

Uncovering Human Rights Fault Lines Across Europe: Annual Report 2024

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Source: a person holding a sign that says we demand justice and change
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

1. SOUTHERN EUROPE	5
1.1 ALBANIA	5
1.2 BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	5
1.3 CROATIA	6
1.4 GREECE	7
1.5 ITALY	8
1.6 MALTA	9
1.7 MONTENEGRO	9
1.8 PORTUGAL	10
1.9 SERBIA	11
1.10 SPAIN	11
2. EASTERN EUROPE	13
2.1 RUSSIA	13
2.2 UKRAINE	14
2.3 BELARUS	15
2.4 GEORGIA	16
2.5 POLAND	17
2.6 HUNGARY	19
2.7 MOLDOVA	20
2.8 SLOVAKIA	21
2.9 ROMANIA	22
2.10 BULGARIA	22
2.11 CZECH REPUBLIC	22
3. CENTRAL-WESTERN EUROPE	24
3.1 AUSTRIA	24
3.2 BELGIUM	24
3.3 FRANCE	24
3.4 GERMANY	26
3.5 THE NETHERLANDS	27
4. NORTHERN EUROPE	28
4.1 ESTONIA	28

4.2 FINLAND	28
4.3 ICELAND	29
4.4 IRELAND	30
4.5 LITHUANIA	30
4.6 NORWAY	31
4.7 SWEDEN	31
4.8 UNITED KINGDOM	32
CONCLUSION	33
SOURCES	
5.1 SOUTHERN EUROPE	34
5.2 EASTERN EUROPE	40
5.3 CENTRAL-WESTERN EUROPE	47
5.4 NORTHERN EUROPE	50

INTRODUCTION

In this report, we will address the major human rights issues and key facts related to Europe, providing an in-depth analysis of the region's diverse human rights landscape. The report is structured into sections corresponding to different European regions: Central-Western, Eastern, Southern, and Northern Europe. Not all countries are included, as some were excluded due to the lack of relevant human rights issues or notable facts pertaining to them.

Throughout the report, we will explore several prevalent recurring human rights themes across the regions. These include freedom of expression, refugees and asylum seekers, discrimination, gender equality, and minority rights. Each theme will be examined in detail in its respective regional section, offering insights into the varying human rights challenges faced across Europe.

Among the most significant events influencing the human rights discourse in Europe are the 2024 elections, including the European Parliament elections, the Gisèle Pelicot case in France, and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. Additionally, the Middle East conflicts continue to have profound implications for European and non-European countries, impacting their foreign policies and domestic human rights debates.

This exploration will provide a comprehensive and nuanced snapshot of the dynamic, multifaceted nature of human rights challenges in Europe, reflecting not only the pressing concerns of the moment but also the broader socio-political shifts that are influencing the protection and promotion of human rights across the continent.

1. SOUTHERN EUROPE

1.1 ALBANIA

One of the most prominent human rights issues has been the failed Albania-Italy deal on immigration. Three facilities were built and opened in Albania to host up to 880 asylum seekers, a deal funded by Italy in the hope of reducing the arrivals of migrants to Italy by sea (Giuffrida, 2024). A large majority of asylum seekers are rejected on the basis that their home countries are considered safe, which results in them being sent to wait for repatriation in Albania. Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni said that in exchange for the Albanian prime minister's backing for opening the centre, she will support Albania's accession to the EU (Tondo, 2024). The current Albanian politics are faced with instability, reflected by the rallies that happened this year, demanding the current government to step down.

In 2024, thousands of citizens protested around the main government buildings in Tirana after the conservative opposition had been causing the prime minister corruption, manipulating the votes, and abusing the power of the Serbian judiciary (Euronews and AP, 2024). The protestors clashed with the police, resulting in a reported 10 officers being hurt with Molotov cocktails and pyrotechnic items, while many protesters were met with tear gas and taken to the hospital (Al Jazeera, 2024a). Foreign actors like the EU and the US encouraged the opposition to engage in dialogues as the ongoing violence would negatively affect Albania's efforts in the EU accession. Discussions of Albania's accession have been ongoing, and the country was aiming for membership by 2030. However, progress can be observed given the current political situation.

1.2 BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

One of the main catastrophes that hit Bosnia was the floods in early October 2024 due to heavy rainstorms, which destroyed infrastructure and took the lives of at least 27 Bosnians (AP News, 2024b). As a result, the municipal elections that were to take place have been postponed by authorities in the flood-affected regions. Yet, the elections still took place days after multiple citizens died in the humanitarian crisis. Rescuers from Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia were deployed to help, while other Eastern European countries also offered their help. The floods shook the country, with thousands of citizens attending a mass funeral in Jablanica intended to commemorate the victims.



Severe flooding. Source: © Don Lodge/Unsplash, 2024.

An important historical change was a UN resolution adopted in May about establishing a commemoration day for the 1995 Srebrenica genocide (Al Jazeera, 2024b). This resolution had the vocal backing of Germany and Rwanda, who warned that this is crucial to prevent events from being forgotten or denied. This, however, was protested heavily by Serbia in fear of being framed as a supporter of the mass killing, resulting in a lobbying campaign for a no-vote in the UN from the Bosnian Serb president and the Serbian president.

In the past, both Bosnian Serbs and Serbia have denied the genocide, which was a motivating factor for this year's UN resolution (Cantone, 2024). Ethnic struggles are still very present in Bosnia, especially due to the ethnic power-sharing system, highlighted by last year's court case in the European Court of Human Rights against Bosnia's constitution, which received a positive ruling (Cantone, 2024). This year, Bosnia disputed the ruling, and a hearing took place in Strasbourg in November. Although the results will probably be seen only next year, the importance of ethnic division within Bosnia significantly hinders its EU accession aspiration along the other Western Balkan states.

1.3 CROATIA

Much political turmoil in Croatia happened this year, partially due to what has been called a "super election year" hosting European, parliamentary, and then presidential elections all in 2024 (Baccini, 2024a). Starting in January, the Croatian parliament attempted to introduce a new criminal offence targeting anyone releasing content related to investigative or evidentiary actions.

Opposed by the president himself (often in conflict with the prime minister) and the Croatian Journalists' Union, the new law was said to be an attack on free speech and public interest (Tesija, 2024). In February, left and centre groups spoke against the right-wing prime minister-appointed politicians in the Croatian justice sector. Tens of thousands of people formed a protest in Zagreb, which followed previous large demonstrations of dissatisfied interest groups like teachers, judges, doctors and journalists who opposed the previous changes to the Criminal Code (Baccini, 2024a). The opposition forces have also submitted an official request for the dissolution of the Croatian parliament and called for new elections. In April, the vote was topped by the ruling centre-right HDZ, which formed a coalition with the right-wing populist Homeland Movement and appointed the controversial Prime Minister Andrej Plenković for the third term (Hajdari, 2024).

We are yet to see what the presidential elections will bring, happening on December 29th. The ILGA organisation, watching over LGBTQIA+ rights in Europe, voiced its concern over the political shift, warning about the potential regressive policies that have already been seen in neighbouring countries. Croatian human rights activists keep busy: in July, they protested against the meeting of the so-called Vision Network, a powerful interest group for right-wingers (Tesija, 2024). Activists highlight that the intentions of the network are dangerous, lobbying against abortion, equal marriage, and access to contraception, standing behind initiatives like anti-abortion marches in Croatia.

1.4 GREECE



The Greek flag. Source: © Matt Artz/Unsplash, 2022.

Greece remains a hotspot on a popular migration line into the European Union. By early October, more than 40 thousand migrants had been registered to arrive in Greece, with over 30 thousand through the sea route (Becatoros, 2024). With this scale of immigration, the Greek government continues to arbitrarily choose to detain or deport refugees to countries such as Syria and Afghanistan, which has been claimed to be unlawful by the non-profit organisation Refugee Support Aegean (RSA). It has been reported that, in the first half of 2024, Greece issued 12,877 removal orders, targeting especially undocumented migrants from Syria and Afghanistan, showcasing the trend of strict enforcement of immigration laws and bypassing the EU asylum rights directives (Refugee Support Aegean, 2024).

Immigrant boats keep arriving at Greek sea waters, with many people, including women and children, drowning or going missing before the Greek rescue police arrives. Nevertheless, on January 1st, 2024, a new code came into effect in Greece aiming to simplify procedures and reduce the administrative delays for third-country nationals. It also introduced more favourable laws for second-generation immigrants living in Greece (Ministry of Migration & Asylum of the Hellenic Republic, 2024). Migration remains a popular topic, making headlines in the EU and constitutes an important theme to observe in terms of human rights in the country.

1.5 ITALY

In 2024, Italy experienced many political turmoils and changes. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has often appeared on the news, with perhaps one of the most contentious human rights events being a deal between Italy and Albania. Initiated last November by

Giorgia Meloni and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, two centres have officially been opened this year to host migrant men who arrive at Italian borders while waiting for their asylum request to be processed (The Guardian, 2024a). The initiative has been rather controversial, and views were divided; on the one hand, it was criticised by human rights groups; on the other hand, it was met positively by the EU (Al Jazeera, 2024c).

In October, 24 asylum seekers coming to Italian waters were sent to Albania. However, none of them remained in the centre for more than 50 hours. Following a ruling by Italian judges deeming it unlawful to ‘store’ immigrants in Albania prior to their repatriation, all detainees were sent back to Italy (Tondo, 2024). Judges have been criticised by the government, but their ruling stands, backed by a previous ruling by the European Court of Justice. Due to the deal, Italy has now borne not only criticism from many NGOs and civil society but also huge financial costs, with transportation of the eight detainees alone summing up to 250,000 euros and a risk to governments’ credibility (Tondo, 2024).

Outside of the subject of immigration, there have been several other notable events which have brought human rights to the forefront of discourse in Italy. In autumn, floods which previously happened in Eastern Europe have moved further down, flooding northern Italian regions.

Many towns’ infrastructure was severely destroyed. As a result, the EU has pledged to continue providing financial aid to repair the damage (Euronews & EBU, 2024a). Another important area has been the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. In May, Italy, along with some other European countries, did not agree to sign the EU deal on LGBTQIA+ persons, which had been seen as a strong advancement of the rights of the community. Currently, the LGBTQIA+ population does not enjoy equal rights in Italy. On the contrary, another discriminatory law was passed later in the year. This law, adopted by Meloni’s government, has criminalised gay couples who seek surrogacy abroad, with potential penalties of 2 years in jail or up to a million euros in fines (Paternoster & De Michele, 2024). Despite this clear backward step in the protection of human rights in Italy, the far right shows no signs of getting any weaker.

1.6 MALTA

The biggest highlight for Malta is a development in LGBTQIA+ rights legislation. Malta has been known for having strong LGBTQIA+ rights protections compared to other European states. However, this year, Malta was noted to be Europe’s most progressive country for LGBTQIA+ rights in the annual ILGA report, receiving 88 out of 100 points on the scale (ILGA Europe, 2024; Riegert, 2024). Back in 2015, the Maltese government adopted the LGBTIQ Action Plan 2015-2017, which set out to introduce alternative gender markers for official documents.

However, it was only in 2024 that this came to life. This summer, the parliament has officially passed the Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act, which legally recognises non-binary genders beyond male or female and allows citizens to include the 'X' gender marker on all relevant documents, such as Identity Card or Passport (Act No. XXV of 2024, Government of Malta). This act marks a historical change for Malta, providing individuals with the choice to be identified on their official documents in accordance with their lived gender.



Source: © Matt Artz/Unsplash, 2022

1.7 MONTENEGRO

In 2024, one of the most significant events for Montenegro's trajectory was its progress in the EU accession procedure. The Montenegrin Prime Minister, Milojko Spajić, has announced that Montenegro is “decisive for becoming the 28th member by 2028” (Baccini, 2024b), given that all the benchmarks are met. So far, the accession negotiations for Montenegro have been going on for 12 years, and the country has been deemed the most advanced one in the EU procedure. However, the process has been stalling due to the Montenegrin judiciary. During the 16th intergovernmental conference in Brussels, Spajić confirmed the compliance with the intermediate benchmarks of Chapters 23 and 24, representing justice and rights respectively, and announced the country is ready for the final stage of accessions. Montenegro has now been said to be “breaking the ice” for other Western Balkan countries and other candidates for accession to continue on their path (RadioFreeEurope, 2024a).

Yet, despite advancements on the EU accession path, the country continues to face internal shortcomings that may hinder its readiness, especially in terms of climate resilience. In June, a massive power outage took place, highlighting the vulnerability of Montenegro's energy infrastructure and raising questions about its readiness for further crises (Milic, 2024). Leaving citizens without electricity for an extended period, the outage is said to have been caused by overconsumption of energy, perhaps due to the use of air conditioning induced by

the extremely high temperatures that came in summer (around 40 Celsius degrees). This is another example of a crisis that happened this year due to extreme weather conditions triggered by climate change.

1.8 PORTUGAL

In the shadow of last year's corruption scandal, Portugal started the year with a call for new elections and their surprising outcome. Last November, the Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa was accused and found guilty of participating in a corruption scandal regarding energy contracts. As a result, he resigned and stepped down from his position (Hernández-Morales, 2023). The next step was the dissolution of the parliament by the president, leading to the March 2024 elections, which saw a complete shift in the Portuguese political landscape.

Although the centre-right Democratic Alliance has the most votes, the traditionally two-party parliament has been fragmented by the rise of the far-right party. The party Chega achieved four times more seats than in the previous elections, rising from 12 to 50 (Fotheringham, 2024). This reflects a broader European trend of recent years, namely the popularity of anti-immigration and populist narratives. This turn is one of the biggest highlights for Portugal, specifically because 2024 marks the 50th anniversary of the abolishment of the Estado Novo dictatorship and half a century of pluralistic democracy, now overshadowed by the rise of the far right (Lundstrom, 2024).

The election brought further developments, most importantly new immigration policies, which are a prominent theme, especially within the politics of Southern Europe and EU-wide discussions. Portugal has been dealing with a huge influx of migrants, with numbers of foreigners jumping 33 percent from last year to currently around a million people - one-tenth the population of the country (Euronews & EBU, 2024b).

To deal with this matter, the new government not only tightened immigration policies but completely removed a rule that previously allowed non-EU migrants to move to Portugal without a work contract. Thousands of Portuguese citizens protested in Lisbon and Porto against "uncontrolled immigration" in a rally mobilised by the aforementioned far-right Chega party, justified by the leader of the party with claims of insufficient housing available for Portuguese citizens and increasing crime rates (Euronews & EBU, 2024b).

As a response, anti-fascist counter-demonstrations organised by various social organisations took place, calling for an end to hate speech and improved regularisation for immigrants. Lastly, major wildfires struck Portugal, bearing huge losses to living infrastructure and causing thousands of firefighters to mobilise, leading to some deaths. Causes are attributed to poor management of biodiversity and higher temperatures brought by climate change (The Associated Press, 2024).

1.9 SERBIA

In 2024, Serbia experienced much turmoil, starting with the European Union's request for an international investigation due to claims of election fraud during the December 2023 elections. In February, the EU issued a report stating that Serbia did not fulfil its commitments to hold free and fair elections, noting manipulation of voter registration and forced signatures, group voting, and breaching of secrecy of vote. Consequently, the European Parliament has called for the suspension of EU funding due to severe breaches of the rule of law (Stojanovic, 2024). Later this year, the Serbian Prime Minister-Designate Milos Vucevic named new members of his cabinet, including two pro-Russian, US-sanctioned politicians, one of them a far-right party leader. He also appointed Aleksander Vulin as deputy prime minister and Nenad Popovic as a minister without portfolio, both US-sanctioned politicians.

Lastly, Milica Djurdjevic Stamenkovski, leader of a far-right party that did not achieve enough votes to enter parliament, was also appointed as a minister (Baccini, 2024c). Despite the invasion of Ukraine, Serbia has consistently maintained its ties with Russia. In October, Serbia's president held talks with President Putin, vowing Serbia will never impose sanctions on Russia, a definite push away from potential EU accession for the country (Press, 2024). However, the EU did agree on a controversial lithium mining project with Serbia, which provoked tens of thousands of Serbian citizens to take to the streets to protest the idea (AP News, 2024a). The protests came after a majority in the parliament, namely the ruling coalition led by the Serbian Progressive Party, rejected an opposition draft law that aimed to ban mining and exploration for lithium. The development of the project is said to damage the region's environment (Vasovic, 2024).

1.10 SPAIN

In the first months of the year, important legislation was passed in regard to the Catalan independence fight. In March, Spain's lower house approved a Catalan Amnesty Bill, the goal of which was to forgive alleged and proven crimes committed during the attempted Independence referendum by the Catalan Separatists (Hedgecoe, 2024a). The controversial law was passed by a very narrow majority of 177 votes for against 172 votes against, after having been delayed six months since the proposal. With this effect, around 400 Catalan nationalists, many of whom were involved in the 2017 independence referendum, will be given amnesty (Hedgecoe, 2024b).

Perhaps the most important development in the country has been Spain's significant engagement with the war in Gaza - one of the most important ongoing humanitarian and political events. On May 28th, Spain, alongside Norway and Ireland, recognised the State of Palestine, making it one of the few three countries to do so (Landale, 2024). The move challenged other European states' disengagement and was intended to refocus the perspective onto finding a political solution in the Middle Eastern war.

The decision was followed by the meeting of prime ministers of Spain and Palestine, an important diplomatic symbol. Even though Spain was one of the three countries to recognise Palestine, it has borne the biggest consequences of doing so, as Israel has withdrawn its ambassadors from Spain, and the Foreign Minister posted a propaganda video accusing Spain of compliance with Hamas (Keeley, 2024). Later in 2024, Spain backed South Africa's ICJ case on genocide against Israel and backed the ICC arrest warrant against Israel's prime minister (McMurtry, 2024). Spain's international support for the humanitarian crisis in Gaza has been a step that many other European states hesitate to take.

In October, Spain faced deadly floods, especially in Valencia. The humanitarian crisis, killing more than 220 people, provoked angry crowds, accusing the authorities of inadequate warnings and insufficient support for the aftermath of the floods (Beake, 2024). The King of Spain visited the affected region but was met with the citizens' anger; mud and objects were thrown (Atkinson, 2024).

2. EASTERN EUROPE

2.1 RUSSIA

Since the onset of its aggression against Ukraine, the Russian Federation has remained a focal point of international concern, particularly due to the ongoing suppression of freedom of expression and the continued shrinking of civic space. This repression has intensified following Vladimir Putin’s controversial re-election in March 2024, which sparked widespread criticism and credible allegations of electoral manipulation. In response, the Russian government has escalated its crackdown on independent media, further entrenched the systemic discrimination against minorities, and implemented measures to silence dissent, both within its borders and beyond.



Source: © EV, Stop War Peace now via Unsplash, 2022

The infamous “foreign agent” law, originally introduced in 2014, was expanded in early 2024 with the addition of Article 4 to the Law on Media, which bans the advertisement of any material produced or disseminated by individuals or organisations previously designated as “foreign agents” (Memri, 2024). In November 2024, the State Duma also passed amendments to six federal laws targeting materials that promote or advocate “childfree” propaganda and imposing fines on those deemed responsible for such activities (RadioFreeEurope, 2024b).

Additionally, human rights violations remain particularly severe for those opposing the Ukraine war. Over the past year, notable figures, such as poets Artyom Kamardin and Yegor Shtovbaon, have been imprisoned on charges of extremism for reciting anti-war poetry (OHCHR, 2024a). These cases appear to be part of a broader and troubling pattern of judicial harassment. This pattern also includes the imprisonment and suspicious killing of opposition leader Aleksey Navalny, as well as the detention of national and international journalists,

such as Evan Gershkovich of the *Wall Street Journal* and Alsu Kurmasheva of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (OHCHR, 2024b). These actions have not only sought to silence opposition but also fostered a climate of fear, making it increasingly difficult for individuals inside the country to voice dissent or hold the government accountable.

The Russian government's disregard for human rights extends beyond its borders, as it faces ongoing investigations into alleged war crimes committed against civilians in Ukraine. These include the abduction and deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, an act that has sparked international outrage. Meanwhile, independent Ukrainian journalist Victoria Roshchyna, who was reporting from the ground on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, died in detention, raising further alarm about Russia's treatment of journalists and human rights defenders (OHCHR, 2024c).

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova, commented on the situation in the country during the 57th session of the Human Rights Council in September 2024, highlighting Russia's growing use of torture as a tool of "repression at home and aggression abroad". Katzarova finally underscored the Russian Federation's failure to enact legislation criminalising torture, a factor that, other than fostering impunity and denying justice to victims, reflects a broader pattern of systemic repression that undermines human rights and fundamental freedoms (OHCHR, 2024d).

2.2 UKRAINE

The protection of human rights in Ukraine continues to be profoundly impacted by the ongoing aggression from the Russian Federation, marked by indiscriminate attacks on civilians and systematic violations of the rights of prisoners of war. Despite the severe constraints imposed by martial law, the Ukrainian government has remained committed to upholding human rights, as evidenced by its efforts to address judicial corruption, tackle torture and ill-treatment, and strengthen media independence, actions that align with the broader goals of EU accession. However, these efforts are hindered by persistent systemic challenges within the country, particularly in areas of governance and the rule of law.

Corruption, driven by political interference, continues to undermine the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, weakening the overall rule of law and preventing the effective implementation of reforms. This problem was highlighted in October 2024 when reports emerged of several Ukrainian officials improperly obtaining disability status to avoid military service (Al Jazeera, 2024d). Moreover, torture and ill-treatment, especially in detention centres and prisons, as well as inadequate living conditions for detainees, remain significant concerns. Although the Cabinet of Ministers approved the 2023-2027 action plan to address these issues, the National Preventive Mechanism remains underdeveloped, and its insufficient coordination with civil society organisations underscores the need for comprehensive reform (European Commission, 2024a).

Freedom of expression remains under significant pressure, particularly in regions under Russian control and territories controlled by the Ukrainian government. Reports of harassment, unlawful surveillance, threats of forced military conscription, and two cases of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) targeting investigative journalists have been widely reported, intimating a wider erosion of democratic principles (European Commission, 2024a).

In response to these challenges, in June 2024, the Ukrainian government adopted a roadmap to support the media landscape, particularly in anticipation of the eventual lifting of martial law. The initiative seeks to counter disinformation and enhance journalists' access to frontline areas. However, the National Council of Ukraine on Television and Radio Broadcasting, the body responsible for regulating media, has faced chronic underfunding, severely limiting its capacity to effectively oversee news outlets and ensure independence, transparency, and accountability within this industry (European Commission, 2024a).

Beyond challenges related to media freedom and judicial independence, Ukraine's recent actions regarding religious organisations linked to the Russian Orthodox Church have also attracted international scrutiny. In October 2024, Ukraine passed a law banning religious entities associated with the Russian Orthodox Church, citing security concerns in response to Russia's aggression. However, this law has been criticised for overstepping international norms and potentially violating Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees religious freedom. If implemented over time, this legislation could set a dangerous precedent, undermining the protections of individuals and organisations, regardless of their affiliations (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

2.3 BELARUS

Since the contested re-election of Alexandr Lukashenko in 2020, widely criticised for allegations of electoral fraud, Belarus has faced increased scrutiny over the systematic erosion of civic space and the escalating persecution of individuals and groups associated with the United Nations' human rights mechanisms. Additionally, the Belarusian government continued to adopt repressive measures targeting minorities and vulnerable populations throughout the year, further deepening the country's human rights crisis.

In the early months of 2024, the government in Minsk amended the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations, significantly narrowing the scope for religious communities to operate freely. The revised legislation imposes stringent registration requirements, mandates state verification, and explicitly prohibits religious organisations from engaging in political activities (OSW, 2024).

Another alarming development in 2024 was the introduction of a new decree regulating "erotic materials", which specifically targets the LGBTQIA+ community (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The decree criminalises the depiction of same-sex relationships as

“non-traditional relations”, classifying them alongside pornography, thereby equating them with other illegal acts such as necrophilia, pedophilia, and voyeurism. Possession of such materials is now punishable by up to four years in prison, which reflects the government’s ongoing efforts to marginalise vulnerable groups under the guise of moral protection.

Belarus’ increasing political and military alignment with the Russian Federation, particularly since the onset of the Ukraine war, has also led to the expansion of “patriotic education” programmes (RadioFreeEurope, 2024c). These initiatives are primarily aimed at minors and disadvantaged groups such as orphans, and they often include military training, weapons handling, and preparation for involvement in potential military conflicts. These programmes raise concerns about the long-term militarisation of Belarusian youth and the risks associated with the increasing normalisation of military conflict in society. In addition to these repressive measures, experts have expressed alarm over the growing misuse of Article 411 of the Criminal Code (Human Rights House, 2024). This provision has been used to extend the detention of political prisoners and human rights activists under the charge of “malicious disobedience”.

The application of this law to individuals engaged in otherwise harmless activities, such as talking to fellow inmates or wearing tracksuits, highlights the increasingly arbitrary and politically motivated nature of the legal system in Belarus. However, the government’s crackdown extends beyond political prisoners, with intensified reprisals against human rights defenders, activists, journalists, lawyers, and trade unionists collaborating with the United Nations (OHCHR, 2024). These individuals are subjected to heightened risks of both online and offline surveillance, resulting in self-censorship, disruption of professional activities, and cessation of cooperation with international human rights mechanisms. This pattern of repression further isolates Belarus from the international community while undermining the ability of its citizens and organisations to engage in meaningful dialogue on human rights.

As of 2024, Belarus remains in persistent non-compliance with several United Nations recommendations, marking a sharp decline in its cooperation with UN human rights bodies. In response, the UN Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights launched the third edition of the “Agenda for Protection” in March 2024. This initiative seeks to enhance the safety and support of individuals who continue to engage with the UN’s efforts to address and mitigate human rights violations in Belarus, providing a crucial lifeline in an increasingly repressive environment (OHCHR, 2024).

2.4 GEORGIA

In 2024, Georgia experienced a marked deterioration in its human rights landscape, with particular concern over the rights of minorities, freedom of expression, and press freedom. A key development contributing to this decline was the passage of the Law on Transparency of

Foreign Influence, which came into force on August 1st, 2024. This law mandates that organisations, including NGOs and media outlets, receiving more than 20 percent of their funding from foreign sources, register as “foreign agents”. As a result, these organisations face risks of delegitimisation and stigmatisation, raising serious concerns about their ability to operate freely and independently within the country (OHCHR, 2024).

The introduction of this law is part of a broader trend of legal and extrajudicial challenges that have created an increasingly hostile environment for journalists. In 2024, many reporters faced physical attacks, death threats, insults, and smear campaigns, with little to no accountability for the perpetrators. This climate of intimidation was particularly severe during the October 2024 Parliamentary elections, when journalists covering the election process were specifically targeted. Furthermore, media outlets perceived to be aligned with the opposition have faced an escalating number of defamation lawsuits, many of which have been recognised as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). Since 2021, outlets such as Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli, and Formula have collectively faced 38 such cases (Council of Europe, 2024f).

In addition to challenges in the media sector, Georgia's Public Broadcaster (GPB) has come under increasing scrutiny for its lack of independence, often seen as susceptible to political influence from the ruling party (Council of Europe, 2024). This issue is compounded by the rise of disinformation and misinformation, including the increasing presence of Russian propaganda within the country's media. The proliferation of such content has significantly eroded the credibility of the media, further undermining the public's ability to access reliable information.

The situation for minority rights in Georgia has also worsened, particularly following the passage of the Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors on September 17th, 2024 (ECPMF, 2024). This law draws a misleading equivalence between incest and same-sex relationships, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and exclusionary attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ community. These developments have exacerbated discrimination and social marginalisation, further entrenching the difficulties faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Similarly, the situation for children in Georgia has shown little improvement despite the 2019 adoption of the Child Rights Code, which was intended to address violence against minors. Incidents of child marriage and abuse remain prevalent, and a particularly disturbing case came to light on June 27th, 2024, when Georgia was found in violation of its child rights obligations by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The violation was due to the government's failure to intervene in response to widespread psychological and physical abuse at a close-type orphanage run by the Georgian Orthodox Church and was uncovered after 57 children filed complaints, alleging harsh punishments and mistreatment, including for incidents as trivial as bedwetting (OHCHR, 2024g).

2.5 POLAND

Following the transfer of power from Jarosław Kaczyński of the Law and Justice (PiS) to Prime Minister Donald Tusk of the centre-right Civic Platform (PO) on October 15th, 2023, Poland remains under international scrutiny due to ongoing concerns regarding media freedom, freedom of expression, women's reproductive rights, the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community, and the situation at the border with Belarus.

The concentration of media ownership continues to be a critical issue. Since 2020, when the state-owned company PKN Orlen acquired the second-largest press distributor Ruch and the country's largest publisher of regional newspapers Polska Press, control over information has become increasingly centralised. This consolidation of media ownership, along with the reported use of surveillance software such as Pegasus and Predator deployed under the guise of national security, has raised serious concerns about the infringement of privacy rights and the erosion of the democratic principles of free information (Civil Liberties Union for Europe, 2024). Journalists' communications have reportedly been monitored, undermining press freedom and raising alarms about the long-term consequences for civil liberties.

Poland's near-total ban on abortion remains a deeply contentious issue. Under the restrictive 1993 law, abortion is only permitted in cases of rape, incest, threats to the health of the mothers, or severe fetal abnormalities. Despite Prime Minister Tusk's campaign promising to amend the law within the first 100 days of his term, the Polish Parliament failed to pass the necessary reforms by July 2024.

In response, the Ministry of Health issued new guidelines in August 2024 aimed at mitigating the "chilling effect" caused by the criminalisation of abortion (Amnesty International, 2024). This provision had previously led many healthcare professionals to avoid performing the procedure, even in cases where it was legally permitted. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has consistently condemned Poland's restrictive abortion laws, asserting that they have caused irreversible physical and mental harm to women, amounting to inhuman or degrading treatment under international law (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2024).



LGBTQ+ flags. Source: © Tristan B./Unsplash, 2018

In addition, Poland continues to face significant challenges in recognising and protecting the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. The country ranks 42nd out of 49 on the Rainbow Europe Index, the lowest among EU member states. Widespread stigma, violence, and anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric persist, especially in regions that declared themselves “LGBTI-Free Zones” in 2019, which at one point covered roughly one-third of the country. In 2024, the government committed to amending the Criminal Code to criminalise homophobia and transphobia, signaling a potential policy shift. The effectiveness of these reforms will depend on the political climate and the government's ability to challenge entrenched conservative forces (Notes from Poland, 2024).

The situation at Poland’s border with Belarus has become a significant concern. Following Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s declaration of a “hybrid warfare” strategy, large numbers of migrants from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa have been channeled toward the EU’s borders, putting immense pressure on the country. Subsequently, reports indicate that Poland increasingly violates the rights of migrants while the 2021 State of Emergency, which severely restricts access to the buffer zone along the Belarusian border, remains in place.

Moreover, this year, the Polish government passed the Border Protection Act, which grants immunity to state agents using force or firearms against displaced persons at the border, either in self-defence or preemptively (EU News, 2024). This legal development has created a troubling grey area, potentially permitting impunity for human rights violations. In September 2024, the European Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O’Flaherty, issued a statement expressing grave concern over Poland’s failure to comply with Articles 2 (right to life) and 3 (prohibition of torture and ill-treatment) of the European Convention on Human Rights, while calling for the immediate repeal of the Border Protection Act (Council of Europe, 2024).

2.6 HUNGARY

Hungary continues to attract international scrutiny, particularly regarding government policies on migration, religious minorities, and the LGBTQIA+ community. Hungary's migration policy remains a point of significant controversy, especially within the European Union. On January 1st, 2024, Hungary enacted a new immigration law that has been widely criticised for its restrictive measures towards third-country nationals (TCNs). The law prioritises highly qualified professionals but negatively impacts lower-skilled migrants, those seeking long-term integration, and individuals who do not meet the financial criteria for the newly introduced Golden Visa programme (European Commission, 2024b).

In June 2024, the European Court of Justice imposed a €200 million fine on Hungary for breaching the Common European Asylum System, alongside a penalty of €1 million per day until Hungary complies with EU regulations. In response, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán reiterated his hardline stance on migration, calling it “an existential issue” threatening the cohesion of the European Union. The Hungarian government has also proposed to offer asylum seekers free one-way travel to Brussels, a move seen as an attempt to externalise Hungary's perceived migration burden by shifting responsibility to the EU (Euronews, 2024a).

In relation to LGBTQIA+ rights, Hungary has faced continued criticism following the adoption of the 2021 Propaganda Law, which banned adoption by same-sex couples and restricted the depiction of LGBTQIA+ topics in media and advertising, associating such content with pedophilia. The law has fostered a climate of self-censorship, with significant repercussions for access to information about sexual orientation and gender identity. Media outlets, bookstores, and other cultural institutions have been forced to alter their content to avoid legal repercussions (Amnesty International, 2024). In November 2024, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that the law violates Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights and constitutes a severe infringement of human dignity, freedom, democracy, and the rights of minorities (Ilga Europe, 2024).

Additionally, Hungary's approach to religious freedom remains debated, particularly after the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, conducted a ten-day visit to assess the situation of religious entities in Hungary. Since the passage of the 2011 Church Law, approximately 350 previously recognised religious organisations have been legally dissolved, while state funding has been concentrated in the hands of a few favoured churches. UN experts have also highlighted the ongoing discrimination and harassment faced by the Evangelical Fellowship (MET), which has been subjected to legislation and unjustified taxation throughout the whole of 2024 (OHCHR, 2024h).

2.7 MOLDOVA

In 2024, Moldova's human rights landscape showed some positive developments, particularly under the Party of Action and Solidarity government, which is working to align with the EU *acquis communautaire* in anticipation of potential EU membership (European Commission, 2024c). However, significant challenges remain. As of 2024, 26 cases are under review by the European Court of Human Rights, addressing issues such as poor detention conditions, ill-treatment in police custody, inadequate remedies for human rights violations, insufficient protection from domestic violence, and violations of patients' rights in psychiatric institutions. These ongoing cases highlight that while progress has been made with the 2024-2027 National Human Rights Action Programme, significant gaps remain in areas such as ill-treatment, procedural rights, and combatting discrimination (European Commission, 2024c).

One of Moldova's most pressing human rights concerns is the prevention of ill-treatment in prisons. Notably, the Committee for the Prevention of Torture has raised serious alarms over the overcrowding, inadequate living conditions, lack of medical care, and violence among prisoners, all of which violate Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits torture and inhuman or degrading treatment. The government's response to these issues has been insufficient, and there is an urgent need for systemic reform to ensure detainees' rights protection (European Commission, 2024c).

In the area of civic space, although there have been some advancements, Moldova has experienced setbacks. Journalists continue to face threats and intimidation, especially from politicians and public authorities, while law enforcement often fails to hold perpetrators accountable. Despite these challenges, the overall environment for media pluralism remains relatively favourable. In March 2024, the Moldovan government established the Media Subsidy Fund to promote media pluralism, enhance editorial independence, and support investigative journalism.

Additionally, Moldova joined the Media Ownership Monitor, a global initiative that aims to combat media concentration and ensure the diversity of media voices (European Commission, 2024c). However, the situation in Gagauzia, a region with complex political dynamics, presents significant threats to press freedom due to politicisation, governmental scrutiny, and insufficient legal protection for journalists. Furthermore, concerns persist regarding the transparency and effectiveness of media license suspensions, particularly following recent license withdrawals for TV channels controlled by internationally sanctioned oligarchs (European Commission, 2024c).

Moldova continues to face significant challenges regarding the rights of minority communities, despite alignment with EU standards on gender equality and children's rights. The European Court of Human Rights has pointed to Moldova's treatment of people with intellectual disabilities, particularly the systemic detention of these individuals in psychiatric institutions. The Moldovan Orthodox Church, alongside certain political figures, continues to

perpetuate discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community, frequently framing their rights as a threat to “traditional values”.

Additionally, the Roma community in Moldova continues to face widespread racism, discrimination, and abuse. Structural inequalities persist, with limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities for Roma individuals. Finally, displaced persons from Ukraine face challenges in securing adequate accommodation, employment, and documentation, further exacerbating their vulnerability in Moldova (European Commission, 2024c).

2.8 SLOVAKIA

On Saturday, April 6th, 2024, Slovakia’s nationalist, left-wing government candidate Peter Pellegrini defeated the liberal, pro-Western opponent Ivan Korčok, winning the presidential election. The first round of this year’s presidential elections saw a total of 11 candidates. The voting took place on Saturday, March 23rd, and it confirmed that the two favourite candidates for the final runoff were Pellegrini and Korčok (The Slovak Spectator, 2024).

The political agenda that Pellegrini will adopt during his six years as president is still unclear. What is certain, however, is his strong alliance with newly elected Prime Minister Robert Fico. Fico became Prime Minister of the country for the fourth time in September 2023, after serving this role between 2006-2010, 2012-2016, and 2016-2018, when he was forced to resign after the political crisis and revolution caused by the assassination of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his girlfriend Martina Kušnírová in February 2018 (The Slovak Spectator, 2024).

Before meeting with Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal in October 2024, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico announced he would block Ukraine’s NATO membership during his tenure, further undermining Kyiv’s NATO ambitions amid Russia’s invasion. Fico is a key ally of Moscow within the EU and NATO, sharing a very similar view with Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Peters and Peters, 2024).

In October 2024, the ECtHR ruled that Slovakia had violated Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits slavery and forced labour, due to its inadequate investigation into a credible human trafficking case (Nillson Juliene, 2024). The case, referred to the court in September 2021, involved a decision to charge the perpetrator with a lesser offence of “pimping”, rather than a more serious human trafficking charge. This decision resulted in a lighter sentence and limited the victim’s access to specialised care for trafficking survivors. The ECtHR found that Slovakia had failed to fulfil its duty under Article 4 to conduct a thorough investigation, thus violating the applicant’s rights (Nillson Juliene, 2024).

2.9 ROMANIA

In 2011, the European Commission declared that Romania was ready to join the Schengen area, but several countries opposed it, with Austria being the final objector, although this veto was lifted in a recent meeting in Budapest (Ádám, 2024). Romania's long-awaited Schengen entry is expected to strengthen ties with Hungary with the removal of border checks on January 1st, 2025, making cross-border travel even more seamless, further facilitating daily commutes between the two nations (Ádám, 2024).

Romania's Constitutional Court has annulled the first round of the 2024 presidential election, which was narrowly won by far-right ultranationalist candidate Calin Georgescu amid claims of Russian interference (Sarbu and Tanno, 2024). This ruling cancels the planned second-round runoff, where Georgescu was to face centrist candidate Elena Lasconi. The court cited Article 146(f) of the Constitution, emphasising the importance of ensuring the integrity and legality of the electoral process (Sarbu and Sanno, 2024).

2.10 BULGARIA

Human rights groups have urged the EU to take action against Bulgaria after lawmakers approved an amendment banning "LGBTQ+ propaganda" in schools (Euronews, 2024b). The law, which received strong parliamentary support, prohibits the promotion of non-traditional sexual orientations or gender identities in education. Proposed by the pro-Russian far-right Vazrazhdane party, the amendment defines 'non-traditional sexual orientation' as any attraction contrary to Bulgaria's traditional view of heterosexual relationships. The move has drawn widespread criticism from advocacy organisations. (Euronews, 2024b).

Bulgaria's immigration detention centres, initially designed for short-term detention of migrants and asylum seekers, have transformed into prolonged imprisonment facilities (Lilov, 2024). According to a recent June testimony by Saudi asylum seeker Abdulrahman Al-Khalidi, migrants are often detained for years without due process, facing the risk of deportation to countries where they could face torture. In his letter from the Busmantsi detention centre, Al-Khalidi described the harsh conditions and constant changes in rules that strip detainees of their remaining rights as they seek safety and freedom (Lilov, 2024).

2.11 CZECH REPUBLIC

The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, has reached out to Czech constitutional officials, urging them to extend the law that provides one-time compensation to individuals sterilised without their informed consent. In his letters to the Presidents of both chambers of Parliament, Senator Miloš Vystrčil and Deputy Markéta Pekarová Adamová, respectively, as well as Prime Minister Petr Fiala, O'Flaherty highlighted

deficiencies in the application of the law. The extension aims to ensure that all victims can fully access their compensation rights (Albert, 2024).

The systematic practice of contraceptive sterilisation began in 1971, following a directive from the Health Ministry. A law, effective since 2022, allows victims to seek compensation, but it is set to expire on January 1st, 2025. O'Flaherty warns that, after this date, victims of forced sterilisation between 1966 and 2012, primarily Roma women, will no longer be eligible for compensation. To address this, Czech Justice Minister Pavel Blažek, MP Eva Decroix, and MP Helena Válková have introduced a bill to extend the deadline for compensation applications by two years. O'Flaherty also reminded Czech officials of concerns raised by his predecessor, Dunja Mijatović, after her 2023 visit to the Czech Republic regarding the functioning of the compensation process (Albert, 2024).

The proposed extension of the compensation law is a crucial step to ensure that all victims, especially those from marginalised communities, have the opportunity to receive justice. The shortcomings in the law's implementation must be addressed to uphold the rights of those who suffered from forced sterilisation. The ongoing efforts to extend the deadline reflect the need for continued attention and action to rectify these historical injustices (Albert, 2024).

3. CENTRAL-WESTERN EUROPE

3.1 AUSTRIA

On September 29th, 2024, Austria held parliamentary elections, leading to significant gains for the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ). These elections, which renewed the National Council, saw protests erupt in response, with demonstrators accusing the FPÖ of echoing Nazi rhetoric and threatening democratic values. Some protesters even linked the party's roots to historical Nazism (Matthews, 2024). The FPÖ has adopted a firm anti-immigration stance, stating that "Austria is not a country of immigration". It also opposes Islam, proposing a ban on "political Islam" and using the slogan "Home, not Islam" in its campaign. This reflects a growing trend of Islamophobia and rising anti-Muslim attacks in Austria.

Additionally, the party holds conservative views on gender and sexuality, opposing same-sex marriage and advocating for marriage solely between a man and a woman for the sake of child welfare (Matthews, 2024). The electoral victory is expected to lead to stricter migration policies, raising concerns about the future of human rights, including potential border pushbacks and challenges to obtaining citizenship (Innocenti, 2024).

3.2 BELGIUM

On December 1st, 2024, a new Belgian law aimed at tackling sexual and labour exploitation came into effect. It grants access to social security for workers with employment contracts and follows advocacy by groups like Utsopi, Violet, and Espace P. (Kilbride, 2024). This legislation responds to the violence and discrimination faced by people involved in sex work. Belgium decriminalised sex work in 2022 following UN recommendations, as research shows criminalisation increases risks for sex workers without reducing trafficking. This new law marks a significant step forward in protecting the rights of sex workers in Belgium, aligning with international human rights standards and addressing long-standing issues of exploitation and discrimination (Kilbride, 2024).

3.3 FRANCE

One of the most groundbreaking human rights developments for France and worldwide is the inclusion of abortion rights in the national constitution. France is the first country in the world to enshrine women's "guaranteed freedom" to have an abortion (Wright, 2024). During a vote in the parliament, the results were overwhelmingly supportive for the constitutional change, with 780 votes for compared to 72 against. This vote has been strongly supported by the public and the French President Macron and implemented on March 8th, marking a historic celebration of Women's Day in 2024 for France (Ray, 2024).

Yet, not all has been this promising and this year, France has seen a lot of political turmoil with the dissolution of the parliament in June and new elections. First, on June 9th, Emmanuel Macron surprised the country and international observers with the decision to dissolve the French National Assembly. The spontaneous call for snap elections, which was due to happen in three years, brought the highest voter turnout in the last four decades (Le Monde, 2024).

Observers had speculated a big win for the far-right following the current national and European political trends. The National Front, led by Marine Le Pen, has been on the rise recently and topped the first round of elections, causing Macron's party to lose (Schickler & Hodgson, 2024). However, a second round held in the first week of July brought unexpected results with the New Popular Front, a left-wing and green alliance, gaining the most seats in the parliament, followed by Macron's centrist party and the least seats for the National Rally (The Economist, 2024). These results left the French parliament with a "hung parliament", meaning no party holding the majority of seats, resulting in general instability for the lower house.

Consequently, the government was removed, and a call for a new government was issued. Even though a left-wing alliance won, in September, President Macron decided to follow his own path by appointing a conservative prime minister, Michel Barnier and a government representing a shift back to the right. Macron appointed ten politicians from the Republicans for the new cabinet, with a single left-wing official appointed as the justice minister (Howard, 2024).

Although the parliament remained fractured, the new government was not accepted, and in December, only three months after its appointment, it became the first cabinet in France to fall in over 60 years due to a non-confidence vote (The Guardian, 2024b). The vote was brought after new austerity law discussions, resulting in Prime Minister Barnier resigning and becoming the shortest-serving prime minister in modern French history, leaving the country in political chaos.

The Gisèle Pelicot trial marked another important event for human rights in France in 2024. Gisele's husband was found guilty of drugging his wife and inviting men to rape her and in December, he was given the maximum sentence for his crimes. For years, Dominic Pelicot invited dozens of men to rape his wife while she was unconscious, which was only



Source: Gisèle Pelicot. Source: © P'Tille/Unsplash, 2024

discovered as a result of other cases involving charges of filming up a woman's skirt in 2020 (Gillett, 2024). The trial included 50 other men accused of paying to rape Mrs Pelicot. They received varying, yet definitely underwhelming convictions, with around 17 men trying to appeal the decision (Gozzi, 2024). The trial represents one of the cruellest rape cases and showed the shortcomings of the French judiciary.

3.4 GERMANY

Migration remains the most contentious human rights topic in Germany, with many changes and demonstrations happening over the course of the year. In 2024, one of the biggest changes was bringing back tighter border checks in light of increased migration. This announcement was introduced following a deadly knife attack in the city of Solingen. With the migration debate at the forefront of German politics, the Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for the attack, which killed three and left at least eight people injured, performed by a Syrian immigrant (Marsh & Ratz, 2024).

During the ceremony held for the victims of the Solingen Stabbings, the German president urged better migration control and stated that an open and tolerant Germany can only be possible if the country is not 'overwhelmed' by irregular migration (Deutsche Welle, 2024). In September this year, Germany officially introduced temporary border checks on all of its borders, a measure agreed on by the coalition government targeted at the surge of arrivals. The tougher stance is particularly measured against the irregular migration of people escaping war and poverty in the Middle East (Alkousaa, 2024). This development has also been influenced by the rising popularity of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party.

In September 2024, the AfD became the first far-right party to win German state elections since 1945, winning in Thuringia and scoring second in Saxony (Edwards, 2024). At the end of the year, the German government underwent significant turmoil, beginning with a conflict between Chancellor Olaf Scholz and his finance minister over the weak economy in Germany. Scholz removed Christian Lindner of the Free Democrats party from the position of minister, leading to the withdrawal of FDP from the ruling three-party coalition (Al Jazeera, 2024e).

Consequently, the Chancellor was left with a minority government with the Green party, and most importantly, chaos in the government that paved the way for new elections to be held (Tanno et al., 2024). According to German law, Scholz has to call a confidence vote (Ehl, 2024). The conservative opposition has been urging to do so as soon as possible, but the German chancellor announced he will call for a confidence vote in January 2025, potentially leading to new federal elections in March in case of a no-confidence result, six months earlier than the original plan for elections. The far-right AfD has already announced its candidate for the Chancellor position in the upcoming elections (Grieshaber, 2024). The party is sure to use its anti-migration stance as part of its program, a winning point in the Thuringia state elections, showing the ongoing challenge to current Germany.

3.5 THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands has seen its new right-wing government, months after the far-right party of Geert Wilders replaced the ruling centre party of Prime Minister Mark Rutte in the elections of late 2023. The new government, sworn in by the Dutch king in July 2024, is a coalition of the Liberals, centre-right and far-right but said to have never been seen so skewed to the right (Baccini, 2024d). The new coalition presented its conservative programme, with main points being made on migration policies, especially including strict asylum admission rules. Additionally, as of October 1st, the previous Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, has been named the NATO Secretary General, welcomed by his successor, Jason Stoltenberg (Baccini, 2024e).

Another very important implication of the new government has been the changes in higher education. In 2024, the Dutch government announced huge budget cuts for universities, forcing thousands of students and staff to take to the streets (NL Times, 2024). The reductions have proposed a cut of almost two billion euros in funding for higher education and research, which has been criticised for threatening the future of the Netherlands (Sokolova, 2024). The announced bill is also mainly aimed at limiting the number of incoming international students, which has been increasing over the years. The government stressed that more emphasis must be put on opportunities for Dutch students and teaching the Dutch language (Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2024).

However, universities fear that these cuts will result in damage to research, diversity, and the current global appeal of Dutch universities. In 2024, the government has already cut student

funding, reducing the sum of the basic student grant provided to working students financing their degrees.

On a positive note, within the broader Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Dutch Supreme Court issued a ruling regarding same-sex marriage in Curaçao and Aruba. The Netherlands was the first country to legalise same-sex marriage in 2001, and now, due to the final decision of the Supreme Court's ruling, same-sex marriage has been legalised in Aruba and Curaçao, marking a milestone for the development of LGBTQIA+ rights both within the Netherlands and worldwide (Shahid, 2024).

4. NORTHERN EUROPE

4.1 ESTONIA

A recent survey provides insight into how Estonia has been addressing the protection of human rights. The latest poll by Turu-uuringute AS, commissioned by the Estonian Institute of Human Rights, shows that most Estonians believe human rights are respected in the country (ERR, 2024). 77 percent of respondents agreed that human rights are upheld in Estonia, with slightly more men than women sharing this view. The belief was strongest among those aged 20-29, with 93 percent in agreement. However, there has been an increase in the number of people who feel the Constitution does not protect their rights (ERR, 2024).

Additionally, 69 percent of respondents believe human rights can only be guaranteed once national security is ensured, with women (74 percent) and ethnic Estonians (75 percent) expressing the most support for this view. Furthermore, 72 percent agreed that, in times of war, the interests of the state and society should take precedence over individual rights. A strong majority, 91 percent, also agreed that ensuring human rights is essential for the security of a democratic, rule-of-law-based state (ERR, 2024).

4.2 FINLAND

What is certainly worth mentioning regarding Finland is the outcome of the latest Presidential elections, which took place in February. Former Prime Minister Alexander Stubb defeated ex-Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto in the run-off election to become Finland's next president, taking on the responsibility of guiding the country's foreign and security policy as a NATO member (Al Jazeera, 2024f). After all votes were counted on Sunday, Stubb, representing the centre-right National Coalition Party, secured 51.6 percent of the votes, while independent candidate Haavisto, from the green-left, received 48.4 percent. The initial voter turnout was 70.7 percent (Al Jazeera, 2024f). This election signifies a new era for Finland, a country that for decades has chosen presidents to prioritise diplomacy, particularly with neighbouring Russia, and has refrained from joining military alliances to ease tensions between Moscow and NATO (Al Jazeera, 2024f).



Source: © Ingunn Eriksen/Flickr, 2023

Additionally, it is imperative to stress how, as of October 2024, two UN Committees have determined that Finland violated the Sámi Indigenous peoples' rights to their culture and land by granting mineral exploration permits on their territory without conducting an impact assessment or providing an adequate participation process (OHCHR, 2024i). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) ruled on complaints from the Kova-Labba Siida Sámi community. The CESCR highlighted Finland's failure to legally recognise Indigenous land rights, while the CRC emphasised the cultural harm caused to Sámi children. Both committees called for reparations and a review of the decisions, ensuring Indigenous peoples' rights are respected through free, prior, and informed consent (OHCHR, 2024i).

4.3 ICELAND

From September 27th to 29th, 2024, the foreign ministers of Canada and the Nordic countries gathered for the Canada-Nordic Strategic Dialogue in New York and Iqaluit, Nunavut. This meeting followed a commitment made during a prime minister-level meeting in Iceland on June 26th, 2023 (Global Affairs Canada, 2024). On September 27th, foreign ministers from Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the State Secretary from Finland met in New York. The group then travelled to Iqaluit, where they were joined by the Foreign Minister of the Faroe Islands and a representative from the Government of Greenland. Iceland's delegation in Iqaluit was led by the Deputy Permanent Secretary of State and Arctic Ambassador (Global Affairs Canada, 2024).

Canada and the Nordic countries have a strong and growing partnership based on shared democratic values, common interests in the North Atlantic and Arctic regions, and a commitment to the rules-based international order, multilateral cooperation, international law, democracy, human rights, and combatting disinformation. The transatlantic relationship is crucial to collective security, and efforts will be made to further strengthen it. Together, they aim to tackle complex global challenges, including those threatening the global order (Global Affairs Canada, 2024).

It is worth noting that Iceland's new government has announced plans to hold a referendum on EU membership by 2027. The administration of Prime Minister Kristrún Frostadóttir also intends to form a panel of experts to assess the pros and cons of retaining the Icelandic Króna versus adopting the Euro. Incoming Foreign Minister Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir, leader of the pro-EU Liberal Reform party, confirmed that a parliamentary motion will be introduced to hold the referendum on Iceland's EU accession talks. Gunnarsdóttir is expected to lead any future discussions on accession (Euronews & EBU, 2024f).

4.4 IRELAND

Ireland is committed to enhancing the protection and promotion of human rights. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has announced the allocation of €350,000 in funding to 24 organisations for projects under its Human Rights and Equality Grants Scheme 2024-25 (Landale, 2024). The themes of the 2024-25 scheme reflect the Commission's strategic priorities outlined in its Strategy Statement 2022-24, focusing on advancing economic equality, raising awareness of rights and access to justice, and promoting climate justice, environmental justice, and a just transition. Grants of up to €20,000 for larger projects and €6,000 for smaller ones were awarded (Landale, 2024). The scheme was open to civil society organisations, trade unions, rights-holder groups, and organisations representing marginalised communities, including migrants and individuals seeking international protection (Landale, 2024).

4.5 LITHUANIA

The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances visited Lithuania from November 20th to 26th, 2024. The delegation, led by human rights experts Gabriella Citroni (Chair-Rapporteur) and Grażyna Baranowska (Vice-Chair), met with state officials, the National Human Rights Institution, NGOs, civil society organisations, and human rights defenders focused on enforced disappearances (OHCHR, 2024j). The delegation reviewed Lithuania's institutional and legislative framework related to enforced disappearances, examining issues like universal criminal jurisdiction, victims' rights to truth, justice, and reparation, as well as efforts to preserve memory and prevent future disappearances (OHCHR, 2024j).

The experts visited the Pabradė Foreigners Registration Centre, the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, and other memorial sites. A press conference to share preliminary observations was held on November 26th. A final report with findings and recommendations will be presented at the 60th session of the Human Rights Council in September 2025 (OHCHR, 2024j).

It is important to highlight the decision made by the Lithuanian Constitutional Court on December 20th, 2024, which ruled that a provision in the Law on the Protection of Minors from the Negative Influence of Public Information, banning the dissemination of information about same-sex relationships to minors, is unconstitutional (Piccioli, 2024). The court determined that the provision violated Articles 25 and 38 of the Lithuanian Constitution, as it narrowed the definition of family and infringed upon freedom of expression and the right to family life. The court emphasised that the Constitution recognises family as a gender-neutral concept and that no law should deem any family model inappropriate for minors (Piccioli, 2024).

Clause 16 of the law had deemed information about same-sex relationships “detrimental” to minors, arguing it contradicted the constitutional concept of marriage and family. The request

for the court's review came after a failed proposal to amend the law in the Lithuanian Parliament (Piccioli, 2024). This issue had previously been raised in the ECtHR in the case *Macatè v Lithuania*, where the court found the ban on books depicting same-sex couples violated freedom of expression under the European Convention on Human Rights. Following the ruling, the provision is now considered null and void. Despite President Gitanas Nausėda's opposition to law changes in 2023, citing concerns about "denigrating the family", this decision aligns with broader human rights concerns, like those raised by LGBTQIA+ activists in other countries with similar bans (Piccioli, 2024).

4.6 NORWAY

Norway has allocated NOK 394 million to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for 2024-2025, with NOK 388 million designated as core funding and NOK 6 million allocated to voluntary contributions for the Fund for Indigenous Peoples and the Fund for Victims of Torture (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). This funding enables the OHCHR to respond swiftly to emerging human rights crises. The OHCHR plays a key role in monitoring human rights violations and assisting countries in meeting their human rights obligations.

Norway considers the OHCHR its primary partner in international human rights and will continue to collaborate on key areas of focus and situations in specific countries (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Currently, only about 5 percent of the UN budget supports the OHCHR, leading to ongoing underfunding of the UN's human rights efforts. Voluntary contributions such as Norway's are, therefore, essential to the agency's work (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

As of December 2024, food prices in Norway have increased by 33 percent over the past three years, contributing to a rise in poverty across the country. The impact is evident in the growing demand for Christmas aid from the Salvation Army, which reports longer queues for assistance (De Ruiter, 2024). According to the Salvation Army's poverty index, one in five Norwegians struggles to make ends meet. During Christmas week, the organisation distributed food boxes to 1,400 families, with families with children facing particularly difficult financial challenges this Christmas (De Ruiter, 2024). Earlier last year, the Norwegian National Institute for Consumer Research released a report indicating that social assistance needs to be increased further to address the worsening crisis (De Ruiter, 2024).

4.7 SWEDEN

What is worth mentioning when it comes to Sweden is how the Swedish government has faced criticism for proposing a national begging ban, with accusations of attempting to "outlaw poverty". The centre-right coalition, supported by the far-right Sweden Democrats, initiated a nine-month inquiry to explore the feasibility of such a ban. Linda Lindberg, leader

of the Sweden Democrats, argued that people from other EU countries were coming to Sweden to beg outside shops and that Sweden should not be Europe's “conscience” (Bryant, 2024).

However, the Stockholm-based Christian social organisation Stockholm's Stadsmission condemned the proposal, with spokesperson Fanny Siltberg stating that banning begging would merely shift the issue without addressing the underlying causes of vulnerability (Bryant, 2024). Aida Samani, deputy legal director of Civil Rights Defenders, warned that Sweden's proposed national begging ban could face legal challenges. She argued that it would likely violate the European Convention on Human Rights and Swedish constitutional rights to privacy and freedom of expression. Samani also criticised the government's focus on the ban amid concerns over organised crime, questioning the significance of begging as an issue in Sweden (Bryant, 2024). The human rights organisation plans to monitor the situation and may pursue legal action if the ban becomes law. The proposal is part of broader policies that critics say neglect human rights and freedoms (Bryant, 2024).

4.8 UNITED KINGDOM

In April 2024, the British government's bill to send asylum seekers to Rwanda was passed in Parliament, following two years of debate. The unelected House of Lords removed its final amendments to the bill early Tuesday, just after midnight local time, clearing the path for it to become law. The plan has faced criticism from international human rights organisations (Al-Kassab, 2024). Only a few hours after the legislation passed, French coast guard officials reported that at least five people, including a child, died attempting to cross the English Channel from France to England on an overloaded inflatable boat carrying 110 people (Al-Kassab, 2024). British Home Secretary James Cleverly expressed outrage over the ongoing tragedies, stating the government aims to stop the human-smuggling trade. Prime Minister Sunak called the new legislation a “fundamental change in the global equation on migration” and emphasised the government's commitment to implementing the Rwanda deportation plan (Al-Kassab, 2024).

On the bright side, it is worth noting that rewilding initiatives are gaining traction in the UK, with Scotland aiming to become the world's first “rewilding nation” supported by over 20 organisations through the Scottish Rewilding Alliance. At the same time, Wales is launching its own rewilding project, with the country's only dedicated rewilding group starting a crowdfunding campaign for a major project set to begin in spring 2025 (Symons & Euronews Green, 2024). Lastly, it is notable that the UK became the first G7 nation to abandon coal power plants. As a matter of fact, the last coal-powered plant at Ratcliffe-on-Soar was disconnected from the grid, marking the end of the UK's 142-year history of using coal for electricity generation (Symons & Euronews Green, 2024).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this report has provided a comprehensive analysis of the major human rights issues and key developments affecting Europe. By examining the diverse human rights landscape across the Central-Western, Eastern, Southern, and Northern regions, we have highlighted both common themes and region-specific challenges. Key topics such as freedom of expression, refugees and asylum seekers, discrimination, gender equality, and minority rights have been explored in depth, shedding light on the varying human rights concerns throughout Europe.

Additionally, significant events, such as the 2024 elections, the Gisèle Pelicot case in France, the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, have played a crucial role in shaping the human rights discourse in Europe, influencing both domestic policies and international relations. This report has aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of these complex issues, offering insights into the evolving human rights situation across the continent.

Improving human rights across Europe requires a multifaceted approach that tackles both systemic issues and the specific challenges faced by individuals and communities. For instance, strengthening legal frameworks and enforcement can better protect the most vulnerable groups and aid in the fight against discrimination. Simultaneously, ensuring fair access to education can raise awareness about major human rights biases and support the achievement of Agenda 2030's Goal 5 —achieving gender equality for all women and girls. By addressing these areas, European countries can continue to make significant strides toward a more just and equitable society, ensuring that human rights are upheld for all individuals, regardless of their background or circumstances.

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