

MUZZLED: THE SILENCING OF POLITICAL DISSENT IN EUROPE ?

(Part I)

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Abbreviations	Full terms
CAES Centres	Centres for reception and situation examination
CESCR	Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRS Officers	Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (Republican Security Corps)
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
EUROJUST	European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation
EUROPOL	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICRMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
ID	Identification
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGO HRO	NGO Human Rights Observers
NGO MSF	NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)

OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PICUM	Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants
RIBs	Rigid Inflatable Boats
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation

INTRODUCTION

Democratic backsliding and the erosion of human rights protections mean that politically motivated imprisonment remains widespread, including in Europe. Freedom of speech and effective political opposition are the cornerstones of democracy; the practice of imprisoning political opponents, or those with divergent political opinions, constitutes a serious attack on democracy and the rule of law. It is imperative to engage critically with emerging trends relating to political repression, arbitrary detention, and civil liberties to recognise the potential democratic threats in Europe.

There is no single established definition of political prisoners, and it remains undefined in international law and human rights treaties. For the purposes of this report, we will use the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe definition, which was adopted by Council of Europe member states in 2012.¹ This states that a person deprived of their personal liberty is to be regarded as a ‘political prisoner’ if:

- “a. the detention has been imposed in violation of one of the fundamental guarantees set out in the European Convention on Human Rights and its Protocols (ECHR), in particular freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression and information, freedom of assembly and association;
- b. the detention has been imposed for purely political reasons without connection to any offence;
- c. for political motives, the length of the detention or its conditions are clearly out of proportion to the offence the person has been found guilty of or is suspected of;
- d. for political motives, he or she is detained in a discriminatory manner as compared to other persons; or,
- e. the detention is the result of proceedings which were clearly unfair and this appears to be connected with political motives of the authorities.” (SG/Inf(2001)34, paragraph 10).

This report is split into two sections: Part I and Part II. Part I sets out the existing protection mechanisms followed by an analysis of the circumstances relevant to political prisoners in Southern Europe and Eastern Europe. For Southern Europe, the report assesses each country against four key indicators: democratic transitions; structural weaknesses; selective justice; and political clientelism. The Eastern Europe section assesses the following indicators: systemic repression; authoritarian consolidation; post-conflict challenges; and illiberal drift within the EU. Part I finishes with partial conclusions on the state of play in these regions.

In Part II, the report will cover Central and Western Europe, Northern Europe, and the Caucasus and Türkiye. For Central and Western Europe, the analysis focuses on the following: anti-terrorism legislation; the use of ‘exceptional measures’; preventive detention;

¹ Resolution 1500, The definition of political prisoner, Parliamentary Assembly, 2nd October 2012.

and migrants and minorities' rights. In Northern Europe, the analysis will focus on three key areas: digital surveillance; civil liberties; and detention linked to immigration and security. Finally, in the section on the Caucasus and Türkiye, the report will assess the extent of illiberal democracies, authoritarianism, detention of opponents and minorities, and armed conflicts and civic space.

Part II of the report will conclude with a comprehensive analysis of the recurring trends, both within the selected regions, and across Europe more broadly. This will determine any points of contrast between countries and regions, as well as consistencies. These conclusions will inform policy and legal recommendations for *inter alia* the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the European Union, and other relevant international bodies and the states who purport to conform to their prescribed norms. These recommendations will suggest measures aimed at eliminating the existence of political prisoners in Europe, and to strengthen the democratic environment required to prevent its recurrence.

1. EXISTING PROTECTION MECHANISMS

1.1 The Council of Europe's Protection

The Council of Europe possesses a series of mechanisms to review and challenge the existence and circumstances of political prisoners in Member States. The General Rapporteur on Political Prisoners – a function instated by the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) – works across various Council of Europe institutions and bodies whose work is relevant to political prisoners, such as the Commissioner for Human Rights. The General Rapporteur has a mandate to intervene in matters relating to cases of alleged political arrests and criminal prosecutions in Europe and in countries with an observer or cooperative status with the Council of Europe or the Parliamentary Assembly (Rohjan, 2025).

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) addresses violations of fundamental rights relevant to political prisoners. Whilst the text of the ECHR does not name political prisoners specifically, certain rights enshrined by the ECHR are often relevant to cases addressing political prisoners. Namely, Articles 5 (right to liberty), 6 (right to a fair trial), 10 (freedom of expression), and 11 (freedom of assembly and association). The Court has assessed these in cases concerning political prisoners in different member states.

In cases concerning the arrest and detention of political prisoners, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has found violations of Article 5 where there was no reasonable suspicion to justify an arrest and for violations of procedural fairness.² Similarly, the ECtHR found that the detention of Alexei Navalny in Russia and surrounding actions by the Russian state violated Articles 5, 6 and 11 of the ECHR. The ECtHR also found that the restrictions on Alexei Navalny were pursued with “*an ulterior motive...namely to suppress that political*

² *Ilgar Mammadov v. Azerbaijan*, no. 15172/13, 22nd May 2014.

pluralism which forms part of ‘effective political democracy’ governed by ‘the rule of law’”.³ On the other hand, the ECtHR has found that Article 9 does not afford prisoners the right to be recognised as a political prisoner or to be treated as such.⁴

The work of the General Rapporteur and the ECtHR is also supported by PACE, the Committee of Ministers, the Conference of INGOs, the Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Secretary General. Collectively, these bodies are concerned with issues related to the detention and treatment of political prisoners.

1.2. The OSCE: Vienna and Moscow mechanisms

Similar to the Council of Europe, the OSCE includes multiple bodies whose work concerns the issue of political prisoners either directly or indirectly. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) supports participating States in the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and tolerance and non-discrimination. This includes observing the trials of political activists, reporting on politically motivated detentions, and assisting in legal reforms. For example, the ODIHR has called for Belarusian authorities to guarantee the right to a fair trial and independence of the judiciary following the handing down of prison sentences to twenty political activists and analysts who worked for opposition figure Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2024; RFE/RL, 2024).

The Vienna Mechanism and the Moscow Mechanisms are tools that OSCE participating states can and have used to address the human rights issues surrounding political prisoners in member states. Using the Vienna Mechanism, States can raise and examine human dimension issues relating to other participating States via information requests and bilateral meetings. The Moscow Mechanism is designed to strengthen the Vienna Mechanism; it gives the option of sending *ad hoc* missions of experts to help resolve a particular issue relating to the human dimension. In July 2022, thirty-eight States invoked the Moscow Mechanism to investigate human rights violations in the Russian Federation. The subsequent report from September 2022 urged Russia to release political prisoners and abolish repressive legislation (Nußberger, 2022). Forty-one participating states invoked the Vienna Mechanism in 2024, reiterating specific concerns about political prisoners in Russia (Vrang, 2024).

Whilst the OSCE does not possess mechanisms with legally binding effects, it is an important body for exerting political pressure on Member States. Moreover, it contributes effectively to the monitoring of human rights and democratic developments, including the issues surrounding political prisoners.

³ *Navalnyy v. Russia* [GC], nos. 29580/12 and 4 others, 15 November 2018.

⁴ *McFeeley and Others v. the United Kingdom*, No. 8317/78, 2nd October 1984.

1.3. The European Union's Oversight

Oversight mechanisms within the European Union (EU) system include the issuance of resolutions by the European Parliament. In recent years, the European Parliament has issued multiple resolutions on political imprisonment in Belarus (European Parliament, 2024 and European Parliament, 2025). These resolutions are non-binding but are used as a political measure and enable the European Parliament to express its views on particular events and situations.

Sanctions, whilst not a direct protective mechanism for political prisoners, enable the EU to target perceived facilitators of politically motivated imprisonment. For example, the EU has sanctioned prosecutors and judges in Belarus for their role in politically motivated trials against journalists and protesters.⁵ The Court of Justice of the European Union – the EU's judicial branch – has historically played an important role in upholding the legality of sanctions following appeals from sanctioned individuals.⁶

1.4. United Nations: the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UNWGAD) is the primary UN body whose work relates closely to the violations faced by political prisoners. It investigates cases of arbitrary arrest and detention and has a mandate to hear direct complaints from individuals. UNWGAD has identified the following five categories of arbitrary detention or imprisonment:

1. Imposed without any legal basis
2. Imposed because of the exercise of human rights
3. Imposed in violation of the principle of fair trial
4. Prolonged administrative custody imposed on asylum seekers, immigrants or refugees
5. Based on illegal discriminatory grounds

The first three factors are often applicable to the detention of political prisoners, which means that these cases often fall within UNWGAD's remit. UNWGAD is a quasi-judicial body – it has no direct enforcement powers but relies instead on diplomacy and advocacy efforts with relevant states for the implementation of its recommendations. Insofar as its opinions rely on international human rights law – such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – its findings are binding on those states which have ratified the relevant treaty or covenant.

The ICCPR safeguards key legal rights relevant to political prisoners. It protects against arbitrary arrest and detention (Article 9), guarantees the right to a fair trial (Article 14) and

⁵ COUNCIL IMPLEMENTING REGULATION (EU) 2021/997 of 21 June 2021 implementing Article 8a(1) of Regulation (EC) No 765/2006 concerning restrictive measures in respect of Belarus.

⁶ *Gutseriev v Council* (Case C-681/23 P) EU:C:2025:327, Judgment of the Court (Sixth Chamber), 8 May 2025.

protects freedom of expression (Article 19). More specifically, Article 9(3) prohibits the general application of pre-trial detention without an assessment of reasonable alternatives, such as bail. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has found violations of this standard in relation to political prisoners; for example, in the case of Server Mustafayev, a Crimean Tatar human rights activist who was arrested in 2018 and kept in pre-trial detention by the Russian government for approximately 17 months (Freedom House, 2025a).

2. SOUTHERN EUROPE

a) Albania

Albania transitioned from a totalitarian communist rule that was led by a single party that monopolized all political, social, and ideological life, suppressing religion and any form of opposition. The dictatorship maintained power through police terror, collectivization, and the politicization of daily life, with all societal meaning centred around the dictator. Since its transition in the early 1990s, the country has had to reinvent its institutions and their working, a process that is still ongoing (Danaj & Iljazaj, 2023). It has undergone significant constitutional and judicial reforms, and aims to align itself with the standards required for EU accession, for which Albania has been a candidate since 2014. During election years, political parties also compete for votes by offering material incentives to voters (Danaj & Iljazaj, 2023). A Few political elites, despite corruption scandals, manage to stay in power for long due to these clientelistic networks, thereby hindering progress towards fully consolidated democracy (Danaj & Iljazaj, 2023). International observers have criticised Albanian elections, calling out unfair and unbalanced media coverage, abuse of public resources, and pressure on public employees (Erebara, 2025; Nahzi, 2025).

The country is undergoing a reform of public administration that aims to harmonise central and local authorities as well as a vetting process of its judiciary, which only 47 percent of judges and prosecutors passed (Skëndaj, 2024). The European Commission's (EC) reports highlight political pressure on the judiciary and shortcomings in the merit-based appointment of officials (European Commission, 2024b). For instance, Prime Minister Edi Rama's criticism of prosecutors after the arrest on corruption allegations of Erion Veliaj, Socialist mayor of Tirana, has been framed as an attempt to influence the judiciary (Gjoka, 2025). This is not an isolated instance, the Prime Minister has also posted on his social media platform pictures of judge Marko Boshku, who had lawfully moved to reinstate a police official that had been dismissed, to stir public opinion against him (Sinoruka, 2025).

While there are no currently known cases of political prisoners and unlawful killings by the state, Albania continues to grapple with its legacy of state repression, which led many to endure unfair imprisonment during the communist rule. As a result, the country launched a compensation scheme for the victims of persecution, which was finalised in 2007 (Cano, 2025). However, only about six percent of identified victims have received full compensation so far, with two-thirds of victims still awaiting compensation (Cano, 2025). This, coupled

with the absence of political will to preserve prisons and concentration camps from the totalitarian rule for memorial, shows the country's current inability to fully transition and achieve justice for its past (Sinoruka, 2023).

b) Bosnia and Herzegovina

The political order of Bosnia and Herzegovina is built upon the Dayton Agreements of 1995, the peace accords that ended the Bosnian War, during which the orthodox Serbs fought the catholic Croats and the muslim Bosniaks following Bosnia's intention to leave the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The country is still dealing with post-conflict governance and relies on ethnic power-sharing and land division (European Commission, 2024c). The country is divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a Bosniak and Croat majority, and the Republika Srpska, with a Serb majority. The Dayton Agreements are supervised by a High Representative. This division accounts for weak oversight of local executives by centralised institutions, with little capacity for communal policy planning (European Commission, 2024c). Although the country is taking significant steps towards gaining EU member status, corruption, lack of judicial transparency, and limited media freedom hinder the country's full transition to a fully liberal democracy.

Internal divisions following the war represent a significant structural weakness. Recently, Milorad Dodik, leader of the Serb-majority *Republika Srpska*, was sentenced to one year of detention and a six year ban from holding office in the Serb entity by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina for refusing to implement the direction of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (RFE/RL, 2025a). The sentence came after repeated violations of international overseers' directives, with Dodik rejecting and ignoring the Court's sentence at first, and moving to call a referendum to dismiss the ruling of the Court (Kurtic, 2025). Such instances generate internal divisions and display the lack of institutional unity within the country. Furthermore, Dodik's behaviour jeopardises the legitimacy of the Court and the Agreements it seeks to uphold.

Other than the structural lack of cohesion created by the partition of the country into two main entities, Bosnia and Herzegovina still lags behind on media freedom, judicial transparency, and political rights. Media freedom, particularly in the *Republika Srpska*, is limited. Intimidation and harassment of journalists are not uncommon throughout the country, with highly-politicised defamation laws in *Republika Srpska* having a chilling effect (European Commission, 2024c).

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the European countries where corruption is most present, as testified by its CPI score (33/100) (Transparency International, n.d.). Selective and non-transparent judicial follow-ups in high corruption scandals hinder public trust, and whistle-blowers' protection is not fully implemented across the country (European Commission, 2024c). Once again, internal divisions make it difficult to develop a harmonised strategy to combat corruption (European Commission, 2024c).

Political ethnic-based clientelism is heavily present, with political parties exchanging selective support and social benefits with voters ahead of elections (Obradović & Filic, 2019). Civil society operates in a constrained environment, particularly in the *Republika Srpska* (European Commission, 2024c). Nevertheless, there are no known accounts of political prisoners in Bosnia and Herzegovina (U.S. Department of State, n.d.a).

c) Croatia

Croatia gained independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, and joined the EU in 2013. While the country has transitioned to a system where political pluralism and civil liberties are enjoyed by the population, corruption and discrimination of minorities, including the LGBTQ+ community and ethnic groups (Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks), persist (Freedom House, n.d.). Additionally, there are reports of self-censorship by members of the press due to fear of harassment, upsetting politically connected individuals, and negative employment effects (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.). Additionally, the government retains strong control of national TV network HTV (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.a).

During the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation in the early 1990s, national sentiments surged, with a strong nationalist drive for self-determination of Croats. However, the political instrumentalisation of such sentiments brought about strong nationalistic feelings, which today are seen to push towards Croat ethnocentric exclusionary narratives which hinder minority rights (Freedom House, n.d.; Ramet & Davorka, 2007). In fact, journalists find it hazardous to investigate previous war crimes (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.a).

Corruption in the public sector is still highly present, with sources reporting a worsening situation since EU accession (Freedom House, n.d.). In November 2024, the Health Minister Vili Beros was fired over suspicions of taking bribes and money laundering together with hospital directors (Al Jazeera, 2024). Such cases reveal the country's need to further tackle corruption.

While Croatia hosted some of the most brutal and notorious concentration camps of the Yugoslavian regime, such as Goli Otok, the country has since moved away from such practices, and there are no known current cases of persecution and political prisoners (Djordjevic & Sterio, 2025; U.S. Department of State, n.d.b).

d) Greece

Greece is a liberal democracy. There are no accounts of political prisoners in the country. However, Greece raises concerns over constraints of media pluralism. In 2023, the country became the object of scrutiny over the government's alleged wiretapping of journalists and opposition leaders (Stamouli, 2023).

Greece is one of the lowest scoring EU countries in terms of media freedom (Cresswell, Myrزابekova, & Prokic, 2024). Strategic lawsuits are often used to silence independent voices, and the main media companies are concentrated in the hands of small elites (Cresswell, Myrزابekova, & Prokic, 2024). For example, Franco-Canadian journalist

Romain Chauvet was sentenced to six months in prison for making a false bomb threat (Szalai, 2025). The accusations blatantly lacked reasonable grounds, and Chauvet was later acquitted by the Court of Athens (Szalai, 2025). Reports have been made about use of police violence and arbitrary bans for journalists with the aim of reducing coverage on the refugee crisis on Greek islands (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.b).

e) Italy

Italy has established itself as a liberal democracy with relatively solid institutions and no reports of political prisoners. However, regional differences impact media freedom, clientelistic networks and the working of the judiciary. Recent adjustments in the country's legal framework have accounted for slidebacks in media transparency and abuses of power.

A major point of discussion has been the recent “gag law” (*legge bavaglio*). The law restricts the ability of journalists to comment and report on legal proceedings and investigations, including those scrutinising political figures (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.c). While media pluralism is largely present, outlets are slowly getting concentrated. For instance, Antonio Angelucci, a member of the Parliament from the ruling coalition, owns three different newspapers, raising concerns over conflicts of interest and journalistic autonomy (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.c). This is coupled with growing political pressure on judicial independence, with the current government under the guidance of populist right-wing leader Giorgia Meloni framing the judiciary as an opposition actor. Additionally, the judiciary itself has faced scandals over corruption and appointments that were not merit-based (Cresswell, Myrzabekova, & Prokic, 2024).

Recently, organisations have spoken out against the government's new law which allows for the criminalisation and incarceration of people who attend peaceful sit-in protests and occupations (Amnesty International, 2025). Additionally, the new law provides financial assistance for law enforcement officers accused of wrong doings, which sparked controversy over the possibility of increased police abuses (Amnesty International, 2025). While Italy does not hold political prisoners, this law opens up the possibility of silencing dissent and incarcerating vocal opposition, and has raised concerns from UN rapporteurs (OHCHR, 2025).

f) Malta

The United States (U.S.) Department of State (2024a), through official international monitoring, declares that no political prisoners have been recorded in Malta; however, numerous problems have been identified regarding impunity and selective enforcement. The line between legal pressure and political imprisonment is very thin, especially concerning media harassment. In 2017, a serious case of the assassination of Caruana Galizia, an investigative journalist who was investigating links between politics and organised crime, had a profound impact on the entire nation, highlighting the use of legal and extrajudicial means to suppress political dissent (Sun, 2022).

Freedom of the press is not always guaranteed, and many journalists report a hostile environment characterised by intimidation, harassment, and abusive litigation (Freedom House, 2023). This persists despite government efforts to portray the situation as improving through the decriminalisation of libel, defamation that, after legal reform, is no longer considered a criminal offense but a civil matter (Freedom House, 2023). The proliferation of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) denounced by journalists and activists, has created an environment that severely undermines investigative reporting (Freedom House, 2023). This element creates a strong similarity with political imprisonment mechanisms, in which legal and international instruments are distorted and used to suppress political dissent. Numerous forms of political repression are practiced, including the targeting of criticism against the political elite and the instrumentalisation of the law, all amplified by the presence of weak institutions tainted by political influence (Sun, 2022).

To understand the Maltese situation, it is necessary to frame it in the political context characterised by polarization and clientelism. Malta represents a small Mediterranean democracy where in recent years, smaller parties have reported emerging difficulties in challenging the dominance of the main parties, with a persistent issue of corruption (Freedom House, 2023). Anti-corruption efforts are very weak, allowing high levels of impunity, especially in the public sector. For instance, a 2023 European Commission (2024a) report which notes that few prosecutions have been launched, and even fewer have resulted in final convictions against high-level defendants, highlighting selective enforcement (Freedom House, 2023). The presence of a Permanent Anti-Corruption Commission (PCAC), due to limited resources, does not allow the creation of tangible results (Freedom House, 2023). These elements are closely connected with the economic sphere because of strong interests influencing the main political parties. The 2022 report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), expressed numerous concerns regarding non-transparent lobbying and an opaque relationship between the public and private sectors (Freedom House, 2023). Caruana Galizia, the aforementioned investigative journalist who was investigating the links between politics and organised crime, was specifically investigating a possible link between government officials involved in a bribery system and the energy consortium Electrogas (U.S. Department of State, 2024a).

Although there are currently no political prisoners, the existing model of repression in place operates similarly to political detention in other contexts and, without adequate awareness, risks becoming a reality.

g) Montenegro

Montenegro does not have any officially recognised political prisoners, but it is necessary to highlight a political and legal framework marked by years of political instability, institutional and constitutional crisis, which, according to Freedom House, reveal dynamics of selective repression (Freedom House, 2024b).

Due to its recent independence achieved in 2006 and a decline in democratic governance due to politicization and dysfunctional local governance, Montenegro is classified by Freedom

House (2024a) as “partly free”, a transitional or hybrid regime. With the 2023 elections, the country managed to obtain a new parliamentary majority, putting an end to more than three decades of rule by the same party (Freedom House, 2025a).

The political landscape is fragmented and the post-Yugoslavia transition decidedly shapes institutions. Despite numerous anti-corruption efforts, the law and judiciary sectors are not completely free from political interference due to a lack of capacities, resources, staff, and equipment, but above all due to accountability mechanisms (Transparency International, 2025). Furthermore, the interference of organised crime in the same structures creates significant problems, including corruption, erosion of the rule of law, threats to freedom and security, obstacles to economic development, political instability, and a loss of public trust, showing institutions still too weak for effective counteraction (Freedom House, 2024a; Transparency International, 2025). This context, which combines institutional weakness and political clientelism, risks creating an environment in which power can be used selectively against critics and political opponents.

In the country, civil liberties are generally respected, and the media and civil society sectors are particularly active despite serious problems of corruption, political dysfunction, and a judiciary with persistent issues (Freedom House, 2025a). Regarding freedom of expression, despite the promise of a 2023 media reform strategy aimed at reducing disinformation, supporting media literacy, and strengthening independence and fair competition, the media scene remains highly polarised. This polarisation reflects political affiliations, due to the fact that the state is among the main funders, which does not allow the development of investigative journalism (Freedom House, 2024a; Transparency International, 2025).

The use of selective justice through vague criminal provisions, combined with procedural shortcomings, contributes to strengthening the power of influential individuals through pressure on prosecutorial bodies. This increases the likelihood that these same mechanisms will be used to target political opponents and journalists, effectively masking acts of political detention.

Of particular importance for the main theme of the report is the proposal by President Jakov Milatovic’s proposal for a law to compensate former political prisoners from the communist era, illustrates the ambivalence of the ongoing democratic transition (Visnjic, 2025; Human Rights Action, 2025). On one hand, the initiative recognises victims of the authoritarian past, representing a symbolic step of reconciliation for greater democratic legitimacy (Visnjic, 2025; Human Rights Action, 2025). On the other hand, this gesture is perceived as instrumental and political, intended only to strengthen support without addressing structural and systemic problems (Visnjic, 2025; Human Rights Action, 2025).

h) Serbia

Although Serbia does not recognise the term political prisoner in its legal framework, six activists currently in custody are regarded by NGOs and independent reports as meeting that definition (Associated Press, 2025; Ivković, 2025; Vujković Šakanović, 2025; Vreme, 2025).

The arrests occurred in March 2025, with the government citing terrorism charges, following the dissemination of audio recordings accusing them of planning a coup (Associated Press, 2025; Ivković, 2025; Vujković Šakanović, 2025; Vreme, 2025). Their situation is further exacerbated by a distorted media narrative. Although Serbia's legal framework guarantees press freedom, the media lacks pluralism and remains heavily influenced by political and institutional actors (Freedom House, 2025c; Smeltzer, 2025). This enables propaganda and manipulations of facts, particularly on sensitive topics such as the war in Ukraine, relations with opposition parties, and Serbian operations in Kosovo (Freedom House, 2025c; Smeltzer, 2025).

These dynamics impact the exercise of freedom of assembly. Recent protests opposing the government's authoritarian tendencies have been met with excessive use of force and numerous arrests (Freedom House, 2025c; Smeltzer, 2025; Stojanovic, 2025; Ivković, 2025; Vujković Šakanović, 2025; Vreme, 2025). Similar responses occurred during earlier demonstrations, particularly those sparked by a lithium mining agreement and a railway accident that led to the death of fifteen people, revealing the consequences of a corrupt political system that enriches itself at the expense of its citizens (Freedom House, 2025c; Smeltzer, 2025; Stojanovic, 2025; Ivković, 2025; Vujković Šakanović, 2025; Vreme, 2025).

Political and institutional fragility is caused by the legacy left by the Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Institutions, despite efforts for European integration, remain fragile with a widespread perception of corruption and lack of judicial independence (Freedom House, 2025c).

In recent years, the dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has progressively put pressure on independent media, political opposition, and civil society organisations, effectively reducing political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2025c). The 2023 elections that brought the current president Vučić to power were characterised by media bias and allegations of misuse of public resources, with his success largely attributed to unparalleled public exposure (Freedom House, 2025c). Local and international observers recorded numerous irregularities both during the campaign and on election day, which provided undue advantage to SNS, while simultaneously diminishing the opposition's electoral prospects (Freedom House, 2025c; OSCE/ODIHR, 2024a). Corruption and links with organised crime have been exposed in recent years, particularly in the law enforcement and judiciary sectors. These sectors have faced pressure from state institutions, reflecting the hybrid and fragile nature of Serbian democracy. The system is capable of punishing political dissidents but not those responsible for a state massacre (Freedom House, 2025c; Smeltzer, 2025).

i) Portugal

Portugal, unlike the previous Southern European countries analysed, presents a more stable situation and the absence of recognised or controversial cases of political prisoners (US State Department, 2024b). Although the country's authoritarian regime until 1974 systematically employed political detention, the consolidation of democratic institutions in recent decades

has reduced the risk of such practices (Jones, 2019). However, grey areas of difficulty have been observed in the field of corruption, minimal constraints on journalism, abusive conditions for prisoners, and cases of discrimination and xenophobia (Freedom House, 2025d; US State Department, 2024b).

Judicial independence is solid and supported by an independent legal system, but is often slowed by procedural delays and long bureaucratic times, which have been identified as a structural weakness (Freedom House, 2025d).

Recent corruption scandals involved Prime Minister Antonio Costa at the end of 2023, and his implication related to mining concessions, demonstrating a situation of involvement in similar scandals of high-ranking politicians, officials, and business people (Freedom House, 2025d; US State Department, 2024b; International IDEA, 2025). In recent years, Portugal, through various laws, has sought to increase accountability and transparency, but many proceedings involving the elites remain blocked, demonstrating how corruption in the political sphere can constantly undermine citizens' trust and the effective implementation of reforms (Freedom House, 2025d). For this reason, at the international level, Portugal has often been called upon to strengthen these mechanisms (Freedom House, 2025d).

The European Commission, together with various NGOs, has also expressed concerns regarding detention conditions and the excessive use of force against members of ethnic minorities such as Roma and people of African descent. These concerns highlight that, even in the absence of political prisoners, the risk of politically and discriminatorily motivated abuses persists (Freedom House, 2025d; US State Department, 2024b).

For these reasons, it is necessary to continue monitoring the structural weaknesses present in Portugal, to ensure that they do not become potential areas of indirect repression.

j) Spain

Spain does not officially acknowledge the existence of political prisoners in its legal system either, but the detention of Catalan leaders after the independence referendum of October 2017 reopened the debate in the country.

The convictions for sedition and embezzlement occurred in 2019 and were deemed disproportionate by Amnesty International (2019). After careful review and monitoring of the trial, it was defined as clearly political in nature, due to restrictions on conduct protected by freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The amnesties granted in 2021 represented an attempt to reduce conflict but confirmed a selective use of criminal law and the risk of transforming it into a tool for political repression (Amnesty International, 2019).

In general, Spain remains a consolidated democracy but is nonetheless characterised by recurring fragilities. Despite the presence of a legal system that prosecutes corruption cases, these often proceed very slowly, sometimes nullifying efforts to strengthen rules and anti-corruption laws (Freedom House, 2024b; U.S. Department of State, 2024c). Past opaque situations regarding party financing have led to restrictions and reinforcement of rules

concerning conflicts of interest and harsher penalties regarding corruption-related crimes (Freedom House, 2024b; U.S. Department of State, 2024c). The monitoring and oversight bodies created are not always able to ensure compliance with transparency obligations due to a lack of resources and an inability to impose sanctions (Freedom House, 2024b).

Investigative journalism is developed and allows information to be gathered and disseminated to society, demonstrating freedom of the press. However, it often puts journalists in uncomfortable positions in receiving harassment or physical assault in the course of their work, particularly during protests and demonstrations (Freedom House, 2024b; U.S. Department of State, 2024c). In 2015, with the Public Safety Act, penalties were increased for participation in unauthorized protests, leading numerous human rights organisations to denounce an escalation in police violence (Freedom House, 2024b; U.S. Department of State, 2024c).

The judiciary is considered to be independent, and the CoE has criticised the General Council of the Judiciary (CGPJ), of which twelve members are appointed by parliament, for exposure to political disruptions (Freedom House, 2024b). It is necessary to recall the agreement between the current Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and the Catalan separatist parties, which established *ad hoc* committees to verify the presence of abusive lawfare practices during cases against Catalan leaders (Freedom House, 2024b; Jones, 2023; Heller, 2024; Kirby, 2023). The general discontent that this event created within the judiciary, particularly concerned the direct political interference in judicial autonomy. This demonstrates that even in a consolidated democracy, constitutional guarantees are not sufficient to prevent the political use of justice.

3. EASTERN EUROPE

a) Russia

In the past few years, the human rights situation in Russia has severely deteriorated, and Russian authorities have decided not only to enforce, but to expand their harsh and arbitrary authoritarian practices (Human Rights Watch, 2025). According to the UN specialist, since President Putin launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the authorities have been targeting individuals who have spoken out through censorship and politically motivated prosecutions (RFE/RL, 2025b). Russia has increasingly consolidated state control over society, and the increased number of political prisoners is a demonstration of this and the escalation of repression.. This section of the report looks at how political imprisonment in Russia has become widespread and systematic over the years.

It has been one year since Alexey Navalny, the main opponent of Russian President Vladimir Putin, died in jail, in Penal Colony No.3 in Kharp, above the Arctic Circle (The Moscow

Times, 2025). Alexey Navalny was one of the biggest opponents of Vladimir Putin, he announced that he was going to run for president in 2017 but his registration was rejected (Al Jazeera, 2024). He was serving a 19-year sentence for several crimes, including having founded and led an “extremist organisation” in 2011 and the Anti-Corruption Foundation (Le Monde, 2025). A year later, there are reportedly more than 2000 political prisoners in Russian jails (The Moscow Times, 2025). It is believed that Navalny’s death exposed the systematic and widespread repression against peaceful dissenters who protest the “ongoing erosion” of human rights and the rule of law, and most importantly, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (The Moscow Times, 2025). Russia, just as any other authoritarian regime, tries to silence all critical voices by using different tools (Amnesty International, 2024b). For example, one of the repression tools is “the broad public safety and national security provisions,” another one could be the expanded legislation to call individuals and organisations “foreign agents” and “undesirables” (RFE/RL, 2025b). The special rapporteur on human rights in Russia, Mariana Katzarova, also stated that “punitive psychiatry has returned as a tool against anti-war voices” (RFE/RL, 2025b). Interestingly, this method was widely used in the Soviet Union, more specifically, these regimes used psychiatry diagnosis, treatment, and detention to obstruct the fundamental rights of certain individuals. During Soviet Union a lot of dissidents were diagnosed as being mentally ill, and as a result they were separated from society and kept under constant control (European Parliament, 2013).

In November 2024, the human rights organisation OVD-Info, which tracks political persecution in Russia and provides support for victims, launched a tool that is designed to make the data more accessible for researchers and reporters. The Criminal Repression Dashboard provides a visual representation of the data that is gathered by OVD-Info on Russia’s politically motivated criminal cases (OVD-Info, n.d.). OVD-Info tracks arrests and police brutality, and offers legal assistance to victims of political repression (Meduza, 2024). As noted by OVD-Info’s managing editor, the tool allows people to engage with data because the Russian government makes it very hard for people to track detentions and imprisonments (Meduza, 2024). According to the tool that OVD-Info created, as of today, 3,979 people are persecuted in Russia, 1,739 are currently imprisoned, and 955 people are under investigation (Criminal Repression in Russia, 2025). Findings show that 20 percent of people who are persecuted are women, and nine percent of the prisoners are also women. Over 40 political prisoners are in isolation within their detention facilities, including solitary confinement, special containment units, and cell-type facilities. 81 of Russia’s political prisoners are of retirement age, and ten people were imprisoned as minors. As mentioned above, punitive psychiatry is one of the tools the Russian government is using against people. According to this data, 47 prisoners are under compulsory treatment today. The website created by the OVD-Info also gives us the opportunity to analyse the professions of the imprisoned people. For example, the data shows that 37 journalists and 38 bloggers are currently imprisoned, reflecting the continued suppression of independent expression in Russia. Those detained not only include media representatives, but also teachers, artists, writers, psychologists, and lawyers (Criminal Repression in Russia, 2025).

The charges most frequently used in politically motivated imprisonments are organisation and participation in the activities of a terrorist organisation, public incitement of terrorist activities, commission of a terrorist act, participation in mass riots, use of violence against a representative of authority, high treason, etc. People are sentenced to long prison terms, some of them face administrative fines, harassment, and surveillance for minor acts of protest. For example, displaying anti-war symbols or posting critical statements on social media. Political prisoners also face prolonged isolation, restricted access to legal representation, and deliberate obstruction of their fundamental rights, including the right to a fair trial (Situation of political prisoners in Russia and Belarus).

The broad persecution of human rights defenders and political opponents, civil society activists, journalists, lawyers, and non-governmental organisations, indicates that the situation of political prisoners in Russia remains deeply concerning. Russia continues to exploit criminal law, anti-terrorism, and anti-extremism frameworks to suppress dissent in the country.

b) Ukraine

Political prisoners are individuals who are unjustly persecuted or deprived of their freedom for political reasons. They are targeted for their beliefs, activities, or opposition to the regime, and they become victims of repression due to their views. There is no official data about the Ukrainian government systematically imprisoning political opponents within its internationally recognised borders. However, a large number of Ukrainian citizens, specifically from occupied Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, and other temporarily occupied territories, have become political prisoners at the hands of the Russian Federation. These regions operate under Russian-imposed governance, often disregarding Ukrainian and international law. Civilians in these regions often face detention for perceived opposition to Russian control.

According to the Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Russia is trying to suppress, silence, and eliminate the voices of Ukrainian patriots in the occupied territories, practices that began long before the full-scale invasion in 2022 (Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, 2025). The first Ukrainian political prisoner of Russia appeared in 2014, with the occupation of Crimea, and by January 2024, the number of political prisoners was at least 218. Moreover, in March 2025, Russia convicted 23 captured Ukrainians on terrorism charges in a military court trial that Kyiv denounced as a violation of international law (AP News, 2025). The captured Ukrainians included current or former fighters of the elite Azov brigade, one of the most combat-ready units of the security and defence forces of Ukraine, and those who worked there as cooks or support personnel. They all had been charged with staging a violent coup d'état and organising the activities of a terrorist organisation.

Memorial, which is a Russian human rights group, designated the defendants as political prisoners (AP News, 2025). According to Memorial, “none of the defendants in the case are accused of any war crimes, they are all being tried for the very fact of serving in Azov at one time or another” (AP News, 2025). OSCE documented Russia’s abuses against Ukrainian civilians who are arbitrarily detained by Russian authorities. They documented extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, and denial of fair trial guarantees (OSCE, 2024b). Conditions of detention remain very severe. For example, detainees often lack access to medical care, water, food, and hygienic products (ISHR, 2025). Torture, ill-treatment, electrocution, and psychological abuse are a big part of their detention, as well as sexual violence and denial of legal counsel.

To summarise, while there is no official data on political prisoners detained by the Ukrainian government, the occupation of its territories has created a parallel system in which numerous Ukrainian citizens are detained or persecuted by the Russian Federation.

c) Belarus

Alexander Lukashenko was first elected as the president in 1994 and has been in power since then (Democratic Erosion, 2025). The most recent 2025 election was another example of Lukashenko’s long-standing autocratic leadership, which is backed by repression and Russian support. For years, his regime has oppressed civil society and targeted individuals who speak out. His regime has systematically dismantled independent media and civil society organisations, creating an atmosphere of fear and silencing dissent. Many were forced to flee the country, yet resistance continues (Article 19, 2025).

The main tool in Lukashenko’s hands to suppress critical voices in Belarus is the politically motivated persecution and detention. According to Viasna, as of October 11, 2025, 122 people in Belarus are considered political prisoners. Since the beginning of the 2020 presidential campaigns, 4198 people have been recognised as political prisoners, including bloggers, businessmen, peaceful protesters, and those who publicly expressed their opinions (Viasna, n.d.). Belarusian authorities detain human rights defenders and journalists as a result of their work. For example, the lawyers representing clients in politically motivated cases or speaking out on rights abuses faced systematic and widespread repression (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Many of these political prisoners have been in jail since Lukashenko brutally stamped out protests in 2020, after he claimed yet another victory in presidential elections, widely regarded as fraudulent (BBC, 2025b). Occasionally, Lukashenko releases some political prisoners. For example, in September 2025, Lukashenko released dozens of political prisoners as part of a deal with US President Donald Trump (BBC, 2025b). More specifically, Lukashenko released 52 prisoners, and in exchange, the US said that it would relieve some sanctions on the Belarusian airline.

Alexander Lukashenko says that Belarus treats inmates “normally,” because “prison is not a resort” (The Guardian, 2025). However, according to the Human Rights Watch, political prisoners in Belarus face ill-treatment and torture (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Political prisoners do not have access to correspondence, calls, parcels, or meetings with their lawyers and family members. They do not have access to timely and appropriate health care, and political prisoners face isolation in punishment cells and harsh confinement regimes. Moreover, Belarus is the only European country that still carries out the death penalty. In 2024, the Minsk regional court sentenced German citizen Rico Krieger to death after convicting him under six articles of the Criminal Code including those related to terrorism and extremism (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Lukashenko later pardoned him, but in October 2024, another person, Alexander Taratuta, was sentenced to death by the Minsk regional court under article 139 (intentional unlawful deprivation of the life of another person, a minor, a person in a helpless state, committed with extreme cruelty by a group of persons) and article 154 (intentional infliction of pain and beating of a minor) of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus.

For over thirty years, Alexander Lukashenko has ruled Belarus through fear and violence. His regime has made it very dangerous to speak, protest, and defend others. Political imprisonment remains a significant feature of the system in Belarus. Although some prisoners are occasionally released as part of political negotiations, these actions do not signify genuine freedom or systemic change. Rather, they highlight how the regime uses human lives as instruments of political leverage. Despite these conditions, Belarusian civil society continues to advocate for democratic reforms.

d) Georgia

Georgia’s political situation has remained unstable for several years, deteriorating further in November, 2024. More specifically, on November 28, 2024, the Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze announced that the ruling party, Georgian Dream, decided to stop the accession negotiations with the EU until 2028 (Civil, 2024). This decision was announced after the Georgian Dream party rigged the parliamentary elections in October, 2024. Immediately after this announcement, crowds poured into the streets of Tbilisi. Georgian citizens have since protested in central Tbilisi and other cities of Georgia every night for more than 300 nights, as they demand new elections and the release of all political prisoners who were arrested during pro-EU rallies.

The Georgian government has increased its use of repressive tactics in recent years, but it escalated after November 28, 2024. Special riot troops used tear gas, pepper spray, water tanks and rubber bullets against peaceful demonstrators. After initial measures failed, the government responded by detaining and using force against over 300 citizens during the first week of protests (Eurasianet, 2024). Most detainees stated that they have been tortured while in custody, some even requiring hospitalisation (Eurasianet, 2024).

Just like any other authoritarian regime, Georgian Dream also decided to use politically motivated imprisonment as a tool to silence the dissent. The number of political prisoners in Georgia is increasing almost every single day. There are more than 100 political prisoners in Georgia as of October 11, 2025, including six women (Political Prisoners 2024-2025). The Georgian government arrests journalists, doctors, miners, businessmen, artists, and even political figures, especially, the opposition figures. More than ten opposition politicians remain imprisoned (Civil, 2025). Most imprisoned politicians were convicted for refusing to testify before a parliamentary commission investigating alleged crimes by the previous government before Georgian Dream came to power in 2012, particularly those related to the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia (BBC, 2025a).

The tension in Tbilisi is very high. In the beginning of October, 2025, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze threatened anti-government activists with further arrests (RFE/RL, 2025c). After the local elections on October 4th, 2025, several people were arrested, and according to Kobakhidze, “no one will go unpunished, many more must expect sentence for the violence they carried out against the state and law-enforcement” (RFE/RL, 2025c).

Georgia was once regarded as a country progressing toward European integration. However, recent developments suggest a reversal of that trajectory. Political imprisonment has increasingly been used as a tool to suppress dissent and intimidate opposition figures.

e) Poland

In December 2023, the coalition government led by Donald Tusk came to power in Poland and started addressing rule of law concerns that developed during the previous government (Human Rights Watch, 2024b). Tusk’s government aimed to adopt reform proposals to strengthen women’s and girls’ reproductive rights and the rights of LGBT individuals, strengthen judicial system and restore media freedom. The government took some important steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.

According to the 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, there were no reports of political prisoners or detainees (US Department of State, 2023). EUvsDisinfo is a project of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force, that was established to address and respond to the Russian disinformation campaigns affecting the EU, its member states, and countries in the shared neighborhood. According to this project, reports suggesting that political prisoners exist in Poland are considered disinformation (EUvsDisinfo, 2025).

In conclusion, since December 2023, Poland’s government under Donald Tusk has begun to repair the country’s democratic institutions and human rights situation. The disinformation

campaigns and narratives about political prisoners are often part of broader efforts to undermine the trust in EU institutions and Poland's democratic transition.

f) Hungary

Hungary's democracy has been corroding slowly day by day since the election of Viktor Orbán as Prime Minister in 2010. Since then, he and his party have systematically dismantled the country's legal system and changed the election system to ensure future victories.

According to the organisation Unhack Democracy (Civil Rights Defenders, n.d.c.), Hungary's electoral process has been undermined through a combination of fraud and systemic irregularities. Reported practices include vote buying, the importation of voters from neighbouring countries, and the implementation of a malfunctioning election software system that restricts access for citizens living abroad. These measures have allowed Prime Minister Orbán to consolidate control over the government and direct state resources to himself and his allies.

In February a new authority named the Sovereignty Protection Office began investigating organisations and individuals considered to be a threat to national sovereignty. This new Office has large powers to stigmatise and intimidate those critical of the authorities, under the umbrella of political, economic and societal interests of Hungary. Due to this, an infringement procedure against Hungary has been issued by the European Commission, referring the country to the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) in October 2024.

Furthermore, since 2011 his party has had the power to withdraw media licenses and fine journalists without justification, censoring the press and controlling state-owned broadcasters. Journalists have difficulties accessing public information and face constant criticism by pro-government media and public officials (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Human rights organisations and advocates are also under constant attack in Hungary, being attacked by stigmatising rhetoric that undermines the legitimacy and credibility of human rights defenders, who are usually portrayed as traitors and foreign mercenaries (Civil Rights Defenders, n.d.c.).

g) Moldova

Moldova's elections have become a battleground for competing political interests and a test for the country's European trajectory, showing how far and how powerful Russia's influence can be. During the 2023 local elections, President Maia Sandu's pro-European party fared well with more than 40% of the vote, however pro-Russian Politician Ion Ceban was re-elected mayor of the capital, Chisinau.

Furthermore, a year later Sandu was narrowly re-elected, and the referendum to add a commitment to joining the European Union to the constitution was an even narrower victory.

In all three elections, Moldova's pro-European political forces faced strong interference organised by Russia and Moldovan oligarchs from the Communist regime (Wilson, 2025).

Through organised anti-Western protests, votes being bought by Russian agents, and the use of Deepfake and disinformation, Russia has been influencing directly in countries from East-Europe, such as Moldova.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 made neighbouring country Moldova a key target, as forces advanced north then west out of Crimea, threatening the country who became an indirect second front. Russia has consistently asserted that it considers Moldova part of its sphere of influence.. According to Elena Burakova, the Deputy chairperson of the Congress of Russian Communities of the Republic of Moldova (Russian World Foundation):

Speaking at the last Assembly of the Russian World, His Holiness Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus', devoted considerable attention to the people of Moldova, its traditions, and its culture, calling our country part of the Russian World.

Moldovan society remains split on Russia, a division reflected along linguistic lines, as Russian speakers typically hold pro-Russian views and a stronger identification with Russia compared to their Romanian-speaking counterparts. However, the control that oligarchs and political leaders exerted over editorial positions has decreased compared to previous years, despite all Russian influence. Measures taken by the Audiovisual Council have tightened control over disinformation and hate speech and have weakened media outlets that broadcast propaganda content produced in Russia (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

It is important that the EU continue supporting Moldova's democratic transition by strengthening judicial institutions and enhancing the country's autonomy and power to resist Russian influence.

h) Slovakia

Following the Communist Party's coup in February 1948, Slovakia experienced widespread persecution and state control over the economy, production, and all areas of public life. Since then, the country has gone through recurring periods of dictatorship and restrictions on liberty.

According to human rights experts from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, over the past year Slovakia has faced an erosion of fundamental freedoms characterised by the stifling of civil society, along with increased pressure on non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the media, and protesters (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2025).

Journalists, human rights defenders, and protesters have become targets, with government smear campaigns against several critical journalists and restrictions on press access to official events.

After the shooting of Prime Minister Robert Fico in 2024 (Gosling, 2024), the government accelerated efforts to control the media by blaming outlets for the attempt on his life. The government was already working to increase its influence on the media before the attack, with the shooting pushing the country further towards state control of the media.

Furthermore, the adoption of the “Lex Atentat”, also called “assassination law” will severely restrict the right to peaceful assembly and will limit protests near government buildings and private residences. It is a legislative instrument created as a response from the assassination attempt, but it can be used as an instrument of oppression.

With the ruling of Robert Fico, a clear trend towards illiberal democracy is emerging in Slovakia, with his populist agenda and a pro-Russian, increasingly authoritarian style of governance, advancing extensive control over institutions. Although this centralisation of power is meeting resistance from civil society, the liberal opposition view democratic principles and the rule of law as threatened. In response, the Prime Minister has sought to silence these voices.

The democratic system in Slovakia is being dissolved with the systemic reshaping of the Slovak state conducted by Fico, raising concerns within the EU, which even considered freezing its cohesion funds for Slovakia temporarily (Krempaská, 2024).

i) Romania

During the Communist Regime, the country suffered violence that still reverberates to this day. During the regime, 44 prisons and 72 forced labour camps were set up for more than 150,000 political prisoners (AFP, 2024). One example is Jilava prison, originally a defence fortress around the capital Bucharest, built in the late 19th century and later transformed into a crowded prison between 1948 and 1964.

Moica, a 16-year-old at the time and accused of joining an anti-communist organisation stated that “it felt like entering a hole”, as inmates were kept in dark and damp cells as deep as 10 meters underground (AFP, 2024).

During the Iron curtain regime, life conditions were dire, with the Communist Party controlling the security apparatus and other key government agencies to suppress the opposition. The year 1947 marks the final period of modern Romania, as liberal political and economic structures were centred around and fully controlled by the Party.

The revolution against the communist regime in Romania was far from peaceful, with an estimated more than a thousand deaths in a small country. During the dictatorship of Nicolai Ceausescu in 1989, several people were killed, tortured and hurt, such as Constantin Jinga, a 20 year old student at the time that was shot from close range on the first day of the uprising (Kollau, n.d.).

Currently, Romania also suffers influence from foreign powers willing to intervene in its democracy to destabilise Europe from within. On November 24, 2024, the presidential

elections were heavily influenced by digital bots like TikTok accounts (Youth European Union, 2025). Independent candidate Călin Georgescu, a nationalist figure known for promoting conspiracy theories against the EU and NATO and for rhetoric favored by the Kremlin, had received minimal support in opinion polls but went on to win 23 per cent of the vote in the first round of elections.

This interference aims to promote political figures who are openly critical to Romania's Western alliances and supportive of what Russia and other actors hostile to NATO, with the objective of weakening the EU and to destabilise Eastern flank.

This shows the evolution of political warfare, proving that digital security is a fundamental pillar of national security. Cybersecurity must be treated as a core defence issue, as it can shift electoral outcomes and influence peoples' ideas and beliefs, particularly in contexts where media literacy is not strong.

j) Bulgaria

After the arrest of Varna Mayor Blagomir Kotsev on July 8, 2025, part of a wider operation targeting local government figures, the Renew Europe party condemned the escalating assault on democratic institutions and the rule of law in Bulgaria (ALDE Party, 2025).

A report from the European Commission (Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers 2025) highlights a reversal in progress towards rule of law in the country, assessing that it lacks an independent judiciary with only 27 percent of citizens and companies believing that courts and judges are truly independent, with a previous rate of 43 percent in 2021.

The imprisonment, carried before an important municipal budget vote, shows the collapse of democracy and political persecution. It was conducted under the flag of the fight against corruption, where the General Prosecutor's Office and the Anti-Corruption Commission became instruments of political suppression.

Bulgaria masks democratic erosion behind the language of legality, preserving the appearance of rule of law while undermining its substance. This is proved by the imprisonment of the opposition mayor, carried out in violation of European human rights standards, which require a reasonable presumption of innocence and concrete evidence before detention.

Another example is the appointment of Borislav Sarafov as acting prosecutor general (Sofia, 2025), chosen as an interim, but who had his role cemented by institutions. By law, the post was meant to be temporary until a permanent successor is chosen. However, by an interpretation of the Supreme Judicial Council, the temporary appointment became permanent, without a new vote, and without competition.

More recently, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Bulgaria is rapidly modernising its armed forces (Angelov, 2023), as it still relied on old Soviet arms. According to Prime Minister Denkov, the country is looking to acquire warships and weapons for its coast guard, as

Russia poses a threat in the Black Sea. With tensions in the region, politicians are using national sovereignty and defence to justify extraordinary measures limiting rights and oppressing human rights' defenders.

Even though Bulgaria just entered the Euro zone, with plans of replacing the Lev, the currency used in Bulgaria, in January 2026 (Simeonova, 2025) its democracy is deteriorating, and its judiciary power is backsliding, posing an internal threat to the EU.

k) Czech Republic

After World War II, the political system in the Czech Republic was greatly affected by the introduction of a Soviet-style Communist Regime, similar to developments with other central and eastern countries in Europe. This created an imbalance in the democratic development, as the three powers necessary for a healthy democracy, executive, legislative, and judicial, were substituted by a unified power (Embassy of the Czech Republic in Sofia).

After 1948, the Communist Party became the only autonomous political entity, holding the power and controlling the government. While other small parties were allowed to coexist, they served primarily to create the appearance of a democratic system.

After the downfall of the regime in 1989, the state faced the uneasy task of resuming its traditions and building a democratic system after years of enduring an undemocratic one. With the adoption of a new constitution, the Czech Republic adopted civil rights, the relationship between the executive and legislative powers, and the independence of the judiciary, having a goal to become a full democratic state.

However, the years under the dictatorship left deep wounds in a country that is still battling it, as shown by human rights issues for ethnic minorities such as the Roma people and persons with disabilities, who are exposed to police violence, denial of access to public healthcare, discrimination of Roma children in education, and so on. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatovic, published a report following her visit to the country in 2023, addressing the overall framework for human rights protection, measures to combat violence against women, and the situation of LGBTI people.

Further efforts are also needed to address discrimination of Roma in housing, labour market, and their interaction with the police, and the same goes for disabled people, allowing them to live independently in the community, being provided with adequate financial means for this, but also to guarantee access to health care and social services (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Despite the grave threat that political imprisonment poses to democracy in Europe, the term 'political prisoners' still remains undefined in both human rights and international law.

Europe offers a multi-layered protection framework, and offers overlapping yet complementary mechanisms. While international and regional bodies like the Council of Europe, OSCE, European Union, and the United Nations, provide monitoring as well as oversight, their strengths remain limited by political pressure, advocacy, and non-binding recommendations. This gap shows the weakness of Europe's enforcement system and having to rely on the goodwill of states.

The Council of Europe, particularly through the ECtHR, offers the strongest judicial recourse to protect individuals in Europe who are deprived of liberties because of their political involvement. However, ECtHR's judgments remain largely inconsistent and dependent on the political will of its member states, which weakens the institution's authority and legitimacy. This is most evident in the persistent political imprisonment in Belarus and Russia, where despite international condemnation and rulings by EU and UN bodies, systematic repression continues. Above all, Europe's protective architecture for political prisoners remains practically constrained, which reinforces the need for better accountability mechanisms, and a universal definition of political prisoners.

In Southern Europe, all the countries are either new or established democracies, and no official cases of political prisoners have been reported, despite the presence of corruption, and freedom of expression being targeted in some countries. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro remain young democracies, still recovering from an authoritarian and conflict-ridden pasts. For instance, in Albania the executive branch has been accused of influencing the judicial system, which clearly undermines the democratic consolidation. Whilst, in Bosnia and Herzegovina's persistent ethnic division has led to a fragmented constitutional system and has allowed political elites to control state functions.

Spain's prosecution of Catalan leaders and Albania's compensation delays for past political prisoners during historical authoritarian rule show the presence of legacy of repression. As Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina try to join the EU and meet the standards set by the institution, there is pressure on them to ensure that the rights to expression and political participation are protected.

Besides that, there seems to be a presence of structural weakness in many southern European states, as corruption remains evident, media pluralism stays limited, and judiciaries are politicised. This makes it easier to weaponise legal instruments to suppress political dissent and opponents. For example, Montenegro's Democratic Party of Socialists is entrenched in systemic corruption, and blurs the lines between state and party interests, which weakens the judiciary's independence. Furthermore, Malta's assassination of a journalist exposes corruption and lack of accountability for political targeting. Additionally, selective justice mechanisms like Italy's gag law (*legge bavaglio*) pose restrictions on journalists and suppress dissent, despite not being cases of recognised political prisoners. Whilst the region does not face political imprisonment, the erosion of a democratic system, and selective justice create fertile ground for repression in the future.

In Eastern Europe, political imprisonment remains an issue of grave concern that challenges the democratic system. The region seems to present a divide between countries who have consolidated democratic institutions, and ones that are drifting to authoritarianism. Across Russia, Belarus, Georgia and to some extent Hungary, the legal systems are actively utilised to criminalise political dissent and strengthen executive power. Whereas countries like Poland, Moldova, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic continue to face varying degrees of democratic backsliding or external interference.

Russia represents the worst case of systematic repression, where political imprisonment is deeply embedded and instrumentalised. High profile cases like that of Alexei Navalny's death in imprisonment and prosecution of opposition figures highlights the collapse of the rule of law. In Belarus, the regime is also accused of using 'extremism laws' to imprison journalists, protestors and human rights defenders. Beyond its borders, Russia also continues to target and arbitrarily detain Ukrainian citizens in occupied territories. In Georgia the political tensions remain high, and imprisonment has been weaponised by the government to suppress dissent increasingly since last year.

In conclusion, when comparing Southern to Eastern Europe, the threat of mass repression and political imprisonment is lower but the erosion of democratic system through selective justices and corruption remains. It is necessary to focus on anti-corruption frameworks and strengthening of judicial independence to ensure that there is no democratic backsliding that could possibly open doors to political imprisonment.

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