicial independence. The Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) has emphasised the need to enshrine the fundamental elements of judicial councils in constitutions to mitigate risks posed by frequent statutory changes that could weaken public trust in the judiciary.<sup>151</sup> It has also highlighted the importance of ensuring a well-balanced composition of judicial councils, with a mix of judicial and non-judicial members, representation across different types and levels of the judiciary, regional balance and gender parity.<sup>152</sup>

The peer election of judicial members is considered essential to ensuring the autonomy and legitimacy of judicial councils.<sup>153</sup> Additionally, clear and limited grounds for disciplinary action and dismissal must be established by law to prevent such provisions from undermining the functional autonomy of judicial council members.<sup>154</sup>

The extensive involvement of executive members, particularly with voting powers, including the minister of justice, in the operations of a judicial council presents a significant risk to judicial independence and the separation of powers.<sup>155</sup> The situation in Türkiye is closely monitored at the Council of Europe by the Committee of Ministers and the Monitoring Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly, which has requested an opinion from the Venice Commission.<sup>156</sup>

One of the issues raised in the opinion – also relevant to the execution of the Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş (No. 2) Court judgments – is the fact that the executive can effectively select most of the members of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK), with the minister of justice and their deputy serving as *ex officio* members. In the Kavala case,<sup>157</sup> the Committee of Ministers strongly urged Türkiye to adopt legislative and other measures in line with the judicial reform strategy, drawing on the Venice Commission's opinion, particularly regarding the structure and election process of the HSK. These steps are essential to protect the judiciary and ensure its resilience against undue influence, including from the executive branch.<sup>158</sup>

150. For a general overview of the relevant case law of the European Court of Human rights see the fact sheet on the [independence of judicial systems](#) and the relevant pages of the [European Court of Human Rights' Knowledge Sharing Platform](#).

151. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)018](#), Poland – Urgent joint opinion on the draft law amending the Law on the National Council of the Judiciary of Poland. See also [CDL-AD\(2023\)045](#), Armenia – Joint opinion on the concept paper concerning the reform of the Ethics and Disciplinary Commission of the General Assembly of Judges.

152. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2023\)039](#), Bulgaria – Opinion on the draft amendments to the constitution. See also [CDL-AD\(2023\)006](#), Georgia – Follow-up opinion to four previous opinions concerning the Organic Law on Common Courts.

153. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)018](#), Poland – Urgent joint opinion on the draft law amending the Law on the National Council of the Judiciary of Poland. See also [CDL-AD\(2023\)033](#), Georgia – Follow-up opinion on previous opinions concerning the Organic Law on Common Courts; [CDL-AD\(2023\)011](#), Montenegro – Follow-up opinion to the opinion on the draft amendments to the Law on the Judicial Council and Judges; [CDL-AD\(2023\)006](#), Georgia – Follow-up opinion to four previous opinions concerning the Organic Law on Common Courts.

154. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)041](#), Türkiye – Opinion on the composition of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors and the procedure for the election of its members.

155. Ibid. See also [CDL-AD\(2023\)039](#), Bulgaria – Opinion on the draft amendments to the constitution;

156. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)041](#), Türkiye – Opinion on the composition of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors and the procedure for the election of its members.

157. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2025\)1521/H46-32](#), *Kavala v. Türkiye* (Application No. 28749/18).

158. See also Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1501/H46-9](#), *Miroslava Todorova v. Bulgaria* (Application No. 40072/13).

■ In a memorandum issued in March 2024 following her visit to Türkiye, the former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, highlighted that the state of judicial independence and impartiality posed an existential threat to the rule of law.<sup>159</sup>

## Judicial reforms and challenges

■ The Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) welcomed the significant steps taken in the Republic of Moldova to make the Superior Council of Magistracy operational and ensure a balanced representation of judges. It also recognised the Superior Council of Magistracy's progress in adopting reasoned decisions, particularly concerning judicial appointments, transfers and career progression.<sup>160</sup>

■ GRECO reiterated its concerns about the *ex officio* membership of the minister of justice in North Macedonia's Judicial Council, emphasising that the risk of political influence persists even in the absence of formal voting rights or the minister's direct attendance at meetings.<sup>161</sup>

■ The ongoing judicial reform in Serbia aims to enhance the independence and efficiency of the judiciary and prosecution service while reducing the influence of the executive and parliament on the appointment of judges and prosecutors. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe welcomed these efforts and encouraged the authorities to adopt the necessary secondary legislation for implementation, in line with the recommendations of the Venice Commission.<sup>162</sup>

■ As former Commissioner Dunja Mijatović highlighted, a strong domestic justice system, an independent judiciary and effective regional and international judicial co-operation are essential for making progress in the fight against impunity for war crimes in Serbia.<sup>163</sup>

■ Government representatives in Slovakia have made statements targeting specific judges, including public calls for their removal, raising concerns about interference with judicial independence.<sup>164</sup> Similar concerns have been expressed regarding campaigns against judges in the Hungarian media.<sup>165</sup>

■ The European Court of Human Rights recalled that judges should have access to a court in matters related, for instance, to an early termination of their mandate.<sup>166</sup> Undue interference by the executive in judicial appointments remains a concern in some member states. In Poland, the authorities have expressed full commitment to implementing the Court's judgments and reversing the effects of judicial reforms from 2015 to 2023. This includes legislative reforms to ensure the independence of the National Council of the Judiciary and to address the status of irregularly appointed judges of the Constitutional Tribunal, as well as judgments issued with their participation.<sup>167</sup>

■ In one of its opinions on Poland,<sup>168</sup> the Venice Commission welcomed legislative provisions aimed at depoliticising the election of Constitutional Tribunal judges and introducing new incompatibility requirements for constitutional judges. However, it did not support a complete renewal of the tribunal at a future date, arguing that this would allow the political majority at the time to appoint all constitutional judges simultaneously.<sup>169</sup> It also criticised the proposal to declare null and void all appointments made within a specific time frame.<sup>170</sup>

■ In France, the Venice Commission recommended granting the Superior Council of Magistracy at least the power to modify judicial appointment proposals made by the minister of justice.<sup>171</sup>

159. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, [Memorandum on freedom of expression and of the media, human rights defenders and civil society in Türkiye](#), 5 March 2024.

160. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Third interim compliance report in respect of the Republic of Moldova](#), adopted 22 November 2024, published 28 November 2024, paragraph 40.

161. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Second addendum to the second compliance report in respect of North Macedonia](#), adopted on 1 December 2023, published on 12 March 2024, paragraphs 35 and 69.

162. Parliamentary Assembly, [Resolution 2534 \(2024\)](#) "The progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure (January-December 2023)".

163. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, [Report following her visit to Serbia](#), March 2023.

164. European Commission, [2024 Rule of law report – Country Chapter Slovakia](#), 24 July 2024.

165. Ibid.

166. European Court of Human Rights, [Pajqk and Others v. Poland](#) (Application No. 25226/18, 24 October 2023 (in French)).

167. See Committee of Ministers decisions: [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1507/H46-22](#), *Xero Flor w Polsce sp. z o.o. v. Poland* (Application No. 4907/18); [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1507/H46-21](#), *Reczkowicz group* (Application No. 43447/19), *Broda and Bojara* (Application No. 26691/18), *Grzęda* (Application No. 43572/18) and *Wałęsa* (Application No. 50849/21) v. Poland; [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1507/H46-20](#), *Juszczyszyn* (Application No. 35599/20), *Żurek* (Application No. 39650/18) and *Tuleya* (Application No. 21181/19) v. Poland.

168. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)035](#), Poland – Opinion on the draft constitutional amendments concerning the Constitutional Tribunal and two draft laws on the Constitutional Tribunal.

169. Ibid.

170. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)029](#), Poland – Joint opinion on European standards regulating the status of judges.

171. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2023\)015](#), France – Joint opinion on the Superior Council of Magistracy and the status of the judiciary as regards nominations, mutations, promotions and disciplinary procedures.

■ In the Netherlands, the Venice Commission welcomed legislative proposals aimed at strengthening the separation of powers but recommended reconsidering the transparency of the process by which the House of Representatives designates Supreme Court judges.<sup>172</sup>

■ In Liechtenstein, GRECO recommended increasing the role of the judiciary in the judicial selection board, with judges being appointed by their peers.<sup>173</sup>

## Prosecutorial independence and accountability

■ In most member states, prosecution services operate as centralised, hierarchical bodies led by prosecutors general.<sup>174</sup> It is therefore crucial that prosecutors general themselves remain fully independent and impartial to safeguard the independence and autonomy of the services they oversee and to which they are accountable.

■ Opinion No. 19 (2024) of the Consultative Council of European Prosecutors (CCPE) recommends, among other measures, minimising the role of the executive in the appointment or election of prosecutors general or ensuring that it is accompanied by strong safeguards.<sup>175</sup>

■ The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has emphasised the importance of safeguarding the independence of the prosecution service as a fundamental element of the rule of law. For instance, it strongly urged the Georgian authorities to adopt the necessary constitutional amendments to revise the rules governing the appointment of the Prosecutor General and reiterated the need to reform the composition and powers of the Prosecutorial Council while ensuring specific guarantees for the individual independence of prosecutors.<sup>176</sup>

■ In *Kolevi v. Bulgaria*,<sup>177</sup> the Committee of Ministers welcomed legislative amendments introducing the appointment of an ad hoc prosecutor to ensure the independent investigation of the chief prosecutor or their deputies. However, constitutional amendments adopted in December 2023 to strengthen this mechanism were struck down by Bulgaria's Constitutional Court in July 2024.

■ Reforms to strengthen the independence of prosecutors have been implemented or are underway in Romania,<sup>178</sup> Cyprus<sup>179</sup> and Ukraine.<sup>180</sup> At the same time, GRECO noted that progress in the Republic of Moldova remains limited regarding the composition of the Superior Council of Prosecutors, as the minister of justice will continue to serve as an *ex officio* member – along with the President of the Superior Council of Magistracy – at least until 1 January 2026.<sup>181</sup>

■ The Venice Commission recommended that France align the disciplinary and appointment procedures of prosecutors with those applicable to judges.<sup>182</sup> It also advised the Netherlands to remove the minister of justice's power to issue instructions not to prosecute in specific cases or, at a minimum, to restrict this prerogative to clearly defined exceptional circumstances.<sup>183</sup>

## Threats to legal professionals

■ The Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE) highlighted reports from national bar associations regarding physical, online and legal threats, as well as harassment and unjustified attacks against lawyers in

172. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2023\)029](#), the Netherlands – Joint opinion on legal safeguards of the independence of the judiciary from the executive power.

173. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Interim compliance report in respect of Liechtenstein](#), adopted on 1 December 2023, published on 11 March 2024, paragraph 59.

174. [Thematic study](#) of the CCPE on management practices of prosecution services in member states in connection with prosecutorial independence and impartiality (CCPE(2024)3).

175. CCPE, [Opinion No. 19 \(2024\)](#) on managing prosecution services to ensure their independence and impartiality (CCPE(2024)7).

176. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1501/H46-13](#), *Merabishvili v. Georgia* (Application No. 72508/13).

177. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2023\)1468/H46-8](#), *Kolevi v. Bulgaria* (Application Nos. 29263/12 and 1108/02).

178. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [second compliance report including follow-up to the ad hoc \(Rule 34\) report in respect of Romania](#), adopted on 21 June 2024, published on 8 August 2024.

179. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Second addendum to the second compliance report in respect of Cyprus](#), adopted on 1 December 2023, published on 9 January 2024, paragraph 47.

180. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Interim compliance report in respect of Ukraine](#), adopted and published on 24 March 2023, paragraph 164.

181. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Third interim compliance report in respect of the Republic of Moldova](#), adopted 22 November 2024, published 28 November 2024, paragraph 74.

182. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2023\)015](#), France – Joint opinion on the Superior Council of Magistracy and the status of the judiciary as regards nominations, mutations, promotions and disciplinary procedures.

183. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2023\)029](#), the Netherlands – Joint opinion on legal safeguards of the independence of the judiciary from the executive power.

the course of their professional duties. It also raised concerns over legal developments that could undermine the independence of the legal profession and the self-regulation of national bar associations.<sup>184</sup>

■ The CCBE conducted a survey<sup>185</sup> in 2023 and 2024 among its members across 20 bars in 18 countries. Of the more than 14 000 respondents, 57% reported experiencing threats or aggression at least once in the preceding two to three years, while 35% stated they had considered leaving the profession due to such hostile behaviour.<sup>186</sup> Most respondents observed an increase in threats, harassment and aggression over the past five years, with only a small fraction reporting any decrease.

■ The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers expressed similar concerns, emphasising that such attacks not only affect legal professionals but also undermine the rights of individuals to a fair trial and other fundamental human rights safeguarded by the rule of law and a well-functioning judicial system.<sup>187</sup>

■ In response to these concerns and recognising the essential role of lawyers in ensuring access to justice and fair trials, the Committee of Ministers adopted the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer – the first legally binding international instrument aimed at protecting lawyers and their professional associations.

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184. CCBE contribution to the 2024 Rule of Law Report, 14 February 2024, page 8 and 9.

185. Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, report “[Opinion on a draft convention for the protection of the profession of lawyer](#)”, Doc. 16102, 28 January 2025, paragraph 11.

186. Verbal aggression is the most reported experience (64%), followed by harassment (44%) and threatening behaviour (36.5%). Physical aggression was less frequently reported (12%).

187. [A/HRC/53/31](#) “Reimagining justice: confronting contemporary challenges to the independence of judges and lawyers” – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, Margaret Satterthwaite, 10 July 2023.



## JUDICIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

### Key findings

- ▶ Strong accountability mechanisms are vital to judicial integrity but must not be misused for political pressure.
- ▶ Many states have improved judicial ethics, disciplinary frameworks and transparency, but challenges persist.
- ▶ Disciplinary frameworks must be clearly defined and shielded from political interference to prevent their misuse against judges.
- ▶ Judicial evaluations should remain separate from disciplinary measures to ensure fairness and prevent undue influence.

Accountability mechanisms in the judiciary are essential for upholding the rule of law and maintaining public trust in the justice system.<sup>188</sup> Judicial ethics and professional conduct can be reinforced through clear codes of conduct, explanatory comments and practical examples. Comprehensive guidelines on conflicts of interest, gifts, incompatibilities and other integrity-related matters are also necessary.

Positive developments have been observed in several countries,<sup>189</sup> where codes of ethics, guidelines and oversight mechanisms have been adopted or revised. In Armenia, the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) welcomed plans to establish an advisory commission within the General Assembly of Judges to provide confidential counselling within the judiciary.<sup>190</sup> In Germany, authorities have been encouraged to enhance transparency by publishing annual reports on judges' secondary activities.<sup>191</sup>

In Georgia, all prosecutors are now required to disclose their assets, interests and liabilities, with asset declarations published online.<sup>192</sup> Similarly, in the Republic of Moldova, candidates entering the National Institute of Justice to become judges or prosecutors must file declarations of assets and interests, which are subject to verification and control by the National Integrity Authority.<sup>193</sup>

GRECO emphasised the importance of training and ongoing professional development in helping judges identify potential conflicts of interest and apply appropriate measures to address them. It positively assessed Ireland's progress in enhancing induction and in-service training for judges<sup>194</sup> and encouraged San Marino to continue organising ethics and integrity training for magistrates, both during induction and at regular intervals.<sup>195</sup>

### Disciplinary mechanisms and safeguards

Disciplinary mechanisms must be effective, objective and protected from undue political influence to prevent their misuse as a tool for intimidating prosecutors or judges handling sensitive cases. The Consultative Council of European Judges' (CCJE) Opinion No. 27 (2024) on the disciplinary liability of judges underscores the need for robust safeguards at the constitutional or legislative level and their effective implementation in practice.<sup>196</sup>

The European Court of Human Rights reiterated the need for appropriate procedural safeguards against arbitrariness in a case concerning the suspension of a prosecutor general from his functions.<sup>197</sup> Clear and spe-

188. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)004](#), Bulgaria – Joint opinion on the Code of Ethical Conduct for Judges.

189. Such as Andorra, Greece, Ireland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Portugal and Ukraine.

190. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Addendum to the second compliance report in respect of Armenia](#), adopted on 22 November 2024, published on 11 December 2024, paragraphs 47-48.

191. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Addendum to the second compliance report in respect of Germany](#), adopted on 22 March 2024, published on 8 July 2024, paragraphs 29-30.

192. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Second addendum to the second compliance report in respect of Georgia](#), adopted 22 March 2024, published 3 July 2024, paragraph 51.

193. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Third interim compliance report in respect of the Republic of Moldova](#), adopted 22 November 2024, published 28 November 2024, paragraph 28.

194. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Addendum to the second compliance report in respect of Ireland](#), adopted on 1 December 2023, published on 30 January 2024, paragraph 39.

195. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Second compliance report in respect of San Marino](#), adopted on 21 June 2024, published on 5 July 2024, paragraph 25.

196. CCJE, [Opinion No. 27\(2024\)](#) on the disciplinary liability of judges.

197. European Court of Human Rights, [Stoianoglo v. Republic of Moldova](#) (Application No. 19371/22, 24 October 2023 (in French)).

cific statutory provisions are equally important, as vague or overly broad definitions of disciplinary offences risk undermining the foreseeability and fairness of disciplinary proceedings.<sup>198</sup>

■ The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe continued to closely monitor cases involving disciplinary proceedings and sanctions against judges, including those imposed for criticising judicial reforms. In *Baka v. Hungary*,<sup>199</sup> for instance, the Committee of Ministers reiterated the paramount importance of procedural fairness in cases concerning the removal of judges from office, as well as the need for effective and adequate safeguards against abuse when restricting the freedom of expression of judges. The European Court of Human Rights considered that a disciplinary sanction imposed on a magistrate – who was also the secretary general of a syndicate of judges – for an interview criticising a reform affecting the independence of the judiciary, in the absence of a review of the decision by an independent and impartial body, violated Article 10 of the Convention.<sup>200</sup>

■ The authority of a minister of justice to initiate and investigate disciplinary cases against judges has been regarded as a potential threat to judicial independence. In an opinion on Armenia, the Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) recommended phasing out this function once the Ethics and Disciplinary Commission (EDC) of the General Assembly of Judges demonstrates its efficiency.<sup>201</sup>

■ GRECO noted that progress remained limited in France on its recommendation to place disciplinary proceedings concerning judges exclusively under the authority of the Superior Council of Magistracy, thereby reducing the minister of justice's role in such matters.<sup>202</sup>

■ Andorra has revised the rules on the disciplinary liability of judges and prosecutors to introduce greater procedural safeguards, public disclosure and transparency.<sup>203</sup> In Belgium, the bodies responsible for disciplining judges and prosecutors have been strengthened, and detailed information and data are now published regularly.<sup>204</sup>

■ GRECO observed that in Ukraine, disciplinary offences related to judges' conduct remain undefined, and further efforts are needed to improve the efficiency of disciplinary proceedings.<sup>205</sup> It also encouraged the Georgian authorities to limit judicial immunity to functional immunity.<sup>206</sup>

## Judicial evaluations and vetting processes

■ The Venice Commission emphasised the importance of distinguishing between disciplinary responsibility and the duty to uphold ethical norms.<sup>207</sup> The European Court of Human Rights stated that where a judicial council decided that no disciplinary violation had been committed, but only a breach of the rules of professional ethics, and no disciplinary sanction had been imposed, a prosecutor could not claim to be a victim of a violation of Article 6 in connection with the disciplinary proceedings in which he had been acquitted.<sup>208</sup> The Venice Commission has also consistently stressed the need for a clear separation between disciplinary accountability and judicial evaluations, ensuring that evaluation processes do not unduly influence disciplinary decisions and that both functions remain distinct.<sup>209</sup>

198. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)004](#), Bulgaria – Joint opinion on the Code of Ethical Conduct for Judges. See also European Court of Human Rights, *Guliyev v. Azerbaijan* (Application No. 54588/13, 6 July 2023) – in the context of the dismissal of a prosecutor for a disciplinary breach.

199. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2025\)1521/H46-15](#), *Baka v. Hungary* (Application No. 20261/12).

200. European Court of Human Rights, *Sarısu Pehlivan v. Türkiye* (Application No. 63029/19, 6 June 2023 (in French)).

201. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2023\)045](#), Armenia – Joint opinion on the concept paper concerning the reform of the Ethics and Disciplinary Commission of the General Assembly of Judges.

202. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Second addendum to the second compliance report in respect of France](#) adopted on 1 December 2023, published on 30 January 2024, paragraph 42.

203. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Addendum to the second compliance report in respect of Andorra](#), adopted on 22 November 2024, published on 4 December 2024, paragraph 32.

204. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Addendum to the second compliance report in respect of Belgium](#), adopted on 22 March 2024, published on 7 May 2024, paragraph 52.

205. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Interim compliance report in respect of Ukraine](#), adopted and published on 24 March 2023, paragraph 163.

206. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Second addendum to the second compliance report in respect of Georgia](#), adopted 22 March 2024, published 3 July 2024, paragraph 50.

207. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)009](#), Bosnia and Herzegovina – Interim follow-up opinion to previous opinions on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council.

208. European Court of Human Rights, *Amar v. France* (Application No. 4028/23, 16 April 2024 (in French)).

209. CoE Venice Commission, [CDL-AD\(2024\)031](#), Armenia – Joint opinion on the draft amendments to the Judicial Code of Armenia (regarding evaluation of judges); [CDL-AD\(2024\)012](#), Montenegro – Urgent follow-up opinion on the revised draft amendments to the Law on the Judicial Council and Judges.

■ Regarding the composition and functioning of judicial evaluation bodies, the Venice Commission has recommended that lay members should have a meaningful role in decision making, even while remaining a minority.<sup>210</sup> It also expressed reservations about Armenia's proposed adoption of a two-year judicial evaluation cycle, cautioning that frequent evaluations could negatively affect judicial independence and place undue strain on judicial resources. Instead, it suggested that by rigorously assessing the integrity and professionalism of candidates at the point of entry into the judiciary, the need for frequent evaluations during a judge's tenure could be reduced.<sup>211</sup> GRECO observed that no progress had been made in Ukraine in introducing clear, uniform and objective criteria for the periodic evaluation of judges.<sup>212</sup>

■ While recognising that extreme levels of corruption may sometimes require extraordinary judicial vetting processes, the Venice Commission has cautioned that such mechanisms should be used only as a last resort. To minimise risks to judicial independence and efficiency, it emphasised the need for strong safeguards throughout the vetting process.<sup>213</sup>

■ As an example, the Venice Commission welcomed aspects of the ongoing vetting process in the Republic of Moldova, particularly the decision to leave the final say on the dismissal of judges and prosecutors to the judicial and prosecutorial councils. It also noted positively that the composition of the vetting commissions – including international members and opposition representatives – was designed to ensure independence from political influence.<sup>214</sup>

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210. CoE Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2024)031, Armenia – Joint opinion on the draft amendments to the Judicial Code of Armenia (regarding evaluation of judges).

211. Ibid.

212. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Interim compliance report in respect of Ukraine](#), adopted and published on 24 March 2023, paragraphs 90-93.

213. For further information on the case law of the European Court of Human rights about vetting procedures for judges, see the fact sheet on [independence of judicial systems](#) and the relevant pages of the [European Court of Human Rights' Knowledge Sharing Platform](#).

214. CoE Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2023)005, Republic of Moldova – Joint opinion on the draft law on the external assessment of judges and prosecutors; see also the joint follow-up opinions [CDL-AD\(2023\)023](#) and [CDL-AD\(2023\)035](#).

## EFFICIENCY OF JUDICIAL SYSTEMS

### Key findings

- ▶ While judicial efficiency has improved, case-processing times in civil, commercial and administrative matters have yet to return to pre-Covid-19 levels.
- ▶ Digitalisation has led to efficiency gains in many states, but technology alone is not a solution.
- ▶ Some lower-budget justice systems have matched the efficiency of wealthier states through pragmatic solutions, such as mobile judges and specialised court chambers.
- ▶ AI and digital tools are reshaping court operations, but their long-term impact is uncertain, and their role in judicial decision making must be carefully monitored.

■ The Council of Europe's European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice's (CEPEJ) 2024 evaluation report on European judicial systems<sup>215</sup> highlights significant improvements compared to the previous evaluation cycle, suggesting that courts were able to handle more cases as pandemic-related measures eased. The overall disposition time indicator – measuring the theoretical time needed to process a case – decreased.<sup>216</sup> However, processing times for civil, criminal and administrative cases have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, with proceedings in civil and commercial cases taking longer in both first and second instances.

■ Criminal justice remained the most efficient area of law, while administrative cases were the least efficient. Streamlined procedures and stricter time limits contributed to the efficiency of criminal cases. Among court levels, third-instance courts were the most efficient across all case types, whereas first-instance courts, despite improvements, remained the least efficient. Prosecutorial efficiency continues to be a challenge across Europe, with a general decline since 2020.

### Judicial budgets and resource allocation

■ The average share of the state budget allocated to the judicial system across member states remains modest at 0.31% of the gross domestic product (GDP), compared to other public sectors. Since 2020, judicial budgets have generally kept pace with inflation, increasing from €59 per inhabitant per year in 2014 to €85 in 2022, with some wealthier countries allocating over €200 per inhabitant. Less wealthy countries tend to dedicate a higher percentage of their GDP to justice, reflecting a greater effort relative to their resources.

■ Many countries that have made significant investments in their judicial systems – both in terms of a higher percentage of GDP and higher per capita expenditure – demonstrate consistently strong efficiency, with civil proceedings at first instance typically completed within 100 to 200 days. Conversely, countries that invest less in their judicial systems, such as Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina, often face challenges with delays.

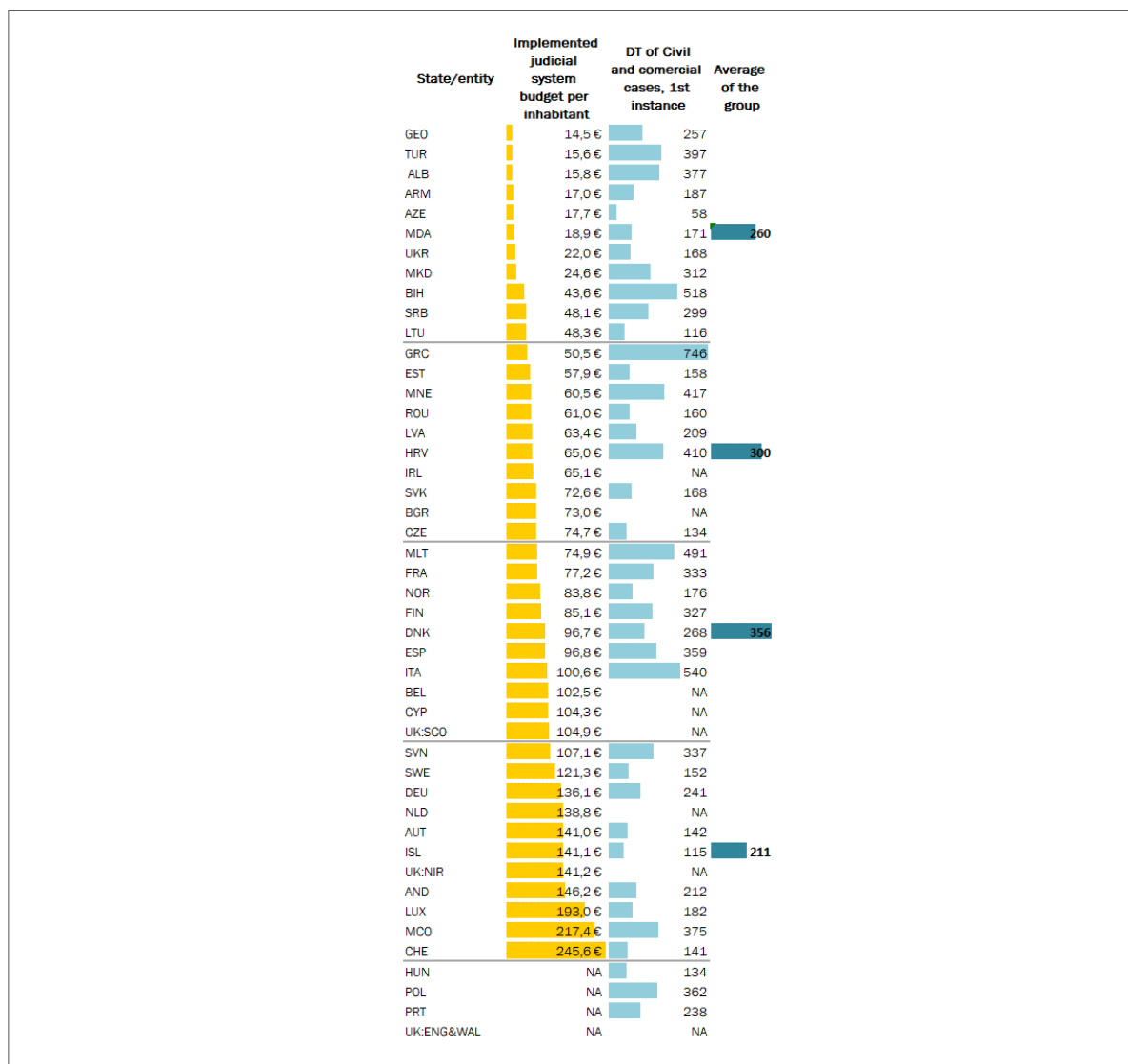
■ However, high efficiency is not always dependent on high spending. For instance, Lithuania, with a judicial budget of €48.3 per inhabitant, achieves the same disposition time<sup>217</sup> as countries that allocate significantly higher judicial budgets. This suggests that pragmatic solutions can enhance judicial efficiency without significantly increasing budgets. Examples of such approaches include teams of mobile judges deployed to courts facing temporary case backlogs (the Netherlands), specialised local chambers for emerging legal areas such as environmental law (Belgium) and national initiatives involving legal professionals to improve service quality for court users (Slovenia).

215. [European judicial systems – CEPEJ evaluation report, 2024 evaluation cycle \(2022 data\)](#), Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg. See also the CEPEJ [individual country profiles 2024 \(2022 data\)](#).

216. Disposition time indicates the time needed for a pending case to be resolved, considering the current pace of work. It is reached by dividing the number of pending cases at the end of a particular period by the number of resolved cases within that period and then multiplying the result by 365 to express it in days. More pending than resolved cases will lead to a disposition time higher than 365 days (one year) and vice versa.

217. Disposition time (DT) reveals the theoretical time needed for a pending case to be resolved, considering the current pace of work. It is reached by dividing the number of pending cases at the end of a particular period by the number of resolved cases within that period, and then multiplying the result by 365 to express it in days.

**Figure 2 – Judicial budgets and disposition time**



Source: European judicial systems – CEPEJ evaluation report, 2024 evaluation cycle (2022 data)

The efficiency of a national judicial system is determined by a combination of factors, both at the policy level and in daily judicial practice. Public policy aspects include the budget allocated to the judiciary, the number of judges,<sup>218</sup> prosecutors and clerks, the national e-justice strategy and policies on access to justice, including legal aid.<sup>219</sup> At the same time, the actions of justice professionals in courts are equally important, such as effective court and case management, oversight of judicial performance and maintaining efficient dialogue between courts and lawyers.

In Malta, the duration of first-instance severe criminal cases has significantly decreased following an increase in the number of criminal court halls, allowing for twice as many jury trials to be held.<sup>220</sup> In Italy, the length of proceedings continues to decline across all case types and court levels, driven by reforms under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.<sup>221</sup>

218. Europe has an average of 22 judges per 100 000 inhabitants (from a minimum of 3 judges per 100 000 inhabitants in UK-England and Wales to a maximum of 42.4 in Croatia and Montenegro) and 12 prosecutors per 100 000 inhabitants. However, significant disparities exist between countries, namely due to specific national characteristics of judicial systems, including the existence of non-professional judges, the role of *Rechtspfleger* (judicial/court officer), and the number and tasks of non-judge staff supporting judges.

219. Legal aid is available in all 46 member states, most of the time following an evaluation of the applicant's income and assets. Some states automatically grant legal aid to specific categories of individuals such as victims of domestic or sexual violence, immigrants or asylum seekers. The budget dedicated to legal aid among member states is on average €2.60 per inhabitant.

220. See also Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1501/H46-20](#), *Galea and Pavia group v. Malta* (Application No. 77209/16).

221. For instance, the length of proceedings in criminal matters in second instance decreased from 1 167 days to 645 days.

■ In Sweden, the introduction of a law requiring parents to participate in an information conversation with the social welfare board before filing a disputed claim for custody, housing or access may explain the low number of family cases brought before the courts.

■ In Croatia, a new law establishing a mechanism to address complaints about excessive trial length was adopted with Council of Europe support. This reform aims to implement the European Court of Human Rights judgment in the Kirinčić group of cases.

■ The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe noted progress in the execution of judgments related to the length of proceedings. For instance, when closing its supervision of the Abenavoli case, it recognised that the Italian administrative justice system had reached a self-sustaining path.<sup>222</sup>

■ It also acknowledged advancements in measuring the workload of judges and clerks in Belgium,<sup>223</sup> the implementation of a judicial human resources strategy in Serbia, with Council of Europe support, and the introduction of a case-weighting formula in all Serbian courts.<sup>224</sup> Progress was also noted in Ireland with the establishment of a statutory remedy for excessive trial length.<sup>225</sup>

■ In *Gazsó v. Hungary*, the Committee of Ministers positively assessed the introduction of an effective remedy to address excessively lengthy contentious civil proceedings.<sup>226</sup> However, concerns remain regarding the availability of remedies for criminal, administrative and non-contentious civil proceedings.<sup>227</sup>

■ Judgments concerning the non-implementation or delayed implementation of domestic final judicial decisions remain pending against several countries, including Ukraine,<sup>228</sup> Greece,<sup>229</sup> Romania<sup>230</sup> and Italy.<sup>231</sup>

■ The CEPEJ provided targeted assistance to authorities using its tools to support judicial reforms. This included efforts to reduce case backlogs in Greece, the establishment of a state-supported primary legal aid system in Latvia – along with enhanced use of mediation – and the development of a methodology for data collection and related indicators in Georgia.

■ In the Republic of Moldova, a human resources strategy and a communication strategy for the judicial system are being developed with CEPEJ tools as a reference. Additionally, the cyberjustice strategic plan in Kosovo\* is based on CEPEJ tools.

## Digitalisation and modernisation

■ The integration and effective use of ICT are becoming essential components of modern judicial systems. When properly designed, deployed and utilised, ICT can enhance transparency, efficiency, accessibility and service quality. As the Consultative Council of European Judges (CCJE) highlighted in its 2023 opinion, technology should serve to support and strengthen the rule of law. It must therefore be designed, implemented and used within a clear, generally applicable and publicly accessible legal and ethical framework that aligns with the fundamental rights guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>232</sup>

■ The Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) issued several recommendations to ensure that court judgments are fully accessible to the public and easily searchable, with the aim of streamlining public complaint mechanisms and reducing delays in court proceedings. In Croatia, the judicial authorities introduced the automated publication of anonymised court decisions using an AI-based tool, along with the widespread adoption of e-communication, both with Council of Europe support. Similarly, in Serbia, the digitalisation of Supreme Court decisions and training for judges and court staff were carried out with Council of Europe assistance.

222. Committee of Ministers Final Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2024\)203](#), *Abenavoli v. Italy* (Application No. 25587/94).

223. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1501/H46-6](#), *Bell v. Belgium* (Application No. 44826/05).

224. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2023\)1475/H46-34](#), *Jevremović v. Serbia* (Application No. 3150/05).

225. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1507/H46-14](#), *McFarlane v. Ireland* (Application No. 31333/06).

226. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2023\)1468/H46-13](#), *Gazsó v. Hungary* (Application No. 48322/12).

227. Committee of Ministers Interim Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2024\)119](#), *Gazsó v. Hungary* (Application No. 48322/12).

228. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2023\)1475/H46-41](#), *Yuriy Nikolayevich Ivanov, Zhovner group, Burmych and Others v. Ukraine* (Application Nos. 40450/04, 56848/00, 46852/13).

229. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1507/H46-10](#), *Kanellopoulos v. Greece* (Application No. 11325/06).

230. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2023\)1483/H46-29](#), *Săcăleanu group v. Romania* (Application No. 73970/01).

231. Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2025\)1521/H46-20](#), *Pennino group* (Application No. 43892/04) and *Croce and Others groups* (Application No. 17607/08) v. Italy.

232. CCJE, [Opinion No. 26 \(2023\)](#), "Moving forward: the use of assistive technology in the judiciary".



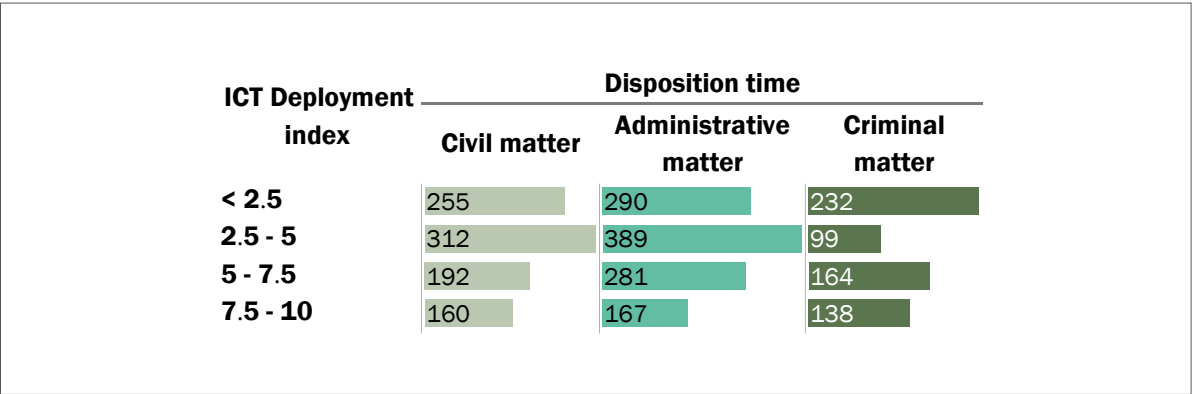
Positive developments in judicial digitalisation have also been noted in other countries, including Portugal<sup>233</sup> and Greece.<sup>234</sup>

Courts can enhance workflow management, track case progress and improve decision-making processes through digital platforms and databases. By automating repetitive tasks, these systems help free up valuable time for judicial personnel to focus on more complex matters.

Innovative tools are also emerging to assist judges in various areas, including class actions, automatic anonymisation of judgments and specialised translation. For example, in Germany, the pilot software “FRAUKE” supports judges in civil courts handling mass lawsuits by extracting relevant case data and providing decision makers with suitable text modules for judgments.

Judicial authorities in Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovenia piloted an innovative methodology for automating the publication of judicial decisions, with Council of Europe support. This included advanced anonymisation and categorisation techniques.

Figure 3 – ICT deployment index<sup>235</sup>



Source: European judicial systems CEPEJ 2024 evaluation cycle report

The direct impact of digitalisation on judicial efficiency remains to be fully demonstrated. States with higher levels of ICT deployment, such as Hungary and Lithuania, generally have lower average disposition time, suggesting greater efficiency in their judicial systems, while those with lower ICT deployment, such as Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, tend to experience longer case-processing times.

Nevertheless, strong investments in ICT and modernisation do not always translate into corresponding improvements in efficiency or better access to justice. Attempting to isolate the effect of ICT deployment on judicial performance may oversimplify the complex interactions that influence efficiency. Other factors, such as economic development, legal culture and broader government investment in public services, may also play a significant role in shaping both ICT adoption and judicial efficiency.

233. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Third interim compliance report in respect of Portugal](#), adopted on 1 December 2023, published on 15 January 2024, paragraph 54.

234. GRECO, fourth evaluation round, [Second addendum to the second compliance report in respect of Greece](#), adopted on 1 December 2023, published on 19 March 2024, paragraph 48.

235. The ICT deployment index is an indicator calculated by the CEPEJ based on 24 different digital tools and processes, their functionalities and deployment rate. Its values are 0 to 10 where 10 is the maximum.

# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: ENSURING HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF LAW IN THE DIGITAL AGE

## Framework convention

■ As a key priority following the Reykjavik Summit, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law ([CETS No. 225](#)) in May 2024, the first legally binding international treaty on AI. The convention seeks to ensure that human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law are upheld throughout the entire AI lifecycle.

■ The treaty was opened for signature in September 2024, with 15 parties having signed as of March 2025. As a transversal instrument with global reach, it was developed in co-operation with Council of Europe member and observer states, the European Union and several non-European states.

■ A core feature is its AI risk-management framework, supported by the HUDERIA Methodology (Risk and Impact Assessment of AI Systems from the Perspective of Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law), a non-legally binding tool to help states assess AI-related risks and impacts.

## Sectoral impact

■ AI's broad reach makes it relevant across the Council of Europe's areas of work. The Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH) is preparing a handbook<sup>236</sup> on human rights and AI to provide practical guidance to policy makers by 2025. In the media sector, the Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI) adopted [guidelines](#) on AI in journalism, outlining responsibilities for media outlets, technology providers and regulators in ensuring ethical AI use in newsrooms.

■ The Cybercrime Convention Committee has established a working group on AI, while the European Committee on Crime Problems (CDPC) is assessing the need for an AI-focused legal instrument in criminal law.

## Children's rights and AI risks

■ AI and immersive technologies offer potential benefits in education, health and safety but also introduce risks such as online predation, privacy breaches and security vulnerabilities.<sup>237</sup> AI can aid in detecting child sexual exploitation, yet regulatory gaps persist.

■ A mapping study on the rights of the child and AI<sup>238</sup> found that most member states lack legal frameworks on AI and children's rights. The Lanzarote Committee adopted a declaration<sup>239</sup> in November 2024 urging states to criminalise AI-generated child sexual abuse material and strengthen victim support and investigation capabilities.

236. See [Human rights and artificial intelligence \(CDDH-IA\)](#).

237. Council of Europe, "[Emerging technologies: threats and opportunities for the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse](#)", Background paper for the Committee to the Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Committee), October 2024.

238. Council of Europe, "[Mapping study on the rights of the child and artificial intelligence](#) – Legal frameworks that address AI in the context of children's rights", approved by the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child in May 2024.

239. Lanzarote Committee, [Declaration on protecting children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by emerging technologies](#), adopted by the Lanzarote Committee on 7 November 2024.

## AI and equality

■ AI poses both opportunities and risks to gender equality. While AI-powered tools can detect discrimination and amplify women's voices, they can also enable online harassment, deepfake abuse and other forms of technology-facilitated violence against women and girls.

■ The Gender Equality Commission (GEC) and the Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI) are developing guidance on ensuring AI systems promote equality, building on a study<sup>240</sup> on the impact of AI systems on equality and non-discrimination. The Gender Equality Division and CDPC have been mandated to address AI's misuse in gender-based violence, with the [Committee of Experts](#) on combating technology-facilitated violence against women and girls (GEC/PC-eVIO) drafting a recommendation on this issue.

■ The European Union–Council of Europe joint project<sup>241</sup> launched in September 2024 is working with equality bodies in Belgium, Finland and Portugal to develop protocols, policy guidance and training to prevent discrimination in AI deployment within public administration.

■ AI is also shaping governance and youth engagement, with the Youth Sector Strategy 2030 prioritising AI literacy and its implications for democracy. These priorities are reflected in the Declaration on Youth Participation in AI Governance<sup>242</sup> and integrated into the strategy.

■ In 2024, the Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape adopted guidelines<sup>243</sup> on AI's impact on culture, creativity and heritage, complementing existing Council of Europe standards. The Committee of Ministers also adopted Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)5<sup>244</sup> on AI use in prison and probation services, ensuring AI supports rehabilitation without infringing dignity, privacy or human rights.

## Educational technologies

■ The Council of Europe [feasibility study](#)<sup>245</sup> for a European Reference Framework for the Evaluation of Educational Technologies found that several countries have established review systems to assess the quality, compliance and effectiveness of educational technologies.

■ In Germany, EduCheck Digital provides a seal of approval for digital resources, ensuring legal compliance, data protection and classroom suitability. Austria's OeAD (Agency for Education and Internationalisation) Lern-Apps-Gütesiegel certifies secondary education apps based on platform independence, data-protection compliance and the absence of in-app advertisements.

■ Education Alliance Finland evaluates education technology (EdTech) products using educational psychology principles, while Goldstar EdTech Diagnostics in the UK assesses AI-driven educational tools, focusing on leadership vision and teamwork. These initiatives highlight growing efforts to ensure high-quality, ethical and effective use of AI in education across Europe.

■ The Council of Europe is actively contributing to global AI governance by fostering collaboration between member and non-member states, experts, civil society and industry. It emphasises integrating human rights, democracy and the rule of law into AI frameworks while ensuring appropriate safeguards and remedies.

240. See <https://rm.coe.int/study-on-the-impact-of-artificial-intelligence-systems-their-potential/1680ac99e3>.

241. See [Upholding equality and non-discrimination by equality bodies regarding the use of artificial intelligence \(AI\) in public administrations](#).

242. See <https://rm.coe.int/declaration-on-youth-participation-in-ai-governance-eng-08122020/1680a0a745>.

243. See ["Guidelines given the latest technological developments, such as AI, complementing Council of Europe standards in the fields of culture, creativity and cultural heritage"](#).

244. See Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member States regarding the ethical and organisational aspects of the use of artificial intelligence and related digital technologies by prison and probation services.

245. See [Presenting an European Reference Framework for the Evaluation of Educational Technologies](#).

## C. SAFETY, SECURITY AND INTEGRITY OF SOCIETY AND PERSONS

### INTRODUCTION

■ Ensuring the safety, security and integrity of society and individuals is a fundamental responsibility of states and a prerequisite for the full enjoyment of fundamental rights and the effective functioning of democratic institutions. The Council of Europe's work in these areas aims to uphold the values of its member states and protect the rights of those living within them. The topics addressed in this chapter are directly linked to the Council of Europe's broader mandate, as issues such as money laundering, illicit financial flows, terrorism and cybercrime often lead to or facilitate human rights violations and organised crime. The effective implementation of existing legal standards, as well as the development of new ones in response to evolving challenges, remains essential.

■ Corruption remains one of the most pressing threats to democratic governance, the rule of law and human rights across member states. From the highest levels of government to local administration, corruption weakens public institutions and erodes democratic foundations. Despite reform efforts, challenges persist in tackling undue influence and strengthening the capacity of authorities responsible for preventing and combating corruption. In some cases, a deterioration in anti-corruption measures has undermined progress, making it difficult to fully address corruption risks and threats to institutional integrity.

■ Serious and organised crime has far-reaching consequences, affecting the daily lives of Europeans, hindering economic growth and weakening state institutions. It undermines the rule of law and threatens the resilience of democratic systems. In response, member states have demonstrated growing commitment to combating organised crime by addressing money laundering risks, disrupting criminal financing and limiting the ability of organised crime groups to infiltrate the legal economy.

■ The Council of Europe remains at the forefront of setting international standards in criminal law, criminal procedure and penology, adapting to emerging crime trends worldwide. Many countries are aligning their criminal legislation and penological practices with Council of Europe standards, as reflected in the increasing number of ratifications of its criminal law conventions and protocols. Additionally, member states have sought guidance through soft-law instruments to address specific challenges such as migrant smuggling and new forms of organised crime.

■ Cybercrime continues to pose a serious challenge to law-enforcement and judicial authorities worldwide. The Convention on Cybercrime and its two additional protocols (ETS No. 189 and CETS No. 224), together with the Cybercrime Convention Committee (T-CY) and capacity-building efforts by the Council of Europe's Cybercrime Programme Office (C-PROC), remain the most relevant international framework for co-operation on cybercrime and electronic evidence.

■ Terrorism remains a serious threat to democratic societies and institutions. The Council of Europe supports member states to strengthen their counter-terrorism capacities by developing standards that uphold human rights, the rule of law and democracy. A key example is the Organisation's recent work on establishing a common pan-European definition of terrorism, aimed at reinforcing international co-operation and enhancing the effectiveness of efforts to prevent and combat terrorist activities.

■ Member states have also increased efforts to counter organised crime by strengthening anti-money laundering measures and restricting the ability of criminal networks to finance and profit from illegal activities. Preventing these groups from infiltrating and distorting the legal economy remains a priority.

■ Sport is at a pivotal moment. The Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games demonstrated the unifying power of sport, underscoring the need for all stakeholders to uphold integrity and respect for human rights in and through sport. The Council of Europe's European Sports Charter promotes a vision of values-based sport and highlights its role as a driver of social progress.

## CORRUPTION AND INTEGRITY OF INSTITUTIONS

### Key findings

- ▶ Co-operation with member states has led to significant anti-corruption reforms, yet challenges continue to hinder efforts to mitigate corruption risks and strengthen institutional integrity.
- ▶ Many member states need to improve conflict-of-interest management by clearly defining rules and procedures, as recommended by the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO).
- ▶ Greater transparency remains essential for maintaining public trust in institutions and preventing corruption.
- ▶ While progress has been made in drafting codes of conduct for public officials, challenges persist in ensuring their effective supervision and enforcement.

■ In 2023 and 2024, GRECO assessed national anti-corruption policies and practices through its peer evaluation and compliance reviews, adopting 16 evaluation reports and 67 compliance reports. In 2024, it concluded its fifth evaluation round, which focused on preventing corruption and promoting integrity within central governments, particularly among persons with top executive functions and law-enforcement agencies.

■ Several member states remain under the fourth round compliance procedure, which examines corruption risks among parliamentarians, judges and prosecutors. In June 2023, GRECO decided that its sixth evaluation round, set to begin in 2025, would focus on preventing corruption and promoting integrity at the subnational level.

■ Countries continued their efforts to develop strategies, action plans and integrity policies to combat corruption,<sup>246</sup> as recommended by GRECO, though gaps remain. To achieve tangible results, strategic frameworks must be evidence-based, focus on high-risk sectors<sup>247</sup> and be backed by adequate funding, strong monitoring and effective co-ordination.

■ For example, North Macedonia's State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption developed a five-year National Strategy for the Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest (2021-2025), prioritising high-risk sectors based on a corruption risk assessment.<sup>248</sup> In Montenegro, a new Integrity Plan for the Ministry of the Interior was adopted on 14 May 2024, identifying integrity risk levels across various administrative entities, including the police, and proposing measures to address them.<sup>249</sup>

### Enhancing transparency, accountability and ethics

■ GRECO recommended the adoption of codes of conduct or clear guidance on integrity-related matters for public officials, including rules on interactions with lobbyists and others seeking to influence public decision making.<sup>250</sup> Encouragingly, several member states have introduced or updated such codes.

■ For instance, in Belgium, the Council of Ministers adopted a code of conduct for government members in 2023,<sup>251</sup> while Lithuania enhanced the codes of conduct for the police and the State Border Guard Service.<sup>252</sup> Additionally, Sweden launched an online course for ministers, state secretaries and political advisers to promote ethical principles and conflict-of-interest awareness.<sup>253</sup>

246. Such as in Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, the Slovak Republic, Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

247. In Kosovo\*, with the support of the Council of Europe, a risk assessment was conducted covering 159 institutions, including 115 executive bodies and 44 state-owned enterprises. Additionally, technical capacity-building efforts, supported by relevant tools and expertise, were observed in several Council of Europe member states.

248. GRECO, fifth evaluation round, [Second compliance report in respect of North Macedonia](#), adopted on 9 June 2023, published on 18 October 2023, paragraph 8.

249. GRECO, fifth evaluation round, [First compliance report in respect of Montenegro](#), adopted on 21 June 2024, published on 8 August 2024, paragraph 66.

250. Lobbying remains unregulated in several member states, including Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Spain and Serbia.

251. GRECO, fifth evaluation round, [Second compliance report in respect of Belgium](#), adopted on 22 March 2024, published on 7 May 2024, paragraph 20.

252. GRECO, fifth evaluation round, [First compliance report in respect of Lithuania](#), adopted on 22 March 2024, published on 14 May 2024, paragraph 60.

253. GRECO, fifth evaluation round, [Second compliance report in respect of Sweden](#), adopted on 9 June 2023, published on 15 November 2023, paragraph 25.

■ However, overall progress remains limited in the introduction or effective application of codes of conduct for members of parliament.

■ Managing conflicts of interest is essential to ensuring that institutions serve the public interest rather than private interests. GRECO recommended that most countries strengthen how conflicts of interest, including ad hoc situations, are identified and managed.

■ In France, the High Authority for Transparency in Public Life developed a questionnaire for government members to complete upon taking office to identify potential conflicts of interest.<sup>254</sup> In Romania, the National Integrity Agency introduced the PREVENT system, which conducts *ex ante* verification to automatically detect potential conflicts of interest in procedures initiated through the Electronic Public Procurement System.<sup>255</sup>

■ Transparency and accountability in public office remain at the core of anti-corruption efforts. Progress has been made in enhancing the transparency of the legislative process, including the publication of draft legislation and the practice of public consultations.

■ GRECO has stressed the importance of public access to information in detecting corruption and ensuring transparency. However, it has raised concerns that some governments retain excessive discretion in determining what information is publicly available and in restricting access to certain documents. GRECO has also emphasised the need for stronger supervision and enforcement mechanisms, including effective controls and sanctions, to address ethical misconduct proactively rather than relying on media or political pressure.

## Strengthening institutions

■ The effectiveness of the criminal justice response to high-level corruption remains a challenge. To build public trust, investigations and indictments in such cases must lead to conclusive judicial outcomes, supported by a strong legislative framework and the consistent use of parallel financial investigations. In several member states, undue pressure on prosecutors and judges by government or political officials continues to be a concern.

■ In Albania, some progress has been made in investigating, prosecuting and convicting high-level corruption cases, including those involving prominent figures, though challenges persist.<sup>256</sup> In North Macedonia, recent amendments to the Criminal Code have raised concerns about their potential negative impact on the prosecution and investigation of certain corruption offences, particularly by shortening the statute of limitations for cases involving high-ranking officials.<sup>257</sup>

■ Several member states and neighbouring jurisdictions have strengthened their legal and regulatory frameworks.<sup>258</sup> However, challenges persist in implementation, particularly in addressing vulnerabilities in the management of public funds and resources. The Council of Europe continues to support efforts to address these challenges through technical assistance and co-operation.

■ Member states and neighbouring jurisdictions have also taken legal and institutional measures<sup>259</sup> to restructure and strengthen specialised anti-corruption institutions, enhancing their capacity to tackle increasingly sophisticated and complex forms of corruption. Efforts have also been made to improve mechanisms for asset verification.<sup>260</sup>

■ However, challenges persist, including limited powers, resources, independence and effectiveness of anti-corruption authorities.<sup>261</sup> The adoption of digital solutions offers potential for addressing resource gaps and enhancing efficiency in anti-corruption efforts.

254. GRECO, fifth evaluation round, [Second compliance report in respect of France](#), adopted on 22 March 2024, published on 10 April 2024, paragraph 33.

255. GRECO, [Fifth round evaluation report on Romania](#), adopted on 9 June 2023, published on 7 September 2023, paragraph 97.

256. European Commission, Communication on EU enlargement policy, Albania 2024 Report, 30 October 2024, p. 6.

257. European Commission, Communication on EU enlargement policy, North Macedonia 2024 Report, 30 October 2024, p. 6.

258. Legislation on conflict of interest (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro), legislation on assets and interests' disclosure (Kosovo\*, Lebanon), legislation on the protection of whistle-blowers (Algeria, Kazakhstan, Kosovo\*, Lebanon, Montenegro), on illicit enrichment (Kazakhstan, Kosovo\*, North Macedonia), extended scope of the asset declaration regime (Georgia).

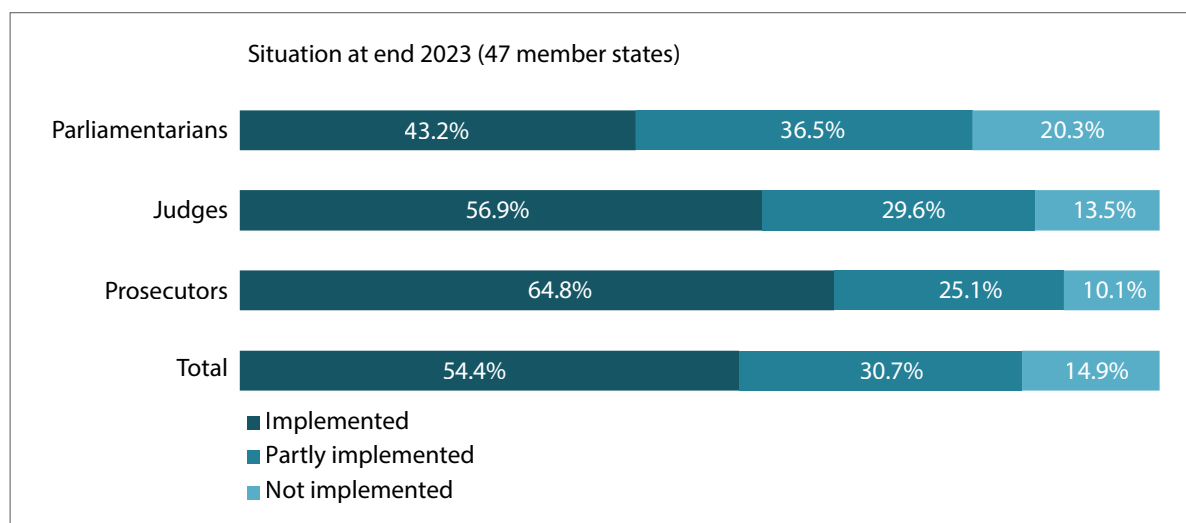
259. Restructured anti-corruption authority in Bulgaria, new Commission on Conflict of Interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

260. For example in Armenia and the Republic of Moldova.

261. For example in Georgia, Poland and Tunisia.

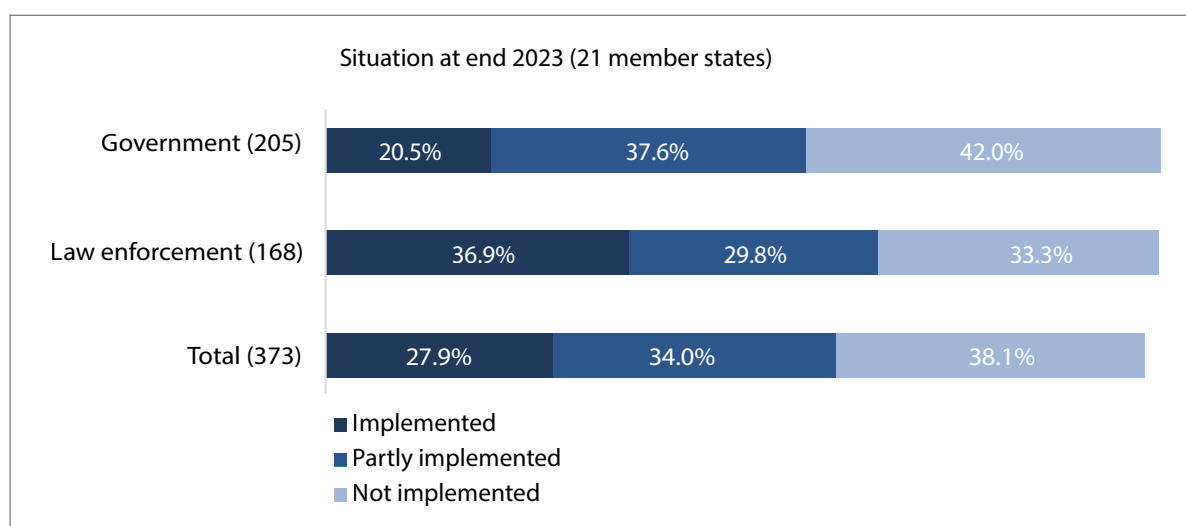


**Figure 4 – Implementation of fourth round recommendations by GRECO member states<sup>262</sup>**



Source: GRECO

**Figure 5 – Implementation of the fifth round recommendations by GRECO member states<sup>263</sup>**



Source: GRECO

Finally, the Council of Europe has worked with neighbouring jurisdictions to promote the adoption of its anti-corruption standards, in line with the Reykjavik Declaration's commitment to strengthening external engagement in this area.<sup>264</sup>

262. GRECO, *24th General Activity Report* (2023), "Anti-corruption trends, challenges and good practices in Europe & the United States of America", p. 10.

263. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

264. Morocco was invited to join the two Council of Europe civil and criminal law conventions on corruption (ETS Nos. 174 and 173 respectively). Kazakhstan was invited to join the Criminal Law Convention on Corruption. Moreover, there is interest in joining other Council of Europe standards and instruments by several neighbouring jurisdictions (Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan).

## CONDITIONS OF DETENTION AND PROBATION

### Key findings

- ▶ According to the 2024 Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics, over one million inmates were detained in Europe, with a median prison population rate of 116.2 prisoners per 100 000 inhabitants. In 2023, at least 1.33 million people were under probation supervision.
- ▶ Persistent challenges include prison overcrowding, the need for improved prison conditions and better support for offenders' reintegration into society. Expanding restorative justice and alternative sanctions remains a priority.
- ▶ A growing number of countries are aligning their criminal legislation with Council of Europe standards, as seen in the increasing ratifications of its criminal law conventions and protocols.
- ▶ Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)5 on AI and digital technologies in prison and probation services marks a key step in ensuring that AI supports rehabilitation while safeguarding the dignity, privacy and human rights of detainees, probationers and staff.

■ According to the Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics on Prison Populations ([SPACE](#)) released in 2024, over one million inmates were detained across Europe, with a median prison population rate of 116.2 prisoners per 100 000 inhabitants. The countries with the highest incarceration rates, in descending order, were Türkiye, Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Republic of Moldova, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Albania, the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Latvia.

■ In 2023, at least 1.33 million individuals were under the supervision of probation agencies across Europe.<sup>265</sup>

■ Between February 2023 and February 2025, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) conducted 39 visits. These comprised 19 periodic visits and 20 ad hoc visits. During this period, the CPT also published 36 reports and held high-level discussions with ministers and senior officials in nine countries.<sup>266</sup>

■ Countries visited have invested in and taken steps to improve the material conditions of their prison systems. However, overcrowding and its impact on human dignity remain major concerns, along with poor living conditions in many states. Adequate financial and human resources are needed to expand activity programmes and implement tailored sentencing plans to support reintegration.

■ The prolonged use of isolation – whether for disciplinary, administrative or judicial purposes – remains a challenge in several countries, as does the disproportionate use of force and the application of mechanical restraints in prisons. Inadequate recruitment and insufficient training, both initial and ongoing, of custodial staff continue to affect the overall quality of prison management and the care provided to detained persons.

■ The treatment of transgender persons in detention also presents challenges for prison administrations. Recognising this, the CPT devoted the substantive section<sup>267</sup> of its 33rd General Report in 2024 to this issue.

■ The CPT continued to closely monitor the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty by law-enforcement agencies, with the prevention of police ill-treatment remaining a key priority. States have reinforced efforts to address this issue by strengthening fundamental legal safeguards, including custody notification, access to a lawyer and doctor and the provision of information on rights. Measures have also been taken to promote investigative interviewing, introduce audiovisual recording of police interviews and improve scrutiny of investigations into alleged police ill-treatment.

■ While some progress has been made in improving material conditions in detention, they remain inadequate in several European countries, requiring further attention and stronger engagement from public authorities.

<sup>265</sup>. Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics on persons under the supervision of probation agencies (2023 [SPACE II survey](#)).

<sup>266</sup>. Albania, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland and the United Kingdom.

<sup>267</sup>. See extract from the CPT's 33rd General Report ([CPT/Inf \(2024\) 16](#)).

■ The CPT continued to focus on the examination of foreign nationals held in immigration detention centres and reception centres at borders, with particular attention on the treatment of vulnerable individuals. This includes families, single women with young children, women at risk of violence and trafficking, and unaccompanied or separated minors.

■ The CPT also remained closely attentive to the conditions and treatment of patients in psychiatric institutions, as well as to the legal procedures for involuntary placement, ensuring they fully respect fundamental rights and safeguards. During visits, cases of unnecessary or abusive use of restraints and seclusion were identified. Strengthening procedural guarantees and promoting alternative approaches to restrictive measures are essential to safeguarding patients' dignity and rights in psychiatric care.

## Penal reforms and alternative sanctions

■ Structural problems related to detention conditions remain a major concern for the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, highlighting the need for a comprehensive, long-term national strategy embedded within a coherent penal policy. Sustainable solutions are essential to ensuring lasting improvements.<sup>268</sup>

■ Many states have taken steps to reduce overcrowding by promoting alternatives to detention, such as electronic monitoring, community service and sentence adjustments.<sup>269</sup> The introduction of effective remedies to address detention conditions also remains key. While the Committee of Ministers closed its supervision of *Neshkov and Others v. Bulgaria*<sup>270</sup> following the establishment of a Convention-compliant remedy, it has called for further measures in *I.D. group v. the Republic of Moldova*, *Varga and Others and István Gábor Kovács v. Hungary* and *Petrescu v. Portugal*.

■ Mental health and healthcare services in prisons remain a serious concern. While some progress has been noted, persistent issues include the limited capacity of specialised institutions and rising suicide rates, as highlighted in *Sy / Citraro and Molino v. Italy*.<sup>271</sup> Additionally, concerns persist regarding the care provided to internees, particularly in *L.B. and W.D. v. Belgium*.<sup>272</sup> In the latter case, the Committee of Ministers urged the authorities to take all necessary steps to resolve the structural problem as soon as possible.

■ Regarding the Russian Federation, which remains legally obliged to implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, the Committee of Ministers called for comprehensive legislative reforms concerning prisoners' rights.<sup>273</sup> In the case of Navalnyy, whose death in detention was strongly condemned,<sup>274</sup> the Committee reiterated<sup>275</sup> the authorities' obligation to uphold judicial independence, grant immediate access to independent international bodies to monitor the health and detention conditions of political prisoners and ensure their immediate release.

■ One of the topics addressed at the 2023 annual Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services (CDPPS), organised in co-operation with the German Ministry of Justice,<sup>276</sup> was the growing number of persons with mental health problems in prison or under probation. To address this issue, the Council for Penological Co-operation (PC-CP) has been working on a recommendation in this field, which is expected to be adopted in 2025.

■ The 2024 CDPPS, organised in collaboration with the Bulgarian Government, explored ways to enhance the autonomy and resocialisation of prisoners and to combat organised crime groups, including prisoner

268. See Committee of Ministers decisions: [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1492/H46-18](#), *Varga and Others and István Gábor Kovács v. Hungary* (Application Nos. 14097/12, 15707/10); and [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1507/H46-23](#), *Petrescu v. Portugal* (Application No. 23190/17).

269. See Committee of Ministers decisions: [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1514/H46-12](#), *Vasilescu v. Belgium* (Application No. 64682/12); [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1492/H46-13](#), *J.M.B. v. France* (Application No. 9671/15); [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1492/H46-15](#), *Nisiotis v. Greece* (Application No. 34704/08).

270. See Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1501/H46-8](#), *Neshkov and Others v. Bulgaria* (Application No. 36925/10).

271. See Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1501/H46-19](#), *Sy* (Application No. 11791/20) and *Citraro and Molino* (Application No. 50988/13) *v. Italy*.

272. See Committee of Ministers Interim Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2024\)331](#), *L.B.* (Application No. 22831/08) and *W.D.* (Application No. 73548/13) *v. Belgium*.

273. See [CM/Del/Dec\(2025\)1521/A4](#) and [CM/Inf/DH\(2025\)3](#) (Article 3: right to decent conditions of detention and other rights of prisoners; also Articles 5, 6, 8, 9).

274. [CM/ResDH\(2024\)49](#) and [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1492/H46-40](#). The Committee of Ministers also deeply deplored the Russian authorities' blatant disregard for its previous calls for Aleksey Navalnyy's release and warnings about his deteriorating health conditions.

275. See Committee of Ministers Decision [CM/Del/Dec\(2025\)1521/H46-28](#), *Navalnyy and Ofitserov v. Russian Federation* (Application No. 46632/13).

276. CDDPS held in Berlin, Germany, 2023.

hierarchies, within prison and probation settings. Work is underway to update Recommendation No. R (89) 12 on education in prison. Further efforts are also expected in areas such as the treatment of foreign national prisoners and the revision of the European Probation Rules.

■ Adopted in October 2024, Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2024\)5](#) addresses the ethical and organisational aspects of AI and related digital technologies in prison and probation services. As the first Council of Europe recommendation on AI since the adoption of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, it aims to ensure that AI supports rehabilitation without compromising the dignity, privacy or human rights of detainees, probationers and staff. These technologies should assist, rather than replace, prison and probation staff in their daily work and interactions with offenders. When used appropriately, they can help enforce penal sanctions and measures, support rehabilitation and resocialisation and reduce recidivism.

### Key findings

- ▶ Cybercrime has become a systemic problem with a deep impact on our societies, with rising incidents of ransomware attacks, online fraud and AI-driven cyber threats undermining privacy, freedom of expression and democratic processes.
- ▶ The Convention on Cybercrime remains a global benchmark, with 78 states now parties and nearly 50% of United Nations member states engaged in its framework. Between 2023 and 2025, 10 additional states became parties and four more were invited to accede.
- ▶ Many countries still lack the institutional capacity to effectively investigate and prosecute cybercrime, particularly in cross-border cases.
- ▶ Some national cybercrime laws contain vaguely defined provisions that risk restricting freedom of expression and media freedom, highlighting the need for legislative safeguards that uphold human rights and the rule of law.
- ▶ Capacity building is essential for implementation, with over 600 training activities delivered in two years to support states to implement the convention, securing electronic evidence and addressing new cyber threats, including AI-related risks and virtual assets.

■ Cybercrime poses a growing challenge to human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the Council of Europe area and beyond. The increasing reliance on digital technologies has led to a surge in cybercriminal activities, including ransomware attacks, online fraud and the misuse of artificial intelligence for malicious purposes. These threats have far-reaching consequences, from undermining individual privacy and freedom of expression to disrupting critical infrastructure and democratic processes. Given these challenges, effective legal and institutional frameworks are essential to combat cybercrime while safeguarding fundamental rights.

■ The Council of Europe plays a key role in establishing international standards for addressing cybercrime. The Convention on Cybercrime is the first and most widely adopted international treaty addressing cybercrime and electronic evidence. It provides a framework for national legislation, international co-operation and capacity building, while ensuring that measures to combat cybercrime comply with human rights standards. The convention and its additional protocols continue to serve as the benchmark for legislative reforms worldwide and remain central to efforts to strengthen the rule of law in cyberspace.

■ Several factors have contributed to the increased global focus on the Convention on Cybercrime, including its effectiveness as a legal tool, the adoption of the Second Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime on enhanced co-operation and disclosure of electronic evidence (CETS No. 224) and the negotiations of a United Nations treaty on cybercrime between 2022 and 2024, which further underscored the importance of the convention.

### Expanding the global reach of the Convention on Cybercrime

■ Some 10 additional states became parties to the Convention on Cybercrime in the last two years – Benin, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador, Fiji, Grenada, Kiribati, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Tunisia – bringing the total number of parties to 78. Another 17 states had signed or been invited to accede, including Kenya, Korea, Malawi, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Uruguay in the period 2023-2024.

A 2025 [global review of cybercrime legislation](#), published by C-PROC, highlighted some of the key trends.

- ▶ Many countries continue to struggle with incomplete legislative reforms, longstanding draft laws and a lack of institutional capacity to apply new legal frameworks.
- ▶ Some 132 states now have substantive criminal law provisions broadly aligned with the convention. In total, 52% of these states have established procedural powers for securing electronic evidence, while others rely on general procedural laws.
- ▶ Nearly 50% of United Nations member states are either parties or signatories to the convention, with 95 states participating as members or observers in the Cybercrime Convention Committee.
- ▶ In some regions, cybercrime laws are not updated regularly, leaving governments ill-equipped to respond to emerging cyber threats such as cryptocurrency-related crimes, artificial intelligence-driven cyber-attacks and sophisticated ransomware operations.

■ The review further highlighted disparities in the scope and implementation of national legal frameworks. While many states have adopted substantive criminal law provisions aligned with the convention, the effective enforcement of these laws remains uneven. Some countries have laws criminalising cyber offences but lack the institutional and technical capacity to investigate and prosecute cybercrime effectively. Gaps persist in the regulation of cross-border cyber offences, with national legislation often failing to account for the transnational nature of cyber threats.

■ The Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime, concerning the criminalisation of acts of a racist and xenophobic nature committed through computer systems (ETS No. 189), continues to play a vital role in combating online hate speech and hate crimes. With Benin's accession, the number of parties increased to 36, yet broader ratification remains necessary considering rising levels of hate-fuelled online content.

■ To support implementation, a [good practice study](#) was prepared under the Octopus Project in December 2023. It compiled best practices from Brazil, France, Germany, Norway, Serbia, Slovakia and Spain. Notably, Spain's Second Action Plan to Combat Hate Crimes aims to prevent and respond to online hate, including through specialised training on both online and offline hate crime offences.<sup>277</sup> Several countries have also created specialised authorities to strengthen enforcement against racist and xenophobic offences.<sup>278</sup>

■ The second additional protocol (CETS No. 224), which opened for signature in May 2022, provides enhanced tools for cross-border co-operation and the disclosure of electronic evidence. By February 2025, 48 states had signed the protocol.<sup>279</sup> While 30 to 40 states<sup>280</sup> have initiated domestic legislative reforms to align with the protocol, only two (Serbia and Japan) had ratified it as of early 2025.

## Implementation challenges

■ The implementation of this protocol remains an important objective, with the Council of Europe ready to provide legislative guidance and capacity-building support to assist states in their ratification efforts.

■ In December 2024, the Cybercrime Convention Committee completed an [assessment of Article 19](#) of the convention, which covers the search and seizure of stored computer data. Based on responses from 74 states parties, the assessment found that:

- ▶ most states have adopted specific powers for searching and seizing stored electronic data, in some cases complementing general legal provisions;
- ▶ some states still rely primarily on general procedural laws but have developed practices and operating procedures to apply these provisions in cybercrime investigations;<sup>281</sup>
- ▶ several states are in the process of reforming domestic laws to adopt specific procedural powers for handling electronic evidence.

■ The findings confirm that while implementation is generally satisfactory, further efforts are needed to ensure that national criminal laws fully align with the procedural safeguards set out in Article 15 of the convention.

■ The convention and its additional protocols include essential safeguards to ensure that cybercrime enforcement measures comply with human rights and the rule of law. The [global review of cybercrime legislation](#) identified concerns about the potential misuse of cybercrime laws for purposes beyond their intended scope. In some states, vaguely defined provisions have been introduced under the pretext of combating cybercrime but have, in practice, been used to restrict media freedom and criminalise legitimate online expression.

■ Certain laws include broad offences such as the dissemination of false information, offensive messages, causing annoyance or spreading of rumours. If not clearly defined, such provisions risk unduly limiting freedom of expression and may fall short of international human rights standards.

277. See "Octopus Project – Implementing the first protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime on xenophobia and racism: good practice study", 2023, p. 47.

278. For example France, Finland, Germany, Slovakia and Spain.

279. Between February 2023 and February 2025, the following states signed the protocol: Albania, Argentina, Armenia, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Cape Verde, Canada, Ghana, Hungary, Malta, Mauritius, Paraguay, Peru and Sierra Leone.

280. Cybercrime Programme Office of the Council of Europe, The global state of cybercrime legislation 2013-2024: A cursory overview. February 2025. For specific examples, see: [CyberSEE: Albania commences legislative reform for the ratification and effective implementation of the Second Additional Protocol to the Budapest Convention](#); [CyberEast+: Armenian stakeholders meet to assess the implementation of the Second Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime](#); [Regional meetings on the implementation of the Second Additional Protocol](#).

281. Andorra, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Lithuania, the Republic of Moldova, Morocco, Norway, Paraguay, Peru, San Marino and Ukraine.



■ To help address these concerns, the Octopus Project developed a [discussion paper](#) in 2024, providing guidance for states on ensuring that cybercrime laws remain proportionate, well-defined and fully aligned with fundamental freedoms.

■ The findings highlight the importance of ongoing capacity building to support states in aligning cybercrime laws with international human rights standards and ensuring balanced and effective enforcement.

## Capacity building and future challenges

■ In December 2024, the Cybercrime Convention Committee established a working group on artificial intelligence and initiated work on virtual assets in relation to cybercrime and electronic evidence. These emerging challenges require a balanced approach that protects against abuse while ensuring the responsible development and use of new technologies.

■ Capacity-building efforts by the Cybercrime Programme Office of the Council of Europe have also played a significant role in raising awareness and supporting states in implementing cybercrime legislation. Between February 2023 and February 2025, the Council of Europe supported countries worldwide through over 600 capacity-building activities, implemented via C-PROC in Bucharest.

■ Key priorities included:

- ▶ supporting the implementation of the second additional protocol;
- ▶ enhancing capacities for using electronic evidence in the prosecution of war crimes in Ukraine;
- ▶ helping newly invited states become parties to the convention while meeting human rights and rule of law requirements;
- ▶ assisting criminal justice authorities to address ransomware attacks and the use of virtual currencies in cybercrime;
- ▶ strengthening co-operation with other Council of Europe bodies, particularly in areas such as data protection, online child protection, combating violence against women and countering money laundering and terrorist financing.

■ Five new projects were launched with extrabudgetary contributions from the European Union, the United States of America, France, Japan and the United Kingdom, as well as through funding for Ukraine. One key initiative, CyberUA, launched in 2024, supports Ukraine's collection and use of electronic evidence for war crimes and human rights violations.

■ As cybercrime continues to evolve, capacity building will remain essential to enhance resilience and support national authorities to meet the challenges of an increasingly complex digital landscape.<sup>282</sup>

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282. For specific priorities see, for example, "[Strategic priorities for co-operation on cybercrime in the Eastern Partnership region](#)", adopted within the context of the Octopus Conference on Cybercrime, 14 December 2023, Bucharest, Romania.

## TERRORISM AND ORGANISED CRIME

### Key findings

- ▶ The terrorist threat landscape has shifted from organised groups to lone actors and small cells operating within transnational extremist networks, often mobilised online. Effective counter-terrorism strategies must be international and adaptable to evolving threats.
- ▶ Member states have intensified efforts to combat organised crime, focusing on tackling money laundering, disrupting financial networks and preventing criminal influence on the legal economy. Challenges remain in financial investigations and asset confiscation.
- ▶ Greater co-ordination is needed to combat illicit finance, including money laundering, terrorist financing and proliferation financing. High-level political commitment is essential to strengthening global security and financial stability.
- ▶ Further improvements are needed in anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing measures, particularly in supervision, preventive actions, beneficial ownership transparency, financial crime investigations, prosecutions and asset confiscation.
- ▶ New measures have been introduced to address terrorism financing risks, particularly those linked to ongoing conflicts, emerging technologies and evolving funding methods.

■ Terrorism and organised crime pose serious threats to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights and they must be countered effectively by Council of Europe member states. However, excessively harsh or disproportionate counter-terrorism measures can be counterproductive, undermining the very principles they seek to protect. While strong law-enforcement actions are necessary and justified, responses must remain within the bounds of legality and proportionality. Efforts to combat these threats should not erode democratic values, fundamental freedoms or the rule of law in the name of preserving security.

■ The Council of Europe provides a unique platform for addressing terrorism and organised crime in a way that upholds human rights and fundamental freedoms. Through legal instruments, monitoring mechanisms and capacity-building initiatives, it helps member states develop effective responses that balance security and rights-based governance. In 2023 and 2024, significant steps were taken to strengthen counter-terrorism efforts, combat organised crime and enhance international co-operation in the fight against financial crime.

### Balancing security and human rights in counter-terrorism

■ The Committee on Counter-Terrorism (CDCT) completed the implementation of the first [Counter-Terrorism Strategy \(2018–2022\)](#) with the adoption of a compilation of good practices with regard to deradicalisation, disengagement and social reintegration<sup>283</sup> for individuals convicted of terrorist offences or at risk of radicalisation. The compilation supports member states to improve programme evaluation, sustainability and gender-sensitive approaches in counter-terrorism policies.

■ Building on this work, the CDCT launched the second [Counter-Terrorism Strategy \(2023–2027\)](#), adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in February 2023, to address the evolving terrorist threat in Europe.<sup>284</sup> In addition to ongoing threats from Daesh and al-Qaeda-inspired attacks, the strategy focuses on the rise of terrorism driven by violent extremist ideologies, including conspiracy theories and anti-democratic movements. It also seeks to mitigate the misuse of emerging technologies for terrorist purposes and to strengthen accountability for terrorist offences and international crimes committed during armed conflict.

■ In 2023 and 2024, the Committee of Ministers adopted two key sets of guidelines: [Guidelines for public and private sector authorities on preparedness and emergency responses to the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks](#), which provide states and practitioners with concrete recommendations for effective emergency response plans; and the [Guidelines on strategies for the prosecution of violent extremism conducive to terrorism](#) – a practical tool to help authorities develop strategies for the prosecution of individuals engaged in violent extremist activities.

■ Another milestone was the successful negotiation of a comprehensive pan-European legal definition of a “terrorist offence”. Designed to address current and future challenges, this definition will strengthen

283. See [CM\(2023\)147-add2](#).

284. See Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, “[Report on emerging terrorist threats in Europe](#)” (CM(2022)149-add).

national counter-terrorism frameworks and international co-operation. It will be integrated into the Council of Europe's legal framework through a protocol amending the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (CETS No. 196).

■ In May 2024, the Council of Europe hosted an international conference on the investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences committed in the context of armed conflict,<sup>285</sup> focusing on the complex interaction between counter-terrorism legislation and international humanitarian law and on holding perpetrators of serious crimes accountable.

## Strengthening legal co-operation against organised crime

■ The Council of Europe's conventions on co-operation in criminal matters, open to third countries, remain essential tools in the fight against organised crime and impunity, including for international core crimes. The European Committee on Crime Problems, through its Permanent Sub-Committee on Criminal Matters, continues to update, promote and facilitate the implementation of these conventions. A major step forward is expected in 2025 with the adoption and opening for signature of a third additional protocol to the European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters (ETS No. 30).

■ Efforts to combat money laundering and terrorist financing intensified through the work of the Conference of the Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime and on the Financing of Terrorism (CETS No. 198). This work complemented monitoring by the Financial Action Task Force and the Council of Europe's MONEYVAL Committee. The Committee of Experts on Criminal Asset Recovery (PC-RAC) is developing an additional protocol to CETS No. 198, strengthening international co-operation on asset recovery (Reykjavik Principle 6). This may also support legal responses to the consequences of the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, particularly in seizing and confiscating certain assets.

## Enhancing financial crime prevention and asset recovery

■ Between February 2023 and February 2025, seven MONEYVAL members<sup>286</sup> underwent mutual evaluations. The assessments revealed persistent challenges in:

- ▶ investigating and prosecuting money laundering, with convictions often limited to basic laundering schemes;
- ▶ increasing the volume of seized and confiscated assets across all profit-driven crimes;
- ▶ addressing resource shortages, skill gaps and restricted database access;
- ▶ establishing effective asset recovery offices.

■ In response, many member states have strengthened their frameworks for financial investigations and expanded tools for non-conviction-based confiscation. North Macedonia has adopted legislation on civil confiscation, while the Republic of Moldova has adopted similar legislation and introduced mechanisms for the social reuse of confiscated assets and victim compensation.

■ Managing seized and confiscated assets has become a priority across the Council of Europe region. In 2024, Cyprus established a dedicated national asset management office to enhance the management of seized and confiscated assets, ensuring compensation for victims and supporting their social reuse.

■ The authorities in Albania, Georgia, North Macedonia and Serbia have also worked to enhance national and sectoral money laundering and terrorist financing risk assessments, with a focus on:

- ▶ organised crime and cross-border financial crime;
- ▶ emerging financial technologies, including virtual assets and online services;
- ▶ strengthening enforcement and justice sector capabilities.

■ The Czech Republic and Slovakia continued their efforts with money laundering and terrorist financing national risk assessments, with the Czech Republic finalising its assessment of proliferation financing risks. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Poland, risk assessments of virtual assets and virtual asset service providers (VASPs) were adopted, accompanied by action plans. Meanwhile, North Macedonia has recently initiated its assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing risks related to VASPs.

285. See [International conference on the investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences committed in the context of armed conflict – Counter-terrorism](#).

286. Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania and the UK Crown Dependencies of Guernsey and Jersey.

■ Regional and national initiatives, in collaboration with the private sector, targeted transparency in beneficial ownership, asset recovery and the fight against corruption. These efforts extended across the European Union, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe and neighbouring regions.

■ Efforts to enhance financial intelligence units (FIUs) continued, with the establishment of dedicated strategic analysis teams and specialised training.<sup>287</sup> However, challenges persist in:

- ▶ financial intelligence related to virtual assets;
- ▶ automating FIU processes due to cost and skills shortages;
- ▶ expanding the use of machine learning and open-source intelligence<sup>288</sup> in crypto investigations.<sup>289</sup>

## Addressing the global dimension of financial crime and terrorist financing

■ Several states have also taken steps to strengthen beneficial ownership requirements, though challenges remain in interagency co-operation and information sharing on economic crimes. In the Republic of Moldova, efforts to enhance co-ordination on anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism are ongoing, with work still needed to fully implement the national strategy for 2020-2025. In Ukraine, the absence of a permanent national co-ordinator or co-ordination body for combating organised crime presents an obstacle to more effective action, highlighting the need for further progress in this area.

■ While regulatory supervisors have been granted stronger powers, their effectiveness in enforcing anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing compliance remains moderate.

■ Countering terrorist financing remains a priority. MONEYVAL assessments indicate improvements in terrorist financing investigations and prosecutions, but challenges persist in gathering evidence and building strong cases, enforcing sanctions effectively and enhancing private-sector awareness of terrorist financing risks.

■ States have made progress in identifying non-profit organisations vulnerable to terrorist financing abuse and in updating legislative frameworks to strengthen the criminalisation of terrorist financing. Bulgaria is conducting a comprehensive review, while Georgia amended its anti-money laundering law in May 2023 to implement United Nations Security Council resolutions. Serbia adopted legal amendments in November 2024 to enhance its anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures and prevent proliferation financing. In 2023, Azerbaijan introduced a new targeted financial sanctions law, supported by an action plan to combat money laundering and terrorism financing for 2023-2025.

■ However, gaps remain in ensuring full criminal liability for legal entities. Capacity-building initiatives have supported financial intelligence units, law-enforcement agencies and prosecutors in improving financial investigations related to terrorism.

■ In response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Council of Europe member states intensified efforts to enforce sanctions effectively, particularly through financial investigations and asset recovery measures. Multi-country initiatives<sup>290</sup> have reinforced compliance, while targeted capacity-building programmes have helped neighbouring states strengthen their legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms.

■ Beyond Europe, the Council of Europe has strengthened its engagement with neighbouring countries in Central Asia and the Middle East and North Africa region, providing technical support to combat organised crime, cross-border money laundering and terrorist financing.

■ In 2023, Jordan and Morocco were removed from the FATF "grey list" after making significant progress in aligning with FATF standards. Morocco revised its legal framework on anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing, while Tunisia and Algeria introduced reforms to enhance beneficial ownership transparency, financial regulation and supervision. Libya established a dedicated agency to combat financial crime, money laundering and terrorist financing.

■ In Central Asia, Kazakhstan's Asset Recovery Law (2023) created key asset recovery bodies and a beneficial ownership register. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan conducted risk assessments on virtual assets, and Tajikistan completed a risk assessment on legal persons, reflecting a growing awareness of emerging financial risks and threats.

287. For example in Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, France, Georgia, Malta, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Serbia, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Türkiye and Ukraine.

288. Bulgaria, Georgia and Poland.

289. For example France and Poland.

290. Organised in Belgium, France, Latvia and Malta.

## GOVERNANCE AND INTEGRITY OF SPORT

### Key findings

- ▶ The growing interest in sport brings economic and social benefits, but also presents new challenges related to its governance, integrity and security.
- ▶ The Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS) continues to attract new states and organisations, reinforcing its role in promoting ethical and transparent governance. The Council of Europe remains committed to supporting the global anti-doping system and tackling corruption in sport.
- ▶ With more states joining the Council of Europe Convention on an Integrated Safety, Security and Service Approach at Football Matches and Other Sports Events (Saint-Denis Convention, CETS No. 218) and the Council of Europe Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions (Macolin Convention, CETS No. 215), the Council of Europe plays a key role in enhancing the safety and security of sports events and addressing competition manipulation.
- ▶ The “All In Plus” project, a joint initiative between the European Union and the Council of Europe, highlights the need for further progress towards gender equality in sport.

■ Sport is a powerful platform for advancing the core values of the Council of Europe – equality, tolerance, respect and fairness. It has the capacity to bring people together, inspire communities and promote human rights and democratic principles. However, sport also faces growing challenges, including corruption, unethical governance, violence and persistent inequalities. Without integrity, sport risks losing not only its credibility but also its ability to drive positive change.

■ The Council of Europe remains committed to upholding the integrity of sport by strengthening governance, embedding human rights and ensuring transparency and safety in all dimensions of sport. This commitment is reflected in the [Strategic Priorities for 2022-25](#), which set out a vision for values-based sport that fosters inclusion, peace and integrity.

■ The 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games reinforced a shared vision for sport as a driver of positive societal change. This vision was further affirmed at the [18th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Sport](#) (Porto, Portugal, 8-10 October 2024), where ministers underscored the need for collaborative governance and ethical leadership. The resolution adopted in Porto called for the aligning of sport governance with the principles of human rights, democracy and inclusivity. It also reinforced the importance of revising and implementing key legal frameworks, such as the revised [European Sports Charter](#), under the guidance of the [Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport](#).

■ Interest in the EPAS continued to grow between February 2023 and February 2025, with its governing board reaching 41 member states and its consultative committee expanding to 30 organisations.

### Advancing gender equality and inclusion in sport

■ Achieving greater gender equality in sport remains a priority, especially as Europe prepares to host another edition of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) European Women’s Football Championship. Findings from the joint European Union–Council of Europe project “All In Plus” highlight persistent gender gaps across the 21 jurisdictions that contributed to the project. While 67% of sports organisations have gender equality included in their long-term plans, women remain significantly under-represented in leadership roles, with only 14% of sports federations having female presidents.

■ Fostering inclusive sport also means ensuring the participation of persons with disabilities. The new joint European Union–Council of Europe project “Sport for All” is dedicated to promoting inclusion and combating discrimination against persons with disabilities in sport.

■ The right to health, enshrined in the European Social Charter, is closely linked to promoting sports and physical activity. Participation in sport plays a crucial role in improving public health, preventing diseases and fostering mental well-being. Going forward, both health and sport will remain central to EPAS priorities.

■ Ensuring the safety and well-being of participants is a key focus of the Council of Europe’s work. The “[Start to Talk](#)” project addresses child safeguarding by preventing violence and abuse in sport, reinforcing the Organisation’s commitment to making sport safer and more ethical.

## Tackling corruption and financial crime in sport

■ The [Network of Magistrates/Prosecutors Responsible for Sports](#) (MARS) continues to serve as an important forum for tackling corruption and other criminal and unethical practices in sport. It will further strengthen international co-operation to address emerging threats such as money laundering through sports betting and the exploitation of athletes.

■ With Switzerland assuming the Presidency of the [International Partnership against Corruption in Sport](#) (IPACS), the Council of Europe – through EPAS – will continue to contribute to good governance and criminal justice co-operation and explore the potential for artificial intelligence in the fight against corruption in sport.

■ A decade since its adoption, the [Macolin Convention](#) remains a key instrument in combating match-fixing and sports manipulation. It continues to attract new ratifications, reaching 14 parties as of February 2025.<sup>291</sup>

■ The Council of Europe also remains a strong advocate for global anti-doping efforts, which ensure the governance and effectiveness of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) through its European co-ordination mechanism (Ad hoc European Committee for the World Anti-Doping Agency (CAHAMA)) and reinforcing the implementation of the Council of Europe's [Anti-Doping Convention](#) (ETS No. 135).

## Ensuring safety and security at sporting events

■ Violence and hate speech at sports venues continue to pose serious challenges. The [Saint-Denis Convention](#) promotes co-operation between public and private stakeholders to ensure that sporting events are safe, secure and welcoming. Based on its three interdependent pillars – safety, security and service – the convention has guided the joint European Union–Council of Europe project “Balance S4”, which focuses on achieving a well-integrated approach to security at sports events. The convention is increasingly attracting ratifications, with 31 parties as of February 2025.<sup>292</sup>

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291. Between February 2023 and February 2025, the following states ratified the Macolin Convention: Belgium, France, Lithuania, Serbia, Spain and Sweden.

292. Between February 2023 and February 2025, the following states ratified the Saint-Denis Convention: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Serbia, Sweden and the United Kingdom.



## THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE DEVELOPMENT BANK: ADVANCING SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND RESILIENCE IN EUROPE

■ The Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) has solidified its position as Europe's leading social development bank. Guided by its Strategic Framework 2023-2027, the CEB continues to advance its social mandate of promoting solidarity and social cohesion, with a reinforced focus on supporting vulnerable populations and a clear operational approach for Ukraine.

■ Under this framework, in 2023 and 2024, the CEB approved nearly €9 billion in loans and grants for nearly 100 projects across Europe in key sectors, including healthcare, education and housing, driving social inclusion, reducing disparities and ensuring no one is left behind.

■ Ukraine is a key example. The CEB was among the first international responders, mobilising €1.45 billion in loans and grants to support refugees and host communities. Ukraine's accession to the CEB in June 2023 allowed the bank to launch direct operations within the country. To date, over €400 million has been allocated to Ukraine, notably for healthcare restoration and housing programmes.

■ The CEB is also a founding member of the Western Balkans Investment Framework, which provides financing and technical assistance for strategic infrastructure projects that drive regional convergence.

■ Another major achievement is the Regional Housing Programme, implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia. The CEB played a pivotal role in implementation, capacity building and donor fund management of this programme, which – in its 11 years of operation – has provided homes for 36 000 vulnerable individuals displaced by the wars of the 1990s.

■ Beyond long-term development, the CEB has also been active in emergency relief efforts, supporting Iceland in response to volcanic activity in 2024 and assisting Türkiye following the devastating earthquakes of 2023.

■ Partnerships are central to the CEB's approach. The bank has expanded its collaboration with the European Union, including through the 2022 InvestEU guarantee agreement, unlocking additional financing for high social-value projects across the CEB's European Union member states. The CEB also joined the InvestEU Advisory Hub in 2023 and has strengthened co-operation with peer multilateral development banks.

■ The CEB's achievements are underpinned by a strong financial position. Its reinforced capital base, triple-A credit rating and pioneering Social Inclusion Bond issuances allow the bank to leverage growing global interest in social investment, which ensures continued support for its member states and their citizens.



## CHAPTER 3

# SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

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### A. SOCIAL JUSTICE, GOOD HEALTH AND A SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT

#### INTRODUCTION

■ Europe continues to grapple with overlapping crises affecting social justice, public health and the environment. The lingering effects of the cost-of-living crisis, accelerated climate change and rising social inequalities have placed additional pressure on governments, institutions and communities. While some economic indicators show signs of stabilisation, vulnerable populations continue to face significant hardships, and structural disparities remain a persistent concern.

■ Against this backdrop, the Council of Europe has reinforced its commitment to protecting social rights, improving healthcare systems and addressing environmental challenges through legal instruments, policy initiatives and cross-sectoral collaboration. Recognising the interconnected nature of these issues, a new Directorate of Social Rights, Health and Environment was established, bringing a more integrated and sustainable approach to these pressing concerns.

■ Social justice was reaffirmed as a priority in the Reykjavik Declaration, where European leaders pledged to strengthen protections under the European Social Charter. However, the gap between legal commitments and lived realities persists. In 2024, the European Committee of Social Rights identified ongoing failures in several member states to protect workers' wages, guarantee access to housing and address child poverty, despite some improvements in social security measures.

■ Progress has been made in some areas, with several states enhancing social investment policies to tackle homelessness, raise minimum wage levels and improve access to affordable energy. However, the impact of inflation and economic stagnation continues to affect low-income households, highlighting the need for sustained and co-ordinated policy action.

■ The protection of health-related human rights remains a priority for the Council of Europe, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Organisation's work in biomedicine, drug policies and the fight against falsified medical products has taken on new urgency amid the rapid expansion of digital health technologies and artificial intelligence in healthcare.

■ Efforts to enhance ethical standards in digital health, including the impact of AI on doctor-patient relationships, have been a focus area, with the Steering Committee for Human Rights in Biomedicine and Health playing a key role in setting guidelines and monitoring best practices. Significant developments in mental health policies – including a new recommendation on respecting autonomy in mental healthcare – reflect a shift towards human rights-based approaches in the field.



■ The Council of Europe has strengthened international co-operation to tackle public health threats, including organ trafficking and the trade in falsified medical products, through the Council of Europe Convention on the Counterfeiting of Medical Products and Similar Crimes Involving Threats to Public Health (CETS No. 211, the Medicrime Convention)<sup>293</sup> and the Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs (CETS No. 216, the Santiago de Compostela Convention).<sup>294</sup> The expansion of these initiatives to additional countries signals growing recognition of the need for cross-border action to safeguard public health.

■ The Reykjavik Summit reaffirmed the urgency of protecting the environment and countering the effects of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. The recognition that environmental degradation poses a direct threat to human rights, democracy and the rule of law has led to intensified efforts to strengthen legal and policy frameworks at the European level.

■ In response, the Council of Europe has launched work on a Strategy for the Environment, integrating human rights and good governance principles into environmental decision making. New legal instruments are also being developed to address environmental crime, with the anticipated adoption of the Convention on the Protection of the Environment through Criminal Law in 2025. These efforts, combined with growing jurisprudence linking environmental rights to fundamental freedoms, mark a significant shift towards a rights-based approach to environmental protection.

■ The coming years will be crucial for determining how Europe responds to the ongoing social, health and environmental challenges shaping its future. While legal frameworks and policy commitments provide a strong foundation, their effectiveness will depend on sustained implementation, political will and civic engagement. The Council of Europe remains committed to working with member states to bridge the gap between commitments and realities, ensuring that social justice, public health and environmental protection remain at the heart of European democratic governance.

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293. See [www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=211](https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=211).

294. See <https://rm.coe.int/16806dca3a>.

### Key findings

- ▶ The revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163) is central to social justice, with reforms under way that are strengthening its implementation. Economic pressures continue to challenge social rights, with wage stagnation, inflation and rising living costs disproportionately affecting low-income households despite some policy interventions.
- ▶ Homelessness and housing insecurity remain critical concerns, leading to increased policy focus on social investment, rent caps and expanding social housing initiatives.
- ▶ The prevalence of child poverty reflects insufficient state efforts to ensure children's social, legal and economic protection.
- ▶ Progress has been made in gender equality and domestic violence protections, with some countries introducing paid leave for survivors, but more action is needed to ensure legal and economic safeguards.
- ▶ Labour rights and protections need further reinforcement, particularly regarding minimum wage adequacy, protections against unfair dismissals and trade union rights.

■ The Reykjavik Declaration reaffirmed the crucial role of social justice in maintaining democratic stability and security. European leaders emphasised their commitment to protecting and implementing social rights, as guaranteed by the European Social Charter, a cornerstone of the Council of Europe's human rights framework. With its legally binding provisions and monitoring mechanisms – including the reporting procedure and collective complaints procedure – the Charter serves as Europe's social constitution.

### Cost-of-living crisis

■ In 2024, significant steps were taken to implement the 2022 Charter system reforms. The European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) conducted a comprehensive review<sup>295</sup> of measures addressing the cost-of-living crisis, drawing on reports from 41 states parties, civil society organisations and national human rights institutions. The findings highlighted a stark reality: food prices in 2023 continued to rise at more than seven times the rate of wage growth, disproportionately affecting low-income households.

■ The ECSR identified failures in maintaining minimum wage levels in several states, leading to continued financial hardship. While inflation eased in 2024, living costs remained high, leaving many in precarious situations.

■ The ECSR has urged governments to take action, aimed notably at:

- ▶ ensuring the net minimum wage is at least 60% of the net national average wage;
- ▶ implementing price caps on staple food items and targeted support for vulnerable groups;
- ▶ guaranteeing stable, consistent and secure access to adequate energy, recognising it as essential for securing Charter rights;
- ▶ addressing housing affordability and homelessness risks through rent caps, increased housing benefits and social housing expansion;
- ▶ adjusting social security and assistance levels to keep pace with inflation.

■ The Council of Europe and the Council of Europe Development Bank further addressed these issues in a December 2024 conference on homelessness and social investment,<sup>296</sup> providing a platform for policy makers and stakeholders to advance rights-based solutions.

295. European Committee of Social Rights, [Review on Social Rights and Cost of Living Crisis](#), March 2024.

296. Secretariat of the Partial Agreement on the Council of Europe Development Bank, conference entitled "[Addressing homelessness through social investment](#)".

## Strengthening social rights through collective complaints

Between 2023 and 2024, several ECSR collective complaints decisions underscored the need for stronger social protections in key areas.

- ▶ Access to essential services – a complaint concerning Spain revealed severe power outages affecting 4 500 people in a shantytown, including 1 800 children.<sup>297</sup>
- ▶ Housing policies – a complaint concerning Belgium highlighted deficiencies in social housing supply and factors underpinning access to affordable housing.<sup>298</sup>
- ▶ Rights of older persons – a complaint concerning Bulgaria exposed failures in the Covid-19 vaccine distribution plan, disproportionately affecting older people and those with health conditions.<sup>299</sup>
- ▶ Labour rights – a complaint concerning Portugal addressed retaliatory measures against trade union representatives.<sup>300</sup>
- ▶ Recognition of volunteer firefighters as workers – a complaint concerning France recognised firefighters as workers.<sup>301</sup>
- ▶ Job security – a complaint concerning Spain ruled that compensation for unjustified dismissals was inadequate, reinforcing the need for stronger employment protections.<sup>302</sup>

In March 2024, in response to persistently high child poverty rates, the ECSR issued a statement of interpretation,<sup>303</sup> calling for stronger efforts to protect children's social, legal and economic rights. The ECSR also raised concerns about:

- ▶ inadequate monitoring of accommodation for children in irregular migration situations;
- ▶ gaps in housing policies, including lack of data on social housing waiting times, insufficient supply, ineffective legal remedies and discrimination.

Progress was observed in domestic violence legislation, with several countries introducing paid leave for survivors to mitigate the socio-economic impact of abuse.

## Political commitments to social rights

In 2024, the Council of Europe organised a high-level conference under the Lithuanian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, reinforcing the Reykjavik Declaration's call for stronger social rights protections. The conference led to new commitments from Andorra, Iceland, Ireland and the Republic of Moldova, complementing earlier pledges by Iceland and Portugal. These commitments aim to enhance ECSR supervision and align national laws with Charter requirements.

The Vilnius Declaration,<sup>304</sup> adopted at the conference, reaffirmed the role of social rights in promoting social cohesion and democracy. A follow-up conference is scheduled to take place in Chişinău in March 2026, under the Moldovan Presidency of the Committee of Ministers.

At the European Union level, the La Hulpe Declaration recognised the European Social Charter as a foundation for a social Europe, calling for closer co-operation between the Council of Europe and the European Union.

Globally, the Council of Europe advanced its social rights agenda at the United Nations Summit of the Future Action Days in New York, particularly on youth access to social rights. These efforts will continue into 2025, particularly in preparation for the United Nations Second World Summit for Social Development in Doha (November 2025), ensuring that social rights remain central to global discussions.

297. *DCI, FEANTSA, MEDEL, CCOO and ATD Fourth World v. Spain*.

298. *European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) v. Belgium*.

299. *Open Society European Policy Institute (OSEPI) v. Bulgaria*.

300. *Associação Sindical dos Profissionais da Polícia (ASPP/PSP) v. Portugal*.

301. *Union Syndicale Solidaires SDIS v. France*.

302. *Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) v. Spain*.

303. See <https://rm.coe.int/press-briefing-elements-conclusions-2023-eng-to-publish-2/1680aefdbb>.

304. See <https://rm.coe.int/en-vilnius-declaration/1680b0dcf3>.



## HEALTH AND QUALITY OF MEDICINES

### Key findings

- ▶ Digital health technologies and AI are transforming healthcare, prompting ethical and regulatory discussions on their impact on doctor–patient relationships and patient autonomy.
- ▶ Mental health policies are shifting towards a human rights-based approach, with new recommendations on autonomy and decision making in mental healthcare.
- ▶ The fight against falsified medical products and organ trafficking has expanded, with more countries adopting the Council of Europe Convention on the Counterfeiting of Medical Products and Similar Crimes Involving Threats to Public Health (Medicrime Convention) and the Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs (Santiago de Compostela Convention).
- ▶ Drug policies and addiction services are evolving, with initiatives targeting online gambling risks, synthetic drugs and alternative treatments for substance-use disorders.
- ▶ Cross-border co-operation on public health threats has intensified, with stronger efforts to regulate drug trafficking, counterfeit medicines and organised crime involvement in health-related crimes.

■ Protecting human rights in healthcare is fundamental to democratic societies, as demonstrated during the Covid-19 crisis, when the equitable provision of medical care, transparency in decision making and protection of vulnerable groups were critical to maintaining social cohesion and institutional legitimacy.

■ The ability to access equitable and high-quality healthcare not only safeguards individual dignity but also reinforces confidence in democratic institutions.

### Biomedicine and digital health

■ The rapid development of digital technologies is reshaping healthcare, presenting both opportunities and risks. In response, the Steering Committee for Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health (CDBIO) has taken some key actions, as follows.

- ▶ A report<sup>305</sup> on AI and the patient–doctor relationship addresses concerns about the ethical use of artificial intelligence in medicine, seeking to balance innovation with patient rights.
- ▶ A [guide on children's participation in health decisions](#) was drawn up to strengthen children's rights in biomedicine and ensure their voices are heard.
- ▶ A recommendation on respect for autonomy in mental healthcare was finalised, promoting a human rights-based approach to mental health services.

### Drug policies and organised crime

■ Following the Reykjavik Summit, the Pompidou Group, under the Italian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, adopted policy guidelines on:

- ▶ the risks and harm associated with online gambling and gaming;
- ▶ human rights in drug policies.

■ These guidelines will inform future recommendations of the Committee of Ministers, in collaboration with the Steering Committees on Media and Human Rights.

■ Additionally, the Pompidou Group is drafting policy guidelines on combating organised crime and drug trafficking, based on European Court of Human Rights case law. Relevant intergovernmental committees are contributing to this work.

■ The 2024 Law Enforcement Conference of the Pompidou Group gathered national experts and international organisations, including Interpol, Europol, UNODC and the OSCE, to discuss:

- ▶ drug manufacturing and synthetic substances;
- ▶ trafficking via general aviation and digital platforms;

305. Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health (CDBIO), "Report on the application of AI in healthcare and its impact on the 'patient-doctor' relationship", September 2024.

- ▶ the environmental impact of drug production;
- ▶ AI, cryptocurrency and money laundering in drug-related crimes.

## Strengthening health systems in member states

Member states have taken steps to improve healthcare in custodial settings and develop comprehensive drug treatment systems based on human rights principles. In this context, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have engaged in country-specific projects to enhance medical care for detainees and strengthen drug treatment policies, with support from the Council of Europe.

In Ukraine, reforms now provide alternatives to criminal penalties for individuals with substance-use disorders. In the Republic of Moldova, national drug policies have been aligned with European standards.

Member states have taken steps to address threats to public health and safeguard the lives and well-being of individuals through the implementation of two comprehensive criminal law conventions: the *Medicrime Convention* and the *Santiago de Compostela Convention*.<sup>306</sup>

The *Medicrime Convention* is a key instrument for protecting public health by combating the spread of falsified medical products and similar crimes. To date, 45 countries worldwide have signed the convention, with 23 having ratified it. Its global reach continues to expand, with Chad, Chile and Tunisia recently acceding to the treaty.

To assess member states' efforts to implement the *Medicrime convention*, the *Medicrime Committee* completed its *first monitoring round* on the general framework for protecting public health during pandemics. The review examined key areas, including prevention and training, education, victim support, co-operation and information exchange, detection, investigation and prosecution, sanctions and aggravating circumstances, and data collection.

The findings indicated that most parties took additional measures during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly to raise public awareness about falsified medical products. Furthermore, existing legal and regulatory frameworks were found to apply equally in both pandemic and non-pandemic situations.

A significant milestone in international co-operation was the establishment of a 24/7 Network to facilitate real-time collaboration between states in the fight against falsified medical products. This network enhances information exchange and operational co-ordination, benefiting all participating countries, regardless of their status as Parties to the *Medicrime Convention*.

Member states have also received legal assistance to align national legislation with the convention's provisions and strengthen their capacity to conduct criminal investigations into pharmaceutical crime. Training efforts have been expanded through the *HELP Medicrime* programme, which is now available in nine languages, supporting legal professionals and enforcement agencies in their efforts to combat these offences.

## Trafficking in human organs

Trafficking in organs remains a serious public health and criminal law challenge, as it constitutes a violation of fundamental human rights and freedoms, including the right to life enshrined in the *European Convention on Human Rights*.

To counter this crime, member states have committed to implementing the *Santiago de Compostela Convention*, which provides for the criminalisation of organ trafficking, the protection of victims' rights and enhanced co-operation at national and international levels. So far, 28 countries worldwide have signed the convention, with 15 having ratified it. Its reach continues to expand, with Chile recently acceding to the treaty.

The *Santiago de Compostela Committee* has launched its *first monitoring round*, focusing on prevention and awareness mechanisms to counter trafficking in human organs. In addition, the committee is preparing a report identifying best practices and gaps, with the aim of further strengthening national responses to this crime.

<sup>306</sup>. See <https://rm.coe.int/16806dca3a>.

# ENSURING QUALITY MEDICINES AND HEALTHCARE: THE EDQM'S IMPACT

■ In 2024, the European Directorate for the Quality of Medicines & HealthCare (EDQM) continued its efforts to ensure the availability of and access to safe, good-quality medicines and health products, both in member states and beyond. These efforts have been consistently supported by more than 2 000 experts from around the globe. The EDQM works together with its experts to develop state-of-the-art and internationally recognised standards, guidelines and policies. Continuous collaboration aims to ensure that all people in Europe and beyond can have access to safe, quality medicines and healthcare.

■ The EDQM continued to grow in 2023 and 2024. The Kyrgyz Republic and Egypt joined as observers.

■ The Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (ANVISA) now relies on the EDQM and its Certificates of Suitability, promoting regulatory convergence and improving access to medicines. In addition, the Turkish official medicines control laboratory joined the [OMCL Network](#) after many years of close co-operation. The Indian Pharmacopoeia Commission became the first new member of the Pharmacopoeia Discussion Group (PDG) in 2023, joining the founding members – the European Pharmacopoeia, the USA Pharmacopoeia and the Japanese Pharmacopoeia. Building on its momentum, the PDG launched the next phase of its [global expansion initiative](#) in 2024, inviting other world pharmacopoeias to join the existing members in developing robust, science-based, harmonised standards.

■ The European Pharmacopoeia Commission removed all general animal safety tests, such as the commonly used [rabbit pyrogen test](#), from the European Pharmacopoeia in November 2024. This is a significant step for animal welfare and illustrates the commitment to environmental sustainability and the protection of biodiversity.

■ The EDQM has provided solid evidence-based international benchmarks such as the [Blood Guide](#) and the [Tissues and Cells Guide](#). An important milestone is the adoption in 2024 of the [EU Regulation on substances of human origin](#), which references EDQM technical guidelines, confirming EDQM's major role in developing standards in this field.

■ The EDQM's seven strategic objectives, embodied in its [Medium-Term Strategy 2024-2027](#), comprise responsiveness, global outreach, stakeholder engagement, sustainability, modernisation, people development and a culture of service. This document provides a road map for the future, guiding the EDQM in its efforts to achieve its vision of better health, for all.

### Key findings

- ▶ Climate change and environmental degradation remain urgent threats, with new legal instruments being developed to address environmental crime and protect biodiversity.
- ▶ A rights-based approach to environmental protection is gaining traction, reflected in landmark European Court rulings and efforts to integrate environmental rights into the European Social Charter.
- ▶ Environmental governance is evolving, with increased decentralisation allowing local and regional authorities a greater role in climate and biodiversity policies.
- ▶ New commitments to environmental justice have emerged, with stronger legal frameworks addressing pollution, illegal logging and hazardous waste disposal.
- ▶ Youth engagement in environmental activism is growing, but challenges remain, including the criminalisation of peaceful environmental protests in some countries.

■ At the 4th Summit, the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe acknowledged the urgency of additional efforts to protect the environment and counter the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss, recognising their impact on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Environmental degradation not only threatens fundamental rights such as life, health and an adequate standard of living but also undermines democratic stability by exacerbating social inequalities and limiting public participation in decision making. Weak environmental governance and insufficient legal protections can further erode the rule of law, reducing accountability for environmental harm.

■ Appendix V to the Reykjavik Declaration, “The Council of Europe and the environment”, sets out key objectives and calls for enhanced action on the human rights dimensions of environmental protection.

■ To implement this commitment, the Council of Europe took several institutional steps. In early 2024, a new Directorate of Social Rights, Health and Environment was established, along with an Inter-Secretariat Task Force on the Environment, to better co-ordinate efforts. The Ad Hoc Multidisciplinary Group on the Environment (GME) was also created by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to provide guidance to member states to shape future action. The GME brings together representatives of member states, Council of Europe institutions, intergovernmental organisations and civil society.

### Challenges

■ The GME assessed the environmental challenges facing member states, identifying major concerns such as air and water pollution, ecosystem destruction, species loss and climate change. The increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters were flagged as particularly alarming. The report<sup>307</sup> underscores the growing recognition of environmental degradation as a threat to human rights, democracy and the rule of law, drawing on the evolving case law of the European Court of Human Rights and the jurisprudence of the European Committee of Social Rights. Marginalised and discriminated groups remain disproportionately affected, exacerbating social inequalities.

■ The GME also highlighted the impact of climate change on democratic governance, noting its role in increasing youth anxiety and contributing to democratic backsliding.

### Strategy on the environment

■ To respond to these challenges, the GME has prepared a draft Council of Europe strategy on the environment, which is expected to be adopted by the Committee of Ministers in May 2025. The strategy focuses on:

- ▶ integrating human rights and good governance principles into environmental decision making and processes;
- ▶ supporting and protecting environmental defenders and whistle-blowers;
- ▶ strengthening conservation efforts for wildlife, ecosystems and landscapes;
- ▶ protecting the environment through criminal law.

307. Ad Hoc Multidisciplinary Group on the Environment (GME), [1st meeting report](#), 25-27 September 2024.

Progress has also been made in tackling environmental crime through criminal law. The new Convention on the Protection of the Environment through Criminal Law, prepared by the European Committee on Crime Problems (CDPC), is expected to be adopted in May 2025. This will be a legally binding international instrument addressing environmental crime and will help states prevent, prosecute and sanction offences such as:

- ▶ pollution and hazardous waste;
- ▶ illegal logging and trading in wildlife species;
- ▶ mining and destruction of protected habitats.

The convention will also strengthen co-operation between the European Union and the Council of Europe on environmental protection and accountability for environmental crimes. Additionally, the Consultative Council of European Prosecutors (CCPE) has issued guidance on the role of prosecutors in enforcing environmental law through criminal, administrative and civil justice mechanisms.<sup>308</sup>

Member states have also taken steps to advance environmental human rights protections. In September 2022, the Committee of Ministers adopted Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)20 on human rights and the protection of the environment,<sup>309</sup> calling on states to consider recognising the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment at the national level.

In May 2023, the Icelandic Presidency of the Committee of Ministers convened a high-level conference on the practical implementation of this right, examining the balance between political and legal considerations in its recognition.<sup>310</sup>

## Implementation of environmental judgments

The Court has continued to clarify states' obligations regarding environmental protection under the Convention.<sup>311</sup>

In *Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland*<sup>312</sup> (April 2024), the Court found that the respondent state's failure to implement sufficient measures to combat climate change violated Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Court notes in the ruling that state authorities must protect individuals from the serious adverse effects on their life, health, well-being and quality of life arising from the harmful effects and risks caused by climate change. The Swiss Government has since reported to the Committee of Ministers on measures taken post-judgment. On 6 March 2025, during its first review of the case, the Committee of Ministers recalled the Court's findings that climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time and that the insufficiency of past state action to combat climate change at the global level has exacerbated risks and posed threats to the enjoyment of human rights.

In its decision,<sup>313</sup> the Committee of Ministers concluded that no further separate action was required concerning individual measures. Regarding general measures, the Committee of Ministers invited the authorities to submit updated information and decided to resume its examination of the case in September 2025.

In January 2025, the Court delivered a pilot judgment against Italy, *Cannavacciuolo and Others v. Italy*,<sup>314</sup> concerning illegal waste disposal, often by organised criminal groups in the Campania region (Terra dei Fuochi). Italy has been ordered to develop a comprehensive strategy within two years, including establishing an independent monitoring mechanism and creating a public information platform.

The Committee of Ministers is actively supervising the execution of environmental judgments – which may concern the right to life, the right to a fair trial, freedom of expression, the right to respect for private and family life or property rights<sup>315</sup> (for example *Cordella and Others v. Italy*<sup>316</sup> and *Genç and Demirgan group v. Turkey*<sup>317</sup>).

308. [Opinion No. 17 \(2022\)](#) of the Consultative Council of European Prosecutors (CCPE) on the role of prosecutors in the protection of the environment.

309. See <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680a83df1>.

310. Proceedings of the high-level conference organised by the Icelandic Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, with the support of the Council of Europe Secretariat, [“The right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in practice”](#), June 2023.

311. See [Environment – ECHR-KS – Knowledge Sharing](#).

312. *Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland* (Application No. 53600/20).

313. *Ibid.*

314. *Cannavacciuolo and Others v. Italy* (Application No. 51567/14).

315. Council of Europe Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, [thematic factsheet on the environment](#), May 2023.

316. *Cordella and Others v. Italy* (Application No. 54414/13).

317. *Genç and Demirgan group v. Turkey* (Application No. 34327/06).

■ The former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, published a [human rights comment](#) on the increasing repression, criminalisation and stigmatisation of peaceful environmental protests in Europe. In September 2023, she delivered oral remarks to the European Court of Human Rights in the case of *Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and 32 Others*,<sup>318</sup> which concerns the negative impact of climate change on human rights, particularly those of young people.

■ The Council of Europe also contributes to the protection of the environment through a set of more specific instruments relating to biodiversity, landscape and natural catastrophes.

■ Member states have continued efforts to preserve biodiversity and landscapes through specialised instruments. The Standing Committee of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (ETS No. 104, Bern Convention) adopted a recommendation<sup>319</sup> clarifying the obligations of contracting parties on the conservation of the areas included in the Emerald Network of areas of special conservation interest.

■ The year 2024 was important for the Council of Europe Landscape Convention (ETS No. 176). The Organisation hosted the 12th conference on the implementation of the convention and the participants endorsed a recommendation to member states on landscape and health as well as the international jury's proposals on the landscape award. In 2025, Italy will host an informal conference of ministers to mark the 25th anniversary of the convention in Florence.

## Political and legislative action on environmental protection

■ The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has actively supported efforts by Council of Europe member states to strengthen environmental rights. It has launched work on the Reykjavik Process, which aims to mainstream the right to a healthy environment and establish a new intergovernmental Reykjavik Committee on human rights and the environment. In Recommendation 2246 (2023) "Environmental impact of armed conflicts",<sup>320</sup> the Assembly called for:

- ▶ stronger legal frameworks to protect human living spaces in armed conflicts;
- ▶ the criminalisation of ecocide;
- ▶ a permanent international mechanism to address environmental damage compensation claims.

■ The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe has stressed that local governance is key to environmental protection and has called for:

- ▶ an Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government to strengthen local and regional authorities' environmental responsibilities;
- ▶ greater awareness among subnational authorities of how to better integrate environmental considerations into policy making;
- ▶ a [report](#) on the role of local and regional responses to natural disasters and climate hazards: from risk preparedness to resilience.

■ The Congress released the [third volume](#) of the "Human rights handbook for local and regional authorities", dedicated to the environment and sustainable development. On 4 July 2023, the President of the Brandenburg State Parliament and the Chair of the Congress Monitoring Committee co-signed the [Potsdam Declaration](#) for a shared commitment to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

■ Member states have made progress in strengthening environmental governance, integrating human rights protections and addressing environmental crime. However, gaps remain in implementation, enforcement and accountability. Continued efforts are needed to translate commitments into tangible results. The Council of Europe will support member states to meet their obligations, monitor progress and develop practical tools to tackle emerging environmental challenges.

318. *Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and 32 Others* (Application No. 39371/20).

319. [Recommendation No. 225 \(2024\)](#) on the further clarification of Contracting Parties regarding the conservation of Emerald Network sites.

320. Parliamentary Assembly, [Recommendation 2246 \(2023\)](#).



## B. EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND RESPECT

### INTRODUCTION

Equality, diversity and respect are the bedrock of democratic societies. When participation is unequal and discrimination persists, democracy weakens, giving way to polarisation, exclusion and authoritarianism. The rise of hate speech, setbacks in gender equality and women's rights and attacks on minority rights highlight the urgent need for renewed commitments. This chapter explores key challenges and progress in promoting gender equality, protecting children's rights and addressing human trafficking, while also examining how digital technologies and conflicts are reshaping fundamental rights and democratic resilience across Europe.

Democracy depends on equal rights and participation for all. Political actors exploiting divisions for electoral gain, such as by framing minority rights as a threat to the majority, weaken democratic foundations. Laws targeting specific communities, such as "anti-LGBTI propaganda" laws, fuel stigma, restrict public discourse and curb civic activism.

The digital sphere plays a growing role in shaping these dynamics. Algorithms amplify hate speech and reproduce biases, thus spreading discriminatory rhetoric with real-world consequences, deepening tensions and eroding democratic values. Inclusive policies that uphold diversity and equality are crucial to countering these threats.

Gender equality remains under pressure, with anti-rights movements challenging progress across member states. Given the link between gender inequality and violence against women, stronger action is needed to combat gender stereotypes, sexism and discrimination – a priority of the [Council of Europe's Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029](#).

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) continues to drive progress on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) monitoring shows tangible improvements, with many states actively engaging with its findings. The European Union's accession to the Istanbul Convention further strengthens recognition of its role as a rights-based instrument.

The [Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2022-2027\)](#) supports member states to address emerging challenges for children. Implementation reports highlight significant progress, reinforcing its role in guiding national policies.

Combating sexual violence against children remains a priority, with the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention) driving national-level improvements in prevention, victim protection and accountability for offenders.

The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, monitored by the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), has influenced legal, policy and practice reforms across member states. However, gaps remain in victims' access to legal aid, compensation and justice.

Human trafficking is evolving, driven by armed conflict, humanitarian crises and climate-related displacement. Some European countries are shifting from being countries of origin to destinations for trafficking victims. The rise of digital technologies and AI presents both challenges and opportunities – facilitating exploitation while also offering new tools to prevent trafficking, assist victims and strengthen criminal justice responses.

As new challenges emerge, international co-operation remains essential to safeguarding equality, protecting vulnerable groups and strengthening social cohesion. The Council of Europe's legal instruments and monitoring bodies provide a strong foundation, but real progress depends on sustained political will and effective national implementation. This chapter examines how member states are responding, the impact of evolving threats and the steps needed to ensure democracy remains inclusive and resilient.

## COMBATING TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

### Key findings

- ▶ Persistent gaps in victim support: GRETA found that 31 out of 35 states must improve victim compensation and 19 states must strengthen victims' access to legal assistance and free legal aid.
- ▶ Inadequate criminal justice response: GRETA found that the number of prosecutions and convictions for human trafficking was low in 28 out of 35 states, with many trafficking cases reclassified as lesser offences.
- ▶ Growing risks linked to conflict and migration: increased forced displacement due to war, climate disasters and restrictive immigration policies has heightened trafficking risks.
- ▶ Child trafficking remains a major concern: one in three identified victims is a child and many states still struggle with effective identification and protection.
- ▶ Technology-facilitated trafficking is on the rise: traffickers exploit digital platforms and encrypted communications, while law enforcement faces challenges in accessing digital evidence and investigating online crimes.

■ The Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, in force since 2008, remains the primary legal instrument guiding member states' efforts to combat trafficking. As of 2024, 48 states (all Council of Europe member states, along with Belarus and Israel) had ratified the convention, which has driven legislative and policy reforms across the region. Many states have strengthened their legal frameworks, introducing laws that criminalise human trafficking, establish recovery and reflection periods and residence permits, and uphold the non-punishment principle for victims forced into unlawful acts. Several countries have adopted comprehensive national strategies with dedicated funding, improved victim identification procedures and appointed independent national rapporteurs on trafficking to ensure more effective monitoring.<sup>321</sup>

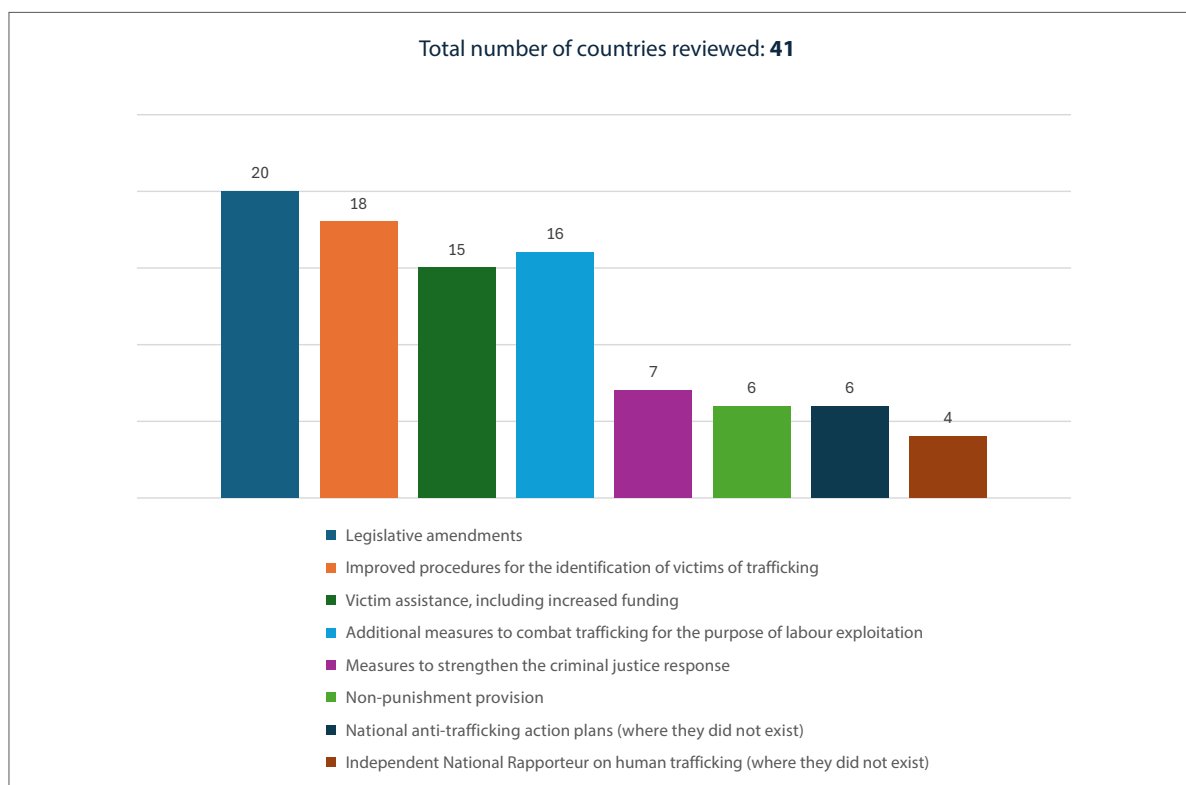
■ In March 2024, the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings published its stock-taking report following the third evaluation round, which assessed victims' access to justice and effective remedies. While progress has been made, critical gaps remain in three key areas.<sup>322</sup>

- ▶ Victim compensation: GRETA urged 31 out of 35 states to remove barriers to compensation, ensuring that victims receive adequate redress. Seven states still lack national legislation guaranteeing state compensation for trafficking victims.
- ▶ Criminal justice response: 28 out of 35 states reported low prosecution and conviction rates, with many cases being reclassified as lesser offences carrying lighter penalties. This not only weakens deterrence but also limits victims' rights and access to justice.
- ▶ Legal assistance and free legal aid: 19 out of 35 states fail to fully comply with their obligations under the convention, with challenges including bureaucratic hurdles, inadequate funding and a shortage of specialised lawyers.

321. GRETA, [Practical impact of GRETA's monitoring work in improving the implementation of the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings](#), March 2024.

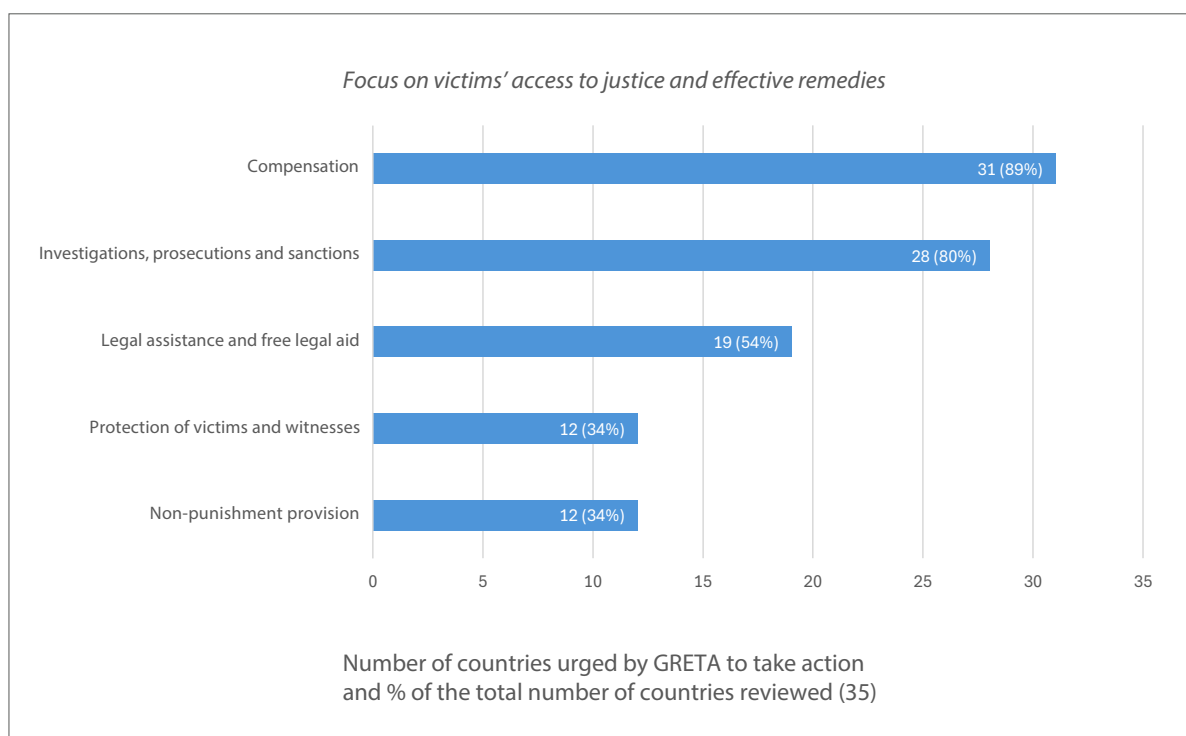
322. GRETA, [Stock-taking of GRETA's third evaluation round of the implementation of the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings](#), March 2024.

**Figure 6 – Number of countries reporting progress in key areas between the second and the third evaluations by GRETA**



Source: GRETA

**Figure 7 – Main gaps in the implementation of the Anti-Trafficking Convention identified by GRETA during the third evaluation round**



Source: GRETA

## Evolving challenges in trafficking

■ Member states face new and evolving challenges, requiring legislative and policy adjustments. Rising numbers of people fleeing conflict, climate disasters and violence are at risk of trafficking and exploitation. Restrictive immigration policies have limited legal migration pathways and barriers to employment for asylum seekers heighten these risks. Several states are reforming labour protection for migrant workers, in line with Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)21 on preventing labour exploitation.<sup>323</sup>

■ One in three identified trafficking victims worldwide is a child, with unaccompanied children particularly at risk.<sup>324</sup> GRETA's reports pinpoint shortcomings in the identification and protection of child victims of trafficking, who are frequently treated as offenders and punished for illegal activities. Several states have stepped up co-operation with internet service providers to tackle online recruitment of children for trafficking. Addressing vulnerabilities to human trafficking, including child trafficking, is a key focus of GRETA's fourth evaluation round, launched in July 2023.<sup>325</sup>

■ The rise of digital platforms, encrypted communications and anonymous transactions has enabled traffickers to expand their activities while complicating detection and prosecution. A GRETA study on online trafficking found that states struggle with access to digital evidence, co-operation with private companies and the capacity of law enforcement to investigate technology-driven crimes.<sup>326</sup> In response, some states have increased capacity to use digital technologies to prevent human trafficking, notably with support from Council of Europe projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia.<sup>327</sup> Continued commitment and co-operation are essential to closing these gaps and ensuring stronger protection for trafficking victims across the region.

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323. Committee of Ministers [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2022\)21](#) on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation.

324. Inter-Agency Co-ordination Group against Trafficking in persons (ICAT), "Call for accelerated action by 2025 to prevent and end child trafficking".

325. GRETA, [Fourth evaluation round](#).

326. GRETA, [Online and technology-facilitated trafficking in human beings](#), April 2022.

327. Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, "The impact of digital technology on human trafficking: changing the way we respond highlighted at conference in Sarajevo".

## GENDER EQUALITY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

### Key findings

- ▶ Legal and policy progress through the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): since 2023, national strategies, legal frameworks and funding for specialist support services have expanded across Europe.
- ▶ Shift to consent-based definitions of rape: more countries are aligning sexual violence laws with European Court of Human Rights case law and the Istanbul Convention, leading to higher reporting and conviction rates.
- ▶ Violence against women remains widespread with significant numbers continuing to experience sexual violence or violence from former and current partners.
- ▶ Structural barriers continue to hinder progress on gender equality, while new threats and opportunities in the digital sphere require adaptive policy responses. Gender equality is under pressure from anti-rights movements, requiring stronger action to combat gender stereotypes, sexism and discrimination.
- ▶ Rising digital manifestations of violence against women: online hate against women, including threats to public figures, is escalating.

■ Gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence remain central to the Council of Europe's work. While progress has been made through legal reforms, policy initiatives and the impact of the Istanbul Convention, challenges persist, including gaps in prevention and enforcement and emerging forms of violence, particularly in the digital sphere. Strengthening commitments and ensuring effective implementation across member states remain key priorities.<sup>328</sup>

■ The Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029,<sup>329</sup> adopted in March 2024, outlines six thematic objectives to address ongoing and emerging challenges. It is too early to assess its impact, but reports on the previous strategy show that most member states prioritised combating violence against women, with less focus on tackling sexism or integrating a gender perspective into migration policies.

■ The European Court of Human Rights continues to shape progress on gender equality. For example, Bulgaria amended a law found to discriminate based on sex and family status after a ruling in *Yocheva and Ganeva v. Bulgaria* (CM/ResDH(2023)402).

■ The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe closely monitors the implementation of the Court judgments on gender-based violence. Many states still struggle to address femicide and widespread domestic violence effectively. The Committee of Ministers has repeatedly urged Türkiye to reconsider its 2022 withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. However, some positive developments have been noted: Georgia expanded electronic surveillance of perpetrators (*Tkheldidze case*) and the Republic of Moldova enhanced measures to combat domestic violence (*T.M. and C.M. case*). The Committee of Ministers continues to encourage further steps to address the root causes of violence against women and raise public awareness.

### Impact of the Istanbul Convention

■ The *Istanbul Convention* remains a driving force for legal and policy reforms. Since 2023, its impact has been visible in more comprehensive policies, increased funding, stronger legal frameworks and a broader range of specialist support services. These reforms have led to practical improvements, including greater police specialisation in gender-based violence and trauma-informed responses by professionals.

■ These and other themes were highlighted during the *10th anniversary* celebrations of the Istanbul Convention's entry into force in May 2024, including a photography exhibition showcasing key advancements.

■ The monitoring mechanism under the Istanbul Convention confirms progress, particularly in shifting to consent-based definitions of rape, aligning with the requirement of the Istanbul Convention and the Court's case law.

328. See also the Key Theme of the Court on the matter: <https://ks.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr-ks/domestic-violence>.

329. The *Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029*.

■ Defining the offence based on the absence of consent – freely given as an expression of a person’s free will – more accurately captures the nature of sexual violence and better reflects the experiences of women and girls. Countries that have adopted this approach have seen increased reporting and conviction rates, underscoring the importance of aligning criminal law with women’s lived reality. This shift also helps address under-reporting and persistently low conviction rates, as highlighted in GREVIO’s 2024 thematic evaluation reports on Denmark, Finland, Spain and Sweden.<sup>330</sup>

## Persistent challenges

■ Violence against women remains widespread, with 17.2% of women in the European Union experiencing sexual violence and 31.8% facing intimate partner violence at least once in their lifetime.<sup>331</sup> GREVIO’s first thematic evaluation round (launched in 2023) identified multiple interrelated factors, including a systemic lack of primary prevention. While some promising initiatives exist, comprehensive, long-term strategies to address the root causes of violence – such as dismantling harmful masculinities that drive perpetration – remain insufficient.

■ At the same time, violence against women in the digital sphere is rising sharply. Online hate, particularly targeting women in the public eye, increasingly leads to real-world threats, affecting their personal safety, professional lives and political participation. Growing exposure to, and active consumption of, violent pornography is also a concern, contributing to harmful sexual behaviour, including by very young offenders. Several states have reported an alarming increase in sexual violence among teenagers and younger perpetrators.<sup>332</sup>

■ These trends highlight the urgent need to recognise and address violence against women as a gendered phenomenon, rooted in misogyny, sexism and harmful gender stereotypes that normalise and glorify aggressive masculinities. Policy approaches that overlook this reality are regularly found by GREVIO to be ineffective and incompatible with the Istanbul Convention. Amid growing discourse questioning the recognition of violence against women as both a cause and consequence of gender inequality, a strong commitment to achieving women’s equality with men remains essential.

## Strengthening implementation

■ By the end of 2024, seven parties to the Istanbul Convention – Albania, Austria, Denmark, Finland, Monaco, Montenegro and Sweden – had completed the full first thematic evaluation cycle. This process, led by GREVIO and followed by recommendations from the Committee of the Parties, showed significant progress across all seven states since their baseline evaluation.

■ As reflected in the graph below, the most substantial improvements have been in legislation and the collection of administrative data on violence against women. These are followed by increased funding for policies and services, enhanced risk-assessment measures, expanded use of protection orders and specialised training for law-enforcement and judicial professionals. Many states have also strengthened specialist support services, particularly for victims of rape and sexual violence. There has been less progress in building co-operation between different agencies and involving the health sector in efforts to stop violence against women. Closing these gaps is key to a stronger, more effective response.

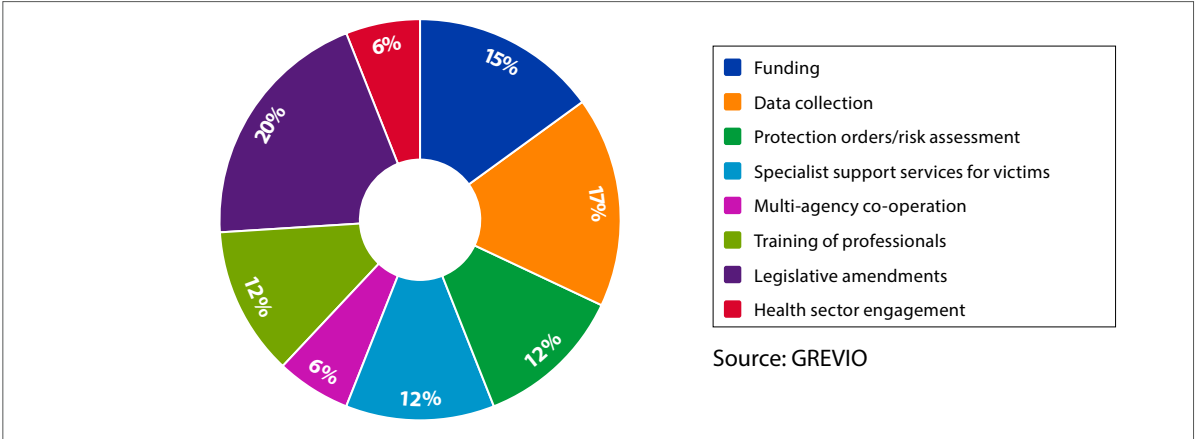
330. See the GREVIO First thematic evaluation report on Denmark, paragraph 146; on Finland, paragraph 153; on Spain, paragraph 141; and on Sweden, paragraph 122.

331. EU Gender-based violence survey – Key results, 2024.

332. See for example, the GREVIO First thematic evaluation report on Austria, pp. 9 and 20; and on Spain, pp. 10-11.



**Figure 8 – Percentage of parties reporting progress per thematic area**



■ The European Union’s accession to the Istanbul Convention in October 2023, along with its efforts to align its laws and policies with the convention’s standards, has provided important momentum for strengthening measures to prevent and combat violence against women across Europe. Through the baseline evaluation procedure launched by GREVIO in January 2025, the Council of Europe is uniquely positioned to engage in dialogue with the European Union on its compliance with these standards.

## HUMAN RIGHTS AND DIGNITY OF CHILDREN

### Key findings

- ▶ Strengthened legal protections: 34 member states have fully banned corporal punishment, with at least five more committing to its full prohibition.
- ▶ Concerns over online child sexual exploitation and abuse: the rise of live-streamed abuse and AI-generated child sexual abuse material requires stronger enforcement and international co-operation.
- ▶ Challenges in the protection of children from violence: many states lack sufficient vetting systems, reporting mechanisms and resources to fully implement child-protection measures. States are taking a more comprehensive approach to violence against children, focusing on a broader range of forms of and settings for violence.
- ▶ Progress in child-friendly justice: 28 member states have established Barnahus or similar services to ensure a child-centred approach in cases of violence against children.
- ▶ Support for children in migration remains uneven: at least 15 states have introduced specific protections for unaccompanied children fleeing Ukraine; but gaps remain in guardianship systems and resources.

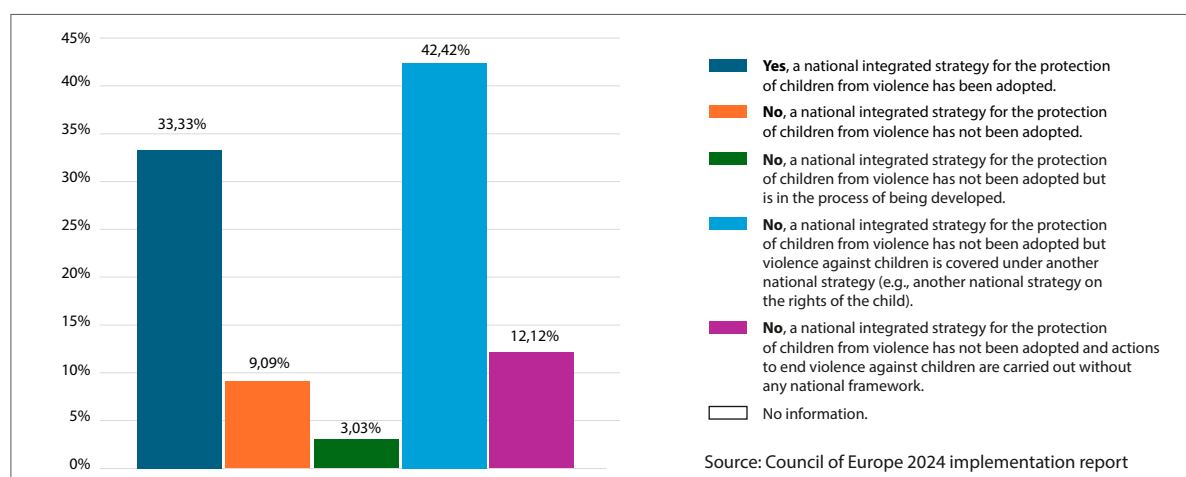
■ The Council of Europe [Strategy for the Rights of the Child](#) (2022-2027) serves as a key reference for most member states in shaping national laws and policies to advance children's rights. Reports indicate notable improvements in child participation, child-friendly justice and the safe use of digital technologies.<sup>333</sup>

### Protecting children from violence

■ In 2023, at least 22 member states introduced new legislation or policies to protect children from violence, focusing primarily on child sexual exploitation and abuse reporting mechanisms, bullying and online peer violence.<sup>334</sup> By August 2024, 34 states had fully prohibited corporal punishment in all settings, including the home, while at least five others had committed to doing so. However, progress towards full prohibition has stalled in recent years.<sup>335</sup>

■ The 2024 implementation review of Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2009\)10 on integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence](#) highlights that states are taking a more comprehensive approach compared to 2019. More states now acknowledge a broader range of forms and settings for violence, recognising that children who witness violence, such as domestic violence, should be considered victims in their own right.<sup>336</sup>

**Figure 9 – Has a national integrated strategy for the protection of children from violence been adopted in your country?**



<sup>333</sup> Council of Europe, [First implementation report](#) of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child, January 2024.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> End Corporal Punishment, [Progress and delay in achieving universal prohibition and elimination of corporal punishment in Council of Europe member States](#), December 2024.

<sup>336</sup> Council of Europe, [Implementation review of Recommendation CM/Rec\(2009\)10 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on Council of Europe policy guidelines on integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence](#) (December 2024).

Most states recognise that violence against children is complex and requires a multidisciplinary approach. However, priorities and responses vary. Some states lack proper vetting systems for professionals working with children or have weak reporting and referral mechanisms. In almost all member states, resources and funding remain inadequate to effectively address the issue.<sup>337</sup>

Child sexual exploitation and abuse facilitated by digital technologies are on the rise, with increasing cases of live-streamed abuse, AI-generated child sexual abuse material and abuse in virtual realities.<sup>338</sup> Assessments under the Council of Europe [EndOCSEA@Europe+ project](#) in Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Montenegro show that several member states have made significant progress in tackling these crimes, including by establishing national helplines and improving detection measures.

Child victims of sexual violence often face significant barriers to reporting abuse, partly due to societal taboos. It is therefore essential to allow sufficient time for reporting childhood sexual abuse, as required by the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention).

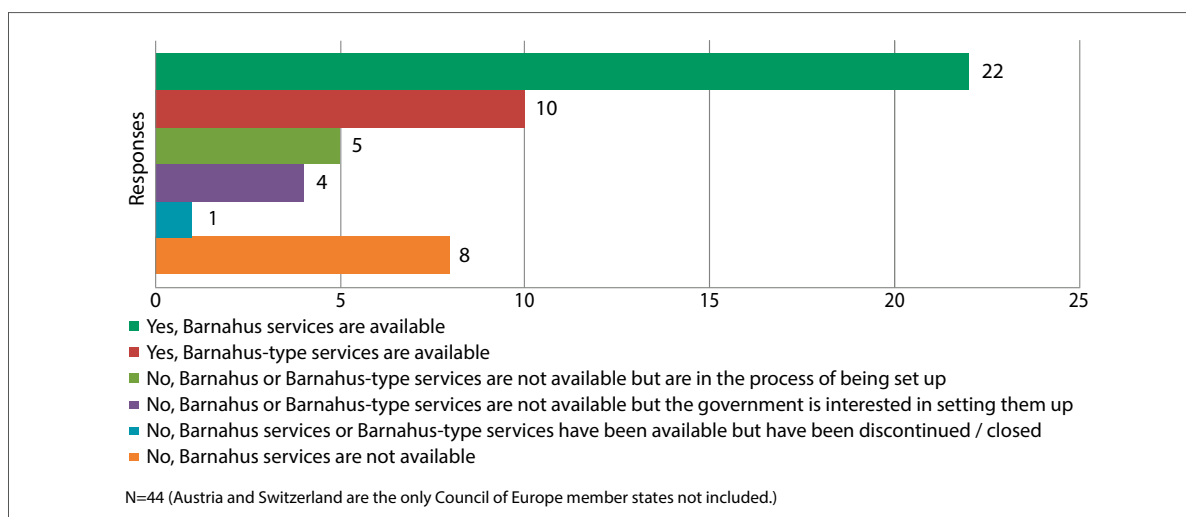
The Lanzarote Committee's Comparative Study on statutes of limitations for sexual offences against children<sup>339</sup> found that 18 of 43 states reviewed had no limitation periods for some or all such offences. In the remaining 25 states, limitation periods varied.

In 2024, the Lanzarote Committee adopted an opinion stressing that limitation periods must not expire before victims reach adulthood and advocating their abolition as an effective measure to allow sufficient time for initiating prosecution.<sup>340</sup> In line with this opinion, several member states, such as Denmark, Hungary, Montenegro and Romania, have recently abolished or extended limitation periods for sexual offences against children.

## Barnahus: child-friendly justice

Member states remain strongly committed to establishing and improving children's houses (Barnahus) – a multidisciplinary, child-friendly model promoted by the Council of Europe to co-ordinate criminal and child welfare investigations in cases of violence against children. By September 2023, at least 28 member states had set up Barnahus or similar services, with five more in the process of doing so.

**Figure 10 – Are Barnahus or Barnahus-type services available in your country?**



Source: Barnahus: a European Journey – Mapping study on multidisciplinary and interagency child-friendly models responding to violence against children in Council of Europe member states.

337. Ibid.

338. Council of Europe, [Emerging technologies: threats and opportunities for the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse](#), Background paper for the Lanzarote Committee, October 2024.

339. Council of Europe, [Comparative study of the statutes of limitations in respect of sexual offences against children in the State Parties to the Lanzarote Convention](#), September 2023.

340. Lanzarote Committee, [Opinion on Article 33 of the Lanzarote Convention and its explanatory note](#): requirements of the provision on statute of limitations and recommendations on its implementation, adopted on 11 June 2024.

## Child participation

■ In 2023, at least 22 member states took steps to enhance child participation at national, regional or local levels. These efforts focused on involving children, including those in vulnerable situations, in policy development, implementation and evaluation, particularly in schools.<sup>341</sup>

■ A mapping study found that while child human rights defenders are becoming increasingly active, they face significant challenges, including threats, pressure and barriers to advocacy. The report recommends that states ensure inclusive and safe participation for child human rights defenders and address gaps in child-friendly information on their rights, access to justice for child victims and a holistic approach to empowerment and participation.<sup>342</sup>

## Children in migration

■ In 2023, at least 16 member states took steps to protect the rights of children in migration, including internally displaced children.<sup>343</sup> However, the implementation review of Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe CM/Rec(2019)11 on effective guardianship for unaccompanied and separated children in the context of migration revealed that comprehensive implementation remains weak in most states. While guardians are generally appointed without delay, challenges persist, particularly for non-asylum-seeking children and in cases where a child's minority status is in doubt, often leading to delays in guardian designation – contrary to the principle of presumption of minority. Many states also report insufficient financial and human resources to meet the growing needs of children entering their territory.<sup>344</sup>

## Support for children fleeing Ukraine

■ For unaccompanied and separated children fleeing Ukraine, 15 out of 22 responding states have introduced specific measures, including legal and policy frameworks, co-ordination mechanisms, appointment flexibility for guardians and improved information provision.<sup>345</sup>

■ Since November 2023, the Council of Europe Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine has provided a multilateral co-operation platform for member states to address legal and policy challenges related to displaced children of Ukraine. Key areas of focus include transnational procedures and guardianship, psychological support and trauma-informed care, understanding the risks of trafficking of children of Ukraine,<sup>346</sup> access to education,<sup>347</sup> preconditions for the safe return of children from Council of Europe member states and reforms to Ukraine's child-protection system. As a sign of the Council of Europe's continued unwavering support to Ukraine, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe nominated a Special Envoy, Thórdís Kolbrún Reykþjórd Gylfadóttir, on the Situation of the Children of Ukraine in February 2025. The Special Envoy undertook her first fact-finding mission to Ukraine on 19 and 20 March 2025.

341. Council of Europe, [First implementation report](#) of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child, January 2024.

342. Council of Europe, "Children as defenders of human rights: a study on Council of Europe member states", December 2023.

343. Council of Europe, [First implementation report](#) of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child, January 2024.

344. Council of Europe, [Implementation review of Recommendation CM/Rec\(2019\)11 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on effective guardianship for unaccompanied and separated children in the context of migration](#) (December 2024).

345. Ibid.

346. See the joint CGU–GRETA Secretariat [report](#), October 2024.

347. See the [mapping study](#) on children of Ukraine's access to education in Council of Europe member states, November 2024.

### Key findings

- ▶ Mixed progress in refugee protection: while some states have committed to reducing or ending the detention of migrant children, concerns remain over pushbacks, inadequate reception conditions and continued detention practices. Reforms in migration and asylum laws have often restricted access to asylum procedures, making it harder for those in need of protection to reach safety.
- ▶ Gaps in access to justice for migrants: despite some progress, age-assessment procedures, collective expulsions and barriers to legal remedies remain significant concerns. Migrant workers face limited access to justice and effective complaint mechanisms.
- ▶ Statelessness and legal identity challenges: several member states joined the Global Alliance to End Statelessness, but implementation gaps persist, particularly for stateless children.
- ▶ Unaccompanied migrant children face additional risks: some states have improved support for young migrants transitioning to adulthood; however, many lack structured policies.

■ The Council of Europe continues to support member states to address migration and asylum challenges. Guided by the [Action Plan on Protecting Vulnerable Persons in the Context of Migration and Asylum in Europe](#) (2021-2025) and practical tools such as the “Administrative detention of migrants and asylum seekers - Guide for practitioners”,<sup>348</sup> efforts focus on ensuring compliance with human rights standards and reinforcing legal and policy frameworks. On 15 January 2025, the Secretary General informed the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe of his decision to consolidate and expand the Organisation’s migration-related efforts. To ensure stability and continuity, a dedicated Division on Migration and Refugees was established, effective from 1 February 2025.

■ A particular focus has been on member states’ responses to the millions of people fleeing Ukraine, particularly women and children. This section examines states’ progress and challenges in three key areas:

- ▶ identifying and protecting vulnerable migrants and refugees;
- ▶ ensuring migrants’ and refugees’ access to law and justice;
- ▶ strengthening the integration of migrants and refugees.

■ Reports issued in 2023 by the former Special Representative on Migration and Refugees (SRSG) assessed member states’ readiness and effectiveness in terms of receiving and protecting displaced persons, particularly from Ukraine. The findings commended efforts while highlighting areas requiring further action:

- ▶ **Romania**: strengthening asylum procedures and improving protection for vulnerable individuals, including unaccompanied children;
- ▶ **Hungary**: enhancing asylum processes for non-Ukrainian refugees, improving vulnerability assessments and facilitating access to education and employment;
- ▶ **Bulgaria**: strengthening care for vulnerable groups, improving reception conditions, tackling smuggling and trafficking, and developing alternatives to immigration detention.

■ The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, in its 2023 reports on [Cyprus](#) and [Greece](#), urged immediate measures to ensure humane treatment and adequate support for migrants, particularly those with special needs. Its 2023 report on the [United Kingdom](#) stressed that individuals should not be detained when detention is harmful and removal is not imminent, calling for faster transfers to psychiatric care for those with severe mental health conditions.

■ The European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR), in its [2023 Conclusions](#) on Article 17 of the European Social Charter, identified serious gaps in terms of:

- ▶ age-assessment procedures, including reliance on bone testing;<sup>349</sup>

348. [Administrative detention of migrants and asylum seekers](#) – Guide for practitioners, published on 10 November 2023, available in English, [French](#) and [Greek](#).

349. Conclusions in respect of Andorra, Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Spain and the Slovak Republic.

- ▶ pushbacks of migrant children in an irregular situation;<sup>350</sup>
- ▶ lack of alternatives to detention for minors.<sup>351</sup>

■ In Türkiye, the joint European Union–Council of Europe [initiative](#), Strengthening human rights protection in the context of migration, supported national efforts to align with international standards, particularly in protecting migrant children. Key outputs included:

- ▶ an [evaluation report](#) on the guardianship system, with recommendations for strengthening child protection;
- ▶ a [legislation guide](#) on the protection of migrant children, outlining obligations under international conventions and national laws.

■ On statelessness, several member states reinforced their commitments by joining the Global Alliance to End Statelessness, launched by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in October 2024. The Council of Europe also [joined](#), leveraging its work on stateless children's rights and access to nationality.

## Access to law and justice

■ Several member states took legislative action in 2024 to address migration-related legal issues. The former SRSG on Migration and Refugees, in his assessment of [Finland's Act](#) of 16 July 2024, underlined the need to balance migration control with fundamental rights, recommending that any restrictive measures remain exceptional and non-discriminatory, in full compliance with *non-refoulement* and the prohibition of collective expulsions.

■ The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights voiced concerns about border measures introduced in response to the instrumentalisation of migration, highlighting issues during visits to [Poland](#) and [Finland](#), in letters to their parliaments,<sup>352</sup> and in [interventions](#) before the European Court of Human Rights on alleged summary returns by Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Similar concerns, including reports of pushbacks, were raised in a [letter](#) to the Cypriot authorities. The Commissioner also criticised the externalisation of border control and asylum processing in a [statement](#) on the UK's Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill.

■ In April 2023, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment issued its [immigration standards](#), urging European governments to protect foreign nationals detained under immigration law from ill-treatment and to end pushbacks at land and sea borders.

■ The Committee of Ministers continued to supervise member states' execution of migration-related Court judgments, highlighting persistent challenges in access to territory and forced returns without safeguards, including collective expulsions (*Ilias and Ahmed and Shahzad groups v. Hungary*). The Committee of Ministers stressed the need for effective safeguards to prevent ill-treatment at borders (*Alhowais and Shahzad (No. 2) v. Hungary*) and welcomed Croatia's establishment of an independent border monitoring mechanism, the first of its kind among member states (*M.H. and Others v. Croatia*).

■ While acknowledging improvements in some migrant detention regimes (*Moustahi v. France*), the Committee of Ministers expressed concern over the continuing unlawful deprivation of liberty in hotspots (*J.A. and Others group v. Italy*). Despite ongoing challenges, progress was noted in reception conditions (*M.S.S. v. Greece*, *J.A. and Others group v. Italy*, *Feilazoo and A.D. v. Malta*), including for unaccompanied minors (*Rahimi v. Greece*).

■ Improvements were also recorded in asylum claim processing and available remedies (*M.A. v. Cyprus*, *M.S.S. v. Greece*, *Camara v. Belgium*), though challenges remain, particularly regarding accelerated procedures and the lack of remedies with automatic suspensive effect (*S.H. v. Malta*). The Committee of Ministers also expressed concern over weakened safeguards in age-assessment procedures following Italy's October 2023 legislative changes (*Darboe and Camara group v. Italy*).

■ As part of the Strengthening Human Rights Protection in the Context of Migration in Türkiye initiative, over 200 lawyers from eight local Bar associations across Türkiye received [training](#) on European and international human rights standards, with a focus on immigration detention and procedural safeguards.

■ An [international conference](#) on human rights and migration in the context of natural disasters and emergency situations, held in Ankara, further strengthened knowledge of international and European standards.

350. Conclusions in respect of Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Spain.

351. Conclusions in respect of Poland and Türkiye.

352. [Letter from the Commissioner for Human Rights to the Parliament of Finland](#), published on 17 June 2024; [Letter from the Commissioner for Human Rights to the Marshall of the Senate of Poland](#), published on 11 March 2025.



The conference highlighted good practices for ensuring access to justice, identity documents, registration and the protection of vulnerable persons displaced by the February 2023 earthquake in Türkiye and Syria.

■ The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has highlighted the vulnerability of foreign nationals to human trafficking, particularly undocumented, seasonal and domestic workers, who are at heightened risk of labour exploitation. In [Resolution 2536 \(2024\)](#) and [Resolution 2504 \(2023\)](#), it urged member states to ratify the European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers, fully implement the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings and comply with GRETA's recommendations. It also called for the European Social Charter to be extended to cover all individuals residing in member states, regardless of status. In [Resolution 2555 \(2024\)](#), the Assembly noted that asylum seekers from vulnerable groups, including trafficking victims, face disproportionate human rights violations throughout the asylum process, often due to state actions or inaction.

## Integration of migrants and refugees

■ Member states have taken steps to strengthen long-term support for unaccompanied migrant children transitioning to adulthood. Through the multilateral Council of Europe [project](#) Building Futures, Sharing Good Practices: Migrant Children's Transition to Adulthood, Greece, the Netherlands and Spain worked to enhance national policies and services aimed at improving education, employment opportunities and legal protection for young migrants. The project helped refine integration strategies, ensuring a more structured and supportive transition for unaccompanied minors into adulthood.

■ Member states have also worked to enhance the capacity of local and regional authorities to address migration challenges, particularly those stemming from the war in Ukraine. Through the [project](#) Strengthening Resilience in Local and Regional Authorities Facing Migration Challenges, Poland, the Republic of Moldova and Romania took steps to improve integration efforts and strengthen protection for migrants and refugees, especially women and children. The initiative reinforced the importance of sustainable local responses, ensuring better access to services, legal protection and social support for displaced populations.

## ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

### Key findings

- ▶ Growing hostility against migrants: hateful rhetoric, often by political actors, against migrants and refugees coming from outside Europe has intensified.
- ▶ Escalation of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate speech: hate incidents have multiplied due to geopolitical tensions, with extremist groups exploiting conflicts to spread hatred and incite discrimination.
- ▶ Political rhetoric undermining LGBTI rights: some states have adopted restrictive laws or blocked discussions on LGBTI issues in public institutions.
- ▶ Limited progress in combating hate speech: Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 on hate speech has been adopted, but no state has yet developed a fully comprehensive strategy to implement it.

Democratic participation relies on equal access and inclusion, yet racism, religious intolerance and anti-LGBTI attitudes continue to undermine this principle. These forms of discrimination fuel hate speech, exclusion and barriers to meaningful engagement in public life, disproportionately affecting marginalised groups.

Over the past two years, the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has observed a deterioration in conditions for groups at risk of discrimination, further restricting their social inclusion and participation in democratic life.

ECRI reported an increasing use of hostile narratives by politicians and senior public officials against refugees and beneficiaries of international protection from outside Europe. In some member states, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric has surged, with newcomers portrayed as a threat to national security or identity.<sup>353</sup>

Additionally, antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate incidents have escalated significantly, particularly in response to developments in the Middle East. According to ECRI, extremist groups have exploited the renewed violence in the region to spread hatred against Jews, exploiting criticism of Israel or its government to incite antisemitic attacks. Similarly, Muslims have been blamed for events in the Middle East, reinforcing stereotypes that falsely associate entire communities with violence.<sup>354</sup>

ECRI has repeatedly warned of setbacks in the protection of LGBTI rights. In several member states, political rhetoric has intensified against a perceived "LGBTI ideology" or "gender ideology", portraying it as an attempt to challenge traditional binary concepts of male and female by promoting socially constructed gender identities.

In some countries where political leaders or parties in power adopted these views, anti-LGBTI sentiment grew stronger among the public, as such rhetoric was seen as having official backing.<sup>355</sup> These attitudes became even more entrenched when laws were introduced that specifically restricted LGBTI rights or banned information on homosexuality and gender identity in public institutions, including schools.<sup>356</sup> The European Court of Human Rights has ruled in its case law that such laws violate the European Convention on Human Rights, while the Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) has found them incompatible with Council of Europe and other international standards.<sup>357</sup>

Recent findings in Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [Resolution 2543 \(2024\)](#) "Freedom of expression and assembly of LGBTI people in Europe" and [Resolution 2576 \(2024\)](#) "Preventing and combating violence and discrimination against lesbian, bisexual and queer women in Europe",<sup>358</sup> along with the former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights' [Issue Paper](#) "Human Rights and Gender Identity

353. ECRI [annual report](#) (published in June 2024), pp. 7-10.

354. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

355. ECRI, [General Policy Recommendation No. 17 on preventing and combating intolerance and discrimination against LGBTI persons](#), 28 September 2023.

356. ECRI [annual report](#) (published in June 2023), pp. 11-12; [annual report](#) (published in June 2022), pp. 9-10.

357. CoE Venice Commission, Opinion No. 1188/2024, Georgia – Opinion on The Draft Constitutional Law on Protecting Family Values And Minors (CDL-AD(2024)021), 25 June 2024.

358. Parliamentary Assembly [Resolution 2576 \(2024\)](#) "Preventing and combating violence and discrimination against lesbian, bisexual and queer women in Europe", 3 October 2024.

and Expression" (2024),<sup>359</sup> further highlight the escalating hostility, scapegoating of LGBTI persons and the clampdown on LGBTI civil society.

■ In the execution of the judgment in *Identoba and Others v. Georgia*,<sup>360</sup> the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe deeply deplored that, notwithstanding the Committee of Ministers' indications, the authorities proceeded with the enactment of legislation which, among other things, prohibits public assemblies aimed at promoting LGBTI identities.<sup>361</sup> Conversely, notable progress was made in *Oganezova v. Armenia*,<sup>362</sup> where the Committee of Ministers welcomed steps that included the drafting of a law on equality, capacity-building measures for the police, the translation and adaptation of relevant Council of Europe manuals and plans to integrate these materials into regular police training curricula.

■ The adoption of Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 on combating hate speech reflects the priority and urgency member states assign to tackling this issue, particularly online.<sup>363</sup>

■ The 2023 Compilation of Promising Practices<sup>364</sup> by the Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI) highlights legislative measures taken by many states, as well as civil society efforts in education, victim support and hate speech monitoring, sometimes with state support. However, no member state has yet developed a fully comprehensive approach and multi-stakeholder co-ordination remains a key challenge, limiting the overall effectiveness of national responses to hate speech.<sup>365</sup>

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359. CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, Issue Paper: [Human rights and gender identity and expression](#), March 2024.

360. *Identoba and Others v. Georgia* (2015).

361. Interim Resolution [CM/ResDH\(2025\)31](#).

362. *Oganezova v. Armenia* (2022).

363. Committee of Ministers, [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2022\)16](#) on combating hate speech. Find out more about the recommendation in the publication "[Combating hate speech](#)".

364. [Compilation of promising practices on combating hate speech at national level](#), Steering Committee on Anti-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI) and Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI), October 2024.

365. To encourage the development of a comprehensive approach, a [self-assessment tool](#) accompanies the compilation of promising practices that can inspire more diverse and co-ordinated efforts at national and international level.

## DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

### Key findings

- ▶ Expansion of the Intercultural Cities Programme: more local authorities adopted evidence-based inclusion policies, with peer exchanges and capacity-building efforts.
- ▶ Conflicts impact minority rights: minority communities face increasing restrictions, particularly regarding language education and cultural expression.
- ▶ Challenges to Roma inclusion: school segregation, poor housing conditions and racist police abuse remain major concerns in many states.
- ▶ Efforts to combat antigypsyism increasing: some states have established national commissions and monitoring bodies to address antigypsyism.
- ▶ Slow implementation of minority rights frameworks: while states have taken legal steps to align with the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ETS No. 157, FCNM) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ETS No. 148), enforcement remains weak, particularly in education and participation in public affairs.

■ Respect for diversity and inclusive policies are essential for democratic resilience, ensuring equal participation and the protection of minority rights. Fostering inclusive societies strengthens social cohesion and contributes to the sustainability of democratic systems.

■ The Council of Europe's Intercultural Cities (ICC) programme continues to expand, providing tools and support for the development of evidence-based inclusion policies. Participating local authorities implement targeted strategies to promote inclusion, benefiting from peer exchanges and capacity-building initiatives.

■ A key component of this approach is the anti-rumour methodology, which helps combat stereotypes, xenophobia and hate speech, fostering greater trust in institutions and across communities. In 2024, Malta became the first country to adopt a national anti-rumours action plan as part of its anti-racism strategy, marking a significant step in national-level efforts to counter misinformation and discrimination.

■ Geopolitical conflicts have had a significant impact on the rights of national minorities in Europe, particularly following the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In 2024, the Russian Federation denounced the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, effectively removing treaty-based protections for the numerous minority communities within its borders.

■ The consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine extend beyond Ukraine itself, affecting minority communities across Europe. A worrying trend has emerged in which minorities are increasingly viewed as security concerns or even threats.<sup>366</sup> In some states, individuals face restrictions on expressing their minority identities, and opportunities for minority children to learn their first language in schools have been significantly reduced.

### Minority rights and education

■ Minority language education is vital for the preservation of linguistic heritage, yet challenges persist, including shortages of teachers and textbooks.<sup>367</sup> Additionally, the segregation of Roma children in schools remains widespread in many states, requiring more resolute efforts to address it.<sup>368</sup> In 2024, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities published a thematic commentary on education to support member states to tackle these issues.<sup>369</sup>

366. See Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC), [14th activity report](#) covering the period 1 June 2022 to 31 May 2024, pp. 11-19.

367. Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Fifth evaluation report on [Austria](#) (2023), Fourth evaluation report on [Poland](#) (2023), Third evaluation report on [Romania](#) (2023), Fifth evaluation report on [Serbia](#) (2023) and Seventh evaluation report on [Croatia](#) (2024).

368. ACFC, Fifth opinion on [Albania](#) (2023), Fifth opinion on [Romania](#) (2023), Fifth opinion on [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) (2024), Fifth opinion on [Bulgaria](#) (2024) and Fourth opinion on [Montenegro](#) (2024).

369. ACFC, [Thematic Commentary No. 1 \(2024\) on education under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities](#).

■ While implementation of recommendations by monitoring bodies remains inconsistent, several member states have made notable progress.

- ▶ The Netherlands and the Czech Republic extended their commitments under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.<sup>370</sup>
- ▶ Spain recognised new languages as cultural assets.<sup>371</sup>
- ▶ Serbia established the Gorani National Minority Council.
- ▶ Slovakia adopted curriculum standards for teaching language and literature in Bulgarian, Czech, Croatian and Polish.<sup>372</sup>
- ▶ Germany decided to introduce the teaching of the history and contributions of Frisians, Danes, Sinti and Roma, and Sorbs to German society.<sup>373</sup>

■ Governments have continued efforts to align their legal frameworks and policies with the standards of the FCNM and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, as well as with country-specific recommendations from monitoring bodies, supported by Council of Europe co-operation activities.

■ Armenia sought legal guidance on national minority rights, leading to the preparation of an [opinion on its draft law on national minorities](#) in co-operation with the Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). Albania advanced its legislative framework by considering expert opinions on three bylaws related to its law on national minorities. Ukraine developed a national action plan on minorities, while Serbia took steps to improve data collection on minority issues.

■ These initiatives reflect member states' commitment to strengthening minority rights protection and ensuring compliance with international standards, though further efforts are needed for effective implementation.

## Addressing discrimination against Roma and Travellers

■ Persistent discrimination in education, housing and policing remains a major concern for ECRI.<sup>374</sup>

- ▶ Education: the proportion of Roma pupils in some school classes has increased significantly, reaching 100% in certain instances, reinforcing school segregation.
- ▶ Housing: Roma and Travellers continue to face extremely poor living conditions in many European countries. In some cases, national and local authorities have shown insufficient commitment to improving the situation.
- ▶ Policing: reports from several member states indicate cases of racist police abuse against Roma, including instances where police actions resulted in the deaths of Roma individuals, particularly adolescents.

■ The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe welcomed the engagement of national authorities in Council of Europe co-operation activities on inclusive education and anti-discrimination efforts, particularly in North Macedonia (*Elmazova and Others v. North Macedonia*) and Albania (*X and Others v. Albania*). The Committee of Ministers also invited the Hungarian authorities to consider similar co-operation activities, while acknowledging Hungary's wide-ranging measures to combat segregation and promote inclusive education (*Horváth and Kiss / Szolcsán v. Hungary*).

■ In the longest-standing case on this issue, the Committee of Ministers welcomed the Czech authorities' commitment to ending Roma segregation in schools and noted their planned measures, including a public declaration rejecting ethnic segregation in education (*D.H. and Others v. Czech Republic*).

370. The Netherlands has extended the protection of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages to the Papiamentu/o language on the Island of Bonaire and on the European part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Czech Republic decided to apply additional undertakings of the charter to German in eight districts located in six regions. See notifications on the [Treaty Office website](#).

371. El Salto – Extremadura, “Aprobado declarar al estremeño como Bien de Interés Cultural, con el único voto en contra de Vox” (“Approved to declare “estremeño” as a Cultural Interest Asset with the votes of the PP and the only opposition from VOX”), 8 December 2024.

372. Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic, Educational standards for teaching Bulgarian, Czech, Croatian and Polish language and literature (Vzdelávacie štandardy pre vyučovanie bulharského, českého, chorvátskeho a poľského jazyka a literatúry – Ministerstvo školstva, výskumu, vývoja a mládeže Slovenskej republiky), 2023.

373. Press release of the Minority Council of the four autochthonous national minorities and ethnic groups of Germany and the Council of Low Saxony, *Erste KMK-Empfehlung zu nationalen Minderheiten verabschiedet*, 13 December 2024.

374. ECRI [annual report](#) (published in June 2023), pp. 13–14.

Several national institutions are recognising the role of antigypsyism in perpetuating segregation and have taken steps such as developing national desegregation programmes, establishing official methodologies and standards and seeking Council of Europe support for their efforts.<sup>375</sup>

However, Council of Europe expert bodies<sup>376</sup> and the Committee of Ministers supervising the execution of educational segregation judgments report that tangible improvements remain limited. To strengthen guidance for member states, the CDADI carried out a feasibility study on desegregation and inclusion policies for Roma and Traveller children and expressed its intention to draft a Committee of Ministers recommendation on this issue.<sup>377</sup>

Progress has been made in the execution of European Court of Human Rights judgments concerning racially motivated violence and ineffective investigations into possible racist motives. The Committee of Ministers welcomed the establishment of a National Preventive Mechanism in the Slovak Republic and took note of the Slovak authorities' efforts, including regular training for law enforcement and a zero-tolerance policy on racially motivated violence (R.R. and R.D. group)<sup>378</sup> and capacity-building measures to prevent discrimination against Roma in criminal investigations (Kitanovski).<sup>379</sup>

Despite these positive developments, the ill-treatment of Roma, failure to investigate racial motives and insufficient protection against hate speech continue to be recurring concerns. The European Court of Human Rights continues to receive new applications raising these human rights violations.<sup>380</sup>

Member states have made notable progress in designing and adopting national strategies aimed at Roma and Traveller inclusion. In addition to targeted policies, Roma and Traveller issues have been increasingly mainstreamed into broader strategies, particularly those focused on combating racism.<sup>381</sup>

A positive development has been the creation of institutions and structures dedicated to addressing and combating antigypsyism. In Germany, this includes the establishment of a federal-state commission on antigypsyism and state support for the Independent Antigypsyism Reporting and Information Centre.<sup>382</sup> In Sweden, the Forum of Living History was created to tackle antigypsyism and promote awareness.

Co-operation with central and local authorities has advanced Roma inclusion and equality, particularly in the Western Balkans, Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye. These efforts have helped devise tailored policies that reflect the specific needs of Roma communities, promoting inclusive practices across various sectors.<sup>383</sup>

Additionally, the Council of Europe's co-operation activities have contributed to raising awareness among media professionals, promoting ethical reporting and unbiased narratives about Roma and Travellers. This has led to the establishment of a strong network of journalists committed to countering harmful stereotypes and misinformation.<sup>384</sup>

However, structural inequalities in education, housing and healthcare remain deeply entrenched. Stronger, more effective actions are needed to improve the daily lives of Roma and Traveller individuals and communities.<sup>385</sup>

375. Co-operation activities were started by Albania, the Czech Republic and North Macedonia with the Roma and Travellers Division of the Council of Europe.

376. See, among others, ECRI [Sixth report on Hungary](#), 2023, paragraphs 10, 78 and 80-84; ECRI [Conclusions](#) on the implementation of the recommendations in respect of the Slovak Republic, 2023; Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, [Fifth opinion on Bulgaria](#), 29 May 2024, paragraphs 20, 136 and 138-141.

377. [CDADI\(2024\)37](#), 28 November 2024.

378. Committee of Ministers, [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1507/H46-3](#) (R.R. and R.D. group).

379. Committee of Ministers, [CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1501/H46-23](#), (Kitanovski group), [CM/ResDH\(2024\)258](#) (*Memedova and Others v. North Macedonia*).

380. [Kaprlyova and Others v. Ukraine](#), [Stalovic v. Serbia](#) and [S.T. v. Czech Republic](#), [Pavlovic v. Serbia](#) and [Memishoski v. North Macedonia](#) related to ill-treatment and lack of effective investigations; [Nikolov v. Bulgaria](#) and [Isaev v. Bulgaria](#) relating to alleged hate speech; [Samko and Tamáš v. Slovakia](#) on remarks related to ethnic origin made by the judiciary.

381. Specific inclusion of antigypsyism in the following national strategies and action plans: Anti-Racism Strategy for Public Service of Austria; National Plan to Combat Racism of Sweden; National Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Combating Discrimination of Croatia; National Action Plan against racism, antisemitism and origin-based discrimination of France; German Federal government strategy "Together for democracy and against extremism"; Strategy for preventing and combating antisemitism, xenophobia, radicalisation and hate speech 2024-2027 of Romania; Anti-racist Wales Action Plan (United Kingdom).

382. Melde- und Informationsstelle Antiziganismus, MIA.

383. See, for example, [Roma integration – Phase III, ROMACT – Building Capacity for Roma Inclusion at Local level](#).

384. See [Equality and Freedom from Discrimination for Roma "EQUIROM"](#).

385. See Committee of Ministers, [CM/ResCMN\(2024\)1](#), [CM/Res\(2024\)12](#) and [CM/ResCMN\(2024\)13](#), on implementing the FCNM by the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Montenegro; Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, [Fifth opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), 8 February 2024, [Fifth opinion on Bulgaria](#), 10 October 2024, paragraphs 172, 178 and 185, [Fourth opinion on Montenegro](#), 10 October 2024, paragraphs 167 and 171; ECRI, [Sixth report on Serbia](#), 27 June 2024, paragraphs 82 and 85; CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, [Visit to the Slovak Republic](#), 15 July 2024.



# ABBREVIATIONS

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## COUNCIL OF EUROPE BODIES AND PROGRAMMES

<b>CAHAMA</b>	Ad hoc European Committee for the World Anti-Doping Agency
<b>CCJE</b>	Consultative Council of European Judges
<b>CCPE</b>	Consultative Council of European Prosecutors
<b>CDADI</b>	Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion
<b>CDBIO</b>	Steering Committee for Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health
<b>CDCPP</b>	Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape
<b>CDCT</b>	Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism
<b>CDDH</b>	Steering Committee for Human Rights
<b>CDMSI</b>	Steering Committee on Media and Information Society
<b>CDPC</b>	European Committee on Crime Problems
<b>CDPPS</b>	Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services
<b>CEB</b>	Council of Europe Development Bank
<b>CEPEJ</b>	European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice
<b>CGU</b>	Council of Europe Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine
<b>the Convention</b>	the European Convention on Human Rights
<b>the Court</b>	the European Court of Human Rights
<b>C-PROC</b>	Cybercrime Programme Office
<b>CPT</b>	European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
<b>ECRI</b>	European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
<b>ECSR</b>	European Committee of Social Rights
<b>EDL</b>	European Day of Languages
<b>EDQM</b>	European Directorate for the Quality of Medicines & HealthCare
<b>EHD</b>	European Heritage Days
<b>ELoGE</b>	European Label of Governance Excellence
<b>EPAS</b>	Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport
<b>EQPR</b>	European Qualifications Passport for Refugees
<b>ESCE</b>	European Space for Citizenship Education
<b>ETINED</b>	Council of Europe Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education
<b>FCNM</b>	Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities
<b>GEC</b>	Gender Equality Commission
<b>GEC/PC-eVIO</b>	Committee of Experts on combating technology-facilitated violence against women and girls
<b>GME</b>	Ad Hoc Multidisciplinary Group on the Environment
<b>GRECO</b>	Group of States against Corruption
<b>GRETA</b>	Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings
<b>GREVIO</b>	Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
<b>HELP</b>	Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals
<b>ICC</b>	Intercultural Cities

<b>IFCD</b>	Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy
<b>MARS</b>	Network of Magistrates/Prosecutors Responsible for Sports
<b>MONEYVAL</b>	Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism
<b>OHTE</b>	Observatory on History Teaching in Europe
<b>PACE</b>	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
<b>PC-CP</b>	Council for Penological Co-operation
<b>PC-RAC</b>	Committee of Experts on Criminal Asset Recovery
<b>Pompidou Group</b>	Council of Europe International Co-operation Group on Drugs and Addictions
<b>RFCDC</b>	Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture
<b>SPACE</b>	Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics on Prison Populations
<b>SRS</b>	Special Representative of the Secretary General
<b>T-CY</b>	Cybercrime Convention Committee

## GENERAL ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AI</b>	artificial intelligence
<b>CCBE</b>	Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe
<b>CSO</b>	civil society organisation
<b>DCE</b>	digital citizenship education
<b>EDC</b>	Ethics and Disciplinary Commission
<b>EdTech</b>	education technology
<b>ESD</b>	education for sustainable development
<b>FATF</b>	Financial Action Task Force
<b>FEANTSA</b>	European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless
<b>FIU</b>	financial intelligence unit
<b>GDP</b>	gross domestic product
<b>HSK</b>	Council of Judges and Prosecutors
<b>ICT</b>	information and communication technology
<b>IPACS</b>	International Partnership against Corruption in Sport
<b>LGBTI</b>	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex
<b>OeAD</b>	Agency for Education and Internationalisation
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>OSEPI</b>	Open Society European Policy Institute
<b>PSM</b>	public service media
<b>SLAPP</b>	strategic lawsuit against public participation
<b>UEFA</b>	Union of European Football Associations
<b>UNHCR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>VASP</b>	virtual asset service provider
<b>VET</b>	vocational education and training
<b>WADA</b>	World Anti-Doping Agency

# COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONVENTIONS IN THE REPORT

Title	ETS/CETS No.
Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms or European Convention on Human Rights (the Convention)	ETS No. 5
European Cultural Convention	ETS No. 18
European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters	ETS No. 30
European Social Charter (Charter or Social Charter) European Social Charter (revised) (revised Charter)	ETS No. 35 ETS No. 163
European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers	ETS No. 93
Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention)	ETS No. 104
European Charter of Local Self-Government	ETS No. 122
Anti-Doping Convention	ETS No. 135
European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages	ETS No. 148
Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM)	ETS No. 157
Criminal Law Convention on Corruption	ETS No. 173
Civil Law Convention on Corruption	ETS No. 174
Council of Europe Landscape Convention (Landscape Convention)	ETS No. 176
Convention on Cybercrime (Cybercrime Convention)	ETS No. 185
Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime, concerning the criminalisation of acts of a racist and xenophobic nature committed through computer systems	ETS No. 189
Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (Warsaw Convention)	CETS No. 196
Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings	CETS No. 197
Council of Europe Convention on Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime and on the Financing of Terrorism	CETS No. 198

Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention)	CETS No. 199
Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention)	CETS No. 201
Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention)	CETS No. 205
Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority	CETS No. 207
Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)	CETS No. 210
Council of Europe Convention on the Counterfeiting of Medical Products and Similar Crimes involving Threats to Public Health (Medicrime Convention)	CETS No. 211
Council of Europe Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions (Macolin Convention)	CETS No. 215
Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs (Santiago de Compostela Convention)	CETS No. 216
Council of Europe Convention on an Integrated Safety, Security and Service Approach at Football Matches and Other Sports Events (Saint-Denis Convention)	CETS No. 218
Second Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime on enhanced co-operation and disclosure of electronic evidence	CETS No. 224
Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law	CETS No. 225
Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of the Environment through Criminal Law	To be adopted in 2025
Third Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters	To be adopted in 2025

The annual report of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe assesses the state of democracy, human rights and the rule of law across the Organisation's member states. It is both a diagnostic tool and a reference for shaping the Council of Europe's priorities and action.

Its purpose is to highlight key developments and challenges in the Council of Europe's member states, support policy formulation and implementation, and encourage reforms where standards fall short.

The 2025 edition covers the two years since the publication of the previous full report. It is structured around thematic chapters, reflecting the core areas of the Council of Europe's work. As a result of methodological choices, and space constraints, the report focuses on a selection of issues. This necessarily excludes some areas of activity – without prejudice to their relevance within the Organisation's mandate and priorities.

The report draws primarily on Council of Europe sources: monitoring mechanisms, judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, reports by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and opinions of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), among others. As in previous editions, the findings include country-specific observations, highlighting good practices as well as challenges. Each chapter includes a summary of key findings, which will inform the preparation of the Council of Europe's next Programme and Budget.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.