

## Europe Under Watch: Human Rights Annual Report 2025

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| Abbreviations | Full terms                                                                 |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AfD           | Alternative for Germany                                                    |
| AI            | Artificial Intelligence                                                    |
| CAT           | United Nations Committee Against Torture                                   |
| CEDAW         | Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women |
| ECHR          | European Convention on Human Rights                                        |
| ECRI          | European Commission against Racism and Intolerance                         |
| ECtHR         | European Court of Human Rights                                             |
| EOCC          | Estonian Orthodox Christian Church                                         |
| EU            | European Union                                                             |
| FPIC          | Free, Prior, and Informed Consent                                          |
| GRETA         | Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings             |
| ICC           | International Criminal Court                                               |
| LGBTQIA+      | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual          |
| NGO           | Non-governmental Organisation                                              |
| PKK           | Kurdistan Workers' Party                                                   |
| SAR           | Search and Rescue                                                          |
| SDE++         | Sustainable Energy Production and Climate Transition Incentive Scheme      |
| SLAPP         | Strategic lawsuits Against Public Participation                            |
| SPAK          | Special Structure for the Fight Against Corruption and Organised Crime     |
| UAE           | United Arab Emirates                                                       |
| UN            | United Nations                                                             |

|       |                                                    |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------|
| UPR   | Universal Periodic Review                          |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |

# INTRODUCTION

Europe is a continent that is defined by diverse cultures, complex political landscapes, and a very wide array of human rights challenges. The year 2025 was marked by several significant events and persistent issues that severely tested the foundation of human rights and democratic principles across the region. As we move into 2026, the fallout and ongoing implications of these events continue to shape the human rights agenda.

This annual report aims to give an in-depth analysis of major human rights violations and key facts across Europe. This analysis has been organised into the following geographical sections: Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, Central and Western Europe, Northern Europe, Caucasus, and Türkiye. The report will only focus on the countries with notable facts of human rights violations, or pressing human rights issues that require attention from the international community.

Throughout this region, several critical human rights issues continue to be prevalent. The report delves deeper into details in every regional section, and gives the most important insights into the specific challenges faced on the ground, including the freedom of expression and the changing media landscape, the complex realities that refugees and asylum seekers have to face, the persistence of discrimination against vulnerable groups, ongoing struggles for gender equality, and the protections of minority rights in diverse societies. Several significant events had a profound impact on human rights discourse in Europe. For example, the war between Russia and Ukraine continues to be a central factor that influences security and human rights in Europe. The conflict in the Middle East, more specifically, between Israel and Palestine, also has a huge implication on European countries and impacts their internal policies and human rights debates. Not to mention, the 2025 Moldovan parliamentary elections were one of the most important events in Europe, offering critical insights for other European states, particularly with regard to the alarming rise of foreign interference, illicit funding, cyber attacks, and massive disinformation campaigns designed to undermine democratic processes.

The report will give a comprehensive and clear picture of the different human rights challenges in Europe. The report reflects not only the most urgent problems happening right now, but also the bigger political and social changes that are impacting the protection and promotion of human rights across the continent.

# 1. SOUTHERN EUROPE

## 1.1 Albania

In 2025, Albania has focused on joining the EU, with six negotiation clusters opening in the past year (Stojanović, 2025). Aiming to become an EU member state by 2030, the negotiations will discuss the tangible reforms that Albania should implement in order to comply with EU standards. Among these are: the functioning of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, fundamental rights, public administration reform, and the economic criteria (Stojanović, 2025).

While these negotiations signal progress, Albania's human rights landscape has been defined by a precarious balance between ambitious institutional reforms and systemic vulnerabilities in the rule of law. One primary driver in justice reforms has been the Special Structure for the Fight Against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), which has earned the trust of citizens in their prosecution of high-level corruption and organised crime and has also shown dedication to the EU accession path (European Policy Centre, 2025). This year, SPAK has investigated senior political figures, including close allies of Prime Minister Edi Rama, whose Socialist Party won a record fourth term in May (Sinoruka, 2025).

One significant human rights concern regards the implementation of the Italy-Albania Migration Protocol. This agreement uses two Italian-run offshore asylum processing centres near the port of Shengjin, Albania, and has been widely criticised by rights groups for being dehumanising and illegal (Rogers, 2025). However, these detention centres have been empty for months due to judicial obstacles with the European Court of Justice (Rogers, 2025).

Albania's commitment to freedom of expression this year faced scrutiny when it comes to the suppression of journalism. Journalists are increasingly subject to harassment around elections, with 36 registered attacks on journalists just this year (Alikaj, 2025). The organisation Reporters Without Borders (2025) attribute the intimidation they face to "conflicts of interest between the business and political worlds, a flawed legal framework, and partisan regulation".

## 1.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

On February 26th, 2025, Milorad Dodik, the President of the Republika Srpska, was sentenced to one year in prison and banned from holding office for six years for knowingly defying decisions issued by Bosnia's High Representative (Kurtik, 2025). This conviction sparked retaliatory legislative actions in the Republika Srpska parliament, including the approval of a draft constitution which expands their decision-making powers, challenging the country's state-level authority (Öztürk, 2025). This has resulted in a sort of "constitutional standoff" between the Republika Srpska leadership and Bosnia and Herzegovina's state institutions, effectively paralysing the country's legal framework (Sahadžić, 2025).

The erosion of the rule of law has translated into a direct assault on the freedom of association and media independence. Earlier this year, the Republika Srpska National Assembly adopted the controversial “Law on the Special Registry and Transparency of the Work of Non-Profit Organisations”, also referred to as the “Foreign Agents” law (Stop Activists Persecution, 2025). This legislation mandates that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that receive any amount of international funding must register as “foreign agents” and subject them to invasive government oversight, similar to repressive legal models used in Russia (Tomovic, 2025). This is a direct assault on Bosnia’s independent media landscape as many of these outlets are registered as NGOs and rely on international grants to operate (Tomovic, 2025).

Now, three decades since the genocide of Srebrenica, ethnic divisions continue to plague Bosnia, along with genocide denial and the glorification of war criminals (Beharić, 2025). Due to ethnic quotas enshrined in the Dayton constitution, an estimated 400,000 Bosnians cannot run for the highest political offices because they do not identify as Bosniaks, Croats, or Serbs (Beharić, 2025). Some schools in Bosnia still segregate Bosniak and Croat students in the same building, despite it being ruled a discriminatory practice (Beharić, 2025). Additionally, Milorad Dodik called the Srebrenica genocide a “fabricated myth” while the head of a Bosnian Serb NGO, Vojin Pavlovic, was sentenced to over two years in prison for denying the genocide and publicly praising Ratko Mladic, a war criminal (Phillip, 2025).

### **1.3 Croatia**

In November, Croatia underwent review during the 50th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the United Nations Human Rights Council. Although progress was highlighted in the country this year, the UPR offered recommendations in strengthening the prosecution of racist and hate-speech crimes, promoting employment among women and inclusivity in education, and amending gaps in Croatia’s justice system (Universal Periodic Review, 2025).

This year, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (2025) documented systematic abuses. The report details testimonies from people who witnessed the use of surveillance technologies at the Bosnia-Croatia border and also describe physical abuse from the police and the destruction of personal property (Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2025). Surveillance drones are now routinely used not only to detect arrivals but to facilitate coordinated “pushbacks”, a term used for forced and illegal deportations of migrants, involving unmarked vehicles and masked officers to evade accountability (Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2025).

### **1.4 Greece**

Greece’s most severe human rights violations involved illegal and violent deportations at both land and maritime borders. The practice of pushbacks has become a systematic tool of Greek border management (Statewatch, 2025). These operations frequently involve the summary expulsion of individuals without any legal process, often accompanied by the

confiscation of personal belongings and physical assault by masked operatives (Statewatch, 2025).

In addition to border violence, the Greek government has intensified its pressure on those documenting human rights abuses. In September, 2025, a communication written by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders discussed a disturbing trend of high-level public statements made by Greek officials that stigmatise migrant rights, NGOs, and human rights defenders (UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, 2025). Notably, the Minister of Migration and Asylum publicly questioned the legitimacy of NGOs that ‘act against the state’ by pursuing legal challenges in international courts and announced retaliatory administrative audits against groups providing legal aid to asylum seekers (UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, 2025). This is an attempt at delegitimising the work of NGOs and human rights defenders, especially in the eyes of the public.

## 1.5 Italy

As mentioned in the previous section on Albania, a significant human rights development for Italy this year was the operational launch of the Italy-Albania Protocol. In addition to this, press freedom is under threat, with Italy falling to 49th place in the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). The car bomb attack outside of investigative journalist Sigfrido Ranucci’s home in October this year raised concerns about the risks faced by those investigating organised crime and political misconduct (Trans-European Policy Studies Association, 2025). Italy is also home to the highest number of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) lawsuits per capita, which aim to suppress public participation and critical reporting (United Nations, 2024).

This environment of restricted oversight coincides with a major structural overhaul of the judicial system. On the 22-23 of March, Italian citizens will vote in a constitutional reform of the justice system called the “Nodio reform” (Wanted in Rome, 2026). One of the main significant proposed changes involves separating careers between judges and prosecutors (Puleo, 2025). In the current legal system, judges and prosecutors are able to change their roles within the first nine years of their careers, but the current government claims that this reform will bolster the impartiality of judges (Wanted in Rome, 2026). Critics of the proposed reform, including the National Association of Magistrates and centre-left opposition parties, worry that these changes will weaken the judiciary and accuse Meloni’s government of seeking control over who investigates crimes (Wanted in Rome, 2026).

The rights of LGBTQ+ individuals are also under threat, with the advancement of a bill designed to restrict LGBTQ+ discussions in schools by prohibiting teachers from discussing non-traditional family structures or identities in curricula (All Out, 2025). Now, educators may face legal or professional repercussions for fostering inclusive environments or providing support to students. This is part of a broader government strategy focused on “traditional family values”, following the criminalisation of Italian citizens who travel abroad to have children via surrogacy in 2024, targeting same-sex couples (Thomas, 2025).

## 1.6 Malta

Malta is an important part of the migration route, as the island is in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, between Libya and Italy. As many boats carrying migrants travel the sea around or to Malta, the government has been accused of refusing to engage in Search and Rescue (SAR) efforts when it concerns these boats (Mainwaring & Stierl, 2025). Authorities routinely fail to cooperate in maritime distress operations, even within their SAR zone, in an effort to prevent people from reaching Maltese shores (Mainwaring & Stierl, 2025).

In May, 2025, the Education Commissioner within the Office of the Ombudsman concluded that a gag order placed on educators by the Director General for Educational Services violated their freedom of expression (Meilak, 2025). The directive prohibited educators from expressing their personal opinions on the state education system, compelling them to align with the government's stance (Meilak, 2025). However, Commissioner Vincent de Gaetano asserted that this could not be “reasonably necessary” in a modern democratic society (Meilak, 2025).

Malta's position as the only EU member state with a near-total ban on abortion continues to result in the criminalisation of women (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2023). In July, a 28-year-old-woman was handed a suspended 22-month jail sentence after pleading guilty to having an abortion using medication she purchased online (Civicus Monitor, 2025a). The European Parliament, however, voted in December to support an optional abortion travel fund to assist individuals in countries like Malta to access healthcare abroad (Debono, 2025).

## 1.7 Montenegro

As Montenegro gets closer to achieving EU membership, it is prioritising reforms on anti-corruption, judicial independence, and the Ombudsman's office (Centre for Civil and Political Rights, 2025). The Human Rights Committee, however, criticised that most reforms “appear to be driven by EU requirements rather than a well-planned national strategy” (Centre for Civil and Political Rights, 2025). In response, Montenegro blamed frequent government changes for poor implementation of reforms, while maintaining its commitment to the EU accession process (Centre for Civil and Political Rights, 2025).

One notable event raised concerns over the violation of freedom of expression. In November of 2024, Pobjeda journalist Ana Raičković was brutally attacked by businessman Zoran Bećirović as a retaliatory strike for her investigative work into his business dealings and legal battles (Pobjeda, 2025). Five months after the attack Zoran Bećirović was put under police protection (Pobjeda, 2025). The high-profile attack underscores the persistent atmosphere of intimidation in Montenegrin media.

## 1.8 Portugal

For Portugal, 2025 was marked by the far-right Chega party becoming the biggest opposition party in parliament (Civicus Monitor, 2025b). In areas like immigration, education, and civil

liberties, Chega has contributed to growing political polarisation in the country (Civicus Monitor, 2025b). The Portuguese parliament even approved a bill to ban face veils used for “gender or religious motives”, which was proposed by Chega and specifically targets Muslim women (Al Jazeera, 2025). Moreover, reports of increasing hate speech, particularly against migrants, Roma communities, people of African descent, and the LGBTQ+ community in Portugal, further demonstrate the rise of the far-right and polarisation in the country (Carmo, 2025).

Also contributing to this polarisation is Portugal’s housing crisis, which has increasingly evolved into a fundamental human rights issue. High foreign demand for housing in Portugal continues to push prices up, making properties unaffordable for locals on lower salaries and effectively undermining the right to adequate housing (Santos Cardoso, 2025). This economic strain is disproportionately impacting young people and low-income families, many of whom are being forced out of urban centres like Lisbon and Porto (Wood, 2025). This displacement represents a failure of the state’s obligation to protect its citizens from the predatory financialisation of the housing market, which is a grievance that the far-right has strategically capitalised on (Wood, 2025).

This year, Portugal went through a high-stakes trial that tested the limits of police accountability and racial justice. On October 22nd, the trial officially began for the police officer who fatally shot Odair Moniz, a 43-year-old Cape Verdean and well-known member of the Zambujal community in Amadora (Donn, 2025). Moniz, a father of three who had lived in Portugal for over 20 years, was unarmed when he was killed during a police intervention in late 2024, an event that ignited the country’s most significant civil unrest in decades (Donn, 2024). The trial revealed that along with the officer responsible for the shooting, two more gave false testimony about the presence of a knife (Donn, 2025). The proceedings are ongoing, and will shed light on impunity within security forces.

## **1.9 Serbia**

Following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway that killed 16 people in late 2024, protests in Serbia erupted throughout 2025 in what began as a call for accountability (United Nations, 2025). These movements were largely spearheaded by university students under the slogan “Corruption Kills”, framing the disaster not as an accident, but as a fatal consequence of opaque state contracts and systemic negligence. Students positioned themselves as the vanguard for state transparency, demanding the public release of secret documents regarding the train station’s renovation (Platform for Peace and Humanity, 2025). University students who protest peacefully have reportedly faced intimidation, physical attacks, surveillance, and arrests without legal justification (United Nations, 2025). The arrest of Stefan Radojičić, a student who was detained after a video came out of him speaking at a protest, represented a violation of human rights in Serbia (Vreme, 2025). Protestors also described the police threatening them with violence, including sexual violence, and in some cases police slapped, kicked, pepper-sprayed, and spat on students (Zoric & Andric, 2025).

Two journalists from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network were also targeted with Pegasus spyware, which is the third time in two years this technology has been used against civil society (Amnesty International, 2025). One of the journalists was working on an article about foreign investments and state-linked corruption cases (Amnesty International, 2025).

The struggle over environmental and land rights in Serbia reached a critical stalemate in 2025. Late this year, the controversial Jadar Valley lithium mine project operated by Rio Tinto paused again following months of opposition (Ford, 2025). Protestors repeatedly blocked major highways and city centers, arguing that the project posed an existential threat to the region's agricultural land and water security (Ford, 2025).

## **1.10 Spain**

In July, the southeastern town of Torre Pacheco saw the eruption of far-right anti-migrant violence following the beating of an elderly local man by three young men of North African origin (Global State of Democracy Initiative, 2025). Over the course of five days, these groups vandalised migrant-owned businesses and intimidated residents, resulting in the arrest of at least 14 people, including the leader of a far-right group on hate crime charges (Global State of Democracy Initiative, 2025).

In a landmark case in July, a Spanish court ruled that megapollution caused by an intensive pig farm breached the rights of local residents (Hughes, 2025). The court found that the environmental degradation of groundwater and air quality violated the residents' right to a healthy environment and private life (Hughes, 2025). This case is the first of its kind, drawing on the Spanish constitution to show that public authorities do not meet their legal obligation to protect citizens from harmful pollution (Hughes, 2025).

# **2. EASTERN EUROPE**

## **2.1 Russia**

In 2025, Russia experienced a substantial and consistent backsliding of its already-weak human rights protections. The Russian government has rapidly dismantled avenues for dissent and human rights advocacy. In particular, the country has seen increased use of legislation to shut down human rights institutions and the proliferation of the imprisonment of lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders, and ordinary citizens. This has led to a clear consolidation of the Russian government's repression.

This has occurred alongside the backdrop of Russia's illegal war of aggression in Ukraine, in part as a consequence of the war. The violations perpetrated by Russia on Ukrainian soil are considered in more detail in the section below concerning Ukraine. As well as perpetrating atrocities in Ukraine, there is evidence that a culture of brutality and torture persists within the structures of the Russian army itself. For example, there are reports of extrajudicial

killings with soldiers being beaten to death for misdemeanours such as drinking alcohol (Zhadaev, 2025).

The outlawing of human rights organisations is one of the most concerning trends in Russia. In April 2025, the Russian Federation adopted legislation which expanded the grounds for designating individuals and organisations as ‘foreign agents’. Since then, Russia has substantially expanded the number of organisations deemed ‘undesirable’, including Amnesty International, Deutsche Welle, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters Without Borders (Amnesty International, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025; RSF, 2025). Any entity declared undesirable is no longer able to set up entities in Russia, carry out projects, or disseminate information (Plenglish, 2025).

In addition to the crackdown on civil society institutions, Russia has continued to attack, repress, and detain individual citizens. In January, Alexei Navalny’s defence lawyers, Igor Sergunin, Alexei Lipster and Vadim Kobzev, were sentenced to several years in prison following a closed-door trial (Kirby, 2025). The Russian government has taken similar actions to limit the freedom of media expression, including sentencing journalists associated with Alexei Navalny’s ‘Anti-Corruption Foundation’ to more than five years in prison (International Service for Human Rights, 2025).

Throughout the year, Putin’s government has distanced Russia further from international norms. In October 2025, Russia notified its intention to withdraw from the ‘European Convention for the Prevention of Torture’ effective from November 1st, 2026 (Council of Europe, 2025). This will place detainees in Russia at substantial risk. Not only this, the Special Rapporteur on human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova, has highlighted that this raises red flags about detention conditions currently (OHCHR, 2025). Putin has also continued his attacks on the ICC, including trying ICC representatives in absentia and finding them guilty of “prosecuting innocent persons, illegal detention, and attempted violence against persons who enjoy international protection” (The Moscow Times, 2025).

In addition to the systematic rejection of human rights and the rule of law, the conditions for LGBTQIA+ persons in Russia have also deteriorated. In May, investigators charged three staff members of two publishing houses with allegedly “ruining an extremist organisation” for selling fiction exploring LGBTQIA+ themes (Human Rights Watch(a), 2025). The situation remains poor for other minorities with xenophobia and anti-migrant stances becoming increasingly predominant (Human Rights Watch(b), 2025). In one region, migrants have been banned from working as taxi drivers and driving buses (Human Rights Watch(b), 2025). In the Moscow region, migrants were banned from selling alcohol, tobacco, and street food, providing social services, and employment in the sports, culture, entertainment, health and education spheres (Human Rights Watch(b), 2025).

## 2.2 Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine continues to dictate the situation for human rights in the country. As the year has progressed, the plight of civilians in the country has deteriorated further. Attacks on the country have increased in intensity, resulting in significant death and destruction (OHCHR(a), 2025). This includes attacks on energy infrastructure across the country which leave people without heating, water, and public transport (OHCHR(a), 2025). There are also widespread reports that suggest Russia is using illegal chemical weapons against Ukrainian soldiers (Al Jazeera(a), 2025), in violation of international law (Dols, 2025). Russia has also continued to use illegal cluster munitions in residential areas, with high child casualties persisting (United Nations, 2025).

The systematic torture of Ukrainian prisoners of war and detained civilians has been a persistent feature of the war (OHCHR(b), 2025). Former prisoners of war have reported severe beatings, stress positions, sleep deprivation, mock executions, and attacks by dogs (Human Rights Watch(c), 2025). Incommunicado detention, whereby detainees are kept in an unknown location and precluded from access to anyone outside of the place of detention, is a widespread practice (Amnesty International(a), 2025). Death in detention and summary executions also remain widespread (Amnesty International(a), 2025).

Other critical human rights violations include Russian attempts to erase national identity, particularly throughout Russian-occupied regions. This has included targeting symbols of Ukrainian statehood, language, heritage and culture. For example, Russian authorities have been removing the study of Ukrainian language from schools (Shapiro and Korkiya, 2025). The abduction and forced re-education of Ukrainian children is another facet of this strategy which has persisted in 2025. Although Ukraine has managed to repatriate 1,859 abducted children, estimates suggest that around 20,000 children were forcibly removed (Goncharova, 2025).

Whilst the war has continued to affect Ukraine severely, progress has been made in terms of accountability and justice for Russian human rights violations and war crimes. In July, the ECtHR handed down its judgment in the seminal case of *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia*.<sup>1</sup> The Court found Russia liable for widespread violations of human rights stemming from the conflict in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022. In June, Ukraine and the Council of Europe signed an agreement to establish a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine (Council of Europe(a), 2025). This is significant because the ICC does not have jurisdiction to try the crime of a war of aggression. Another important development was the establishment of an International Claims Commission for Ukraine in December (Deutsch and van den Berg, 2025). The Commission will assess reparations claims and determine the amount to be paid to Kyiv.

Besides Russia's actions, challenges persist domestically. Despite attempts to reform the judiciary, corruption remains widespread among judges and prosecutors (Velychko, 2025). In

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<sup>1</sup> *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia* (dec.) [GC], nos. 8019/16 and 2 others, 30 November.

November, Ukraine's anti-corruption bureau uncovered a high-level criminal scheme involving Ukraine's nuclear energy body which supplies Ukraine with more than half its electricity (Harding, 2025). It is alleged that a group of government insiders received kickbacks of 10-15% from partners of Ukraine's nuclear energy body, Energoatom (Harding, 2025). If the partners refused to pay, they would be removed from a list of approved counter-parties or not reimbursed for services already provided (Harding, 2025).

## 2.3 Georgia

Georgia faces a worrying situation for human rights, and 2025 was a particularly challenging year. In 2024, the country began to slide into authoritarianism, a trend which has persisted in 2025.

The year in Georgia was marked by waves of protest against the decision to pause Georgia's EU integration plan for four years. The Georgian government has suppressed these with extreme brutality and a systematic dismantling of the right to protest. Throughout the year, Georgia has introduced progressively restrictive measures on protest, including extensions of detention times for administrative offenses and making mask-wearing a crime (Human Rights Watch(d), 2025). Protestors have also experienced police brutality, including the use of water cannons, pepper spray and tear gas to disperse protestors (Al Jazeera(c), 2025). Reports published in December 2025 suggest that the Georgian government used a World War 1 toxic compound on protestors during protests between November and December of 2024 (Hudson *et al.*, 2025). The chemical can have long-lasting effects, including burning sensations and impact on breathing. There are also widespread reports that women protestors face gender-based violence and gendered reprisals, including threats of sexual violence and degrading strip searches (Amnesty International(c), 2025).

Georgia has also faced severe democratic backsliding this year. Local elections in Georgia took place in early October with severe political reprisals against opposition figures and civil society (Amnesty International(d), 2025). Multiple opposition figures were detained and accused of spurious criminal charges. The result was a resounding victory for the ruling party, Georgian Dream (Kitachev, 2025).

This repression of political freedom has occurred alongside increased restrictions on media freedom and civil society organisations. NGOs must register under Georgia's "foreign influence" law and have been subject to criminal investigations, asset freezes, and inspections (IBAHRI, 2025). Independent media has also been forced off air: *Mtavari Arkhi* TV-broadcaster has not been able to broadcast since May 1st, 2025 (Amnesty International(d), 2025). There have been 600 attacks against the press since November 28th, 2024 including arbitrary fines, assaults, and suspensions of accreditations (RSF(a), 2025).

Georgian Dream has also launched intense attacks on LGBTQIA+ communities across the country. In April, the government announced a proposed ban on LGBTQIA+ marches and

symbols relating to the community, such as rainbow flags (Georgia Today, 2025). This follows frequent counter-protests at Pride events, including far-right groups attacking journalists and activists during Pride week.

## 2.4 Belarus

President Lukashenko's government in Belarus has persisted in its regime of autocracy, repression and human rights violations. Throughout the year, the country's human rights situation has shown no sign of improving. Right from the start of the year, Belarus's presidential elections in January were conducted in an atmosphere of severe repression and intimidation with President Lukashenko securing a seventh term. The election was widely condemned as a sham (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2025).

Throughout the year, the Belarusian government has continued its practice of politically motivated prosecutions. In August, the Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers was declared an "extremist formation" (Human Rights Watch(f), 2025). The organisation protects the rights to a defence and a fair trial (Human Rights Watch(f), 2025). Its prohibition represents a significant attack on the legal profession in Belarus. Lawyers who have acted in politically motivated cases have also faced revocation of their licenses, searches and fines (Human Rights Watch(f), 2025). Lukashenko's government has enacted similar repression against journalists and human rights activists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2025 and Article 19, 2025).

There are consistent reports of political prisoners facing ill-treatment and torture in Belarusian prisons (Human Rights Watch(e), 2025). Multiple political prisoners also died in 2025, some due to a lack of medical treatment and others under suspicious circumstances (Spring96, 2025). Lukashenko agreed to release 123 political prisoners after the US agreed to lift certain sanctions on Russia in early December (Rainsford, 2025). Despite this, as of December 19th, 1,103 political prisoners remained detained in Belarus (Spring96(a), 2025).

In March 2025, six NGOs submitted evidence to the ICC of potential crimes against humanity committed by the Belarusian authorities (International Federation for Human Rights, 2025). In particular, the organisations accused Belarus of creating an atmosphere of fear, terror and persecution with the goal to cleanse the population of "disloyal" individuals (International Federation for Human Rights, 2025).

There also continues to be exceptionally concerning reports of Belarus's mistreatment of migrants at its external borders. Belarusian border guards perpetrate brutal beatings and set dogs on migrants at the border (We Are Monitoring, 2025). Others have reported that following pushbacks to Belarus, Belarusian police tortured and beat them and then left them without food or water (We Are Monitoring, 2025).

## 2.5 Bulgaria

Bulgaria's year ended with political turmoil amid protests sparked by the government's plan to increase taxes (Aikman, 2025). The mass protests at the beginning of December resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov (Kirby(a), 2025). As well as the immediate cause of the budget plan, protestors rallied against corruption and called for institutional reform (Henley, 2025). The European Commission has highlighted that there are significant failings in the rule of law in Bulgaria, with perceived judicial independence considered "very low" and the country's anti-corruption strategy "limited" (European Commission, 2025).

Throughout the year, there were significant incidents of repression and violation. For example, around 200 Roma people were left homeless in Sofia after Bulgarian authorities demolished their homes without due process and in violation of an ECtHR ruling (Amnesty International(e), 2025). Proposed amendments to the Child Protection Act and other legislation would criminalise gender affirming healthcare for minors and ban exposing children to content concerning transgender persons, which constitutes a significant attack on transgender rights (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025).

## 2.6 Czech Republic

The landscape for human rights in the Czech Republic was mixed throughout 2025. On the one hand, the Czech Republic has a strong civil society, free press, and has made progress in relation to certain human rights issues. However, there are concerns that the country's recently appointed president, Andrej Babiš, will weaken human rights protections and democracy.

Positively, the Czech Republic banned the use of corporal punishment for children in October 2025 (End Corporal Punishment, 2025). In January 2025, a new law came into effect granting same-sex unions nearly all the same rights as marriage, barring joint adoption (Salerno, 2025). Whilst the legislation stopped short of full equality, this remains an important development. In July, the government approved the third National Action for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, which intends to strengthen the involvement of women in peace and security processes, and support women and girls domestically and internationally (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2025).

President Babiš's suggestion to scrap licence fees for Czech Television and Czech Radio, and to introduce additional obligations and restrictions on NGOs receiving funding from abroad are worrying (Eisenschetter, 2025). This threatens press freedom and might conflict with the European Media Freedom Act, which obliges member states to ensure adequate financial resources for public service media (Syndicate of Journalists of the Czech Republic, 2025).

## 2.7 Romania

Romania faced political turbulence towards the end of 2025. In December, Romania's coalition government survived a no-confidence vote over its economic policies and reform plans, which means it has now survived six no-confidence votes since taking power (Reuters, 2025). The vote came after protests triggered by the release of a documentary revealed systemic abuse and corruption in the justice system (Al Jazeera, 2025).

There have also been a series of restrictive measures and concerning trends in Romania throughout the year. Although Romania has taken important steps to address human trafficking, it remains a trafficking hotspot and a GRETA report highlighted that the increasing number of migrants in the country are at risk of trafficking (Council of Europe, 2025). Women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights have been significantly undermined in Romania with hospitals increasingly adopting policies that prohibit the provision of abortions on request and healthcare professionals misinterpreting laws on recommended time limits for medical abortions (Human Rights Watch(g), 2025). With women facing increasing barriers in access to public healthcare, many have been forced to pay privately for abortions, which can cost more than a month's salary on the national minimum wage (Human Rights Watch(g), 2025). The situation for LGBTQIA+ rights also remains poor with Romania overtaking Poland as the worst EU country for LGBTQIA+ persons (Skiba, 2025).

## 2.8 Slovakia

In 2025, Slovakia saw a pattern of human rights violations and restrictions on rights. In September, the government passed constitutional amendments targeting LGBTQIA+ rights (Kassam, 2025). This included the almost-complete prohibition of same-sex couples adopting children and declaring that male and female are the only recognised sexes. The constitutional amendments also restricted reproductive rights by allowing health care professionals to refuse abortions on the grounds of "conscience" (Amnesty International, 2025).

Slovakia has also passed laws which restrict the activities of civil society organisations. The legislation imposes rules on NGOs, such as on financial reporting and freedom of information requirements (Bachels, 2025). The government also interfered in the media by increasing its control over the country's public broadcaster and putting greater pressure on private media (Media Freedom Rapid Response, 2025). Legal harassment of journalists, intimidation, and smear campaigns have all been reported in the country (International Press Institute, 2025).

As well as this, the government's recent amendments to the judicial system threaten the rule of law in Slovakia, including by dismantling the whistleblower protection agency (Al Jazeera(e), 2025). This triggered major protests in Bratislava, which come after a series of protests against Prime Minister Fico's policies, including his failure to distance the country from Putin (Gosling, 2025).

## 2.9 Moldova

Moldova has experienced a mixed record of human rights and democratic protections in 2025. The election of the pro-EU party, Party of Action and Solidarity, in the September elections indicated the population's desire for closer relations with the EU and commitment to democracy and the rule of law (Committee to Protection Journalists, 2025).

However, the country has seen challenges for media freedom. The removal of USAID funding in January has detrimentally impacted many pro-European media in Moldova (Amnesty International(g), 2025). In March, the government suspended TV channel TVC 21's licence for sixty (Amnesty International(g), 2025). TVC 21 is an opposition channel and vocal critic of the government, which makes this particularly concerning (Amnesty International(g), 2025).

There are still significant shortcomings in Moldova's treatments of persons with disabilities who are in state care. An investigation published in March 2025 revealed systemic failures in the country's care of disabled persons, including care home residents living in isolation and inhumane conditions, while also facing abuse (Calmis, 2025). Not only this, but care home residents were subjected to forced labour, exploitation, and physical and sexual violence (Calmis, 2025). The Moldovan government has promised to address these issues.

## 2.10 Poland

In Poland, 2025 was marked by harsh policies towards migrants and asylum seekers. In March, a new law suspended the right to seek asylum for migrants who enter Poland irregularly (Paternoster, 2025). This violated international law and undermined the rights of refugees and migrants. Migrants in detention centres also faced poor conditions, with overcrowding and conditions that might violate international standards (Notes from Poland, 2025). Poland also continued its systemic practice of illegal pushbacks at the border with Belarus (Oxfam International, 2025). Survivors' testimonies revealed severe violence perpetrated by Polish authorities, which included shooting people with rubber bullets, releasing dogs to chase them, and providing water laced with pepper spray (Oxfam International 2025).

Poland's abortion laws continue to be exceptionally restrictive, and the country failed to follow the CEDAW Committee's recommendations of legal reform to legalize and fully decriminalise abortion (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2025). A doctor who provided a lawful late-term abortion faced potential prosecution and imprisonment of up to eight years after providing an abortion to a woman who faced a severe threat to her health (Amnesty International(h), 2025).

In December, the European Court of Justice found that Poland's judiciary, particularly its Constitutional Court, was not sufficiently independent and breached EU law (Oelofse, 2025). This suggests that the current government has not done enough to address the measures taken by previous administrations to reduce the independence of the judiciary.

## **2.11 Hungary**

There was a further escalation in the decline of democracy and the rule of law in Hungary throughout 2025. In May, the government proposed legislation which would restrict the activities of NGOs, enabling the government to target organisations by placing them on a blacklist (Inotai and Watson, 2025). Orban's government also attacked media freedom in May, proposing legislation to allow the monitoring, penalisation and banning of organisations that receive any foreign funding, including EU grants (Kassam, 2025). In December, the European Commission alerted Hungary of its intent to open infringement proceedings against the government for its failure to comply with EU media law (Shelton, 2025). The Commission highlighted the inadequate protection of journalistic sources and failure to comply with requirements in terms of interference with journalists' work.

The government also attacked the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community, including banning assemblies that "depict" or "promote" homosexuality and gender diversity (Amnesty International(i), 2025). Legislation passed in March authorised the use of surveillance measures, including facial recognition technology, to identify and fine participants in any such events (OHCHR(c), 2025). Other minorities also face challenging circumstances. Roma people experience discrimination in education, employment, healthcare, housing, and access to goods and services, and are disproportionately impoverished (Phiren America, 2025). Hungary also continues to mistreat migrants and has stated that it will not accept any migrants under the EU's new migration solidarity mechanism (Amnesty International UK, 2025 and InfoMigrants, 2025).

## **3. CENTRAL AND WESTERN EUROPE**

### **3.1 Austria**

In the year 2025, women and people with disabilities still face significant barriers in accessing social assistance benefits, including stigmatisation, bureaucratic hurdles and restrictive legal provisions, undermining their right to social security.

Furthermore, the far-right led coalition pledged to deploy more police at the border, deport Afghans and Syrians back to their home countries, and replace cash payment for refugees with benefits in kind, hurting human rights and underprotecting refugees (Murphy, 2025). While the country is grappling with record inflation and high living costs, the country's

response was swift to cut costs and limit investment capacities, affecting disproportionately lower-income households, establishing national preference for social housing, and denying all but basic medical care to asylum seekers, in a measure to cut expenses (Greilinger, 2025).

The United Nations Committee against Torture (CAT) expressed concerns about the lack of federal provision to ensure guardianship for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children on their arrival in Austria (UNHR, 2024). It also highlighted that no safe and dignified pathways like resettlement programmes, were created for people seeking international protection.

Concerns of failure to adopt long-term strategies to prevent violence against women, with 27 of them being killed by the end of the year. Austria failed to ensure that places in women's shelters were available in sufficient quantity and in an adequate geographic distribution (Amnesty, 2025).

On the other hand, the government enacted a new Freedom of Information Act (*Informationsfreiheitsgesetz*), which gives companies and individuals the right to access public information held by public bodies or other legal or natural persons that perform public tasks or are under public control, including information regarding organisational rules and structures, official gazettes, and official statistics. It also allows access to published data for free and informally (Denk et al, 2025). This means that the public instances have the duty to proactively publish information of general interest, although most municipalities were exempt from it (Amnesty, 2025).

Austria failed to harmonise anti-discrimination legislation on regional and national levels, with disability, ethnicity, and gender still being considered protected grounds only in access to goods and services. Meanwhile, rates of antisemitic and anti-Muslim crimes were high throughout the year, exemplified by an antisemitic rally hosted on November 11th, 2025, by Austria's first far-right parliamentary speaker (Le Monde, 2025), and a legal amendment passed prohibiting Muslim girls under 14 from wearing headscarves in school (Deutsche Presse Agentur, 2025).

Finally, though the country has made notable strides in environmental and climate policy, and its circular economy has improved (European Environment Agency, 2025), the government violated human rights by failing to introduce a binding climate protection act, when human-induced climate change increased extreme weather events, with floods, warming weather, droughts, and so on (Amnesty, 2025).

## **3.2 Belgium**

Belgium is a stable electoral democracy with a long record of peaceful transfers of power, with political rights and civil liberties being legally guaranteed and largely respected (Freedom House, 2025).

Although freedom of expression is still protected and guaranteed in the country, the parliament adopted a new criminal code in February 2025 that criminalises acts such as

malicious attacks on the authority of the state, glorification of terrorism, and lese-majesty, which undermines this principle, as it punishes those that lack respect for the sovereign. The new code further provided that custodial sentences should be imposed only as a measure of last resort, reaffirming the presumption of innocence. However, prison overcrowding persisted, alongside deteriorating infrastructure and inadequate healthcare and sanitation, with reports of violence against inmates, threatening their safety and hindering their reintegration (Lopez, 2025).

Furthermore, municipalities continued to require prior authorisation for public gatherings, a disproportionate restriction of the right to protest. Additionally, police violence against peaceful demonstrators, especially those protesting human rights violations in Gaza, harm the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Civil society organisations called attention to the increasing repression against pro-Palestinian demonstrators, highlighting the use of administrative sanctions against peaceful protesters for failing to comply with unlawful municipal authorisation regimes:

*Since the end of August, around seventy people who participated in or supported the occupation of a building at ULB on the Solbosch campus have received a summons from the police, notably for 'membership in a group advocating segregation and racial discrimination' <sup>2</sup>(Amnesty, 2024).*

Furthermore, thousands of asylum seekers were left homeless and destitute by being denied access to accommodation throughout the year, including around 170 Moldovan refugees who have been living in an abandoned office building in July and were forced to leave due to a judicial decision, with no other place to go to (The Brussels Time, 2025).

The government also continued to deny international protection to most Afghan asylum seekers, with only 39 percent of those applying being granted protection, despite the severity of the human rights crisis in Afghanistan. Those denied the protection were unable to return to their country of origin, being left vulnerable without papers and without access to the basic rights due to their irregular migration status.

Finally, in February, the Walloon regional government suspended export licenses of military material to Israel, after protests from civil society organisations. However, the media later reported in December that the same regional government resumed issuing export licences for military material to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) despite significant human rights concerns (The Brussels Time, 2025).

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<sup>2</sup>Original : « Depuis la fin août, une septantaine de personnes qui ont participé ou soutenu l'occupation d'un bâtiment de l'ULB sur le campus du Solbosch ont reçu une convocation de la police notamment pour 'appartenance à un groupe prônant la ségrégation et la discrimination raciale' ».

### 3.3 France

In France, systemic racism and religious discrimination persisted, including against Muslim women and girls. The government's approach to tackling racism continued to be undermined by its refusal to address systemic racism, alongside its failure to collect reliable data. Authorities continued to deny the existence of systemic racism in policing, when widespread use of discriminatory identity checks persisted, as confirmed by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in 2025, when judging the case of *Seydi and Others v. France*<sup>3</sup>. The Human Rights Committee also called on the French government to develop policies to combat racial discrimination based on statistics from more effective data collection tools, relying on the principles of self-identification and anonymity.

Furthermore, the freedom of expression and assembly was not respected by the country when its government acted with excessive and disproportionate restrictions against people expressing solidarity with Palestinians in major cities such as Paris, Lyon, Alençon and others across the country. Under allegations of “apology for terrorism,” several human right defenders, trade union representatives, politicians, journalists, academics, and medical practitioners expressing solidarity with Palestinians were investigated, harming freedom of expression. Peaceful protesters and bystanders were fined for participation in an undeclared or banned protest, when France experienced a deep political crisis and significant civic mobilisation, since the President Emmanuel Macron called snap elections in 2024 (CIVICUS, 2025). This trend was also noted overseas in New Caledonia, during the unrest erupted after parliament adopted a bill in May changing the territory's voting rules, leading to insecurity and fear throughout the country, with burned-out schools, businesses and homes (The Conversation, 2025).

On the other hand, the government continued to license arms exports to Israel despite calls by UN experts for the immediate cessation of these transfers, which violates international humanitarian law, despite President Macron's call in October for an embargo on arms for use in Gaza (Comerford, 2024).

With regards to women's rights, a major reform of the French Penal Code adopted in July 2025 amended the statute of limitations for sexual offences. Depending on the seriousness of the offence and the age of the victim, certain crimes are now subject to significantly extended limitation periods. In particular, rape of a minor is subjected to a 40-year statute of limitations, which begins to run only once the victim reaches adulthood. (Paganelli, 2025). This reform strengthens protection for victims, particularly when they are minors at the time of the offence.

Finally, France slowed its progress in reducing fossil fuel emissions, compared to 2023, as the expansion of the renewable energy sector remained insufficient to meet the targets. However, the Paris Court of Appeal announced the creation of a chamber dedicated to

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<sup>3</sup> This case marks the first time the court has found France in breach of the convention in a case concerning racial profiling by the police, when Mr. Karim Touil, the victim, had his identity checked three times over the course of 10 days, which amounted to discrimination in violation of the ECHR.

emerging litigation submitted to the Duty of Vigilance Law, which requires the companies employing at least 5,000 employees in France or at least 10,000 employees in France or abroad, to include the reasonable vigilance measures to identify risks and prevent serious harm to human rights and fundamental freedoms, health and personal safety, as well as the environment (Latham & Watkins, 2024).

### 3.4 Germany

Germany has been criticised by journalists and political analysts for racist plans coined by the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD), including plans for large-scale repatriation referred to as “remigration.” The AfD defined it as a legal and constitutional return of foreigners who are required to leave the country and return to their home. However, journalists exposed plans of mass deportation of 250,000 foreigners, who would be required to leave the country, including those with criminal backgrounds, also calling for reviewing and revoking humanitarian residency, even for those at high risk if returned, such as Afghans and Syrians (Santos, 2025).

Furthermore, criticism has been brought upon a security package proposed by the government, which aims to expand Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered biometric surveillance, including the use of AI-driven facial recognition technologies to search online sources for matching images of individuals (Simsek, 2025). Human rights’ advocates warn of the potential threat to civil liberties, as it could create a surveillance regime:

*It would be indiscriminate – there doesn't have to be any concern raised against me to be included in police databases. We find this problematic from both a human rights and fundamental rights perspective,* affirmed Matthias Spielkamp, executive director of Algorithm Watch.

The conservative-led coalition of Chancellor Friedrich Merz view the legislation as a modernisation of policing tools, but human rights defenders see this decision as a way of normalising mass state surveillance.

When it comes to the environment, the country is stepping up its climate and environmental efforts as challenges intensify, with renewable energy and biodiversity being its top priorities, as the government rules out coal and nuclear power (EEA, 2025). While heating and transport still rely heavily on fossil fuels, the energy transition is picking up speed, with millions employed in green sectors. Initiatives such as a federal action plan on nature-based solutions and national water strategy that aims to restore nature and build resilience, aligned to changes in food habits among the citizens, show an interest in protecting the environment. Nonetheless, biodiversity loss continues, with more than 350 species endangered (Max Planck, 2011). Additionally, waste in the food industry is still rising and the shift to a circular economy is slow (EEA, 2025).

Finally, Germany announced on November 17th that it will resume weapons exports to Israel, after initially freezing deliveries in August, on grounds of Israel maintaining the ceasefire and ensuring humanitarian aid is provided on a large scale (The Cradle, 2025). Data shows that Germany supplied 30 percent of Israel's major arms imports between 2019 and 2023, including arms used in the Gaza war (Hussain, 2025).

### 3.5 The Netherlands

The new government, a coalition of far-right, farmers, liberal and anti-corruption parties, announced proposals to restrict the procedural position of asylum seekers, proposing the “strictest-ever” asylum policy, including an opt-out from EU rules, allowing the deportation without a valid residence permit “by force if necessary” (Le Monde, 2024). This decision led to a perpetuation of the Dutch asylum system crisis in 2025, with enormous amounts of public funds in Europe being used to finance the centres of detention and asylum reception, but with little to no improvement of the lives of those that are forced to live there. A thriving market has emerged, where substantial profits can be made from emergency solutions, while the quality of the care remains substandard (Den Boer and Logger, 2025).

The country has also been called out for using drones and video surveillance cars against peaceful protesters without adequate regulation, safeguards or accountability. For example Paul, a climate activist stated:

*It's unpredictable. I've seen camera surveillance in all forms (...) Police in uniform photographing, and the camera cars with a telescopic camera on the roof. (...) I never experienced that the police informed us. A car like that, it's just there or it isn't,* said Paul, a climate activist to Amnesty International (2024).

Such surveillance practices undermine the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. At the same time, the government also announces firmer and faster action against pro-Palestine activists, amid accusations of complicity through its support for Israel (Gunaydin, 2025).

Lastly, the new right-wing government weakened climate policies, threatening the target of a 55 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, and achieving climate neutrality by 2050, as established by the European Climate Law (CCPI, 2025). However, the Sustainable Energy Production and Climate Transition Incentive Scheme (SDE ++), announced in 2025, continues to drive renewable energy protection and climate transition by funding large-scale renewable installations and emission-reducing initiatives, among other incentives, such as a separate lower tax tariff on hydrogen, expansion of wind energy, and so on (Visser and Docx, 2025).

## 4. NORTHERN EUROPE

### 4.1 Estonia

As of 2025, Estonia faces human rights challenges regarding freedom of religion, minority rights, and citizenship. This year, UN human rights experts pointed to escalating legislative measures targeting the Estonian Orthodox Christian Church (EOCC) (OHCHR, 2025). Questioning the Church's canonical affiliation due to its historic ties to the Moscow Patriarchate, the government pushed amendments to the Churches and Congregations Act, which have been reported to be applied only to the EOCC (OHCHR, 2025). These included reduction of public funding, the exclusion of the EOCC from consultations, restrictive residence-permit decisions affecting clergy, the abrupt termination of a long-standing lease in Tallinn, sharply increased insurance premiums for the Pühtitsa Convent, and the expulsion or de facto removal of senior clergy without adequate procedural safeguards based on undisclosed security assessment (OHCHR, 2025). Experts claimed these may amount to restrictions on freedom of religion (OHCHR, 2025).

Another key area for improvement regards Estonia's large stateless population, which is roughly five percent of the total (Monette, 2025). Statelessness in the country is a result of post-independence citizenship policies which affected ethnically Russian residents (Monette, 2025). Stateless individuals cannot take part in Estonia's democratic processes, and recent constitutional amendments have further restricted voting rights for stateless residents (Monette, 2025). The debate is very sensitive and tied to ideas of security and preservation of identity, given the country's past resistance to russification.

Structural inequalities persist in Estonia. Women held only 14 percent of board positions in the largest listed companies, signalling the gender gap at high levels of economic decision-making (EIGE, 2025). Furthermore, Roma communities in the country face high unemployment levels caused by widespread prejudice and limited access to education (Roma Civil Monitoring, 2025). There are no specific measures to tackle anti-Romani discrimination in employment (Roma Civil Monitoring, 2025).

### 4.2 Finland

In 2025, Finland's most pressing human rights challenges regard migration control, bodily autonomy of intersex people, and Indigenous rights. Asylum seekers still suffer from Finland's 2024 "emergency law", which allows the government to limit asylum application in specific sections of its borders (Amnesty International, 2025). Border guards are authorised to prevent entry, even through the use of force (Amnesty International, 2025). The emergency law, which initially was intended to last a year, has been extended till the end of 2026, prolonging restrictions for people seeking asylum as well as the risk of violence on these vulnerable individuals (Amnesty International, 2025). Additionally, the Finnish Parliament has been discussing restrictive access to healthcare for asylum-seekers to urgent care only, which implies further concerns for the living conditions of migrants. Several

amendments to the Aliens Act have also restricted access to family reunification, even for unaccompanied minors (ECRI, 2025).

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) found violations of the right to bodily autonomy regarding intersex people (ECRI, 2025). Non-medically necessary sex-normalising surgeries are still carried out on children, and medical records of these operations are often missing or deleted, complicating access to one's own medical history (ECRI, 2025). No ban on non-consensual sex-normalising procedures has been introduced yet (ECRI, 2025).

Finally, the Indigenous Sámi People's ways of life remain at risk amidst increasing demand for critical raw material and green energy projects (Amnesty International & Saami Council, 2025). These are carried out in the Sápmi region and affect historical Sámi herding territories. The current framework consistently fails to ensure the free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) of Sámi representative institutions before initiating land use projects (Amnesty International & Saami Council, 2025).

### **4.3 Iceland**

As of 2025, Iceland's main areas of improvement affect asylum seekers, detainees, and minority groups who are targeted by hate speech. Since March 2024, Iceland's new immigration bill restricts access to housing and healthcare services for asylum seekers from the 30th day after their application has been denied, leaving these vulnerable individuals at risk of homelessness and serious health conditions (ILGA-Europe, 2025). Moreover, obstacles to family reunification further deny refugees their rights. Solitary confinement is widespread for migrants in pretrial detention (OHCHR, 2025). Thus, asylum seekers in the country face precarious legal, housing, and health situations (OHCHR, 2025).

However, solitary confinement does not only affect migrants. The widespread use of the practice in the country has drawn scrutiny. One woman was held in isolation at Hólmshéiði prison while still awaiting trial (RÚV, 2025). The woman suffers from depression and was assessed to be posing a threat to her own health (RÚV, 2025), nevertheless, she was kept confined (RÚV, 2025). Under international law, solitary confinement should be an exceptional practice and applied with strict safeguards in order to prevent vulnerable individuals from being subject to cruelty.

Finally, disinformation and hate speech, especially in online space, are rising in the country and targeting migrant communities and trans people (OHCHR, 2025). A national plan against hate speech was drafted in 2023, but had not been adopted yet as of 2025.

### **4.4 Ireland**

In 2025, Ireland's main human rights challenges regard migration and family reunification, as well as discrimination and structural exclusion against Irish Travellers and Roma People. New measures now require the payment of application fees, stricter accommodations

requirements, and consider the income of a single sponsor to meet the earnings threshold (MRCI, 2025). These new changes are said to make reunification unattainable for the families of many migrant workers, especially when employed in low-paid sectors such as care, hospitality, and food production (MRCI, 2025). There are cases of migrants who have been denied the possibility to reunite with family for over seven years (MRCI, 2025).

Additionally, in November 2025, the Irish cabinet approved new measures restricting access to state support for migrants and asylum-seekers (Al Jazeera, 2025). Refugees who find employment will have to contribute to state-provided accommodation, which will significantly impact their possibility for meeting income thresholds for reunification and citizenship or permanent residency (Al Jazeera, 2025). Citizenship rules have also changed so that residency requirements increased from three to five years for refugees (Al Jazeera, 2025).

Discrimination against Travellers and Roma remains a significant structural issue (O’Flaherty, 2025). Traveller men and women are substantially overrepresented in prisons compared to other communities, and are often incarcerated for minor offences (O’Flaherty, 2025). There is widespread ethnic profiling from authorities against Travellers and Roma, who in turn report a complete lack of trust in law enforcement to protect their rights (O’Flaherty, 2025). Many report reluctance by police to report crimes on Roma and Travellers, including domestic abuse (O’Flaherty, 2025). Frequent police raids on halting sites, often conducted without warrants, have been described as traumatic for Traveller children (O’Flaherty, 2025).

## **4.5 Lithuania**

In 2025, Lithuania saw legal progress for the LGBTQIA+ community, although persistent structural and societal challenges still account for great discrimination. In April 2025, Lithuania’s Constitutional Court ruled that prohibiting same-sex couples from registering as such violated the Constitution (Karčiauskas, 2025; Lithuanian Gay League, 2025). It found that it was unconstitutional to define partnership as happening exclusively between a man and a woman. Hence, same-sex partnerships have been allowed since (Karčiauskas, 2025). However, marriage remains explicitly limited to couples formed by a man and a woman. Registered partnerships do not provide rights to inheritance, information about hospitalised partners, and adoption, leaving same-sex couples with fewer protections and without full legal equality (Karčiauskas, 2025).

In general, protections for LGBTQIA+ people remain insufficient. Hate crime policies are poorly and rarely implemented, legal gender recognition is extremely difficult to attain, and lacks a self-determination model (Karčiauskas, 2025). Public opinion data shows extremely high levels of intolerance towards the community, such as opposing contact with queer individuals (Pads kocimaite, 2025). This is manifested in hostile actions such as vandalism of LGBTQ+ symbols, burning of pride flags, and several physical assaults (Pads kocimaite, 2025). As a consequence, Lithuania has recently lost several cases regarding LGBTQIA+ rights before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

## 4.6 Norway

In 2025, the main human rights challenges in Norway concern treatment of asylum-seekers and the rights of the Indigenous Sámi. Immigration detention violates several human rights. The Trandum Migrant Detention Centre has been criticised by civil society for its punitive and prison-like environment, despite detainees serving no criminal sentences and are simply attempting to find refuge in the country (Global Detention Project, 2025). It has been reported that unjustified lockdowns happen routinely, as well as body checks and restrictions on mobile phone use (Global Detention Project, 2025). Children and their families are detained in the Haraldvangen Family Centre (Global Detention Project, 2025). This practice is concerning as it disregards the principle of the child's best interest.

Similarly to Finland, Sámi communities are suffering the expansion of development activities such as power projects, infrastructure, tourism, and mining (OHCHR, 2025). Impacting historical herding territories, these activities threaten Sámi culture, traditions, and livelihoods (OHCHR, 2025). Without herding, Sámi cultural transmission becomes more difficult. The low number of revoked licenses for industrial projects in Indigenous territories, when compared to the significant volume of Sámi complaints highlights power imbalances in Norway (OHCHR, 2025). Affected communities reported being only formally consulted but with little notice and insufficient information on projects (OHCHR, 2025). The Sámi Parliament has little power to influence the national government, which undermines Indigenous self-determination on projects affecting their land (OHCHR, 2025).

## 4.7 Sweden

In 2025, Sweden faces human rights concerns over migration and integration policy, discrimination, and Indigenous rights. In 2025, the Swedish government has put forth the intention to implement stricter rules for residence permits and citizenship and expand the grounds for denying or revoking one's residence permit (OHCHR, 2025). The government also discussed increasing residency requirements for citizenship from five to eight years (OHCHR, 2025). Civil society groups raised concerns over increasing structural hostility against asylum seekers and migrants, particularly regarding the rights to a fair asylum procedure and family reunification (OHCHR, 2025, Amnesty International, 2025). Racism and hate crimes have risen, and more than half of the reported hate crimes pertain to xenophobia, with only six percent of cases going through, with victims rarely obtaining justice (OHCHR, 2025). Online spaces see widespread hatred and racist comments (OHCHR, 2025).

Recent security measures raised alarm with regard to overpolicing of certain communities. Now "security zones" can be legally designated where police officers can conduct body searches without suspicion (UN HRC, 2025). These measures disproportionately affect minorities and poorer neighbourhoods, giving room for ethnic profiling (UN HRC, 2025).

The Sámi people's livelihood is also threatened. Inadequate consultation breaches international standards on free, prior, and informed consent on mining activities, renewable

energy projects, and infrastructure plans (CERD, 2025 & Saami Council, 2025). Sámi territories and possibilities for herding are damaged, posing risks for cultural continuity (CERD, 2025).

## **4.8 United Kingdom**

In 2025, the United Kingdom faced criticisms linked to migration and asylum policy and its restriction on the rights of protesters to peaceful assembly. Migration policies have contributed to exacerbating vulnerability of migrant groups, particularly women and girls (Alsalem, 2025). The Illegal Migration Act undermines prospects of protection for those fleeing conflict and gender-based persecution, thus exposing women and girls to violence, trafficking, and sexual exploitation (Alsalem, 2025). Women who underwent female genital mutilation reportedly face invasive genital examinations during asylum procedures (Alsalem, 2025). With the “no recourse to public funds”, people subject to immigration control cannot access state support, facing homelessness and extreme poverty (Alsalem, 2025).

New planned reforms for the asylum system include ending permanent resident status for refugees, and instead switching to a model where refugees re-apply every two and a half years and may be subject to repatriation if their country of origin is deemed safe in the meanwhile (Topping, & Syal, 2025). According to the proposed reforms, people with refugee status would have to face an increased 20-year-long wait before applying for permanent residency (Topping, & Syal, 2025). Refugees who are deemed able to support themselves would lose housing and financial support, or if they are accused of non-compliance (Topping, & Syal, 2025). Additionally, the use of AI for age assessment of asylum seekers has raised concerns about racist biases and misclassification of children as adults (Topping, & Syal, 2025).

Freedom to protest peacefully has also been targeted. In July 2025, the protest group Palestine Action was placed under counter-terrorism legislation (Amnesty International, 2025). Since then, thousands of peaceful protesters have been arrested, with some of them facing terrorism-related charges (Topping, & Syal, 2025). Membership, expression of support, and symbolic association to Palestine Action are criminalised and can be punished with up to 14 years of imprisonment (OHCHR, 2025). Many have labelled this as a misuse of counter-terrorism law that affects fundamental democratic freedoms (OHCHR, 2025).

# **5. CAUCASUS AND TÜRKİYE**

## **5.1 Armenia**

In 2025, Armenia achieved a significant breakthrough in its long conflict with Azerbaijan. Armenia and Azerbaijan have been in conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh since the end of the Cold War, in the longest-running conflict in the past-Soviet space (European Parliament,

2025)<sup>4</sup>. Against all odds, in March 2025, after months of bilateral negotiations, both Armenia and Azerbaijan announced that they had agreed on a draft peace treaty that established the basis for future peaceful mutual relations (European Parliament, 2025). The agreement commits both sides to cease hostilities permanently, open full diplomatic relations, and respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Vision of Humanity, 2025). The centerpiece of this deal is to create a 43 km transit corridor through southern Armenia, which will connect mainland Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave and, via Türkiye, to European and Mediterranean markets. The peace deal should also influence the human rights in Armenia and Azerbaijan, including the release of political prisoners (Vision of Humanity, 2025). Before reaching the peace deal, the Armenian government faced some difficulties in integrating more than 100,000 refugees who fled Nagorno-Karabakh after Azerbaijan took control in September 2023 (Amnesty International, 2024). The biggest issues were connected to housing, employment, and education. The government could not fulfill the right to a safe and dignified return. Armenia and Azerbaijan have undoubtedly made an important step towards lasting peace and full normalisation of relations, contributing to stability in the region and laying the groundwork for shared prosperity.

While working towards the peace deal, in 2025, Armenia also made progress in strengthening its resilience and in consolidating democracy and the rule of law (European Commission, 2025). Armenian society remained polarised, and the government's domestic and foreign policies were strongly contested by the opposition. However, Armenian institutions could keep operating normally, and the domestic situation remained stable throughout the year (European Commission, 2025).

## 5.2 Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is an authoritarian regime, with power heavily concentrated in the hands of Ilham Aliyev, who has been the president of Azerbaijan since 2003 (Freedom House). Azerbaijan is not considered a free country, primarily due to increased corruption and weakened political opposition in recent years (Freedom House). In recent years, the Azerbaijan authorities have intensified their crackdown on civil liberties, adding to the ranks of political prisoners and leaving very little room for freedom of expression and activism.

Since 2023, the Azerbaijan authorities have targeted several independent media platforms, arrested their reporters and other staff on spurious smuggling charges (Human Rights Watch, 2024). In 2024, the authorities pressed additional criminal charges against journalists, including tax evasion, forgery of documents, and money laundering (Human Rights Watch 2024). Moreover, after the presidential elections in 2024, police raided the office of Toplum

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<sup>4</sup> The first Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan was the most violent conflict resulting from the breakup of the USSR. It started in the late 1980s when Nagorno-Karabakh's secession from Azerbaijan, backed by Armenia, sparked war and displacement (Vision of Humanity, 2025). In September 2020, a full-blown war broke out once again (European Parliament, 2025). Azerbaijan could regain significant territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and by 2023, Baku had reasserted full control of Nagorno-Karabakh, triggering the ethnic Armenian population to leave their homes (Vision of Humanity, 2025).

TV, confiscated all of their equipment, sealed their office, and arrested five civic and political activists (Human Rights Watch 2024). The latest wave of targeting journalists, political activists, human rights defenders, and scholars, followed by criminal investigations, happened in early 2025. Since March 2025, the Azerbaijan courts have issued numerous arrest warrants and handed down convictions in absentia. For example, in September 2025, a court sentenced a France-based blogger in absentia to six and a half years in prison on several charges, including inciting mass unrest (Human Rights Watch, 2025). This shows that the Azerbaijani authorities still use politically motivated charges to crack down on independent voices at home and abroad.

The historical peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan was one of the most significant events in 2025 for Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is planning to construct the Zagezur Corridor, which is intended to link Azerbaijan's mainland with the Nakhchivan exclave, boosting trade and transit (Global Conflict Tracker, 2025).

### 5.3 Türkiye

In 2025, Türkiye faced a major crisis regarding human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. This situation was driven by the government's aggressive campaign to suppress political opposition and public dissent. One of the most important problems is the continued erosion of the rule of law and the fact that the justice system has become a tool against the government's rivals. Furthermore, the country was ranked 118th among 143 countries in the 2025 World Justice Project Rule of Law index, which measures countries' performance across eight categories, such as constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, open government, fundamental rights, order and security, regulatory enforcement, civil justice, and criminal justice (Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2025).

The most important event was the arrest of Istanbul's mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, in March 2025, which is also an example of the justice system being weaponized to remove a leading opposition politician from the political scene (Human Rights Watch, 2025). He was considered the strongest challenger to the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. On 19 March, İmamoğlu was arrested and charged with corruption, aiding the PKK, and leading a criminal organisation. By Sunday, the court ruled that he would be jailed without bail pending trial for the corruption charges, and the terrorism charges were later dropped. İmamoğlu denied all accusations against him (BBC, 2025). This political action caused massive, widespread protests across Türkiye, which was the largest anti-government demonstration in years (The Guardian, 2025). The protests resulted in increased pushback from the Turkish authorities, with police deploying pepper spray, tear gas, and water cannon trucks against crowds gathering in Turkish cities (The Guardian, 2025). According to the Turkish authorities, law enforcement officials detained at least 1,879 people (Amnesty International, 2025). According to Amnesty International,

*“The violations documented constitute cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and, in some cases, may amount to torture. These unlawful acts of violence must be investigated promptly, and the perpetrators brought to justice in fair trials”* (Amnesty International, 2025).

Journalists were also arrested, with one of them being detained while covering demonstrations that took place outside Istanbul city hall (The Guardian, 2025).

Under international law, states have the obligation to respect and ensure the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Any restrictions on the right of peaceful assembly must be prescribed by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary and proportionate to that aim. Any use of force by law enforcement officials must be strictly necessary and proportionate, and only the minimum force necessary may be used. Using tear gas and pepper spray against the peaceful demonstrators, as well as detaining journalists, only for doing their job, shows that the Turkish government prioritises political control over fundamental rights.

## CONCLUSION

The human rights landscape of Europe in 2025 depicts a continent at a pivotal, paradoxical, and also at the crossroads. The report reveals that moving into 2026, the fundamental principles of democracy and human rights are being tested by a wave of legislative shifts, geopolitical pressures, and the rapid evolution of technology.

A synthesis of regional developments suggests that the narrowing of the public sphere is becoming increasingly systematic. Across nations as diverse as Georgia, Russia, and Türkiye, there is a visible trend where legal frameworks are being redirected to marginalise political opposition and silence independent media. This is also mirrored in Southern Europe through the proliferation of “foreign agent” labels. Another “problem” is connected with the hardening of technologies in Europe. Across Eastern and Western Europe, the integration of AI-powered surveillance, spyware, and drone monitoring has created a new, high-tech frontier of state control. This technological surge has particularly impacted activists in the Netherlands, where the government is using drones and video surveillance cars against peaceful protesters without adequate regulation, safeguards, or accountability.

Perhaps one of the most concerning trends across the continent is border control. From the “emergency laws” of Finland and the asylum suspension of Poland to the offshore processing centers used by Italy and Albania, Europe is increasingly prioritising a strategy of exclusion and closing its borders.

However, the report also highlights a continent of deep contrasts. While Lithuania and the Czech Republic took significant steps forward in LGBTQIA+ equality and protection for children, their neighbors in Slovakia and Hungary moved in the opposite direction, embedding restrictive social policies into their legal documents. A similar tension exists in the North. While the Nordic countries remain global leaders in many human rights indices, they face a growing internal crisis regarding indigenous people. Sami people in Norway, Finland, and Sweden find their traditional ways of life threatened by the very green energy projects intended to protect the environment. This is a contrast that illustrates the complex trade-offs between climate goals and minority rights.

Ultimately, the events of 2025 demonstrate that the protection of human rights in Europe is no longer a linear journey towards progress. As we look toward 2026, the resilience of civil society and the intervention of international bodies will probably be the deciding factors in whether Europe remains a beacon of human rights or allows these emerging patterns of repression to become the new standard.

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#### **Case law**

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