



Newsletter



Human rights as our compass: a retrospective on the final months of 2025

Dear reader,

As 2026 begins, I wanted to take a moment to look back at a remarkably busy and consequential period. My message throughout has been consistent: **human rights and the protection system around it are Europe's greatest strategic asset**. They are not static principles from the past; they are fit for purpose and the roadmap we need to navigate the challenges of today and the uncertainties of tomorrow.

Ukraine: centring peace efforts on people

I have called for a fundamental shift in our approach to peace-making in Ukraine. We must move away from a transactional approach and toward a people-centred approach. Just and lasting peace can only be achieved if the rights, safety, and voices of those affected by the conflict are at the heart of negotiations. Accountability and justice for the victims of Russia's aggression are non-negotiable.

[Read my joint opEd with Oleksandra Matviichuk](#)

[Read the Warsaw Meeting report](#)

Navigating geopolitical shifts

Recently, I issued a *Shout-Out* in response to the latest U.S. National Security Strategy, which paints a grim picture of "civilisational decline" in Europe. I firmly reject this analysis. Europe's commitment to human rights is not a sign of weakness but the source of our tangible resilience. While some suggest we must abandon our values to thrive, I believe Europe is only at its strongest when it defends them and shows that dignity, law, and freedom remain the only foundations on which a stable and prosperous future can be built.

[Read 'Refute the critics: human rights are Europe's greatest strategic asset'](#)

[Read 'Migration: facts and law: securing the European human rights system'](#)

[Read my interview in the Guardian](#)

Message to the Ministers of Justice

On 10 December, I addressed the Informal Conference of Ministers of Justice on migration and the European Court of Human Rights, in Strasbourg, with a clear warning: we must remain assiduously evidence-based. I urged the Ministers to reject the unconvincing claim that migration is a threat to national security or a driver of criminality.

We cannot treat human rights as a "zero-sum game" where security comes at the expense of rights. Respect for the human rights of everyone will best secure a safe state. I specifically called for the absolute protection of the prohibition of refoulement and the preservation of the independence of the European Court of Human Rights.

Yielding ground on human rights would ultimately serve the interest of populists by weakening the rule of law. The idea that we would create or foster the impression of a hierarchy of people, some more deserving than others, is very worrying. The focus right now is on migrants, in large part. But who is it going to be about next time around?

Read [‘Migration: facts and law; securing the European human rights system’](#)

Read my [interview](#) in the Guardian

Externalised migration policies

European states should refrain from actions that may lead to human rights violations. They should adopt a precautionary approach in external co-operation, uphold standards, establish clear human rights safeguards and enhance transparency, accountability, and monitoring of these agreements.

Read the report on [externalised asylum and migration policies and human rights law](#)

The crisis facing civil society

In a Shout Out, I warned about the threats facing Europe's civil society and human rights defenders: increasingly restrictive legislation, a crackdown on activists and harassment and a severe funding crisis. States and non-state funders should stand up for civil society. They are the lifeblood and pillar of democratic societies.

Read [‘Alarming trends: the crisis facing civil society and human rights defenders in Europe’](#)

Artificial intelligence

Following consultations with experts, I delivered a critical warning on the risks facing democracy: "data cages", social isolation and "careless speech".

We have to push back against the myth that regulation stifles innovation. We need targeted, coherent, smart oversight and regulation to protect us all from the risks inherent to AI and to build trust in its use.

Read my [keynote address at the Parliamentary Conference on AI in London](#)

Read the meeting report [‘The Human Line’](#)

Human rights of Roma and Travellers

This fall, I published a book and an accompanying traveling exhibition ‘THE UNHEARD 12 MILLION’ to tell the compelling stories of those Roma and Travellers, especially the unstoppable women, who fight for their rights and for those pushed to the margins of society. It is an urgent call for European decision makers and all of us to act decisively to improve the lived experience and secure the human rights of the 10-12 million

Roma and Travellers across the continent. After Strasbourg and Berlin, the exhibition will be presented in other European cities.

*[Read my book 'THE UNHEARD 12 MILLION'](#)
[Watch a short video presentation of the exhibition](#)*

Highlight on some country work

Georgia: I have been calling for effective, independent investigations into allegations of police violence during the 2024 protests and I intervened in the case on Georgia's 'Foreign influence' law before the European Court of Human Rights.

*[Read my letter to Prosecutor General of Georgia](#)
[Read my Third Party Intervention in ECtHR case on Georgia's 'Foreign influence' law](#)*

My visit to **Germany** focused on ensuring human rights safeguards in migration and asylum policy, protecting freedoms of assembly and expression in the context of Gaza-related protests and tackling the surge in antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred.

In **Türkiye**, I focused on ensuring the implementation of human rights standards, specifically regarding freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.

*[Read my end-of-visit statement for Germany](#)
[Read my end-of-visit statement for Türkiye](#)*

Building a better future

In a recent [speech at the University of Galway](#), I spoke about the essential role human rights play in building a better future. They are the very tools we need to construct a society that is resilient, just, and inclusive for the generations to come. Human rights make a difference. They are our powerful empirical basis for hopefulness.

I wish you a Happy and a Peaceful 2026. It will be a deeply challenging year. We have to do all that we can to embed human rights in peace-making and governance.

Thank you for reading,

*Michael O'Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights*



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