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EU ANNUAL REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD
2023 COUNTRY UPDATES

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Enlargement countries

Republic of Albania

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Albania's legal framework sets out an overall good basis for the protection of fundamental rights. However, implementation of the legal and policy frameworks needs to intensify. The political scene continued to be marked by political polarisation. Local elections on 14 May 2023 were conducted in a generally calm manner. However, concerns relate to the misuse of state resources, claims of pressure on public sector workers and voters, and allegations of vote buying. The delays and politicisation of the appointments of the Ombudsperson and of the new Anti-Discrimination Commissioner weaken these institutions. Progress was made on the use of alternatives to detention. There was some progress on the rights of persons with disabilities regarding the reform of the biopsychosocial assessment, which is now implemented country-wide. The intersection of business and political interests, the lack of transparency of funding sources, the concentration of media ownership, intimidation and precarious working conditions continued to hamper media independence, pluralism and the quality of journalism. The process of first registration of property and other transitional processes need to advance in full transparency, including by tackling corruption. On the protection of minorities, the adoption of the remaining implementing legislation did not advance. Furthermore, Albania needs to put in place strong legal and institutional safeguards to prevent breaches of personal data. With regard to communist-era missing persons, continued political will is important to increase the number of cases solved and to raise public awareness of the issue.

The efficiency of the judicial system and access to justice continued to be affected by the long timescale of proceedings, increased workload and high backlog of cases, which remains particularly high in appeal and first instance courts. Despite some progress and continued efforts in fighting corruption, overall, corruption is prevalent in many areas of public and business life and preventive measures continue to have a limited impact, particularly in vulnerable sectors. Discrimination against LGBTI persons is still very prevalent in Albanian society. The 12th Tirana Pride took place peacefully on 20 May 2023. Public awareness and acceptance of LGBTI persons remains low. While civil society is generally free, shortcomings affect the ability of civil society organisations (CSOs) to contribute to policy development processes. The role of civil society, including in the EU accession negotiation process, needs to be strengthened.

For more information, please refer to the European Commission's: Albania Report 2023 - European Commission (europa.eu).

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to monitor the protection and entrenchment of democracy and human rights, with particular attention to access to justice, independence of media and freedom of expression, protection of minorities and vulnerable groups as well as registration of properties and transitional ownership rights. The EU also followed developments in the areas of citizenship rights, gender equality, right to life, prevention of torture and ill-treatment in the prison systems, and freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Regular political dialogue has continued mainly in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The EU - Albania Stabilisation and Association Council took place on 16 March 2023, for the first time in Tirana. These meetings provided an opportunity to take stock of the progress that Albania made in the preparations for EU membership, with a focus on rule of law aspects, including fundamental rights. Human rights and democracy remained a central focus of the political dialogue with the authorities. While putting EU-related reforms at the centre of its legislative and policy planning, the government needs to refrain from measures that are not in line with EU standards. The European Commission continued the screening process and published the Screening Report for Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, encompassing functioning of the democratic institutions and the fundamental rights.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU continued the implementation of a wide array of projects in the field of human rights and democracy. The funding allocation from the EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2021 – 2027 (IPA III) of EUR 80.6 million has been supporting actions to advance the right to an independent tribunal, consolidation of democracy, supporting the country on fundamental rights, as well as access to water, the right to education and access to employment of young people. With the support of the Programme on Social Inclusion (EUR 70.65 million) under IPA III, continued providing support to families in vulnerable situations, including those affected by COVID-19 crisis, Roma and Egyptian families, and older persons.

There were no on-going projects under the Thematic Programme for Human Rights and Democracy.

Under the IPA Civil Society Facility and Media Programme, seven projects continued in 2023 focusing on active citizenship, support to civil society, investigative journalism and social reuse of confiscated assets for a total budget of EUR 5.1 million. Five other projects started in 2023 to support CSOs in the areas of good governance and rule of law, including support to CSOs in the Fundamentals Cluster under the accession negotiations, fight against corruption, budget transparency and justice accountability, for a total of EUR 2.3 million.

Cooperation with the Council of Europe continued under the Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye – Phase III with a total budget of EUR 5 million for Albania (out of EUR 41 million for Western Balkans) focusing on promoting equal treatment, freedom of expression and social inclusion. In Albania, the programme enabled to launch the Central Election Commission's Electronic Platform on Financial Monitoring and Reporting, in the run-up to the 14 May local elections, with a view to facilitate the monitoring of the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns.

5. Multilateral context: Albania continued its dialogue and cooperation with European and international human rights organisations and monitoring bodies, notably in the context of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Albania was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2022 and 2023 and was elected, in October 2023, to the UN Human Rights Council for the 2024-2026 term. Albania has an observer status in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The legislative and institutional framework on fundamental rights and democracy is largely in place and, overall, in line with the relevant international and European standards. In August, the Parliament designated by law the human rights Ombudsman as national preventive mechanism against torture and ill-treatment. The gender action plan was adopted in October 2023.

There was backsliding in guaranteeing freedom of expression. The criminal penalties for defamation were reintroduced in the Republika Srpska entity in July 2023 that severely impacts freedom of expression and of the media, and represents a major step backwards. The political pressure, intimidation and harassment towards journalists, including physical and verbal attacks, continued in 2023 without appropriate institutional follow-up. The public broadcasters remain under political influence, and in precarious financial conditions. In September 2023, the Republika Srpska entity assembly adopted in first reading a draft law targeting civil society groups as foreign agents; if fully adopted, it would mark a major step backwards. The freedom of assembly sees limitations on spontaneous assemblies and due to security costs, and notably remains restricted in the Republika Srpska entity, where in March 2023 the police banned an LGBTI event. The Pride marches are held regularly.

Following elections in October 2022, a new state-level Council of Ministers took office in late January. The state budget for the year was adopted in March. All state and entity-level legislative and executive bodies were set up by May. The country needs to urgently finalise pending constitutional and electoral reforms. The significant reforms are needed to ensure that all citizens are able to effectively exercise their political rights and thus bring the country's constitutional and legislative framework into line with the Sejdić-Finci case-law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The divided education needs to end in order to ensure non-discriminatory, inclusive and quality education for all, including by overcoming the practice of 'two schools under one roof'. Gender-based violence, ill-treatment of detainees and the insufficient protection of persons belonging to minorities, including the Roma, continue to cause concern.

For more information, please refer to the European Commission's Bosnia and Herzegovina Report 2023 - European Commission (europa.eu).

2. EU action – key areas: As part of the EU integration process, the EU continues to closely monitor the respect for human rights, including freedom of assembly and association and freedom of expression, the rights of persons in vulnerable situations, including persons belonging to minorities, as well as gender equality. Half of the fourteen key priorities set out in the 2019 Commission Opinion on the EU membership application of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) focus on fundamental rights. They call upon the country to strengthen non-discrimination and gender equality, ensure the prohibition of torture, guarantee freedom of expression and of the media, improve the protection and inclusion of groups in vulnerable situations, and promote an environment conducive to reconciliation.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Following the recommendation of the European Commission and, as stated in its conclusions from December 2023, the European Council will open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina once the necessary degree of

compliance with the membership criteria is achieved. During 2023, the Commission regularly held meetings under the Stabilisation and Association (SA) Agreement.

4. EU financial engagement: the EU support via the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) focuses on the areas of judiciary (EUR 6.4 million), civil society and media. The support continued to be provided through the Civil Society Facility (Programme 2021-2023) for EUR 7.8 million resulting in 14 signed projects for the capacity building of civil society organisations in the areas of health, social inclusion and social entrepreneurship, environment, youth, culture, local economy, women's rights, freedom of expression, anti-corruption, elections integrity as well as CSO resource centre.

EU funding contributes to accounting for missing persons (EUR 3 million) as well as supporting and monitoring the processing of war crime cases (EUR 5 million). The support to gender equality (EUR 0.5 million) under the Gender Equality Facility continued, including for the development of the first Gender Equality Index for Bosnia and Herzegovina and gender institutional mechanisms. The founding for meeting the accession criteria for fundamental rights protection continued to be provided through the EU4HumanRights (EUR 800,000), which directly supports the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees, the Gender Equality Agency, and the human rights Ombudsman.

The capacity building of governments to include CSOs into the decision-making was continued in 2023 through a new Civil Society Facility (EUR 944,750). Under the Thematic Programme for Human Rights and Democracy seven projects were launched in supporting women victims of violence, protecting the rights of LGBTI persons, protecting and promoting the rights of the child, promoting human rights through sport, supporting freedom of expression, including independent media, while through the 2023 allocation, six projects were supported totalling over EUR 1 million for supporting and promoting implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, supporting Roma women and girls, strengthening access to information and addressing reconciliation and transitional justice.

The EU – Council of Europe Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye Phase III founded actions aimed at strengthening human rights, including on the treatment of persons in detention, preventing and combatting trafficking in human beings, supporting equal, inclusive and tolerant BiH, quality education for all, and freedom of expression and of the media. In 2023, the Facility supported the fourth Pride March in Sarajevo that gathered around 2,000 participants. The action also supported the Agency for Gender Equality in organising a co-ordination meeting on the implementation of the first LGBTI Action Plan. Also, the 'mapping responses to hate speech' were developed and officially adopted by the Council of Ministers in November 2023.

5. Multilateral context: Bosnia and Herzegovina continued its dialogue and cooperation with European and international human rights organisations and monitoring bodies (UN, OSCE, Council of Europe). No significant progress was made towards addressing most of the 204 accepted recommendations from the November 2019 Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Bosnia and Herzegovina still need to address most of the 79 recommendations and three requests received in October 2021 by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Republic of North Macedonia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The legal framework on the protection of fundamental rights is partially aligned with the EU *acquis* and European standards. The country continues to meet its general obligations on fundamental rights, but legislation should be implemented in a systematic manner. The Criminal Code was amended to increase the legal protection in cases of gender-based violence. The services for victims of gender-based violence need improvement and proper budgeting to meet the standards laid down by the Istanbul Convention. Persons with disabilities continue to face direct and indirect discrimination, social exclusion and barriers. The cooperation between the Ombudsman's Office and the Commission for the Prevention and Protection against Discrimination increased following the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding. The situation in prisons is still dire. The recommendations made by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture on the treatment of detained and convicted persons were not addressed. The Agency for Community Rights Realisation needs to receive sufficient funding to further promote the protection of minorities and the implementation of the national strategy One Society for All and Interculturalism. The external oversight mechanism for the police, including the prison police is still not fully functional.

The general context is favourable to media freedom and allows for critical media reporting. The amended Criminal Code and Law on civil liability for defamation raised the overall level of legal protection for journalists. Greater transparency is needed regarding media advertising by state institutions and political parties. The reform of the public service broadcaster is required to strengthen its independence, professional standards and financial sustainability. The working conditions of the journalists remain challenging. The Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services is broadly in line with the EU *acquis*, following the legislative changes of July 2023.

North Macedonia continued its efforts to strengthen democracy. Overall, the legal framework remains conducive to holding of democratic elections. However, no progress was made to address and implement the outstanding recommendations of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Venice Commission. The Parliament's work was marred by political polarisation, which deepened further, delaying the adoption of many reform laws and important appointments.

For more information, refer to the North Macedonia Report 2023 - European Commission (europa.eu).

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to monitor closely the respect for human rights in North Macedonia within the framework of the EU accession negotiations. Key focus areas in 2023 included freedom of assembly and association, freedom of expression, the rights of persons in vulnerable situations, prevention of torture and ill-treatment in the prison systems, children rights, persons with disabilities, as well as gender equality. Special attention was given to promoting non-discrimination, increasing effectiveness in addressing hate crime and hate speech, strengthening the capacity and independence of institutions in charge of the protection of rights of persons belonging to minorities.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Regular political dialogue between North Macedonia and EU continues mainly in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The EU - North Macedonia Stabilisation and Association Council held its sixteenth meeting on 17 March, for the first time in Skopje. These meetings provided an opportunity to take stock of the progress that North Macedonia made in the preparations for EU membership, with a focus on rule of law aspects, including fundamental rights. Human rights and democracy remained an important element of the political dialogue with the authorities. The European Commission continued the screening process and published the Screening Report for Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, encompassing functioning of the democratic institutions and the fundamental rights.

4. EU financial engagement: The third phase of the EU-Council of Europe Horizontal Facility (CoE/HF III) programme has been launched for a period of four years to support reforms in the field of human rights and rule of law, including the implementation of the Council of Europe's recommendations. The HF III programme has been implemented since January 2023 through six single beneficiary actions for North Macedonia for a total of EUR 4.765 million.

Seven EU funded projects (EUR 1.5 million) under the Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy, continued providing support to enhance children's rights, combating discrimination, ensuring decent working conditions for women, monitoring of human rights, and strengthening national protective mechanisms against hate speech.

The EU contracted 22 projects in 2023 for an amount of EUR 3.3 million under the Civil Society Facility to help CSOs to bolster participatory democracy, EU integration, and society democratisation by empowering women, youth and promoting human rights.

Under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, the 2020 EU for Rule of Law action, with a budget of EUR 10 million, continued to support numerous institutions, including the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination and the Ombudsman Office. Also, IPA 2020 (EUR 400,000) continued to support freedom of expression initiatives, including enhancing the support for journalists, social and economic rights, supporting the quality of local journalism. The Ministry of Information Society and Administration received EUR 300,000 support for aligning audio-visual media legislation with EU *acquis*. EU-twinning assistance amounting to EUR 788,000 was launched to support the media regulator in the implementation of the Media Directive, as well as the public broadcaster to expand audience reach through improved internet and social media use.

5. Multilateral context: North Macedonia continued active cooperation with international organisations. Its priorities in the UN are in line with important EU priorities. In January 2023, the country assumed the position of Chair of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). It has been actively promoting European standards and values and seeking to meet the threats arising from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Georgia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: A national strategy for human rights protection was adopted in March 2023, and a draft action plan elaborated. Both contain

some positive elements concerning economic and social rights. However, several key issues remain to be addressed, notably discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. The Parliament adopted a legal package on legislative mechanisms ensuring reference to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) decisions by Georgia's courts supporting judicial capacity and institutional development. The new Public Defender was appointed in February 2023. More remains to be done on key human-rights issues, such as anti- discrimination (notably against persons belonging to minorities), and the independence, accountability and transparency of the judiciary. Moreover, national strategies to fight all forms of hatred and discrimination and to protect persons belonging to minorities remain to be adopted. Nevertheless, the recent amendments to the law on broadcasting introduced provisions on protection of persons belonging to minorities and against hate speech, and the legislative progress can be noted on gender equality, including on preventing and combating gender-based violence against women and domestic violence.

Overall, the legislative framework, institutional setup and vibrant civil society in Georgia are conducive to further democratic and rule-of-law reforms. Deep political polarisation and the lack of effective cross-party cooperation on the reform agenda and parliamentary oversight hampered the reform process. The electoral reform continued, however, some of the key OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, including on the appointment of the Central Election Commission Chair and conducting effective investigations into instances of electoral malpractice remain to be addressed. Similarly, civilian oversight over security services, dialogue with CSOs and the involvement of civil society in policy-making processes remain to be improved.

Freedom of expression is overall respected and upheld. In Georgia, there is an overall pluralist, diverse but highly polarised media landscape and critical media reporting is available. Challenges persist regarding the exercise of the rights to freedom of assembly and expression with legal constraints introduced in 2023. Georgia has continued to align its legislation with the key principles of the Audio-visual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) and adopted related amendments to the law on broadcasting. The effective independence of the national regulator, the Communication Commission, remains to be ensured. There are limitations to media independence. The follow-up investigations to intimidation and physical and verbal attacks on media professionals are not yet effective.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, the EU continued to focus on a necessary reform of the judiciary to ensure its accountability and independence, and adequate protection of human rights of vulnerable groups, including by bringing perpetrators and instigators of violence to justice more effectively. The EU continued advocating for respect, protection and fulfilment of the rights of LGBTI persons, persons belonging to minorities, and marginalised groups, including their full and equal enjoyment of the right to freedom of assembly, the fight against discrimination and hate speech. The EU worked with the reform of media regulator. The empowerment of civil society to strengthen its ability to advocate and defend civic rights as well as its capacity to engage in constructive policy dialogue, both at a national and regional level, remained a priority for the EU in 2023.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In December 2023, Georgia was granted candidate status for EU membership on the understanding that nine steps set out in the European Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023 are taken. Human rights, democracy, a conducive legal framework for civil society and the need for due legal proceedings for

violations of fundamental rights remained a central focus of the political dialogue with the Georgian authorities in 2023, notably in the context of the EU-Georgia Human Rights Dialogue and the 7th EU-Georgia Association Committee (held respectively in June and July) and the first full enlargement package, including the nine steps to continue reform on the enlargement path.

4. EU financial engagement: Under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), the EU continued to implement the 'EU4Human Rights' (EUR 11 million) programme through 7 projects, which aim to strengthen human rights protection, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities and vulnerable groups, internal and external oversight of law enforcement, protection of privacy, child rights and provide support to victims of domestic violence. In addition, under the EU4Human Rights, a new project was launched in March 2023 to strengthen the Public Defender's Office in Georgia in implementing and monitoring human rights policies.

Under the Technical Cooperation Facility IV programme (adopted in 2021), a project was launched to provide support to justice reform in July 2023 (EUR 3.6 million), focusing on combating violence against women and children.. Furthermore, a new project (EUR 1 million) to promote civil society's engagement in judicial reforms and facilitating increase access to justice was launched in September 2023. The project is still in the early stages of implementation. The EU support policy development and institutional capacity building in gender equality area through a long-standing partnership with UN Women and with the UNFPA (EUR 1.5 million for 'Gender Equality for Georgia') complemented by the regional programme EU4Gender Equality.

In 2023, a project on quality media and conscious media consumption continued implementation (EUR 700,000). Furthermore, a new project aiming to improve the local monitoring of electoral process was launched under the NDICI Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy. Under the NDICI Thematic Programme for Civil society Organisations, two projects for EUR 1.97 million in total started to support gender equality and combat gender-based violence.

Under the Eastern partnership Civil Society Facility for Resilient and Inclusive Society, EUR 2 million project continues capacity-development of civil society in the region of Abkhazia and a new project was launched to support civil society's capacity and involvement in the European integration process in Georgia (EUR 2 million).

The third phase (2023-2027) of the EUR 3.07 million Partnership for Good Governance (PGG) with the Council of Europe was launched. The PGG focuses on legal expertise and technical assistance in the fields of judiciary, fight against corruption, combating discrimination, protection of rights of vulnerable groups and combatting violence against women.

Georgia's participation in the media and cross-sectoral strands of Creative Europe (2021-2027) was extended in results of recent amendments to the law on broadcasting, further approximating the Georgian media legislation with the Audio-Visual Media Service Directive.

5. Multilateral context: Georgia was in 2023 one of the fourteen elected members of the UN Human Rights Council. Georgia co-sponsored most of the UN resolutions initiated by the EU. The UN Special Rapporteur on situation of human rights defenders visited Georgia in October and stressed the need for further implementation of human rights legislation as well as to work more closely with civil society. Georgia was active within the OSCE in 2023 and pursued

active cooperation with ODIHR on elections and Belarusian human rights defenders residing in Georgia. The Council of Europe Action Plan for Georgia 2024-2027 was prepared in close consultation with the Georgian authorities and adopted in October 2023.

Kosovo*

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In general, the legal framework guarantees the protection of fundamental rights and is in line with European standards. Kosovo adopted the Law on the Kosovo Property Comparison Verification Agency and set up a protocol for the treatment of sexual violence cases. The capacity of the authorities to monitor implementation of fundamental rights policies and legislation has improved and the rate of implementation of the Ombudsperson's recommendations increased.

The Parliament adopted the Law on prevention and protection from domestic violence, violence against women and gender-based violence. The Government also approved the Framework of Indicators for Human Rights in the Republic of Kosovo to support authorities in monitoring the fulfilment of human rights obligations. The government's capacity to streamline and oversee fundamental rights issues requires further improvements, including in coordinating mechanisms to protect human rights, gender equality and non-majority communities, at both central and local levels. The fundamental rights issues need to feature higher on the political agenda and consequently more human and financial resources should be allocated to relevant institutions.

Kosovo must continue its efforts to ensure equal access of persons with disabilities to institutions, quality services, employment and education. More efforts should be made to implement the process of verification of university diplomas from the University in Mitrovica North and extend this process to high school diplomas, to ensure language compliance in both official languages and to ensure that the representation quota for all non-majority communities is respected in public institutions. There was no progress on implementing the Constitutional Court decision on the Dečani Monastery. The Constitution protects against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender. Hate speech against those in vulnerable situations, including the LGBTI and non-majority communities persists.

Following the withdrawal of Kosovo Serbs from Kosovo institutions in November 2022, local by-elections were organised in the four municipalities in the north of Kosovo in April 2023. These were held in line with the legal framework of Kosovo. Despite the continued lack of cross-party cooperation and disagreements within the majority, there were important legislative achievements and Kosovo made important progress with electoral reform. This includes the adoption of the Law on Financing of Political Parties and the Law on General Elections.

The media environment in Kosovo remains lively and pluralistic, and the legal framework is mostly in line with European standards. Concerns remain regarding physical attacks and threats against journalists and public smear campaigns.

For more information, please refer to the European Commission's 2023 report on Kosovo: Kosovo Report 2023 - European Commission (europa.eu).

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to closely monitor the respect for human rights in Kosovo as part of Kosovo's European path. This includes freedom of assembly and association, freedom of expression, the rights of persons in vulnerable situations including persons belonging to minorities, the right to equality and non-discrimination, children, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons, persons with disabilities, as well as gender equality.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Due to the lack of decisive steps by Kosovo to de-escalate the situation in the north of Kosovo, and in line with the statement by the EU High Representative on behalf of the EU on 3rd June, the EU is implementing a number of measures vis-a-vis Kosovo that also impact financial support. These measures are temporary and fully reversible, depending on the steps taken to de-escalate the tensions in the north of Kosovo. Kosovo has taken steps in the right direction but more remains to be done. The EU continues to facilitate the Dialogue on normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The Parties reached the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation in Brussels on 27th February 2023, and agreed on its Implementation Annex in Ohrid, North Macedonia, on 18th March 2023.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, Kosovo continued to benefit from support under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III). The EU's post COVID-19 recovery support (EUR 68 million) was finalised in 2023, including EUR 63 million for socio-economic recovery measures, notably of persons in the most vulnerable situations. The additional IPA III support focused on strengthening the rights of people with disabilities (EUR 500,000). A project aiming at strengthening the capacity of the Ombudsperson Institution ended in June 2023 with the establishment of an electronic system for nearly all internal functions of the institution (EUR 2.7 million). Under the NDICI Thematic Programme for Human Rights and Democracy, important projects continued for supporting children's rights, countering discrimination, hate speech and gender-based violence, addressing discrimination and gender-based violence against women and girls with disabilities and single mothers of children with disabilities, promoting access to clean water, access to justice for the most vulnerable groups as well as women's political participation (EUR 1.8 million). Six new projects for a total of EUR 1.2 million were contracted by the end of 2023 to support transitional justice, including resolving the fate of missing persons from the war as well as fighting discrimination towards women, children and other vulnerable groups.

Under the Civil Society and Media Facility Programme (2021-2024), the EU continued to support media independence and professionalism fomenting diversification of voices in journalism and strengthening small media outlets (EUR 350,000, January 2023 – December 2025), improving the economic sustainability of independent media outlets, supporting their capacities for quality reporting, regional exchanges as well as innovative content and production formats (EUR 10 million). Furthermore, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) is currently providing support to a number of media outlets, CSOs, and individual initiatives. These efforts are aimed at promoting and protecting democracy, as well as safeguarding human rights (EUR 600,000).

Under the Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations, the EU also continued to strengthen youth empowerment, employment and skills development and provided new grants under to support CSOs in fighting corruption, improving access to justice and public administration reforms, strengthening the role and capacities of the civil society to influence decision making in the field of green transition, media pluralism as well as promoting better relations and dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia (total of EUR 1.9 million).

Assistance continued under the EU/Council of Europe Horizontal Facility III for the Western Balkans and Türkiye. The actions in Kosovo focused on three thematic areas/projects: strengthening the quality and efficiency of justice in Kosovo - (KoSEJ III) (EUR 779,000), combating discrimination and hatred (EUR 450,000), protecting freedom of expression, including media independence and professionalism, and strengthening the media regulatory authority (PRO-FREX) EUR 550,000.

5. Multilateral context: Kosovo continued its dialogue and cooperation with European and international human rights organisations and monitoring bodies, including UN bodies, OSCE and Council of Europe (CoE), including through participation in most regional forums. On 24 April, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe requested that the CoE Parliamentary Assembly prepare an opinion on Kosovo's membership application.

Montenegro

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The legislative and institutional framework on fundamental rights is largely in place in Montenegro. However, additional efforts are needed to fully implement this framework. Some legislative changes are needed, in particular in the area of non-discrimination. The most vulnerable groups in society - the Roma and Egyptians, persons with disabilities and LGBTI persons - continued to be subjected to discrimination, hate speech and hate crime.

The media landscape remained pluralistic and diverse, although highly politically polarised, with uneven application of the journalistic Code of Ethics and professional standards. In general, the authorities provided prompt and effective law-enforcement and institutional responses to new cases of violence against journalists. However, there was no effective judicial follow-up of old cases. The new media legislation was not adopted. Radio Televizija Crne Gore (Radio Television of Montenegro – RTCG), the national public broadcaster continued to produce politically balanced content, including during election periods.

In 2023, Montenegro suffered from deep polarisation and division. This led to a blockage of the political system. The political situation was dominated by a caretaker government lacking the necessary political legitimacy and a Parliament unable to assemble a consistent majority to take forward reforms. The absence of a functional Constitutional Court for part of the year led to uncertainty and legal discrepancy. The Presidential and Parliamentary elections took place, and were monitored by an election observation mission of the Office for Democratic

Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR). The local elections took place in 14 municipalities.

For more information, please refer to the Montenegro Report 2023 - European Commission (europa.eu).

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU's action in Montenegro continued to focus on the key areas described in the interim benchmarks on fundamental rights in Chapter 23 – judiciary and fundamental rights – of the accession negotiations. They relate to the alignment with the EU *acquis* and international standards on the strengthening of effective application of human rights, procedural safeguards, the protection of minorities and cultural rights, protection against racism and xenophobia and data protection.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued to closely monitor the respect for human rights in Montenegro within the framework of the EU accession negotiations under Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights. There is a regular policy dialogue at political levels. Such dialogue draws from monitoring developments in Chapter 23, the interim benchmarks, EU funded projects, as well as engagement with international organisations and civil society. The 12th meeting of the EU-Montenegro Sub-Committee on Justice, Freedom and Security under the Stabilisation and Association Process took place on 22 and 23 March. Montenegro committed to focus on improving the legal framework and institutional response to improve gender equality and fight discrimination and misogyny and to adopt the media legislative package.

The EU - Montenegro Subcommittee on Innovation, Human Resources, Information Society and Social Policy took place on 12 October 2023 and provided an update on the area access to education for marginalised or disadvantaged groups, including for children with special needs and the Roma, as well on social protection and inclusion (including people with disabilities and the Roma). The EU delivered three demarches to Montenegro on the EU priorities in the UN Human Rights Council (OHCHR). Following the appointment of the new Government and constitution of the Parliament, outreach on the interim benchmarks was conducted to all national rule of law stakeholders.

4. EU financial engagement: Under the Thematic Programme for Human Rights and Democracy, the implementation of four projects (EUR 650,000) continued, including three projects completed in December 2023, with a focus on the right to fair trial and protection of vulnerable groups such as elderly, children in closed institutions, and the Roma. In December 2023, the EU contracted eight projects for a total amount of EUR 1.072 million to support the electoral reform, fight against peer violence, combatting and prevention of impunity and gender-based violence, as well as protection of journalists against violence, including online and capacity building of investigative journalism.

Under the IPA III Civil Society Facility, two grant contracts were signed in December 2023, including to support the Government of Montenegro for cooperation with civil society. In addition, under the IPA III bilateral envelope, a project for EUR 500,000 was launched to support gender equality.

Cooperation with the Council of Europe continued under the Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye – Phase III that was launched in January 2023 with a total budget

of EUR 41 million and EUR 5 million for Montenegro with a focus on ensuring justice, fighting corruption and organised crime and promoting human rights, including diversity, equality, freedom of expression and social inclusion. In Montenegro, the programme enabled the adoption of amendments to the Criminal Code in line with CoE's recommendations on anti-discrimination and countering hate speech.

5. Multilateral context: In 2023, Montenegro continued to meet its international obligations on human rights. The country continued its dialogue and cooperation with European and international human rights organisations and monitoring bodies, including the United Nations' bodies and the Council of Europe. Montenegro continued to fully align itself with EU statements on human rights in multilateral fora, including EU restrictive measures following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Montenegro was a member of the UN Human Rights Council. Montenegro continued to ensure good cooperation with the European Court of Human Rights.

Republic of Moldova

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, the Republic of Moldova (hereinafter Moldova) made a clear commitment to meet its international obligations on human rights. Efforts were made to implement the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). Additional measures included strengthening the mandates of the Equality Council and the People's Advocate and adopting programmes on strengthening gender equality, inter-ethnic relations, and support to the Roma. Despite efforts to promote anti-discrimination and equal opportunities, persons belonging to minorities, persons with disabilities and the Roma as well as LGBTI persons continue to face discrimination, including in the labour market. Detention conditions remain poor.

Moldova has a pluralistic media environment and has made some progress in the freedom of expression, notably on the issue of ownership concentration. The legislation sets out rules to prevent concentration of media and ensure transparency of media ownership. The Audiovisual Council needs to boost efforts to implement these rules. The government is taking steps to address foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), which remains a challenge, especially the spread of disinformation online.

Moldova has continued reform efforts to strengthen democracy and the rule of law despite multiple challenges linked to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Good progress was made on electoral legislation in addressing and implementing the remaining recommendations of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Venice Commission in their opinions of December 2021 and October 2022. Further amendments to the Electoral Code were adopted in October 2023, a month ahead of the local elections. They provided for the possibility of limiting or prohibiting members of political parties from standing for elected office. According to the ODIHR preliminary findings following the local elections, interference

from abroad and restrictive measures, imposed due to national security concerns on freedom of speech, association, and the right to compete, had a negative impact on the process.

For more information, refer to the Moldova Report 2023 - European Commission (europa.eu).

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, the EU continued to closely monitor the respect for human rights, including freedom of assembly and association, freedom of expression, the rights of persons in vulnerable situations including persons belonging to minorities, as well as gender equality, as part of the EU accession process. The EU has supported these areas by providing significant assistance, as well as through policy dialogue and public diplomacy. The EU also actively supported civil society, independent and pluralistic media, access to information and the fight against disinformation.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU engaged in a regular political dialogue with Moldova throughout 2023. The 14th EU-Moldova Human Rights Dialogue took place on 20 November 2023 in Chisinau. Discussions covered human rights policy developments, electoral framework, media freedom and pluralism. In particular, they focused on upholding human rights in the justice system, labour rights, the rights of the child and the efforts to promote equality and address discrimination, including gender equality, the rights of persons with disabilities, the rights of LGBTI persons and the rights of persons belonging to minorities. The EU welcomed positive developments in Moldova's human rights framework and encouraged the country to ensure a balance between measures aimed at countering foreign interference and upholding fundamental freedoms. In the media environment, the EU welcomed steps taken to improve transparency and address media concentration, in line with Moldova's commitments to the de-oligarchisation process. The EU reiterated its call on Moldova to pursue decisive efforts to bring the conditions of detentions in line with international standards and to thoroughly investigate and prosecute, as well as effectively sanction any act of torture or ill-treatment in detention facilities.

4. EU financial engagement: Under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), a project to enhance transparency, accountability of, and access to the judiciary system ended in December 2023 (EUR 1 million) after its initiation in 2021. Under NDICI, a project to support the justice reform in Moldova (EUR 2.430 million) was initiated in 2023 to increase the independence, professionalism and transparency of the judiciary and support the implementation of the justice reform in line with the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) Opinions, Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) compliance report, and other European standards.

The third phase (2023-2026) of the Partnership for Good Governance for Eastern Partnership countries with the CoE was launched. It provides tailor-made support to beneficiary countries to meet their reform agendas and comply with the European standards in the fields of human rights, the rule of law and democracy. Under the NDICI Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, a project was launched in 2023 to strengthen CSOs' capacity in the process of implementation of the Association Agreement (EUR 979 000).

Under the NDICI Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy, three ongoing projects initiated in 2021 were in their final phase in 2023 contributing to child protection environments (EUR 300,000), building a society where every girl and boy can reach their full potential with dignity (EUR 599,999) and provided support to human rights defenders (EUR

380 000). A project aimed at securing integrity, efficiency, and independence of the justice system (EUR 445,000) was launched.

5. Multilateral context: In 2023, Moldova ratified the third Optional Protocol on Communications Procedure (OPIC) on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UN Independent Expert (IE) on older persons conducted an official visit to Moldova in November 2023 with the aim to, inter alia, examine efforts to implement international and regional standards for the protection and promotion of the human rights of older persons. In October 2023, the HRC54 (54th Session of Human Rights Council) adopted a resolution on the question of the death penalty co-sponsored by Moldova. In 2023, Moldova signed the Protocol amending the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to the Automatic Processing of Personal Data. The OSCE deployed an Election Observation Mission to observe November 2023 local elections. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media visited Moldova and noted the importance of continued assistance to the development and sustainability of the independent media sector. In 2023, Moldova ranked among the top five Council of Europe member states in terms of the number of applications before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) per capita. The low compliance rate with decisions of the ECtHR needs to be addressed.

Republic of Serbia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Serbia's legislative and institutional framework for upholding fundamental rights is broadly in place. The Ombudsman was re-elected in April 2023 without cross-party support. Implementation of the new strategies and action plans on gender equality, anti-discrimination and the Roma inclusion started, although monitoring bodies were not in place for most of the reporting period. The action plans and related funding as regards combating violence against women and deinstitutionalisation are significantly delayed. The new National Minority Councils were constituted following the elections held in November 2022. Serbia continued drafting and conducting consultations on the new Action Plan for the Realisation of the Rights of National Minorities. As regards the rights of LGBTI persons, a Pride march took place in Belgrade in September 2023 without incidents. There were no developments on the draft law on same-sex partnerships initiated by the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue.

Regarding freedom of expression, limited progress was made. The police and the prosecution services reacted swiftly to several cases of attacks and threats, working with the standing working group on the safety of journalists. However, cases of threats, intimidation, hate speech and violence against journalists remain a concern, as is the increase of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), notably launched by members of national and local authorities. This may produce a chilling effect including self-censorship. After increasing delays amendments were adopted to the laws on public information and media and on electronic media before the dissolution of the Parliament in October 2023. Overall, the new laws are expected to strengthen the independence of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). They codify the role of the Press Council and render the process of public co-funding more transparent and accessible. However, the legislative process was not finalised

fully in line with the EU *acquis* and European standards. The ownership of media by state-owned enterprises was prominent in deliberations and safeguards to protect media pluralism and editorial independence remain to be improved. The political polarisation remained in evidence. This was illustrated by frequently harsh and intolerant language in debates and in the media. The period following the tragic mass shootings in May 2023 saw a further deepening of this polarisation. A number of peaceful mass protests by citizens "Serbia against violence" took place from May with support from several opposition parties. The freedom of assembly was guaranteed, and protests took place mostly unhindered. However, the protests were sometimes accompanied by verbal attacks on participants by politicians and parts of the media, which also consistently downplayed the size of the protests. There were also instances of criminal sanctions issued against participants. Serbia held early parliamentary elections in December 2023, following which a joint statement was issued noting the need for further inclusive reform and for credible allegations of irregularities to be followed up in a transparent manner.

For more information, please refer to the European Commission's Serbia Report 2023 - European Commission (europa.eu).

2. EU action - key focus areas: The key focus areas in 2023 included freedom of expression, human rights institutions and the rights of persons belonging to minorities, including the Roma. The EU continued to focus on the key areas described in the interim benchmarks of Chapter 23 of the accession negotiations: Judiciary and Fundamental Rights. As regards the latter, benchmarks relate to the effective application of human rights, procedural safeguards, the protection of persons belonging to minorities and cultural rights, protection against racism and xenophobia and data protection. The EU closely monitored Serbia's continuous implementation of its action plan for Chapter 23.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: There is a regular policy and political dialogue, including in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. This dialogue is based on monitoring of the implementation of the action plan for Chapter 23 in the framework of the EU accession negotiations.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, under the EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2021 – 2027 (IPA III) the EU continued to providing support for social inclusion and anti-discrimination policies and improvement of the situation of persons in vulnerable situations. EUR 27 million were disbursed for the improvement of living conditions of the Roma, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities and woman victims of domestic violence. The core support to media freedom continued through an ongoing IPA III support for media: 1) grants (EUR 6 million) implemented by the European Endowment for Democracy, 2) a grant (EUR 700,000) to the Press Council of Serbia to support its capacity to promote ethical standards, 3) a grant (EUR 320,000) to OSCE to support quality journalism, and 4) nine new grants to independent media organisations and associations (EUR 2.8 million). Under the IPA III Regional Civil Society Facility, implementation of 20 action grants and 7 operating grants continued to be implemented in 2023 to strengthen the capacity of CSOs (EUR 19 million). In addition, EUR 2.3 million was awarded to four CSOs that will be operating regionally in Serbia (South, West, East and Vojvodina). Five grants under the NDICI Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy 2021-2027 continued being implemented in 2023, focusing notably on the protection of minorities, gender equality, child rights and human rights defenders (EUR 894,000). In December, eight new grants (EUR 3.3 million) were signed on the same topics.

The EU-Council of Europe Joint Programme "Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey – Phase III", with also a bilateral envelope for Serbia (EUR 5.52 million) was launched in January 2023 and focused on ensuring justice, fighting against discrimination, against organised crime, protection of the rights of vulnerable groups, including LGBTI persons and persons belonging to minorities, and freedom of expression.

5. Multilateral context: Serbia continued its dialogue and cooperation with European and international human rights organisations and monitoring bodies. In April, the Council of Europe Anti-torture Committee carried out a visit to Serbia to examine the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty by the police. In September, Serbia ratified the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In October, the UN Human Rights Council adopted the Universal Periodic Review outcome of Serbia.

Serbia mostly aligned in UNGA on resolutions related to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (with some exceptions). The alignment record in other multilateral forums was mixed and Serbia often abstained on positions related to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Republic of Türkiye

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, the human rights and fundamental freedoms situation in Türkiye continued to deteriorate. Türkiye's refusal to implement certain ECtHR rulings further increased concerns regarding the judiciary's adherence to international and European standards. The 2021 Human Rights Action Plan is being implemented but does not address critical issues or improve the overall human rights situation. The trials and convictions of journalists, writers, lawyers, academics, human rights defenders, and other critical voices for alleged support for terrorism have been taking place. Türkiye needs to align its criminal and anti-terror legislation, and its implementation with European standards, the ECHR, ECtHR case law and the Venice Commission recommendations. It also needs to improve the legislative framework and its implementation to effectively tackle all forms of violence against women as well as racism and discrimination, including against LGBTI persons, and to ensure the protection of minorities.

On freedom of expression, the serious backsliding continued. The broad restrictions on the activities of journalists, writers, lawyers, academics, human rights defenders and critical voices had a negative effect on the exercise of their freedoms. The implementation of the criminal laws relating to national security and anti-terrorism contravenes the ECHR and diverges from ECtHR case law. Türkiye needs to revise its criminal legislation, in particular the anti-terror law, the Criminal Code, the data protection law, the internet law, the new media law in relation to the definition of 'fake news', and the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) law to ensure that they comply with European standards and are implemented in a proportionate manner not curtailing freedom of expression.

As regards freedom of assembly, protests and demonstrations for human rights, environmental rights, and political and socio-economic rights were banned and dispersed by the police on several occasions. The gender-based violence, discrimination and hate speech against minorities and against LGBTI persons are still a matter of serious concern.

The presidential and parliamentary elections took place in May 2023. According to the OSCE's ODIHR, which deployed an election observation mission, voters had a choice between genuine political alternatives and voter participation was high. However, the biased media coverage and the lack of a level playing field gave an unjustified advantage to the incumbent and the ruling coalition. The functioning of Türkiye's democratic institutions remained severely hampered. The structural shortcomings of the presidential system persist. The constitutional architecture kept powers centralised at the level of the Presidency and does not ensure a sound and effective separation of powers between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. The ineffective checks-and-balances mechanism means that the executive branch is democratically accountable only through elections. Democratic backsliding and political polarisation increased in the run-up to the May 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections. The political pluralism is also undermined by frequent restrictions to freedom of assembly targeting opposition parties, especially in the South-East Türkiye.

For more information, please refer to the Türkiye Report 2023 - European Commission (europa.eu).

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU actions in 2023 focused on protecting and empowering individuals, on building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies, and on addressing challenges deriving from new technologies. They also focused on combatting disinformation and false narratives. The EU continued to support human rights defenders, refugees, persons belonging to minorities, access to justice as well as freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and media pluralism, and the capacity of civil society organisations to monitor human rights.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued to monitor closely and report on human rights violations and developments in the judicial sector. The policy and political dialogue continued at political level. The relevant EU-Türkiye Sub-committee, under the framework of the Association Agreement, which covers, inter alia, the functioning of the judiciary, fundamental rights and freedoms and home affairs, was held in June 2023.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU continued the implementation of human rights and democracy related actions in Türkiye and signed several new contracts.

Under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) two projects were launched for a total value of EUR 11 million in the areas of social entrepreneurship (EUR 6 million), also for vulnerable groups to support social needs-driven development through (i) skills enhancement of CSOs and social enterprises, (ii) partnerships between CSOs and social enterprises (iii) policy and regulatory framework reform and protective and restorative approaches for children in judicial processes (EUR 5 million).

Under the Thematic Programme for Human Rights and Democracy, four new projects for an overall amount of EUR 5.2 million were launched to contribute to combating impunity, human rights protection in the penitentiary system, access to justice and youth participation. In addition, 22 actions continued to support protection of women's rights, rights of the child and persons with disabilities, refugee rights to fair trial, non-discrimination, rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Under the IPA Civil Society Facility and Media Programme, eight new projects (EUR 12.4 million) were launched to support, inter alia, social inclusion, gender equality, empowerment of women and girls, rights of LGBTI persons. Also, 14 new projects (EUR 13 million) were

launched to support civil society organisations in the areas of environmental rights, green deal, climate change, disaster risk management, gender equality. The projects continued providing support to monitoring and increasing advocacy capacities of human rights organisations, independent media, gender equality, combating gender-based violence as well as the implementation of the EU Local Strategy to Human Rights Defenders. The project support was also provided to CSOs for persons with disabilities and CSOs and activists in the cultural sector.

The cooperation under the EU/Council of Europe Horizontal Facility III (with a bilateral allocation to Türkiye of EUR 3.25 million) continued with focus on the following areas: i) fighting corruption, economic and organised crime; ii) promoting anti-discrimination and protection of the right of vulnerable groups; iii) fostering women's access to justice; iv) strengthening human rights protection in the context of migration.

5. Multilateral context: In 2022, the EU Delegations to the Council of Europe, to the UN and to the OSCE kept expressing on multiple occasions the EU's concerns over the human rights and fundamental freedoms situation in Türkiye. The EU Delegation to Türkiye and EU Delegation to the Council of Europe closely followed the developments related to the non-implementation of the ECtHR rulings and launching of an infringement procedure against Türkiye for failing to release human rights defender Osman Kavala.

Ukraine

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: While the promotion of human rights, and its observance was generally well respected by the Ukrainian government, the human rights and humanitarian situation remained in a state of crisis as the Russian full-scale military aggression continued.

In Ukraine, Russia continued to violate international human rights law, international humanitarian law and principles of the laws of war, acting without military necessity, causing unnecessary suffering, in particular amongst the civilian population. The UN and other international organisations, have documented widespread cases of arbitrary arrest, extra-judicial execution, torture, and ill-treatment, including sexual violence, of many civilians detained by Russian armed forces in the occupied territories under its temporary control, revealing gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. The territories of Ukraine temporarily occupied by Russia have faced serious human rights violations, including mass forced conferral of Russian citizenship; illegal conscription and mobilisation of local residents to the Russian Army in areas under Russian control; human rights violations and abuses amid lack of presence of, and access by, independent international actors; systematic violations of the Geneva Conventions by Russia in connection with prisoners of war; and continued acculturation, "re-education" and forced transfer of children to Russia and Belarus, often forcibly separated from their families. Moreover, freedom of media and freedom of speech in the temporarily occupied territories, including Crimea, continues to be severely curtailed.

Despite the extremely difficult context, Ukraine continued to function as a democracy, generally complying with international human rights instruments and ratifying most international conventions on the protection of fundamental rights. The government has made continued efforts and progress, in particular on the rule of law, notably by aligning its legislation with international standards and the EU *acquis*, despite the impact of the Russian military aggression.

As regards the state of democracy in Ukraine, martial law, in place in Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, has imposed a number of restrictions on the rights and freedoms of citizens, in particular freedom of movement and freedom of assembly but its overall application has been proportionate. Also, elections could not take place due to martial law. Despite the war-time restrictions on access to media, freedom of expression is generally ensured, as was the access to independent media (i.e. the new media law adopted in December 2022 strengthening the legislative framework for media).

The Law on National Minorities (Communities) of Ukraine, adopted in December 2022, was amended a number of times, including in December 2023, when a comprehensive law amending legislation affecting national minorities was adopted. More efforts are needed as regards the situation of the Roma and the implementation of Ukraine's Roma Strategy and Action Plan.

Ukraine ratified the Istanbul Convention, adopted an updated national action plan on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and adopted the 2030 State Strategy on Ensuring Equal Rights for Men and Women. Cases of discrimination against LGBTI persons are reported less and a legislative proposal enabling same-sex civil partnerships has been prepared but not yet adopted. Further efforts are also needed to ensure that persons with disabilities can enjoy their rights as per the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. There is still remaining work to be addressed as regards the application of European and international standards on torture and ill-treatment, as well as the situation in Ukrainian prisons.

In addition, government continues to support civil society with a multi-year civil society development strategy adopted in 2021. The action plan for the Civil Society Strategy was adopted in February 2023 with measures to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society organisations, such as improvements to legislation regulating the work of volunteers and related to the delivery of humanitarian aid.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU actions concerning fundamental rights focused in 2023 on accountability, freedom of expression and of media, protection of fundamental freedoms, countering hate speech, protection of rights of persons belonging to minorities and protection of vulnerable groups, documenting war crimes, as well as countering discrimination.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human Rights continued to be on the agenda of the political dialogue between the EU and Ukraine, including under numerous high-level visits to Ukraine, involving the Commission and Council Presidents, several Commissioners and the EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity were held. The EU-Ukraine Annual Human Rights Dialogue took place in April 2023 to discuss priorities and recommendations by the EU. The political dialogue intensified in 2023 due to Ukraine's status as a candidate country to the EU

and building on the potential of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, leading to the publication of the first country report on Ukraine as part of the Enlargement Package.

4. EU financial engagement: The Thematic Programme for Human Rights and Democracy continued to support civil society actions on documentation and accountability of war crimes.

In addition, at the beginning of 2023 grant support was awarded to human rights defenders for EUR 720,000 and at the end of the year two new grants were launched (EUR 2.4 million) to promote internationally the principle of universal jurisdiction, awareness raising about the war crimes and advocate for the implementation of EU acquis on fundamental rights. The grant support for protection of freedom of expression and media pluralism continued for a total of EUR 3.2 million. Grant support to civil society organisations for their survival and coping with threats posed by the military operations was provided for a total of EUR 1.6 million.

These actions were complemented by a grant under the Technical Cooperation Facility 2019 (EUR 840,000) launched in June 2022 to document war crimes and a contribution agreement (EUR 3 million) launched in November 2020 under the Technical Cooperation Facility 2020 to support activities of the OHCHR Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine.

Three grants under the Country-Based Support Scheme for Civil Society continued to support persons belonging to minorities, women, and protection economic and social rights (EUR 1 million).

5. Multilateral context: Ukraine continued to actively cooperate with international organisations, including the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and Council of Europe promoting condemnation of the Human Rights violation committed in the context of the Russia's full scale of invasion and war of aggression against Ukraine through all the available international instruments and aligning with the EU in this process. On 23 February 2023, The UN General Assembly called for ending the war in Ukraine and demanded Russia's immediate withdrawal from the country, in line with the UN Charter. On 17 May 2023, the Council of Europe Summit in Reykjavik announced the establishment of the Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine through an Enlarged Partial Agreement. The Riga Principles established the guiding rules for the Register's functioning, among them a victim-centred approach.

EEA/EFTA Countries and non EU Western European Countries

Swiss Confederation

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Switzerland has a very high standard of human rights internally, and an active human rights policy abroad, with no issues

of major concern. During the 2022 fall session, the Swiss parliament approved a law to establish the country´s first National Human Rights Institution.

With regards to gender equality, Switzerland continues face persistent wage differences between the sexes, the underrepresentation of women in managerial positions, the difficulties in balancing work and private life, domestic violence and violence against women in general. In August 2023, the Federal Office of Gender Equality (FOGE) reported that women in Switzerland earn 18% less than men – despite the fact that the principle of "equal pay for work of equal value" has been enshrined in the Federal Constitution since 1981, and being set out in greater detail in the Gender Equality Act since 1996. To tackle this, the FOGE has notably explored the possibility to include to expand Logib to include a functionality enabling the creation of a simple, gender-neutral salary system.

Starting in 2024, the FOGE is also taking the lead on matters relating to the issue of equality for LGBTI people. One of its major tasks will be to draw up a "national action plan against LGBTQ-hostile hate crimes".

On 22 June 2022, the Swiss Federal Council adopted a national action plan 2022-2026 for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. The plan is centred on three topics: public information and awareness raising, providing basic and further training for professionals and volunteers, and sexualised violence.

On the matter of racism, in December 2021, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) expressed concern over ethnic, religious, and racial hate speech in Switzerland, including on the Internet and social media. CERD was also concerned about persistent racial profiling by the police in Switzerland.

The UN Committee against Torture issued in July 2023 its main concerns and recommendations on Switzerland´s implementation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Committee welcomed the establishment of the Swiss Institution for Human Rights and called on Switzerland to ensure all necessary resources to enable it to effectively fulfil its existing mandate. On the other hand, the Committee reiterated its concern that torture has not yet been included as a specific crime in Swiss domestic legislation. It was also concerned about claims of ill-treatment and barriers to justice by individuals detained in federal asylum centres, call for the establishment of independent, confidential and effective complaints mechanisms.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU and Switzerland enjoy close and frequent cooperation within the international institutions and multilateral arena as regards human rights and democracy promotion (such as the UN, the Council of Europe, the OSCE). The EU and Switzerland often support each other's resolutions/statements in the UN Human Rights Council. The EU and Switzerland are also like-minded partners in the context of the UN General Assembly Third Committee.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In general, Switzerland has good mechanisms in place to assure the protection of human rights within its territory. Possible issues are best addressed in the framework of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in the UN Human Rights Council. The EU and Switzerland hold human rights consultations, most recently in Brussels on 12

December 2022. A range of matters, including EU-Switzerland cooperation in multilateral fora, are addressed as part of these consultations.

4. EU financial engagement: Switzerland is not included in any operational projects or programmes funded by the EIDHR or other EU instruments.

5. Multilateral: Under its Federal Constitution, the promotion of respect for human rights and democracy is a stated goal of the foreign policy of Switzerland. At the political level, the Foreign Policy Strategy 2024-2027 sets out how Switzerland aims to reinforce the universality of human rights in the global context.

As a follow-up to the Foreign Policy Strategy 2020-23, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) has released Human Rights Guidelines 2021–24. These guidelines are meant to ensure coherent and effective Swiss human rights diplomacy, including in the fields of peace and security, business, and sustainability. Human rights are also an important topic in follow-up strategies, notably the International Cooperation Strategy 2021−24 (IC Strategy 2021–24), which also establishes goals and instruments for promoting human rights, and the Digital Foreign Policy Strategy 2021−24.

The FDFA's Peace and Human Rights Division (PHRD) is responsible for the promotion of peace and human rights as set out in the Federal Council's foreign policy strategy, notably in multilateral settings. For instance, the FDFA's PHRD provides experts for bilateral and multilateral projects, international peace missions and election observation missions, a case in point being the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. In addition, Switzerland also holds a human rights dialogue with China. The latest (17th) iteration took place in Bern in July 2023, after a four-year hiatus.

Switzerland is currently a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), with a two-year mandate that started on 1 January 2023. In the context of the UNSC, Switzerland has four thematic priorities, which are closely linked to human rights: building sustainable peace, protecting civilians, enhancing effectiveness in the work of the UNSC, and addressing climate security. Switzerland is also a member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) during the period 2020-2024.

Switzerland was subject to the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in January 2023. It received 317 recommendations and supported 209.

Kingdom of Norway

1. Overall human rights situation: Norway is a strong supporter and promoter of human rights. Norway has ratified all the main UN conventions on human rights, and the protection of civil and political and economic, social and cultural rights is strong domestically. Norway is

considered as one of the most gender-equal countries globally, ranked second in the WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2023[1].

The promotion of human rights remains a key component of Norway's foreign and development policy. Norway put International law and human rights at the heart of its efforts on UNSC (as non-permanent member 2021-22).

In Norway, there is also a healthy debate on many issues, including some criticisms. Examples encompasses criticism over the excessive application of solitary confinement in prisons; concerns over cases of Child Protection Services; indigenous peoples and criticism over the use of coercive measures in mental health.

Norway also strongly advocates for LGBTI rights on the global stage addressing discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The Norwegian government presented an Action Plan focused on improving queer people's mental health, promote expertise in gender and sexual diversity in the public sector to ensure equitable public services, strengthening civil organisations promoting LGBTI rights.

2. EU action – key focus areas: highlighting relevant EU and international initiatives (via social media, official institutions, schools, etc.) is a priority, as well as providing targeted information to relevant Norwegian stakeholders. The EU Delegation proposed Sami activist Ella Marie Hætta Isaksen to the EU-NGO Human Rights Forum 2023. She was selected, but unfortunately declined her participation. The Delegation also maintains contact with the Norwegian National Human Rights Institution.

The EU Delegation has joined the MS diplomatic missions in promoting the annual pride event, through a joint social media campaign and also through the EU Delegation's website.

3. EU bilateral political engagement and their impact: Norway and the EU have very similar views on human rights issues. Close cooperation takes place in various multilateral fora (UN, Council of Europe, OSCE), where Norway is very active on human rights issues. The EU and Norway also cooperate locally on country-specific strategies around the world. The latest EU-Norway consultations on human rights and multilateral affairs took place in November 2022.

The HoD delivered a demarche in support of EU priorities at the 78th session of the UNGA Third Committee to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 26 October.

4. EU financial engagement and their impact: The EU Delegation in Oslo undertook several public diplomacy and information activities during the course of 2023, including:

- #StandWithUkraine – continuous coverage throughout the year on EU solidarity with Ukraine, as well as updates on sanctions against Russia (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and website)
- Food Security (Twitter, Instagram post)
- Sámi National Day (Twitter)
- International Women's Day (Twitter, Retweet, Instagram Story, Facebook post)
- Oslo Pride (Twitter, Instagram, website)
- International Day of Democracy (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Website)

[1] https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf

- World Day Against Child Labour (Twitter)
- World Humanitarian Day (Instagram, Facebook)
  The #orangetheworld campaign against gender-based violence (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook)
- International Human Rights Day

5. Multilateral context: Norway is active on human rights issues in multilateral context (UN, OSCE, CoE) and it often provides added value to the EU/Member States efforts. Norway is the lead sponsor of a biannual resolution on human rights defenders in the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly.

Iceland

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Iceland maintains a high standard of human rights and a high level of cooperation with the European Union and with international organisations on human rights issues in 2023. It continued to be at the forefront of promoting human rights and particularly gender equality at both national and international level making it the most gender-equal country in the world for the 14th year in a row[2].

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, the EU Delegation and Member State Missions in Iceland focussed on (1) showcasing EU action on promoting human rights and democracy; (2) maintaining dialogue with Icelandic authorities as well as with the main human rights organisations active in the country; and (3) encouraging EU-Iceland cooperation on human rights issues in multilateral fora.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Iceland is a like-minded partner of the EU in the field of human rights and democracy, resulting in close cooperation both in multilateral fora and in country-specific contexts in 2023. During the year, Iceland also participated in political dialogue with the EU in the EEA-EFTA[3] framework.

4. EU financial engagement: Iceland is not included in any operational projects or programmes funded by the EIDHR or other EU instruments. In 2023, the EU Delegation in Iceland financially supported the organisation of the Reykjavik Pride festival, among other human rights related activities.

5. Multilateral context: Iceland is a global leader in the field of human rights. In 2023, Iceland actively promoted human rights in multilateral institutions as well as aligned with EU positions in this context. Iceland took over the presidency of the Council of Europe in November 2022 and hosted the fourth Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Reykjavik on the 16-17 May 2023. At the Summit, a Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation Against Ukraine was established, and European leaders also agreed to strengthen the work of the Council of Europe by adopting the so called

[2] 2023 Global Gender Gap report published by the World Economic Forum
[3] The European Economic Area – European Free Trade Association

"Reykjavík Principles for Democracy". On 11 May 2023, Iceland hosted the annual IDAHOT+ Forum in Reykjavík, one of the most important platforms for the assessment of rights of LGBTI persons in Europe. The EU Commissioner of Equality, Ms Helena Dalli, attended the IDAHOBIT+ 2023 Reykjavík Forum. The Commissioner highlighted the EU's LGBTIQ Equality Strategy and EU's strong message across the world in support for inclusion. The EU Delegation arranged media engagements and ensured high visibility in local media.

Iceland held the presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2023, where it focused on the importance of peace as the prerequisite for welfare, human rights, and environmental protection.

Following Iceland's successful tenure at the UN Human Rights Council in 2018-19, in September 2023, Iceland formally presented its candidature to the Council for a full three-year term 2025-2027. Iceland voted along the same lines as the EU with regard to a series of resolutions at the autumn 2023 session of the UNGA Third Committee.

Iceland's most recent Universal Periodic Review (UPR) took place in January 2022. Several steps have been taken towards establishing a National Human Rights Institution in Iceland – a major recommendation of the 2022 UPR.

Principality of Liechtenstein

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Liechtenstein has a very high standard of human rights. In November 2016, the Liechtenstein Parliament adopted a law forming the basis for a National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) and this law entered into force on 1 January 2017. The Liechtenstein NHRI is called the Association for Human Rights (*Verein für Menschenrechte*, VMR) and it has the responsibility for the protection and promotion of human rights in Liechtenstein. The government´s Equal Opportunities Department is also responsible for awareness-raising, providing financial support for funding projects and counseling centers, participation in legislative projects as well as participation in regional and international expert bodies.

In June 2021, Liechtenstein ratified the Istanbul Convention. The Convention entered into force on 1 October 2021In the context of implementing the Convention, Liechtenstein is focused on work with the relevant authorities (such as the National Police), awareness-raising, as well as financial support provided to civil society actors (such as the Liechtenstein Women's Shelter).

In July 2022, the European Commission published the most recent country report on gender equality for Liechtenstein. The report reaffirmed that the implementation of the EU gender equality *acquis* in Liechtenstein is satisfactory. However, the report stated that because of the lack of case law concerning gender equality, it is difficult to assess whether enforcement is satisfactory as well. According to the 2021 status report on the human rights situation in Liechtenstein, published by the Liechtenstein authorities in April 2022, more work remains to be done to address persistent wage differences between men and women and continued

female underrepresentation in domestic politics (as of the last parliamentary elections held in February 2021, only 12% of the seats were occupied by women).

Liechtenstein is in the process to legalise same-sex marriage, after recognising same-sex registered partnerships since 1 September 2011, following approval by voters in a referendum. Parliamentary consultations on the government´s proposed legislative changes to recognise same-sex marriage concluded on 10 October 2023, with results pointing to a highlikelihood of Liechtenstein legalising same-sex marriage in 2024. Liechtenstein has also advocated for the protection of LGBTI individuals from violence and discrimination in the multilateral setting, e.g. by consecrating parts of its voluntary contributions to the CoE to promote rights and equality for LGBTI persons.

In July 2022, the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) under the Council of Europe submitted a compliance report following the evaluation report on Liechtenstein which assessed the effectiveness of the systems in place to prevent corruption in respect of members of parliament, judges and prosecutors. In this, GRECO concluded that Liechtenstein had achieved a "very low level of compliance" with the recommendations (1 of 16 was implemented) and encouraged the Principality to pursue further progress.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Liechtenstein is a like-minded partner of the EU in the field of human rights and cooperation takes place in various multilateral forums (UN, Council of Europe, OSCE). Liechtenstein is a steadfast supporter of the International Criminal Court (ICC), including with regard to the investigations in Ukraine.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In general, Liechtenstein has good mechanisms in place to assure the protection of human rights within its territory. Possible issues are best addressed in the framework of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in the UN Human Rights Council.

4. EU financial engagement: Liechtenstein is not included in any operational projects or programmes funded by the EIDHR or other EU instruments.

5. Multilateral context: Protection of human rights and the rule of law are amongst Liechtenstein's key foreign policy objectives. Liechtenstein focuses on the protection of human rights especially within the framework of multilateral cooperation, notably the UN, OSCE, and particularly the Council of Europe (CoE), as Chair of the CoE's Committee of Ministers (November 2023 – May 2024). Liechtenstein has been a steadfast supporter of the International Criminal Court with regard to the investigations in Ukraine, and joined the Enlarged Partial Agreement on the Register of Damage for Ukraine created on 17 May 2023, together with the EU.
The Veto Initiative, launched by Liechtenstein, was adopted by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) without a vote on 26 April 2022. To increase transparency and accountability, notably in the face of human rights abuses, the Veto initiative ensures that, whenever a veto is cast in the UN Security Council (UNSC) by one of its five permanent members, the UNGA will meet automatically within 10 days.

Liechtenstein has played a central role in advancing the Finance Against Slavery and Trafficking (FAST) initative, which is based at the UN University Center for Policy Research. The FAST

initiative aims to put the financial sector at the centre of global efforts to end modern slavery and human trafficking. It remains among the main initiatives of the Principality in the multilateral context.

Liechtenstein's fourth Universal Periodic Review cycle took place in October 2023. Liechtenstein received a generally positive appreciation during its review. Liechtenstein received 184 recommendations. Of these, 132 enjoyed its support, and 52 were noted. Many recommendations related to the strengthening of children's rights, and to the equality of women and men in different areas of society, particularly in politics and the economy. In this regard, Liechtenstein was continuously implementing measures to promote the compatibility of family and career and to combat role stereotypes. Liechtenstein reaffirmed its commitment to conduct an active policy on gender equality and to end violence against women; it had thus accepted all relevant recommendations.

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The UK maintains a robust rights framework, which ensures democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. At the same time, in the course of 2023, the government has continued to come under criticism for legislative initiatives and political discourse that have been followed with some concern by UN bodies, the Council of Europe, as well as human rights defenders.

In July, the UK government enacted the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which includes provisions that severely restrict the access to rights for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants who arrive 'irregularly' to the UK. The new law imposes a duty on the Home Secretary to seek to remove such persons to their home country or to a 'safe third country,' puts in place extensive new powers to detain migrants for lengthy periods pending their removal, and curtails the scope for judicial review of detention and of removal orders. It also restricts the protection offered by the UK's anti-migrant trafficking rules to many migrants. The implementation of most of the Act's provision has, however, been delayed pending the outcome of the legal proceedings against the government's plans to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda, as this is currently the only country which has agreed to receive such migrants from the UK. Following a ruling by the UK Supreme Court in November 2023 finding that Rwanda was not a 'safe third country,' the UK concluded a revised Treaty with Rwanda in December 2023 that includes measures designed to address the concerns identified by the Supreme Court. The government continues to seek to put through parliament a new law (the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill), which would severely restrict the ability to legally challenge deportations to Rwanda.

The new legislation (and the draft law still making its way through parliament) have received strong criticism domestically and internationally, including from the UK parliament's own Joint Committee on Human Rights, who in particular considers that the laws would violate the principle of non-refoulement. Critics consider that the new laws would be incompatible with the UK's international obligations under the Geneva Refugee Convention, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the Council of Europe Convention on combatting

trafficking in human beings, the UN Statelessness Conventions and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Concerns have also been raised regarding the conditional immunity under the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 for individuals implicated in serious human rights transgressions. The act provides a restricted type of exemption from prosecution for offenses related to the Troubles for individuals who collaborate with a new organisation focused on uncovering the truth and fostering reconciliation. In its findings, the UN Human Rights Committee urged the government to revise or revoke this legislation to ensure that all past human rights violations committed by British officials and members of the armed forces undergo thorough investigation and prosecution, with appropriate sanctions applied regardless of any time constraints.

Rights groups have also expressed concern about the Public Order Act adopted in April 2023, which is seen as placing additional limitations on people's right to peaceful protest. The government has also introduced an **'**anti-boycott bill' in parliament, which could limit the ability of public entities to steer investments away from companies implicated in human rights violations and international crimes.

Regarding social and economic rights, concerns have been raised about the limited access to social housing, as well as child poverty and social exclusion exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. As for anti-discrimination, the London Metropolitan-commissioned report in March found that the excessive use of force by Met police affected Black people in a disproportionate manner. Following its ratification by the UK, the International Labour Organization Violence and Harassment Convention (C190) came into effect in March.

The UK government decided not to take forward a draft 'Bill of Rights' in Parliament, which would have replaced the Human Rights Act of 1998 and has given rise to some concerns that it may restrict access to judicial redress for human rights violations. At the same time, political discourse on the government considering withdrawing the UK from the European Convention on Human Rights continued throughout the year.

2. EU action on Human Rights and Democracy - key focus areas: A Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategy is yet to be elaborated.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In 2023, the EU and UK had informal consultations that also touched upon human rights issues.

4. EU financial engagement: There are no EU projects or programmes related to human rights currently covering the UK.

5. Multilateral context: The UK remained committed to multilateralism in 2023 and was eager to cooperate with like-minded countries to push forwards human rights and democracy in an international context. In the 2021 Integrated Review of defence, security, development and foreign policy, and its refresh of 2023, the government committed to protecting 'open society and democratic values' through: using sanctions to hold serious human rights abuses to account; supporting effective governance and justice reform; tailoring the government's approach to local needs, with a particular focus on the European neighbourhood, East Africa and the Indo-Pacific; and working through the UN and Council of Europe. According to a report by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) published in 2023, the UK spent around GBP 1.4 billion from 2016 to 2021 to support democracy and human rights worldwide.

The UK has continued to sanction human rights abuses under its Human Rights Sanction regime, which targets 96 individuals and 11 organisations as of 8 December 2023. In December 2023, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UK unveiled sanctions in collaboration with the United States and Canada. These sanctions targeted individuals implicated in coerced labour operations in Southeast Asia, as well as government-affiliated officials in Belarus, Haiti, Iran, and Syria involved in curtailing individual freedoms. Furthermore, the UK administers distinct sanctions frameworks directed at specific nations, including Russia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Myanmar.

European Neighbourhood Policy

People's Democratic Republic of Algeria

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, President Tebboune announced further increases for pensions and the salary for civil servants, as well as improvements in the health insurance system, in line with the measures initiated in 2022.

In 2020, the Constitution was amended to require the State to protect women from violence, but no concrete mechanism has yet been established to guarantee such protection.

With regard to fundamental freedoms, in particular freedom of the press, the situation remains worrying. According to the National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees (CNLD), a number of politically motivated arrests and trials continued to take place in the country. On 20 January 2023, the Algerian judiciary announced the dissolution of the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH). On 23 February 2023, the Council of State confirmed the permanent dissolution of the Youth Actions Rally (RAJ), an opposition political association that played a major role in the Hirak movement in 2019. Trade unions in Algeria also expressed concerns about their right to organise strikes due to new legislation. In 2023, *Reporters sans frontières* ranked Algeria 136th among 180 countries. On 11 May 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation of journalists in Algeria, calling for respect of freedom of expression and urging the Algerian authorities to release imprisoned journalists.

Algeria has been observing an undeclared moratorium on the application of the death penalty since 1993. No executions took place in 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU support to Algeria in the framework of Human Rights and Democracy Strategy includes:

i) promoting democratisation, governance and rule of law,

ii) facilitating a favourable environment for civil society and reinforcing the participation of CSOs in a global, national and regional scale;

iii) promoting gender equality and fighting gender-based violence;

iv) preventing all forms of discrimination, intolerance, violence or persecution;

v) promoting freedom of thought, conscience and religion;

vi) promoting freedom of expression and information, and of peaceful assembly and association"

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU has regularly raised the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms with the Algerian authorities, as well as NGOs and the civil society. The EU Delegation closely follows the situation of human rights defenders in Algeria.

During the official visit of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) to Algiers in March 2023, the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms was addressed. The HRVP reaffirmed the EU's commitment to these fundamental values, including freedom of expression and association, as well as the media.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU has financed several programmes to fight against gender-based violence.

The EU has provided support to Algeria's civil society actors, including professional associations, in order to strengthen their capacity to contribute to the socio-economic development of the country and to relevant national debates.

In addition, refugee protection is an integral part of EU-funded humanitarian projects in five Sahrawi refugee camps in south-west Algeria, near Tindouf.

5. Multilateral context: Algeria is a member of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) for the period 2023-2025, marking its third term. On 6 June 2023, Algeria was also elected by the UN General Assembly as a non-permanent member of the Security Council for the period 2024-2025 (for the fourth time).

Algeria remains an important interlocutor and was able to join consensus on several EU-led resolutions, such as on the Rights of the Child, Freedom of Religion and Belief, DPRK, Myanmar and Afghanistan.

In 2023, Algeria welcomed two UN Special Rapporteurs to visit the country: the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, carried out a 10-day official mission to Algeria in mid-September visiting Oran, Algiers and Béjaïa. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, also visited Algiers, Tizi Ouzou and Oran in November-December 2023, where she met government officials and human rights defenders.

Republic of Armenia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In spite of the challenges, Armenia maintained a relatively good overall human rights and democracy record and continued to implement wide-ranging reforms in the field of justice and rule of law. Areas in which further improvements by Armenia are necessary include the fight against discrimination and violence based on gender identity and sexual orientation, ill-treatment by law enforcement, conditions in the penitentiary system, hate speech, violence against women and girls and discrimination against persons with disabilities.

The adoption of Armenia's National Human Rights Action Plan (HRAP) for 2023-2025 in September 2023, the Judicial and Legal Reforms Strategy for 2022-2026, the 2019-2023 Strategy for Penitentiary and Probation Services, and the new Anti-Corruption Strategy and its Action Plan for 2023-2026 were important milestones in addressing the shortcomings in the areas of human rights and democracy. Armenia made significant progress in shaping and extending its previous Justice Reform Strategy for 2019-2023 to cover the period 2022-2026.

The security situation remained a significant challenge for the country throughout the year. Azerbaijan's military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 led to a mass exodus of more than 100,000 Karabakh Armenians onto the territory of Armenia. The Government took swift action in addressing the immediate humanitarian needs and safeguarding human rights of the displaced persons.

2. EU action – key focus areas: The EU assisted Armenia in the implementation of the National Human Rights Action Plan (HRAP) for 2023-2025 through policy dialogue and assistance, including through geographic and thematic instruments such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). The EU continued to provide technical support to the Office of the Human Rights Defender (HRDO), which supports legislative reforms, public outreach and human rights monitoring in Armenia.

The EU retained its strong support for Armenia's ambitious constitutional, judicial and police reform programmes, continuing to be the largest external donor.

The EU and its Member States continued to address the human rights challenges and providing support to Armenia particularly in the areas of equality and non-discrimination, rights of the child, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and information, elections, and labour rights.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Notwithstanding the challenges faced, Armenia reiterated its commitment to implementing the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU, which entered into force in 2021. The EU-Armenia Civil Society Platform, which was established under CEPA in 2022, continued its work in 2023.

The 13th EU-Armenia Human Rights Dialogue (HRD) and the 13th EU-Armenia Sub-committee on Justice, Freedom and Security (JFS) were held back-to-back in Yerevan on 18 and 19 January 2024. Specific human rights issues discussed at the HRD included equality and non-discrimination, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and information, electoral and constitutional reform, torture and other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment, and the strengthening of labour rights. Armenia provided the overview of the situation of the displaced persons and informed the EU about the specific needs related to their rights and integration into society. At the JFS, discussions focused on judicial reforms and cooperation, reforms in the security sector, protection of personal data, the fight against corruption, law enforcement and crime prevention, as well as spikes of domestic violence.

4. EU financial engagement: In view of the immediate needs of displaced Karabakh Armenians, the EU provided Armenia with EUR 12.2 million in humanitarian assistance and EUR 15 million of supplementary budget support. Since the outbreak of the war in and around Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, the EU has allocated EUR 32.9 million in humanitarian aid to provide emergency support to the affected people. The EU continued to support Armenia's

long-term socio-economic resilience, including through financial and technical assistance on key areas of human rights.

Apart from financing a number of grant projects in the field of human rights, the EU launched in 2023 EQUAL – EU4Women Empowerment in Armenia, a contract to the value of EUR 1 million, with the aim to elevate and empower women in Armenian society.

The EU remained the largest donor to the Armenian justice sector, including through an ongoing budget support programme for 2021-2023 with a total amount of EUR 30 million, as well as a Phase II budget support programme of EUR 11 million for 2023-2025. Among other projects in the justice and anti-corruption field, the EU funded a complementary technical assistance contract to support Armenia in the implementation of ongoing reforms. Justice and anti-corruption efforts in Armenia were also supported through the EU-Council of Europe "Partnership for Good Governance", as well as one EU Twinning and two regional programmes.

5. Multilateral context: Despite difficult circumstances, Armenia continued to work towards fulfilling its international human rights obligations. On 14 November 2023, Armenia formally deposited the instrument of ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Statute entered into force for Armenia on 1 February 2024, when the country became 124th State Party to join the Statute. The EU stands ready to assist Armenia on all steps taken to harmonise its domestic legislation with ICC requirements.

In October 2023, Armenia ratified Protocol No. 13 to the European Convention on Human Rights, concerning the abolition of the death penalty in all circumstances, including for crimes committed in times of war and imminent threat of war. Armenia has yet to ratify the Istanbul Convention, signed in 2017.

Republic of Azerbaijan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The overall state of human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan continues to be of concern, as reflected by the intensification of prosecution of critical voices in the second half of the year, restricted space for civil society and independent media, and several limitations to civil liberties.

The new Law on Political Parties of 11 January 2023, has introduced a number of problematic provisions according to the joint opinion of the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission of 13 March 2023[4]. At the same time, the overall electoral legal framework requires revision in line with international standards and obligations. Activities of non-governmental organisations are restricted, including by the obligation to register grant agreements in a complex and arbitrary procedure. Furthermore, on 17 August 2023 Azerbaijan was excluded from the Open Government Partnership (OGP) for failing to meet the necessary membership conditions and the persisting challenges for civil society engagement[5].

Freedom of opinion and expression continued to be restricted, so as the repression of human

[4] https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)007-e
[5] https://www.opengovpartnership.org/azerbaijan-withdrawn/

rights defenders, journalists, civic and political activities. In September 2023, several activists, journalists and human rights defenders who criticised the Azerbaijani leadership in social media for the 19-20 September military intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh, were arrested either on administrative or criminal charges. Between November and December, a further number of independent journalists were arrested on charges of money laundering. Gender inequality remains high. Domestic violence is an issue of concern. The rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) communities are not fully respected[6]. Corruption is also a challenge. Nonetheless, on 8 May 2023 President Aliyev signed an order pardoning a number of individuals out of which eight were released based on appeals of human rights organisations[7]. On 8 March 2023, Azerbaijan signed Protocol No. 13 to the ECHR banning the death penalty in all circumstances and in June it amended the Law on the Judicial Legal Council[8]. Mediation reached a success rate of 50.9%.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The promotion and support of human rights and fundamental freedoms is at the core of EU's action in Azerbaijan, along the following priorities:

- Strengthening Rule of law and democratic institutions. In this framework, the EU is supporting steps in the direction of an independent, fair and efficient justice system, as well as supporting the fight against corruption.
- Promoting an enabling environment for civil society. The EU is supporting civil society organisations (CSOs) and strongly promoting the elimination of legal provisions (such as registration obligations) that are currently hampering CSOs space and action in the country.
- Promoting freedom of expression. The EU supports the freedom of press and the plurality of opinions, advocating against the prosecution of individuals on political grounds.
- Support development and social and economic inclusion, including by contributing to access to basic services and by focusing on regional development and on vulnerable groups.

The EU also aims at contributing to the protection of rights, equal opportunities and equal participation in the public and political life of women, youth, persons with disabilities, displaced people and minority groups.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: To promote human rights and democratic principles, the EU has addressed relevant concerns with the authorities in official fora, such as the annual Sub-Committee on Justice, Freedom, Security and Human Rights and Democracy (held in May 2023).

The EU Special Representative for Human Rights, the EU Delegation and numerous EU Member States engaged regularly in meetings and public diplomacy events on human rights and stressed the pivotal importance of promoting and protecting human rights. Meetings were held with the competent national institutions in the course of 2023, notably the Presidential Administration, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ombudsperson, State Committee on Family and Children, State Committee on Religious Associations, State Committee for

[6] https://rainbow-europe.org/#8622/0/0
[7] https://president.az/en/articles/view/59655
[8] https://www.coe.int/en/web/execution/-/azerbaijan-legislative-changes-on-the-composition-of-the-judicial-legal-council

Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, General Prosecution Service, Bar Association, Agency for State Support to NGOs etc. In the course of 2023, several thematic meetings on human rights have been held upon initiative of the EU Delegation with EU Member States, US, UK and Switzerland representatives. Meetings were also held with representatives of NGOs, think tanks, political activists, human rights lawyers, human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers as well as with representatives of religious organisations and the LGBTI community. The EU Delegation and/or some EU Member States conducted trial monitoring in several cases.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU supported projects in the following areas: CSOs and human rights defenders; gender equality and women's rights; rights of the child and rights of persons with disabilities; freedom of expression, media freedom and freedom of assembly and association; strengthening the independence, impartiality, professionalism and efficiency of the judicial system and the rule of law and on promotion of peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Regarding EU financial support to civil society organisations, in 2023 no EU direct grants were registered at the Ministry of Justice. EU provided financial support to Azerbaijani Civil Society Organisations via contribution agreements with UNDP, OHCHR, Council of Europe and UNICEF.

5. Multilateral context: Despite some recent positive developments, the overall rate of implementation of European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rulings remains low. The proposal to ratify the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention remains under consideration.

Republic of Belarus

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, the human rights situation in Belarus further deteriorated. By the end of 2023, there were at least 1452 political prisoners in detention, including representatives of civil society and political opposition, human rights defenders, journalists, media workers, lawyers. Amongst these, there are persons with serious illnesses, disabilities and elderly. The authorities subjected political prisoners to incommunicado detention, torture and other forms of ill-treatment. In 2023, the authorities also subjected family members of political prisoners to arbitrary searches, detentions, interrogations, and other forms of harassment. At least two political prisoners died while serving their sentences. As of the end of December 2023, no less than 960 NGOs were in the process of forced liquidation. This adds to the at least 550 organisations that self-liquidated.

In view of the parliamentary and local elections of 25 February 2024, the regime tightened the repression. Belarusian authorities continued detaining and prosecuting people in connection with peaceful protests in 2020, including some who returned to Belarus from abroad. The institutionalisation and legalisation of repressive measures significantly expanded, including through the increased use of terrorism and extremism related offences to intimidate, repress and prosecute individuals exercising their fundamental freedoms. In 2023, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), and some of its individual staff members, as well as HRC Viasna, a prominent human rights organisation, were designated as "extremist formations." Founders and members of independent organisations deemed "extremist" were compelled to

exile due to the high risk of arbitrary detention and other human rights violations. Most of them continue their activities from abroad.

Belarus remains the only country in Europe to carry out the death penalty. In March, Lukashenka signed a law that expanded the application of the death penalty to "high treason" by civil servants and members of the military, further broadening the scope of this cruel and inhumane punishment for acts that do not qualify as intentional killing, which is against international law. The first death sentence in Belarus, since May 2021, was pronounced in October of 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued its support to the victims of repression, civil society organisations and independent media. The EU also continued to support actions with a view to holding perpetrators of human rights violations accountable. The EU Delegation in Minsk, in cooperation with Member States embassies and like-minded partners, engaged in several initiatives in support of political prisoners. This included public awareness-raising campaigns as well as targeted official demarches with the Belarusian authorities. The EU and like-minded countries continued to observe politically motivated trials, despite very challenging circumstances. The EU also continued to support the International Accountability Platform for Belarus.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In 2023, Belarus continued to be high on the EU's agenda. The continuing repression and the deteriorating human rights situation was addressed at all levels, including by the Foreign Affairs Council and the European Council, and raised in numerous contacts, including with third countries. In August 2023, the seventh package of sanctions was imposed on an additional 38 individuals and 3 entities in Belarus, over continued human rights abuses. Further targeted measures were introduced in response to Belarus's involvement in Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, extending export bans to firearms, aviation and space industry. In line with the Council conclusions of 12 October 2020, the EU scaled down its bilateral cooperation with Belarusian public authorities and increased EU's support to the Belarusian people, democratic forces and civil society. The EU launched a Consultative Group with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society in June 2023. The Consultative group also met in December. The HR/VP addressed the situation in the EP plenary on several occasions. The EU Special Representative for Human Rights also addressed the dire human rights situation in Belarus focusing on attempts to improve the situation of political prisoners and ensure their release.

4. EU financial engagement: In line with the Council conclusions on Belarus of 12 October 2020, the EU has redirected assistance from the public authorities to non-state actors. The total support to the people of Belarus, coming from different European Commission sources of funding since August 2020, amounts to almost EUR 140 million. The last bilateral support package adopted in November 2023 consists of EUR 30 million and has three main strands: support to independent media, arts and culture as well as small and medium enterprises. The second annual Senior Officials' Meeting took place in May 2023, providing a forum for representatives of EU institutions, Member States and Belarusian civil society and democratic forces to assess the needs and coordinate assistance to the people of Belarus, including in the human rights domain.

5. Multilateral context: The EU continued to raise the human rights violations in Belarus in international fora and support initiatives to promote accountability. As in previous years, the

EU led on two initiatives on the human rights situation in Belarus, making it a standing item on the UN Human Rights Council's agenda. The mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus and of the investigative mechanism under the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights were renewed in 2023. The EU made several statements in the Council of Europe, the OSCE framework, and the UN General Assembly, condemning the ongoing human right violations in Belarus.

Arab Republic of Egypt

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The Egyptian authorities have taken several steps putting greater emphasis on the importance of the respect for human rights. The implementation of these commitments, stemming from the National Strategy for Human Rights, has been slow and lacks an action plan to be followed. Human rights challenges remained widespread, particularly in relation to freedom of expression and the rule of law.

The first phase of the National Dialogue announced by the authorities took place, usefully bringing to the forefront some political and social debates on human rights and a set of recommendations to legislators. Following the reactivation of the Presidential Amnesty Committee in 2022, releases continued in 2023, yet at a slower rate than the previous year. In the same period, a number of new arrests were also recorded. Meanwhile, former detainees face challenges in their reintegration into society, with asset freezes and travel bans being some of the main hurdles.

The protection of fundamental freedoms and the civic space for civil society and human rights defenders, in particular freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and media freedom, have remained largely restricted. Concerns remained high about the use of the Terrorism Law against peaceful critics and individuals, and the extensive and indiscriminate use of pre-trial detention. Freedom of the press has remained significantly hampered – blockage of websites was not reversed and monitoring and prosecuting of criticism on social media continued – as reflected in Egypt's ranking (166th out of 180 countries) in the World Press Freedom Index 2023. Extensive use of the death penalty continued, while there are no official data to date for 2023 summarising concrete numbers. As a result of the implementation of the National Strategy for Human Rights, the Criminal Law should be amended reducing the number of crimes punishable with death penalty. Concerning freedom of religion or belief, Egyptian authorities have continued making visible signs of support to the Coptic community. Moreover, intermittent clashes between Christians and Muslims over places of worship declined and the legalisation of the ''unlicensed'' churches proceeded in batches of ten every three months. The collective personal status law for Christians was finalised by Christian denominations and awaits to be submitted to the Parliament.

In 2023, Egypt continued to provide protection and assistance to refugees and asylum seekers. However, external shocks, including Russia's war of aggression, the conflicts in Sudan and in Gaza, have further exacerbated the pressure on state resources devoted to socio-economic protection. Egypt has yet to adopt asylum laws.

2. EU action – key focus areas: The EU applied different tools ranging from diplomatic outreach, consultation with civil society and cooperation projects with the authorities and civil

society. In addition to socio-economic aspects, projects and initiatives focused on reinforcing a culture of human rights, capacity-building for civil society organisations, support to human rights defenders, the rights of women and girls cultural rights, the promotion of tolerance and the protection of vulnerable communities, including refugees. Observation of trials was among the tools employed by the EU and Member States, although diplomats continued to face restrictions in access.

Protecting and empowering individuals: In 2023, the EU was active with projects aimed at improving living conditions and promoting development at community level, particularly for the benefit of disadvantaged groups residing in informal settlements in urban areas. The Technical Education and Vocational Training sector has also been supported by the EU, by targeting Youth in the public schools/centres in order to be equipped with the skills needed for the labour market. The EU continued to provide direct support to Human Rights NGOs.

Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies: In 2023, the EU continued to support the OECD, contributing to strengthen government capacities to monitor sustainable development strategies and upgrade the administrative reform plan. In 2023, thanks to EU support, UNDP has started the implementation of a project aiming at enhancing governance and leadership at the local level. On November 2023, a project financed by the EU was launched to assist the OHCHR to support Egypt in implementing its human rights commitments.

Promoting a global system of human rights and democracy: In August 2023, the EU launched a project with the UN OHCHR. The aim is to establish a partnership EU-UN and join synergies to reinforce a culture on human rights in Egypt. The project aims, among others, at strengthening capacities of public officers and relevant stakeholders, monitoring and implementing the National Human Rights Strategy and reporting to the Universal Periodic Review Mechanism and Human Rights bodies.

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: In 2023, the EU worked on a project in support to the NCHR aiming to contribute to the promotion, protection and provision of Human Rights in Egypt. The EU project includes the use of a digital complaints management system, accessible to victims of Human Rights violations in remote areas of the country.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Salient human rights issues were raised throughout the year at all levels in formal EU-Egypt political dialogue. The EU and Egypt had a constructive in-depth exchange on human rights and democracy issues at the Association Committee in May 2023 and at the High level Political Dialogue in June 2023. On 5 October 2023, the European Parliament adopted a plenary resolution on the human rights situation in Egypt, referring specifically to the Hisham Kassem case.

4. EU financial engagement: Significant EU bilateral assistance to Egypt was directed to the socio-economic sector and support to civil society. The EU's cooperation in Egypt aims to support Egypt's 'Sustainable Development Strategy – Vision-2030'. EU-supported projects in Egypt contributed to the promotion and protection of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights though global and bilateral means of implementation. In 2023, the EU delegation managed 24 projects (EU contribution of approximately EUR 20.4 million) in support of human rights and civil society through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights / NDICI Human Rights & Democracy, thematic lines supporting civil society organisations.

5. Multilateral context: Egypt has ratified all major international human rights treaties, but has not yet signed the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty, nor the Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture. On 2023 Egypt underwent the regular review by the UN Committee on Human Rights on the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the periodic review by the Committee against Torture. Egypt was cited in the EU Statement under Item 2 at the 54st Human Rights Council session on 12 September 2023.

State of Israel

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Israel is a democracy with independent institutions and robust checks and balances. A strong judiciary serving as check and balances for government proposals and legislation has continued to play an active role in ensuring the protection and promotion of human rights and freedom of individuals and groups in Israel.

Human rights and good governance have in 2023 been affected by the severity of the political, security and internal challenges in Israel, partly stemming from the continuous surge in violence and counter-terror measures in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), mass protests against the government's plans for judicial reforms, but also following the attack of Hamas on 7 October on Israel and the ensuing war.

A record number of Israelis has been killed in terrorist attacks in 2023 (in particular on 7 October, the highest number of Jews -1,200- were killed in one single day since the Holocaust). About 240 Israeli hostages were taken to Gaza, of whom about half have been freed or have died in captivity before the end of 2023. About 120,000 Israelis from communities close to Gaza and the Israel's northern border with Lebanon have become internally displaced in 2023. There were reports of massive sexual and gender-based violence against Israeli women on 7 October.

In the war following the 7 October attack by Hamas, an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe has unfolded in Gaza with a record number of Palestinians killed. While Israel has made some efforts, albeit insufficient, to ensure better facilitation of humanitarian aid, the war had an immense impact on civilians in Gaza. A record number of Palestinians have also been killed in the West Bank (WB) this year by Israeli security forces and some Israeli settlers.

Since 7 October, CSOs are reporting an unprecedented surge in settlement activities in the West Bank, including the construction of illegal outposts, new roads, fences, and roadblocks often initiated by settlers. Since October, the Israeli government has been advancing fast on construction plans in East Jerusalem through different projects. Earlier in 2023 (before the attacks), Israel had also decided to advance at least 4,500 new housing units in West Bank settlements.

Before the start of the war, there were 110,000 Palestinian workers from the West Bank working inside Israel with work permits. Additionally, 30,000 worked legally in the settlements. Another 20,000 from Gaza worked with permits inside Israel. Since 7 October,

Israel closed all border crossings, and the WB Palestinian workers who were in Israel could not initially return. Since the onset of the war, WB workers are not allowed into Israel. This has resulted in financial hardship as they lost their source of livelihood. Between 4,000-5,000 Gazan workers have been held in detention centres at military bases in the WB since the outbreak of the war. Many of them have now been returned to Gaza. The Israeli Ministry of Justice expressed concern about the conditions of their detention, as thousands were transferred to overcrowded cage-like facilities.

Human Rights defenders and civil society organisations continue to be actively involved in the promotion of good governance and human and civil rights, which have gradually resulted in political smear campaigns, rhetoric, legislative and administrative processes meant to limit the influence and work of CSOs was temporarily suspended.

The unprecedented civil protests in 2023 and the outbreak of the October 7 war brought to a halt the judicial reform legislation. The Minister of Justice declared a Special State of Emergency within the court system, halting operations with the exception of urgent hearings, and this has had a broad impact on human rights and judicial rights.

The press remains independent, despite efforts to reform the media.

2. EU action – key focus areas: The EU focused on five strategic priority areas: Israel's responsibilities as an occupying power; upholding democratic values; combatting discrimination against the Arab minorities; rights and protection of persons in vulnerable situations; and engagement with the United Nations.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In 2023, the EU Delegation to Israel organised a number of demarches on issues such as settlement expansion, pending demolitions, and new draft laws targeting CSOs, or favouring the widening of the scope of capital punishment in Israel.

The EU Delegation has cooperated closely with relevant NGOs (such as Physicians for Human Rights Israel) to monitor the well-being of prisoners, mostly in cases of hunger strikes. The EU Delegation has also followed up with the Israeli authorities and expressed concern about the potential lack of prisoners' access to healthcare and medical follow-up in a number of concrete cases.

Since 7 October, the EU has frequently followed up with Israeli authorities about the need to facilitate humanitarian assistance to Gaza, reminded relevant Israeli authorities about the need to open the Kerem Shalom crossing point and additional humanitarian corridors, scale up the capacity to allow more trucks with humanitarian aid to go into Gaza. The EU has also consistently reminded its Israeli interlocutors of Israel's duty to respect international law and international humanitarian law.

4. EU financial engagement: In the framework of the former European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, and the new NDICI - Human Rights and Democracy programme, 14 human rights projects were implemented in 2023, involving almost 30 CSOs.

Six new contracts were signed in December 2022 (for a total amount of EUR 2.3 million), whose implementation runs through 2023 and 2024.

In addition, funding to CSOs is also channelled through both the thematic programme for civil society, under which five new contracts have been signed in 2023, and the European Peacebuilding initiative (EUPI), which now has a confirmed Action Document and a call for proposals coming up.

The bilateral envelope from the European Neighbourhood Instrument has traditionally served the key objective of strengthening EU-Israel relations through approximation of Israeli norms and standards to the EU ones and promotion of institutional cooperation. This work has continued in 2023, with a number of twinning projects, including one with the Ministry of Labour on "Promoting Protection of Labour Rights of Foreign Workers" with France as counterpart.

In 2023, the EU awarded small value grants (under EUR 60,000) to four extraordinary grassroots civil society initiatives that contribute to the objectives of Human Rights and Democracy in Israel, but could not have been funded through regular Calls for Proposals due to their small scale, unique approach or organisational capacity. The projects are: (1) providing emergency social work services to potential victims of human trafficking, working alongside and closely with state authorities; (2) educating about human rights and democracy through filmmaking workshops for youth living in mixed Jewish-Arab communities; (3) football training for Jewish and Arab children as a tool for building a more resilient, inclusive, and democratic urban community in Jerusalem; and lastly, (4) helping Bedouin communities in the South of Israel to prepare themselves for emergency situations and empower them to create a more secure environment for their families in situations of war.

5. Multilateral context: In 2023, the Human Rights Council approved five resolutions on Israel. In addition to the four yearly ones (Accountability, Settlements, Self-determination, Golan) it also approved resolution 53/18, aimed to ensure adequate financial resources for yearly updates of the OHCHR database of business enterprises operating in Israeli settlements.

Furthermore, the HR Council received reports on the human rights situation in Israeli-occupied territory from the UN Secretary General, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Special Rapporteur and Commission of Inquiry. The human rights situation in Israel and the occupied territories was also raised by the High Commissioner, his office, various HRC mandate holders and treaty bodies in a number of statements and communications, especially numerous during the months of war in Gaza following October 7 terrorist attacks. On 16 November, the High Commissioner for Human Rights called an informal briefing on the situation in Gaza and Israel following his visit to the region, during which he was not allowed to enter Israel or oPt. Israel has not renewed the issuance of visas for OHCHR international staff.

Israel underwent its fourth Universal Periodic Review on 9 May 2023. It received 320 recommendations, supporting 171 (in whole or in part) and noting 149 (including all those made in relation to the occupied Palestinian territory).

Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan continued the modernisation of the political system initiated by King Abdullah II in 2021, including reforms to encourage the formation of nation-wide programme-based political parties, the participation of women and youth in political life and enhanced geographical representation in national institutions. The EU has received in August 2023 an invitation by the Jordan Independent Election Commission (IEC) to observe the legislative elections in 2024.

In 2023, the government took some steps to improve legislation in line with international human rights standards. Jordan amended the Labour code to add the definition of sexual harassment in the workplace and provisions for the prohibition of discrimination, including in terms of equal pay between men and women. The Penal Code was also amended to strengthen fair trial guarantees and to extend community service and other alternatives to detention.

However, important challenges remain, especially in relation to freedom of expression (online and offline) – for which Jordan is ranked 146th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2023 –, as well as freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and the rule of law. Jordan experienced a further shrinking of civic space in 2023 through legal and administrative restrictions as well as enhanced monitoring of activities of CSOs. The foreign funding authorisation system, established in 2015 and amended in 2022, continued to exert pressure on civil society actors. The EU expressed concern about the adoption of a new cybercrime law in August 2023[9], emphasising the importance of protecting freedom of expression in its implementation.

The administrative detention of peaceful activists also raised concerns regarding effective access to due process and fair trial guarantees. Jordan ranked 62nd out of 142 countries in the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2023. Gender-based violence and lack of gender equality remain issues of concern. The economic participation of women remained very low, with the Kingdom ranking 126th out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index 2023, while discrimination of women persisted in the personal status law, particularly as regards custodianship, divorce and inheritance of citizenship. LGBTI activists continued to be subject to recurrent harassment by the authorities.

2. EU action – key focus areas: *Protecting and empowering individuals*: The EU promoted leadership at municipal level, women's economic empowerment, gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence. It supported projects aimed at enhancing the resilience and strengthening the protection of women among refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities. EU Member States supported projects to strengthen the economic and political participation of women as well as to improve gender equality with a particular focus on youth.

As part of its formal political dialogue at various levels, the EU has encouraged the authorities to enhance freedom of expression and media freedom, and the rule of law, pointing to specific areas of concern. It supported projects aimed to build capacities of independent journalists, including on new media.

[9] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/jordan-statement-spokesperson-revision-cybercrimes-law_en

Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies: The EU and its Member States supported projects aimed at enhancing the rights of persons with disabilities, as well as promoting their inclusion in the school system and in the labour market. They also worked on strengthening the participation of the refugee community, and on promoting the socio-economic and political participation of young people in Jordan. They continued to support projects promoting awareness of the rights of the child, including on the issue of child marriage.

Promoting a global system of human rights and democracy: The EU supported the development of the justice sector's strategy for 2022-2026 and provided technical assistance to improve the criminal justice chain in Jordan. Similarly, Member States continued to support judicial institutions, to foster capacity-building of young lawyers and to implement projects aiming to improve access to juvenile justice.

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: The EU and Member States supported projects aimed to enhance the digital rights infrastructure to promote internet freedom in Jordan. The EU is accompanying the government to support the digital transition in Jordan in line with human rights standards through data protection and AI as key enablers.

3. EU bilateral political engagements and their impact: The 13th meeting of the EU-Jordan Subcommittee on Human Rights, Democratisation and Governance was held on 6 and 7 March 2023 in Amman. The EU and Jordan reaffirmed their commitment to democratic principles and fundamental human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and in the EU-Jordan Association Agreement, and the EU raised a number of issues of concern.

4. EU financial engagement: Strengthening good governance, the rule of law, democratic reform and human rights, including social and labour rights is a shared priority stipulated in the new EU-Jordan Partnership Priorities 2021-2027. To this endeavour, the EU has signed in 2023 a EUR 10 million Financial Agreement with the Jordanian Authorities to support democratic reforms, including promoting the political participation of women and youth, also in view of the upcoming elections scheduled for autumn 2024. The implementation of the programme "EU support to rule of law and access to justice" worth in total EUR 39 million started in 2023, working towards most efficient, accountable, and accessible justice system, also for vulnerable populations in Jordan (including refugees). The EU also adopted the 2023 Jordan Special Measure in response to the Syria crisis, committing EUR 90 million to support the access to basic services for refugees and host communities (in the sectors of education, social protection and solid waste management in the camps). Finally, the EU has contracted five new programmes under NDICI thematic budget lines focusing especially on women empowerment, fight against hate speech, and support to civil society organisations for about EUR 4 million.

5. Multilateral context: Jordan is part of the main core Human Rights treaties except the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families and the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Jordan has however not signed the optional protocols to ICCPR (on death penalty) and to the Convention against Torture (on inspections), nor has it accepted any human rights treaty-based individual complaints procedures.

Lebanese Republic

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: While Lebanon continued to stand out in the region for generally upholding civil and political rights, persistent institutional fragility delayed meaningful reforms, thereby impacting social and economic rights notably for marginalised communities (including children, elderly, women, disabled individuals, refugees and migrant workers). The spill over of the Israel-Hamas war aggravated the situation, particularly in South Lebanon.

Throughout 2023, Lebanon's democratic life suffered from the extended delay in electing a President of the Republic and appointing a full-fledged government. Municipal elections were postponed anew and no significant progress was recorded in the implementation of electoral reforms following the parliamentary elections of May 2022 or towards increasing the political representation of women.

Lebanon was still one of the most liberal countries in the region for freedom of expression and the overall guarantee of the freedom of assembly was generally observed. However, corruption in Lebanon remained widespread and justice and security institutions faced renewed challenges, threatening the delivery of basic justice services. No substantial progress was recorded on the independence of the judiciary, and the investigation into the 4 August 2020 Beirut Port explosion continued to suffer political interferences.

Alleviating discrimination under the various sectarian personal status laws remained a challenge while the observed occurrence of sexual and gender-based violence continued. Discrimination and aggressions against the LGBTI community increased and a legislative initiative to decriminalise homosexuality failed. The adopted Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has yet to be ratified.

Syrian refugees faced restrictions of movement, with some municipalities imposing curfews and new registration obligations. Security conditions in some of the Palestinian refugee camps continued to deteriorate. Labour migrants predominantly engaged in domestic work remained subject to a sponsorship system ("Kafala") rendering them vulnerable to exploitation.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to embed a human rights-based approach in programming and development, through a number of targeted projects and by raising human rights concerns in official meetings with the Lebanese Government. The EU notably focused its cooperation engagement in the field of justice reform, community policing, anti-corruption, media law reform, electoral support (women's electoral participation and representation), children's rights to education, LGBTI community's rights, rights of refugees and migrant domestic workers. These priority areas were integrated into an active public diplomacy of the EU Delegation to Lebanon, marking various human rights milestones and occasions on social and traditional media, and commenting on human rights violations or emerging topics.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In the very challenging institutional, economic and regional context faced by Lebanon throughout the year 2023, the EU bilateral political engagement on Human rights notably focused on the need for institutional accountability and

legitimacy, the independence of the judiciary, governance reforms and the fight against corruption.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU consolidated its dialogue with the Ministry of Justice, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, the main judicial bodies and civil society on justice sector reform, through enhanced coordination with international donors and a dedicated EU-funded project. The EU supported community policing, notably through a rights-based collection and use of digital evidence. The EU also continued to support the National Anti-Corruption Strategy and active grassroots organisations in this field.

The EU continuously advocated freedom of expression, assembly and media through public outreach events, notably the Samir Kassir Award for freedom of the press. The EU funded a project on media law reform, legal standards and media governance during elections. The EU supported a project for key election management bodies to organise high-quality elections and coordinate CSOs' advocacy, communication, democratic participation, accessibility, youth engagement, women's representation, and media monitoring. The EU notably advocated a gender quota in the electoral law and gender mainstreaming.

The EU supported children's rights to education, focusing on access for the most vulnerable, support to the functioning of public schools, inclusive education for children with learning difficulties and disabilities and alternative forms of learning for children who dropped out, support to the Child Protection Policy and the National Action Plan on Prevention and Response to Child Marriage.

The EU continued to support programmes to improve the living conditions of refugees and host communities, including in education, health, social protection and assistance, as well as water, hygiene and sanitation. The EU responded to the financial difficulties of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) through bilateral support and by mainstreaming support to Palestinian refugees in all programmes.

The EU initiated a project to address forced labour and exploitation for migrant domestic workers.

5. Multilateral context: The EU consistently underscored the imperative to end the culture of impunity in Lebanon, as exemplified by its statement under item 2 in the UN Human Rights Council stressing the need for a transparent investigation into the Beirut Port explosion.

The EU carried out diplomatic *démarches* and made public statements in support of human rights in a multilateral context, including on the occasion of the 67th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the 78th session of the UNGA Third Committee or Lebanon's participation at the World Congress against Death Penalty in November in Berlin.

The EU recalled the importance for Lebanon to fulfil in due time its reporting obligations under the Human Rights treaty system, including the report for the mid-term review of the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review and the reports due under the Convention against Torture, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

State of Libya

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights situation remains a source of deep concern and is compounded by the overall instability regarding the political and security situation. Throughout 2023, numerous human rights and international humanitarian law violations continued to be committed in Libya, often perpetrated with impunity. The lack of accountability for human rights violations has reduced the potential deterrent effect of justice against crimes committed by state and non-state armed groups across the country. A number of serious crimes, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, kidnappings, torture and other forms of ill-treatment, as well as a variety of other violations and abuses, have been reportedly committed. Sexual and gender-based violence remains pervasive, and a significant number of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people continue to be the target of discrimination, exploitation, sexual violence, extreme insecurity, human trafficking, and even slavery. The legal and legislative vacuum allowed for a deterioration of the media situation in Libya, with an increase in attacks and human rights abuses. In 2023, instances of hate speech, intimidation, and threats remained consistent, particularly targeting human rights activists, journalists, politicians, and members of the judicial system in both offline and online contexts. The already severely restricted civic space continued to decline and was having an adverse impact on the standard of living of all Libyans, as well as on the environment for fair, transparent and credible elections.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The work of the EU and its Member States has focused on five political and operational strategic priorities:

i) Strengthening democracy, rule of law and legitimate national institutions;

ii) Addressing impunity and strengthening accountability for human rights violations and violations of International Humanitarian Law;

iii) Promoting fundamental freedoms and strengthening civic and political space;

iv) Promoting gender equality, women's rights and combatting gender-based violence;

v) Enhancing the protection of internally displaced people (IDPs), minorities, migrants, irregular migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, in particular those in vulnerable situations.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Despite the absence of a bilateral political dialogue with Libyan authorities, the EU political engagement is present through informal meetings and consultations with a wide range of actors. EU advocacy has focused on a set of key issues, including arbitrary detention, the continuing degrading of civil space and the situation of migrants and refugees in the country.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU and its Member States provided support to Libya and civil society actors through various actions and projects. These aimed at helping address the shrinking civic space, human rights violations (including by supporting victims, improving monitoring and reporting), gender issues and gender-based violence, but also corruption and electoral processes.

In the area of migration, the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) enabled the EU to assist migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Through actions with partners (i.e. UN and NGOs), the EU supported the evacuation of over 1,000 people in need of international protection, but also voluntary humanitarian returns, reintegration, while enhancing the capacity of the Libyan border guard agency for search and rescue operations.

5. Multilateral context: Libya is a member to the majority of international human rights agreements, albeit with notable exceptions and reservations.For example, Libya is not part of the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, although it is party of the Organisation of the African Union Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.

Despite Libya's commitments to human rights conventions, violations of fundamental human rights persist. The death penalty continues to be a criminal penalty, even if a moratorium is being applied since 2010. Severe lack of transparency in government and systemic corruption further weakens the rule of law - already badly affected by problems of institutional legitimacy, poor governance, pressures by armed groups and a weak judiciary.

Kingdom of Morocco

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, progress was visible in the sphere of socio-economic rights. In November 2023, Morocco adopted a law on direct social assistance, aiming to support the purchasing power of families, boost school attendance and provide social assistance for families, the elderly and people with disabilities. Reforms in the education sector triggered a series of strikes beginning in October 2023, which deprived approximately 7 million pupils of 50 days of school in 2023. The situation was addressed through a social dialogue in mid-November, although negotiations continued until the end of the year. The long due reform of the Criminal Code, together with the revision of the Code of Criminal Procedure, are still pending.

Individual freedoms, particularly freedom of expression and the media, faced most challenges. In 2023, *Reporters sans frontières* ranked Morocco 144th among 180 countries. On 19 January 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation of journalists in Morocco, calling for respect of freedom of expression and urging the Moroccan authorities to release imprisoned journalists.

On 8 September 2023, an earthquake with an epicentre in the High Atlas struck Morocco, affecting some 300,000 Moroccans and taking the lives of approximately 3,000 people. The high death toll and significant level of material destruction, especially in the remote mountain areas, aggravated access to basic services such as housing, education and health. Reconstructions efforts are under way.

Morocco has been observing an undeclared moratorium on the application of the death penalty since 1993. No executions took place in 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU support to Morocco in the framework of the Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategy includes:

i) strengthening processes and institutions that guarantee democracy and the rule of law, in particular the National Human Rights Council (CNDH);

ii) decentralisation and regionalisation; reform of the justice system;

iii) promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms;

iv) freedom of expression and media professionalisation;

v) freedom of association and assembly;

vi) promotion of women's rights and gender equality;

vii) children's rights and the rights of vulnerable people;

viii) cooperation with the Council of Europe;

ix) fight against corruption.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU actively engaged in the international human rights campaigns to mark the International Day against the Death Penalty on 10 October 2023. Human Rights Day and the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were marked on social media on 10 December.

During the official visit of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) to Rabat in January 2023, the situation of human rights, in particular freedom of the media, was addressed.

The EU Delegation has regularly discussed the human rights situation with EU Member States in various formats. The EU has also discussed the human rights situation in the country with the National Human Rights Council of Morocco (CNDH); the EU Special Representative for Human Rights met with the President of the CNDH in October 2023 in Brussels.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU provided support to Morocco and civil society actors, through several thematic and sectoral instruments. EU financial support focuses on: building bridges between the government and civil society; contributing to the capacity building of the CNDH at the central and regional level; improving the quality of public services, creating economic opportunities and involvement of civil society; strengthening the capacities of Moroccan civil society organisations.

The EU support also targeted the reinforcement of the judicial system, the public administration reform, and education, vocational training and literacy, in line a new law that strengthens the right for education.

5. Multilateral context: Morocco is a state party to all major UN conventions on human rights and an active member of several UN working groups demonstrating good cooperation on human rights.

Morocco is President of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2024, and member for the period 2023-2025, marking its third term. The results of the examination of Morocco under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group were adopted by the HRC on 24 March 2023. Morocco received recommendations on the fight against violence and discrimination against women, gender equality, decriminalising of consensual sexual relations outside marriage, child marriages, rights of persons with disabilities, freedom of expression and the

abolition of the death penalty. Morocco also received a number of recommendations related to the situation in Western Sahara.

Palestinian Authority (occupied Palestinian territories – oPt)

Preliminary remark: A distinction must be drawn between the responsibilities of the Palestinian Authority (PA), those of Israel as the occupying power and those of Hamas, a terrorist organisation, *de facto* ruler in Gaza.

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The year 2023 has seen an unprecedented deterioration of the human rights situation in Palestine. Even before the outbreak of the war in Gaza, following the brutal terrorist attack by Hamas, 2023 was expected to surpass 2022 as the deadliest year in the West Bank since the UN started systematically documenting fatalities in 2005. The war has led to a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, directly and indirectly impacting the further deterioration of the overall situation of human rights in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Between 7 October and 30 December, more than 21,672 Palestinians were killed in Gaza according to the Hamas-led Ministry of Health (including thousands of Hamas fighters), and 307 in the West Bank. The number of journalists killed, people displaced and detained is significantly high. The ongoing war in Gaza has further exacerbated vulnerabilities particularly of women and children who are disproportionately affected by the conflict, including severe malnutrition and lack of access to life saving health services.

The implications of the Israeli occupation, the closure of Gaza, and the internal Palestinian divide leave a complex picture regarding the responsibility for the grave human rights situation in Palestine. In the West Bank, Israeli incursions and settler violence have increased also in areas under PA security responsibility. In occupied East Jerusalem, the responsibility to ensure human rights lie entirely with Israel. The focus of this section lies in particular on the PA's responsibilities in the West Bank and the *de facto* authorities in Gaza as well as EU measures before the outbreak of the war.

Free and fair elections: In the absence of a parliament, President Abbas rules by decree. The ruling party Fatah had planned to hold its 8th General Congress on 17 December 2023 (postponed since 2016). However, in light of the outbreak of the war in Gaza, President Abbas decided to postpone the General Congress again indefinitely, lowering expectations for real progress.

With regard to freedom of opinion, expression and peaceful assembly, the year 2023 has seen a continuation of the previous year's trend of increased violations by PA security forces against journalists, media, and activists. The PA has also continued to shrink the space for civil society. Widespread frustration about the PA's perceived inadequacy in reacting to the war in Gaza has led to a further limitation of expressions of discontent in this regard.

Arbitrary detention continues to be a matter of concern: Despite the Supreme Constitutional Court ruling that provisions granting the governor the authority for administrative detention are unconstitutional, the practice continues. Detention conditions continue to be problematic.

Rule of law: The justice system in Palestine continues to face numerous challenges that hinder its overall functioning, such as a lack of qualified justice personnel, backlog of court cases, lack of specialised services (Gender Based Violence and Violence Against Women cases), lack of fair trial guarantees and effective remedies, limited independence of the judiciary, lack of access to courts for vulnerable litigants, and slow alignment of the judicial system with international standards. Israeli security measures have further reduced the efficiency of the judiciary system, preventing officials from reaching their place of work. All of this contributes to undermine the credibility of justice institution, and has significant consequences for Palestinian citizens, particularly women and children.

Freedom of religion or belief is generally well observed. Even though the Basic Law states that women have the same rights as men, gender equality, domestic and gender-based violence remain a challenge. The status of the Family Protection Bill and the publication of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in the official gazette remain key issues. Anti-women's rights campaigns continued in 2023, accusing the Family Protection Bill and the CEDAW of being anti-religion and encouraging moral decay and family disintegration, including via a dedicated anti-CEDAW conference in Gaza in August 2023. The Government for the most part has not publicly addressed the situation or taken any concrete measures to protect women human rights defenders from the ongoing intimidation and threats. Gender-based violence (GBV) also remains a significant problem in Palestine, with 59% of women and girls reporting experiencing at least one form of GBV, according to UNFPA. However, the uptake of multi-sectoral GBV services is very low, with less than 2% of survivors seeking healthcare, legal, or protection services due to weak protection systems and national referral mechanisms.

2. EU action – key focus areas: In 2023, the EU continued its support for Palestinian state building, rule of law and justice, as well as on service delivery to the most vulnerable people and on sustainable economic development. Cross-cutting issues (gender equality, youth, environmental protection, human rights, and support for civil society) were mainstreamed in all sectors. The EU has also followed the guidelines established by the Joint European Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Palestine, which has sought to contribute towards an environment in which CSOs are fully able to participate in Palestinian society.

The EU continued to engage in human rights and democracy discussions with the Palestinian Authority (*not with the de facto authorities in Gaza*). In this regard, the EU continued its structured dialogue with the PA on human rights issues through European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) mechanisms. The Office of the EU Representative in Jerusalem (EUREP) carried out a large number of actions at local level. These included local statements, field visits, and attendance at court hearings. Issues of concern were raised at regular meetings with Palestinian counterparts. EUREP also engaged with CSOs to obtain information and to explain and promote the EU's position. The EU has also continued to advocate for the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In 2023, the EU continued to provide financial support for human rights and democracy-related programmes and projects. Sustainable development in Palestine is supported in line with the aim of the two-state solution based on parameters set out in the Council Conclusions of July 2014.

4. EU financial engagements: In 2023, the EU provided financial support to 35 human rights and democracy-related programmes and projects implemented by UN agencies, local and

international NGOs. The overall EU contribution to these projects is EUR 26 million. Sustainable development in Palestine is supported in line with the aim of the two-state solution based on parameters set out in the Council Conclusions of July 2014.

5. Multilateral context: Since its recognition as a "non-member observer State" by the United Nations General Assembly in 2012, Palestine has acceded to seven core human rights treaties. To date, the PA has submitted its initial reports under all seven of the international human rights treaties it has ratified. Four of the UN treaty bodies CEDAW, CERD, CRC and CAT have so far reviewed submissions and provided concluding observations to the PA, who following national consultations drafted action plans to implement these recommendations on CEDAW, CERD, CAT and CRC. The CEDAW Action Plan is in place, while CERD, CAT and CRC is a final draft, pending adoption by the Cabinet of Ministers, and/or the President. In November 2022, the CEDAW Committee published the List of Issues and questions prior to the submission of the second periodic report of Palestine, which was due in July 2023. However, the report has yet to be submitted. After many years of advocacy and capacity building by OHCHR, the EU, international and national organisations, the Palestinian Authority published CAT and its Optional Protocol in the Official Gazette. Additionally, in a noteworthy development after sustained advocacy and capacity building initiatives in July 2023, Palestine published the ICCPR and CESCR in the Official Gazette, and most recently in February 2024 the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was published in the Official Gazette.

As regards the rights of the child, the PA has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and on 25 July 2021 published it in the official Gazette. Nevertheless, the PA still needs to finalize an action plan on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to implement the recommendations/concluding observations of the Respective CRC Treaty Committee received in February 2020. The UN Convention against Torture (UNCAT) was signed by Palestine in March 2014 but regular complaints of torture and ill-treatment in detention centers continue in both Gaza and the West Bank.

In the West Bank, although no executions have been carried out since 2006, death penalty remains in domestic legislation. Despite presidential statements, there is no official moratorium on the abolition of death penalty. In 2023, prior to the outbreak of the war, the *de facto* authorities in Gaza issued 20 death sentences, twelve of which were new and eight were confirmations of earlier sentences. This brought the number of death sentences handed out in Gaza to 72 since Palestine's accession to the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aimed at the abolition of the death penalty.

Western Sahara

Western Sahara is listed by the United Nations as a non-self-governing territory, whose status remains the object of a negotiation process conducted under the auspices of the UN. This dedicated UN-led process assists the relevant parties in achieving a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution, based on compromise, in the context of arrangements consistent with the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations. The UN Security Council agreed on 30 October 2023 through its Resolution 2703 to renew the mandate of the UN

peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara, MINURSO (*Mission des Nations Unies pour l'Organisation d'un Référendum au Sahara Occidental*) for a period of one year until 31 October 2024.

The resolution draws attention to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria and to insufficient funding. It strongly encourages donors to provide additional funds and for aid agencies to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance in accordance with United Nations best practice. The resolution also stresses the importance of enhancing the promotion and protection of human rights in Western Sahara and in the Tindouf camps, including freedoms of expression and association. It encourages the parties to work with the international community to develop and implement independent and credible measures to ensure full respect for human rights, bearing in mind their relevant obligations under international law. It welcomes steps and initiatives taken by Morocco, and the role played by the National Council on Human Rights Commission operating in Dakhla and Laâyoune, as well as Morocco's interaction with Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council.

The resolution also expressed support for the Secretary-General and his Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, M. Staffan de Mistura, to advance the political process. Following his appointment in October 2021, M. de Mistura established contacts with all concerned parties and paid several visits to the region. Resolution 2703 strongly welcomed the efforts during the 27-31 March 2023 informal consultations and strongly encouraged Morocco, the Frente POLISARIO, Algeria and Mauritania to engage with the Personal Envoy throughout the duration of this process. Despite the call and the Personal Envoy's ongoing efforts, there has been no concrete relaunch of political negotiations to date. The overall security situation remained fragile but stable, and was marked by low intensity incidents. The UNSC Resolution 2703 recognised the important role played by MINURSO and the need for it to conduct the safe and regular resupply of its team sites, to conduct patrols throughout its area of responsibility to implement its mandate. The EU continues to fully back the UN process including the Personal Envoy, and encourages the parties to return to the UN-led talks, as well as promote and protect human rights in Western Sahara.

Syrian Arab Republic

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Violations of human rights and international humanitarian law continue in both regime and non-regime held areas in Syria. Violations committed by various actors appear in many forms, including but not limited to: civilian casualties, attacks on vital civilian infrastructure (hospitals, schools in north-west Syrian, water and electricity stations in north-east Syria), enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, torture, forced confessions, delays for urgent medical treatment in detention, sexual violence, denied access to legal counsel or representation, and child recruitment in an armed conflict. The Syrian regime continues to be the largest perpetrator of such violations.[10] Returning internally displaced persons, refugees, and returnees are also a

[10] https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/report-coi-syria-september2023

target of these violations by the Syrian regime. The already extremely reduced civic space is further shrinking due to the regime's firm control and repression of the activities of CSOs. Freedom of association and freedom of expression is severely curtailed, stifling political life.

In Syria, the continuing disintegration of the rule of law and public life undermines the fulfilment of basic human rights for many Syrians, including a number of core civil, political, economic and social rights. Syria has one of the highest numbers of detained, abducted, and missing persons in the world. The absence of functioning and independent institutions overseeing rules and guaranteeing accountability lead to widely spread arbitrary behaviour by the regime towards the population. The Syrian regime has continued to issue various decrees to tighten control on citizens' assets or to fill in the state coffer through bribes. Moreover, several domestic laws and policies are in breach of international law.

2. EU action - key focus areas: *Protecting and empowering individuals:* the EU promotes freedom of expression in Syria, including by supporting free and independent media, particularly at local level. On the accountability front, the EU supports access to justice mechanisms. On the Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights and civil documentation, EU-funded activities contributed to a better understanding of the legal framework among 1,200 stakeholders, and 107 project participants with HLP and legal identity and civil documentation cases were referred to legal service providers.

Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies: the EU provided financial and organisational support to Syrian civil society organisations, including via the UN's Civil Society Support Room and Women's Advisory Board. The EU Civil Society virtual platform regularly organises a series of events bringing Syrians together.

Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy: In 2023, the EU continued to support financially the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on Syria and to work to ensure accountability for war crimes, human rights violations and abuses as well as violations of international humanitarian law, including the use of chemical weapons (see below under "multilateral context").

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: the EU organised a dynamic media workshop, bringing together Syrian journalists and civil society advocates from across Syria. This initiative aimed at empowering a resilient journalistic community including by improving access to new technologies.

Delivering by working together: The Council of the EU has assessed[11] that regime-affiliated militias and businesspeople support the Syrian regime in its repressive policies, commit abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law on behalf of the Syrian regime. Hence, the Council has regularly introduced new sanctions against individuals and entities including migrants smugglers, individuals involved in trafficking of narcotics, the business elite supported by the regime's illegal business model and military and security officials – responsible for violence and repression in Syria, and the use of chemical weapons.

3. EU bilateral political engagements and their impact: The EU has enhanced its dialogue with human rights activists – both inside and outside Syria – and with UN OHCHR in order to support

[11] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/04/24/syria-eu-sanctions-drug-trade-benefitting-the-regime/

their efforts, to achieve accountability for crimes committed by state and non-state actors from all sides, and to look for ways for communities to prevent such crimes. The EU regularly exchanges on the human rights situation with other like-minded actors on the ground.

In addition, the EU Delegation to Syria marked international days observed by the EU on key human rights issues, including death penalty, violence against women and girls, rights of LGBTI people, access to basic human rights in emergencies including education and clean water. On 30 November, High Representative/ Vice-President Josep Borrell commemorated those who have died and suffered as a result of the use of chemical weapons with a specific reference to Syria and the 10th anniversary of the Ghouta chemical attack[12].

4. EU financial engagements and their impact: The Syrian crisis is one of the world's most acute humanitarian disasters. The EU and its Member States remain the largest donors in support of Syrians in Syria and across the region since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, having mobilised over EUR 30 billion in humanitarian, stabilisation and resilience assistance. Funding includes support for civil society among which human-rights related actions.

5. Multilateral context : The EU regularly comments on the human rights situation in Syria. In New York this is done notably in its statements at the quarterly UNSC open debates on the 'Situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question'[13]. The EU also intervened on Syria in the UNGA's Third Committee[14] and in the Interactive Dialogue on missing persons in Syria and on the resolution on an Independent Institution on Missing Persons[15].

In Geneva, the EU is a member of the Core Group of the Syria resolution in the Human Rights Council (HRC) and delivered a statement on behalf of the EU and its Member States during the 52nd session of the HRC in the Interactive Dialogue with the Commission of Inquiry on Syria (March 2023) and during the 53rd session of the HRC (July 2023), the EU fully supported the resolution on the Human Rights Situation in Syria.

The EU continues to strongly support, politically and financially, the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) for Syria as part of its efforts to fight impunity so all those responsible for war crimes or crimes against humanity can be held accountable[16]. The EU has also supported the establishment of the UN Independent Institution for Missing Persons in Syria (IIMP), as provided for by UN General Assembly Resolution 301/77 adopted in December 2023, which is due to be launched in spring 2024[17].

The EU welcomed the adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution for the establishment of a new independent institution on missing persons in Syria aimed at clarifying the fate and

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12 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/syria/day-remembrance-all-victims-chemical-warfare-statement-high-representative-vice-president-josep_en

13 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-un-security-council-open-debate-situation-middle-east-including-palestinian-question_en?s=63

14 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-explanation-vote-%E2%80%93-un-general-assembly-3rd-committee-human-rights-syria_en?s=63

15 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-%E2%80%93-un-general-assembly-interactive-dialogue-missing-persons_en?s=63

16 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-%E2%80%93-un-general-assembly-debate-international-impartial-and-independent-mechanism-iiim_en?s=63

17 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-explanation-vote-un-general-assembly-resolution-independent-institution-missing-persons-syrian_en?s=63

whereabouts of missing persons in Syria and to providing adequate support to meet the needs of the victims, survivors, and the families of those missing. The EU stands ready to support this new Institution.

Republic of Tunisia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Although human rights and fundamental freedoms are enshrined in the Tunisian new constitutional framework, the situation remains a source of concern.

The year 2023 was marked by the completion of the implementation of the Presidential political roadmap announced in 2021, based on the drafting of a new constitution adopted by referendum in July 2022 and the election of a new Parliament in December 2022 and January 2023.

A new Assembly of People's Representatives convened in March 2023, ending a period of a year and a half without a sitting Parliament. The first round of local elections for the upper house of parliament were held in December 2023. Both elections had a very low turnout (around 12%) and were largely boycotted by the political opposition. The latter considered that it was excluded from a political process that revised the Constitution and strongly reinforced the role and power of the Presidency.

CSOs expressed their concerns throughout the year, pointing out a narrowing space for freedom of expression and the prospect of a reform of the law on associations that may make it more difficult for them to receive funding. They also expressed reservations about the independence of the judiciary, especially after the arrest of several political figures and journalists between February and April 2023. Preoccupation has also been expressed in 2023 on the situation of migrants in Tunisia. Associations and journalists reported numerous racist attacks across the country in the first half of the year. In the summer, there have been reports about the deaths of several sub-Saharan migrants during their repatriation to the Tunisian border.

In March 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling to stop the attacks against freedom of expression and association.

Tunisia has been observing a moratorium on the application of the death penalty since 1991. No executions took place since.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Against this backdrop, the European Union and its member states have continued their work to support the authorities and civil society in promoting human rights, notably in the context of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, in particular:

i) Protecting people, eliminating inequalities, discrimination and exclusion;
ii) Rule of law, fair administration of justice, transitional justice;
iii) Democratic, accountable and transparent institutions;

iv) Freedom of expression and media;
v) Safe new technologies.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: 2023 was marked by intense political dialogue with the Tunisian authorities, in particular in preparation of the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on a renewed partnership between the EU and Tunisia on 16 July.

The EU has raised human rights issues publicly and with Tunisian authorities, both at local level and during high-level visits. The EU had a continuous dialogue with associations, activists and civil society. A trilateral dialogue was organised in January 2023, providing an occasion to gather both Tunisian CSOs and the Tunisian authorities prior to a technical subcommittee meeting on migration and social affairs. The EU delegation also advanced the implementation of the EU Civil Society Roadmap, carrying out structured dialogue sessions with 523 civil society organisations.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU has provided support to Tunisia and civil society actors through several thematic and sectoral instruments. Main ongoing programmes include:

i) Gender equality and women's rights. The EU launched a new program to combat gender-based violence (EUR 6.2 million) to provide support to vulnerable women and girls to exercise their rights. This programme complements other existing European programmes (EMNA programme, 2021-2026) and those of Member States.
ii) Non-discrimination in the field of migration, the European Union provided assistance and financial support to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR – EUR 8 million) to support protection of refugees and asylum-seekers.
iii) Universal access to social services. EU action focused in particular on access to social assistance for the most vulnerable (Social Inclusion Programme – EUR 100 million), education (modernisation of school infrastructures).
iv) Promoting the rule of law and democratic governance. In 2023, the EU finalised the implementation of the third justice sector reform programme (PARJ3). The EU also supported local civil society during electoral processes.
v) Media support. The EU continued to implement the EU Media support programme (PAMT2), which integrated in 2023 a renewed support to associative radios or coaching to the national press agency.

5. Multilateral context: Tunisia is a historic partner in our multilateral initiatives. The country is party to a majority of human rights conventions. During the last Universal Periodic Review, Tunisia was invited to accede to several additional conventions, in particular the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

The EU Delegation reached out to authorities with demarches concerning inter alia the EU priorities during the 67th session of the UN Committee on the Status of Women and the 78th session of the UN Third Committee. The EU Delegation also carried out outreach in support of Albania's counter-bid to the candidacy of Russian Federation to the Human Rights Council, ahead of the UN General Assembly vote in October 2023.

Russia and Central Asia

Republic of Kazakhstan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The political reforms initiated following the tragic events of January 2022 continued, albeit at a slower pace. The investigations into the events are still to be completed, with the overall demand of accountability and social justice remaining high among the population. The elections to the lower house of Parliament (March 2023) have resulted in only limited opening for new political forces. Kazakhstan undertook some important political reforms such as the re-establishment of the Constitutional Court (to which citizens can now directly appeal), the abolishment of the death penalty, and the formalisation of the status of the Human Rights Commissioner (Ombudsman), combined with the creation of a regional network. The space for civil society was marked by restrictions on foreign funding (a list of 'foreign agents' was published for the first time in September 2023), and the arbitrary application of the laws pertaining to extremism. The attempts to limit the independence of media and the presence of international outlets represented a worrying development. The completion of several torture-related trials was a positive development, although further substantive efforts are needed in this field. The Ministry of Justice of Kazakhstan demonstrated considerable openness to discuss human rights concerns in regular meetings with the EU Delegation and Member States.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU and its Member States continued to focus their activities on the five strands of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-24. The EU focussed inter alia on allegations of cases of torture, concerns over the law on public assemblies, changes to the draft law on media (including defamation), and the persisting blockage of independent trade unions. Other important EU focus areas included obstacles to freedom of expression, freedom of the media, freedom of assembly and association, anti-discrimination and the protection of vulnerable persons, as well as combatting sexual and gender-based violence. While acknowledging the continued reform process in Kazakhstan, the EU underlined the importance of its effective implementation with the active participation of civil society. In 2023, the EU started implementing the renewed country Roadmap for Engagement with CSOs in Kazakhstan, which reflects the lessons learned from past engagement with CSOs and takes into account the political changes that occurred since January 2022.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: As part of the EU's structured dialogue with Kazakhstan, the Human Rights Dialogue and the Justice and Home Affairs Subcommittee were held in Brussels in March 2023. Human rights and democracy were also discussed during the EU-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee in May 2023 and the EU-Kazakhstan Cooperation Council in October 2023. Furthermore, the regular dialogues with the Ministry of Justice (held by EU Ambassador and the Ambassadors of EU Member States) provided a useful platform for human rights advocacy and raising both systemic and ad hoc issues. Furthermore, the EU Delegation together with Member States and like-minded Embassies monitored trials (torture cases in Taldykorgan) and raised individual cases with the authorities. The EU also supported several joint human rights campaigns, such as on women's rights (8 March), LGBTI rights (IDAHOBIT Day), and the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence.

On 8 December 2023, the EU co-organised with independent NGOs a Human Rights Day event in Astana focused on three key human rights topics (elections, media freedom, investigation of January 2022 events), which brought together diplomats, experts, journalists and activists.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU continued its five bilateral human rights related projects under the EU Thematic European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and Human Rights and Democracy (HRD) Programmes for a total amount of EUR 1.25 million. The projects focused inter alia on the fight against torture, social, economic and cultural human rights and values, media and legal literacy, and the promotion and protection of the freedom of expression. Furthermore, the EU also continued to implement the "Central Asia Rule of Law Programme and the regional "Spotlight" Programme implemented by UN organisations with the aim to fight domestic violence. A new Public Diplomacy contract is expected to be launched in early 2024, which includes public diplomacy in the area of human rights/rule of law.

5. Multilateral context:

In 2023, Kazakhstan continued to be one of the fifteen members of the UN Human Rights Council during 2023. On 11 October, the Human Rights Council adopted by consensus a resolution initiated by Kazakhstan, "Ensuring quality education for peace and tolerance for every child", which was also an example of close and constructive collaboration with the EU. In the UN General Assembly, Kazakhstan abstained on the Resolution regarding the principles of the UN Charter underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine (ES-11/6) and supported the Resolution on Israel's Withdrawal from Syrian Golan Heights.

Kyrgyz Republic

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The deterioration in the overall human rights situation continued in 2023, including with regard to freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of the media, good governance, torture, discrimination, labour rights and rights of religious minorities. Corruption also remained of concern. Several media outlets were blocked and taken to Court based on existing restrictive legislation. The EU raised serious concerns in relation to a draft law on 'foreign representatives' and a draft law on mass media. The President vetoed the controversial draft law on trade unions that would have imposed serious restrictions on workers' rights to freedom of association and organisation. The prevention of torture remained hampered by systemic barriers, and the Istanbul protocol to report on cases of torture is not fully in use. Lack of medical care in places of detention is widespread, and often deaths of detainees are not fully investigated. National minorities continue to face discrimination in accessing employment, services and education. Discrimination against LGBTI persons remains widespread and even intensified in 2023. A discriminatory article against LGBTI was adopted as part of the amendments to the law on Protection of Children from Harmful Information. There was a sharp rise in officially reported and registered domestic violence cases, including several particularly cruel crimes committed against women.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to work towards implementation of the Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2021 - 2025 (GAP III), as a top priority. The EU made several statements calling on Kyrgyzstan to ensure respect for human rights, rule of law, and international commitments. The project "Rule of Law in the Kyrgyz Republic" supported the ongoing legal and judicial reforms, and the establishment of a more professional, independent, accountable and transparent court system. The project also introduced e-justice in all courts, and developed the e-register of crimes and misdemeanours. Local civil society was consulted regularly on developments in human rights, draft legislative initiatives and programming activities, including in preparation for the annual EU-Kyrgyzstan Human Rights Dialogue. The EU also ensured regular dialogues with local and international human rights defenders on various issues of concern. The EU provided support to the Office of the Ombudsperson, and expressed support for the independence of the National Preventive Mechanism in line with the UN Convention against Torture.

Human rights-related events organised during the year included a European Green Weeks campaign with journalists and bloggers from Kyrgyzstan participation in a final event in Brussels. A Green Diplomacy online campaign highlighted major EU-funded projects. A Human Rights campaign in cooperation with the popular public page Bashta.kg covered labour rights, women rights and the right to education, and an EU Weeks campaign with its closing event "Europe Summer Fest" organised in Bishkek.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU raised human rights issues, including GSP+ commitments, in all its EU-Kyrgyzstan high level events throughout 2023: Human Rights Dialogue (9 November) and Cooperation Committee (10 November).

The EU raised specific cases of intimidation and violence against journalists and attempts at shutting down independent media outlets, such as Kloop Media and Radio Azattyk. The EU Delegation, together with Member States and like-minded Embassies, monitored numerous court hearings of these media outlets. In relation to the draft mass media law and the draft law on 'foreign representatives', the EU regularly called on Kyrgyzstan to adhere to international standards, follow recommendations made by the Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR, and to maintain fair and transparent trials in legal cases. The EU underlined that the draft law on 'foreign representatives' could seriously hamper the ability of international partners to implement cooperation programmes, and could impact EU budget support. With regard to the right of peaceful assembly, the EU stressed the watchdog role of civil society and the importance of the right of peaceful assembly.

4. EU financial engagement: Under the NDICI, Human Rights and Democracy thematic programme, Kyrgyzstan continued to benefit from the project, "To promote fair and inclusive society in Kyrgyzstan" with a total budget of almost EUR 1 million contracted in 2022. Two new projects, financed by the programme were signed in 2023: "Sustainable Economic Development, Empowerment and Protection of vulnerable young women", and "Youth Empowerment for Digital Governance" (Youth Go).

Support was also provided to civil society through four EU funded projects: "Building Transparent Future for Rural Communities via Digitalisation", "E-QUALITY- Digital Education for Social and Financial Inclusion and Gender Equality", "Support to the Development of Green Agriculture by Local Communities", and "Youth's Climate Change Resilience".

The ongoing Central Asia regional project, "Resilience and Engagement with Varied Information for a Vibrant Environment (REVIVE)", has a particular component for Kyrgyzstan which supports the Media Action Platform uniting media professionals in advocacy efforts for the promotion of freedom of expression.

Phase I (ended in March 2023) and Phase II (started in October 2023) of the FPI-funded project "EU-UN Support to the States in Central Asia for their Citizens Returned from Conflict Zones", continued to enhance the protection of the rights of the child in Kyrgyzstan.

5. Multilateral context: Throughout 2023, the EU and its Member States, and in some cases with like-minded countries, presented several demarches to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan on EU priorities and initiatives at the UN General Assembly Third Committee, and UN Human Rights Council, including on the Pandemic Agreement and on Food Security. Demarches were also conducted in support of Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan's potential ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and on the Donor's Conference in support of the people of Türkiye and Syria.

The EU continued to work with the UN, and other likeminded partners, to encourage Kyrgyzstan to implement its international commitments on human rights, labour rights and good governance, for example, advocating against the controversial legislation on NGOs, Media, Constitutional Court and the law on Preventing of Children from Harmful Information (the article related to discrimination of LGBTI).

The EU cooperated closely with the International Labour Organisation. The Generalised System of Preference Plus (GSP+) monitoring is an ongoing process where the EU assesses how Kyrgyzstan implements the 27 core international conventions, with the support of the UN.

Russian Federation

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The situation of human rights in Russia has significantly deteriorated over the past years and continues following the same trend. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Russia stated in her report that both the harshness of recent criminal sentences and the number of people sentenced on politically motivated charges has increased. Russia continues the use of repressive legislation and criminal persecution to impede the exercise of civil and political rights. The internal repression and external aggression are interlinked. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a significant part of the repressions targeted various forms of anti-war expressions. Administrative and criminal penalties for discreditation and "fake news" about the Russian Armed Forces are extensively used to silence civil society, independent media and those who challenge the official narratives or express their opinion about the government policies. The Russian authorities have fundamentally undermined the independence of the judiciary and the guarantees of fair trial. Lawyers working with the cases related to human rights face increasing disciplinary, administrative and criminal harassment. Political trials have been one of the primary tools systematically used by the Russian

authorities against political opposition figures and critical voices. Human rights organisations have been forced to shut down throughout the country.

Russia continued to isolate itself by further expanding the so-called “foreign agent” and “undesirable organisations” legislation, not renewing or creating complications with extending foreign journalists’ visas and proceeding with expulsions of diplomats. Cooperation and interaction with foreign organisations is subject to approval and monitoring and may result in administrative penalties. The “extremist” label was widely used to prosecute those perceived as opponents, ranging from politicians to representatives of religious minorities such as Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Russian authorities continued persecuting Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians often accusing them of “extremism” and issuing long-term prison sentences on “terrorism” charges. Human rights violations and abuses in Chechnya include torture, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and detention without trial. Numerous brutal attacks on and murders of independent journalists remain without proper investigation.

The Russian authorities use promotion of so-called “traditional values” as a pretext for cracking down on LGBTI individuals. In November 2023, Russia’s Supreme Court agreed on declaring what it calls “international LGBT public movement” as “extremist”. Police and security forces have been documented initiating blackmail, abduction and torture against LGBTI individuals.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Support of Russian independent media, civil society and human rights defenders inside and outside Russia is a key element of European Union’s approach to Russia. EU programmes support civic activists and human rights defenders. Public attention and trial observation are further examples of how the EU supports individuals under pressure.

In the absence of a human rights and other political dialogue with the Russian authorities, the EU and the EU Special Representative for Human Rights have held frequent consultations concerning the situation of human rights in Russia with members of Russian civil society organisations, international organisations and like-minded countries.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: As a response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU suspended all bilateral engagement with Russia, including programmes and projects with Russian public bodies and state-owned enterprises.

Since its establishment, the EU Global Human Rights sanctions Regime (EUGHSR) has been extensively used to address the dire human rights situation in Russia, under its different aspects. There are listings in connection to Alexei Navalny’s and Vladimir Kara-Murza’s cases, human rights abuses in Chechnya, the misuse of facial recognition technology by Moscow authorities, Russia’s human rights abuses in Ukraine’s Crimea.

The EU continued raising concerns over the human rights situation, individual cases and legislative developments using public statements and social media.

4. EU financial engagement: Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, all activities with Russian state-linked entities were suspended. The EU continues to engage directly with Russian civil society, human rights defenders and independent media inside and outside Russia.

5. Multilateral context: In the second year of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine, the international community continued to isolate Russia internationally and call it out for war crimes and blatant violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. In February 2023, United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution demanding Russia to withdraw its military forces from the territory of Ukraine and emphasising the need to ensure accountability for the most serious crimes. On 10 October, Russia failed to regain a seat at the UN Human Rights Council, which it had lost after UNGA decided to suspend the Russian membership of the UN HRC in April 2022.

Following the appointment of the Special Rapporteur for human rights situation in Russia by the UN Human Rights Council in October 2022, the report on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation was presented in September, outlining the significant deterioration of human rights in Russia since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In October, the UN Human Rights Council voted to extend the mandate for a year. In April, the mandate of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry was extended by the Human Rights Council for a further period of one year to continue the investigation of all alleged violations and abuses of human rights, violations of international humanitarian law and related crimes in the context of the aggression against Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

Russia's war against Ukraine was also discussed on a weekly basis in the OSCE Permanent Council and in the Forum for Security Cooperation. In March 2023, 45 participating States of the OSCE invoked the Moscow Mechanism to examine reports of the Russian Federation's forcible transfer and deportation of Ukraine's children.

On 17 March 2023, the ICC issued arrest warrants against President Putin and Commissioner for Children's Rights Lvova-Belova on alleged responsibility for the war crime of unlawful deportation and transfer of children from occupied areas of Ukraine to Russia. The Council of Europe (CoE) has been discussing and documenting the war crimes committed by the Russian Federation's forces in Ukraine. At the CoE Summit in Reykjavík, the leaders set up the Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and condemned the deportation of Ukrainian children.

Russia underwent its fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in November. Recommendations provided during the interactive dialogue related to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, calling for a ceasefire, ending violations of IHRL and IHL, ending illegal deportation of Ukrainian children, and conducting an impartial investigation into committed violations.

Republic of Tajikistan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Tajikistan's human rights record remained poor in 2023, with a particular impact on freedom of expression, freedom of the media and freedom of association. Human rights defenders and journalists continued to experience persistent pressure. The space for political participation remained extremely limited in a country with a highly centralised political system and tight control over political and civil rights. In the 2023 Freedom in the World Country Report of Freedom House,

Tajikistan's scored 7/100 points for political rights and civil liberties, making it one of the countries with the worst aggregate score. The working environment for independent media remained difficult with a high number of journalists serving lengthy prison terms. Tajikistan ranked 153/180 in the 2023 World Press Index of Reporters without Borders (one rank below 2022). Scrutiny and pressure by the Tajik authorities on human rights defenders and civil society organisations remained high. During 2023, hundreds of civil society organisations were forced to close by self-liquidation following pressure by the authorities or because of lack of funding. In the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), only a handful of independent civil society organisations remain operational. Several prominent Tajik human rights defenders and activists remain in prison with long sentences, especially in connection with the GBAO incidents of 2022. Following a visit to Tajikistan in April 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, urged Tajikistan to adapt and reshape its laws, policies and practices on freedom of religion or belief. She noted that the scope for the exercise of freedom of religion or belief falls alarmingly short of the guarantees of international human rights law. The importance of minority rights issues in Tajikistan was highlighted by the visits of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Abdrakhmanov and of the UN Special al Rapporteur on minority issues De Varennes. In particular, Mr. De Varennes stressed that much more needs to be done to implement and protect the human rights of religious and other minorities, including the Jughi (Roma) community, users of sign languages, Uzbeks, religious minorities and the Pamiri community in GBAO. There were some positive developments, especially within the normative framework. In April, Tajikistan adopted the National Acton Plan for implementation of the Universal Periodic Review recommendations. In August, the Tajik President approved the National Strategy for the Human Rights Protection until 2038 and its action plan for the period 2023-2025; the first such strategy in the Central Asian region. The authorities also showed commitment to make progress on gender equality and advance women's rights, in particular through empowerment. However, domestic and gender-based violence remains endemic, with a long-standing proposal to introduce a specific crime of domestic violence still not adopted in the national legislation.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU action focused on priorities such as increasing the resilience and empowerment of the Tajik civil society; support to independent media and access to information, including digital rights; gender equality and women's rights; upholding the rule of law; rights of people with disability; as well as support to the penitentiary system reform and the fight against torture and ill-treatment. Given the deteriorated operating environment for independent media and of human rights defenders, a focus remained on their empowerment. The EU-UN Global Spotlight Initiative continued to provide support to the Tajik Government in countering violence against women and girls - endemic in the country.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued to monitor human rights developments in Tajikistan, held regular political dialogues with the authorities and actively co-operated with civil society and international organisations (in particular UN and OSCE). On 14 December 2023, the 14th EU-Tajikistan Human Rights Dialogue took place in Dushanbe. During the Dialogue, the EU side raised the most concerning issues, with particular focus on freedom of expression, media freedom as well as the working environment for journalists, human rights defenders, and the situation in GBAO. The EU urged the Tajik authorities to uphold its human rights commitments, including the international fair trial standards. The Human Rights Dialogue was coupled with an EU evaluation mission of Tajikistan's application

process to the Generalised System of Preference Plus (GSP+). This application provides a platform of continuous dialogue on human rights issues as GSP+ is linked to the implementation of UN core conventions on human rights, labour rights, environment and good governance. In addition, a number of high-level visits and meetings provided important occasions for engagement on human rights. These included, among others, the 10th EU-Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee held in Dushanbe, and the visits to Tajikistan of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator as well as of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia. The negotiations of the new EU-Tajikistan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), launched in February 2023 and currently ongoing, provided the EU with a unique momentum for engagement on sensitive issues, and to emphasise the role of universal human rights and democracy principles as the foundation of the EU-Tajikistan bilateral relations.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, a number of human rights projects focusing, inter alia, on civil society support, marginalised groups, penitentiary reform, gender-based violence and gender equality were operating. A new call for proposals under the Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy and the Thematic Programme for civil society organisations was launched. Subsequently, five new projects were selected that will be implemented by local and international civil society organisations focusing on the areas of prevention of domestic violence, torture prevention and penitentiary system reform, rights of people with disabilities, and supporting civil society organisations in good governance, particularly through digital innovations. Various FPI-funded projects contributed to the promotion of the rights of the child, women, national minorities, youth and freedom of media and speech, and of awareness of laws and international human rights commitments related to detainees and refugees.

5. Multilateral context: Following the third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Tajikistan (November 2021) and the review outcome adopted at the 49th session of the Human Rights Council (March 2022), the Tajik government adopted a National Acton Plan for the implementation of the accepted UPR recommendations in April 2023. Tajikistan demonstrated noticeable openness to multilateral institutions by receiving in the course of 2023 the visits of two UN Special Rapporteurs, for example on freedom of religion and belief and issues related to minorities) and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. The EU Delegation delivered a demarche on EU priorities at the 78th session of UNGA Third Committee, and a demarche to promote the establishment of a UN Cyber Programme of Action.

Turkmenistan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, the human rights situation in Turkmenistan remained worrying. The transition of presidential power from Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to his son Serdar in 2022 did not bring tangible improvements. Uncertainties remained as to the division of power between the two. The President's father became chair of the People's Council amid Constitutional changes, a body that has the right to change the Constitution and decide policy directions of the country. An ODIHR election assessment mission concluded that the Parliamentary elections in March took place in an

environment that lacked genuine competitiveness and pluralism. Strict control by the security apparatus prevented expressions of discontent, but some spontaneous protests took place in reaction to deteriorating living standards. The economic situation pushes many Turkmen to emigrate, and strict control and restrictions against those wishing to travel abroad, including students, indicate that the government fears mass exodus and nationals voicing dissent abroad. The evaluation of progress in the implementation of the 2021–2025 Human Rights Action Plan remained challenging due to the lack of data and of adequate monitoring mechanism. The interagency commission on the implementation of Turkmenistan's international obligations in the field of human rights continued holding meetings, but the EU was no longer invited. The new Criminal Code that entered into force in January 2023 de-criminalises sexual relations with minors in case of reconciliation or cohabitation with the victim, and criminalises consensual sexual relations between male adults.

2. EU action - key focus areas : The EU continued to support capacity building of Turkmen authorities to implement international human rights conventions and domestic legislation. On a positive note, Turkmenistan stepped-up its participation in the EU-Central Asia Rule of Law Programme, which provides support to reform the national legal systems, state institutions and the judiciary. In October 2023, Turkmenistan hosted a conference on "Fostering access to justice in Turkmenistan: the role of a lawyer in International and European law and practice".

The EU continued advocating for reforms of the judicial and prison systems. In July, European diplomats visited a penitentiary institution in Tejen, for the first time since COVID-19 restrictions. Following reports about cases of torture and enforced disappearances, the EU continued encouraging Turkmenistan to establish a National Preventive Mechanism for the monitoring of detention facilities, to facilitate access to prisons for independent international monitoring bodies, to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture.

The EU supported civil society and human rights defenders, including journalists, and voiced concerns about a number of individual cases, OSCE statements and quiet diplomacy interventions, as well as during the Human Rights Dialogue. The EU further enabled the participation of Turkmen civil society organisations and journalists in events and projects such as the regional EU – Central Asia Civil Society Forum, the REVIVE project on media literacy and the global "Back to School" campaign.

The EU included gender equality aspects and women's rights in all its actions and encouraged Turkmenistan to adopt a specific law on domestic violence, while the country continued the implementation of the second National Action Plan on Gender Equality 2021-2025. Nonetheless, the situation of women remains difficult, also due to entrenched conservative views of the society; traditional norms of appearance and behaviour are strictly enforced. For example, unjustifiable restrictions persist in issuing driving licences for women. On the other hand, the government has shown some openness to discuss gender-related issues with international partners and hosted an EU-Central Asia meeting on Afghanistan, which discussed rights of women and girls, in May 2023.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU Delegation to Turkmenistan stepped-up communication on human rights related priorities and issues of concern on the ground. In 2023, the Delegation organised and participated in a number of events and conferences in Turkmenistan. The EU consulted international and national civil society organisations, both in

exile and in the country, in particular ahead of the Human Rights Dialogue in Brussels (18 December), the Joint Committee meeting in Brussels (19 December), as well as the visit of EU Special Representatives for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, and EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Terhi Hakala (20-21 April). The EU voiced its concerns about a number of individual cases, as well as during the bilateral the Human Rights Dialogue and meeting of the Joint Committee.

4. EU financial engagement: The protection of human rights, with particular reference to rights of women and persons with disabilities, has been mainstreamed across all projects that the EU implements in Turkmenistan, both at bilateral and regional level. In line with this, in 2023, Turkmenistan benefitted from many EU-funded bilateral and regional programmes and initiatives, including European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR); EU-Turkmenistan Cooperation Facility 2022-2023; Dialogue and Action for Resourceful Youth in Central Asia (DARYA); first-ever survey on the situation of women in the family (published in August 2023); Spotlight Initiative, incl. Central Asia Alliance to End Gender-Based Violence; "Girls Matter" social media campaign; Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA); Promoting International Trade in Central Asia (R4T); EU – Central Asia Rule of Law Programme and Central Asia COVID-10 Crisis Response Programme (phase 2).

5. Multilateral context: The European Delegation to Turkmenistan coordinated actions in the field of human rights with EU Member States' embassies and like-minded partners. Furthermore, the EU raised human rights concerns within OSCE and UN frameworks. The EU continued encouraging Turkmenistan to seek the advice of specialised international bodies, to study best practices of other countries and to involve civil society in the process of reforms as well as drafting or amending legislation and implementing the human rights instruments.

The Turkmen government maintained a low level of engagement with multilateral human rights institutions. Engagement with the EU in the Human Rights Council of the UN General Assembly Third Committee was limited. Since 2008, UN Special Procedures have not visited the country. In November 2023, Turkmenistan took part in its fourth Universal Periodic Review, with all recommendations accepted or "under consideration". Turkmenistan attended the Human Dimension Conference of the OSCE ODIHR in October.

Republic of Uzbekistan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The general picture for human rights and democracy in Uzbekistan in 2023 was mixed. There were important steps forward, notably the introduction of legislation to combat gender-based violence, and the constitutionalisation of important social, political and economic rights. However, in a year which saw both a referendum on a new Constitution and a presidential election, the space for political engagement shrank, with increased pressure on independent journalists and bloggers, and further restrictions on the freedom of association. Full transparency and accountability following the violent unrest in Nukus in July 2022 continues to be lacking, with the report of the Investigative Commission going unpublished.

2. EU action - key focus areas: During 2023, the EU and its member states continued to focus their activities on the five strands of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-24.

The EU Delegation in Tashkent kept in constant touch with Human Rights Defenders, civil activists and registered NGOs. The Delegation worked closely with like-minded partners, including UN agencies and third country embassies, to coordinate their activities. Human rights and democracy were a regular item on the agenda of the monthly EU Heads of Mission meetings. As well as observing the referendum and the presidential elections, staff from the EU Delegation also attended and observed key trials in cases involving Human Rights Defenders.

On 14 December 2023, to mark International Human Rights Day, the EU Delegation (jointly with the US and UK Embassies) hosted a round table on prison conditions, facilitating an open discussion between representatives of civil society and the national authorities.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In March 2023, the EU organised the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum in Tashkent, with the aim to strengthen the voice of civil society in EU programming and to foster capacity building and advocacy capacities all over the region.

As part of the EU's structured dialogue with Uzbekistan, the Human Rights Dialogue and Justice and Home Affairs Subcommittee was held in Brussels in June 2023. The EU used this opportunity to engage in a detailed discussion with the government of Uzbekistan on a range of human rights and democracy-related issues, including concerns over the freedom of expression, pressure on civil society activists, and perceptions that the space for civic engagement in Uzbekistan is shrinking. Human rights and democracy were also discussed during the EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Committee in December and the EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council in April 2023.

On 17-19 April 2023, the EU Special Envoy for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, and the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Terhi Hakala, visited Uzbekistan to discuss human rights issues with Uzbekistan's President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and other members of his government.

4. EU financial engagement: The projects under the EU's Human Rights and Democracy Instruments that were described in last year's report are still ongoing. Additionally, in 2023, the EU launched a call for proposals under the CSO Thematic Programme (EUR 3.5 million) which had to include a substantial capacity-building component directed at local civil society organisations. Eight proposals were chosen, focusing on the empowerment of youth and women within civil society organisations, and emphasising themes such as gender equality, environmental sustainability, green growth, human rights, and the protection of vulnerable groups.

5. Multilateral context: Uzbekistan was one of the fifteen members of the UN Human Rights Council during 2023. In the UN General Assembly, Uzbekistan abstained on all country-specific resolutions, with the exception of those relating to Gaza.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, paid an official visit to Uzbekistan on 12-15 March 2023. Uzbekistan underwent its fourth Universal Periodical Review on 8 November 2023. During the session, many States recognized Uzbekistan's efforts and progress

in human rights, but several concerns were raised, specifically with regard to freedom of expression, the situation of journalists and human rights defenders, obstacles to NGOs registration, criminalisation of same-sex relations, human trafficking, and allegations of torture. A total of 234 recommendations were made, out of which 219 were accepted and 15 were noted.

Africa

Republic of Angola

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Angola continues to face challenges in democratic governance and human development, with socio-economic rights suffering after years of economic recession, and concomitant worsening health and quality of life indicators. Youth especially struggle due to lack of jobs and career perspectives, which fuels increasing frustration and disappointment. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to be felt, further aggravating the challenges for vulnerable groups. Concerns remain over the humanitarian situation in the southern provinces. The drought severely weakened the communities' resilience, with women, older people and children the most affected.
Angola has made progress with the implementation of the Angolan National Strategy for Human Rights adopted in 2020. The Strategy is considered a matter of national security by the Government of Angola (the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights reports directly to the President of Angola on its implementation). Efforts to staff, finance, and operationalise the network of Local Human Rights Committees are ongoing. All 18 Provinces have established a Provincial Human Rights Committee. In addition, all 164 municipalities have set up a Municipal Committee and more than 80 communes and urban districts. However, the vitality and work of these committees is uneven and depends on the pro-activeness and abilities of the people involved.

Considering that most Angolan citizens have a limited knowledge of their human rights, the National Strategy for Human Rights has also fostered some workshops with civil society and closer relations with the academic world, with four universities now offering human rights related master degrees.

A National Plan to Combat Human Trafficking has also been adopted. It contains not only measures to punish traffickers, but also a multidisciplinary approach that places protection and assistance to victims at the heart of all actions. Particular attention is given to trafficking in minors.

Throughout 2023, concerns raised regarding a reduced space for civil society with the consequent limitation of freedom of association and expression. Killings, arbitrary arrests and detention of political activists and protesters have been reported. The date of the local elections has not been set.

There are important delays with the investigations of alleged episodes of excessive use of force towards civil society by the police and other law enforcement agencies. With the intention to avoid further human rights violations, the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights is providing specific training to the security forces.

A draft Law on the Statute of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), approved in first hearing by the National Assembly in May 2023 raised questions about its strict regulations and governmental control over the operations of NGOs. In line with the Financial Action Task Force recommendation, the Angolan authorities '*should take focused, proportionate and risk-based measures against money laundering and terrorism, without unduly disrupting or discouraging legitimate activities of non-profit organisations*' .

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to support human rights and democracy in Angola in partnership with the government, intermediary institutions and civil society. Following a rights-based approach, the protection of human rights and the fight against inequality form the basis of all EU actions in Angola. The Multiannual Indicative Programme for the period 2021-2027 identifies transparent, accountable and effective governance as a priority area. This choice responds to the interest of relevant stakeholders in more inclusive governance. The EU also supports important judicial and public administration reforms as well as the expansion of the national social protection system in line with the principle of 'leaving no one behind'.
The thematic budget line dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights and democracy (funded under the NDICI Human Rights & Democracy thematic line) complements the bilateral cooperation envelope with specific actions in favour of vulnerable groups. Key areas of cooperation in 2023 included: i) freedom of expression and the work of human rights journalists; ii) fight against gender based violence; iii) sexual and reproductive health rights; iv) protection of disabled women, children and young women from human rights violations.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Political dialogue on human rights continued in 2023, in the framework of the EU-Angola Working Group, created under the EU-Angola 'Joint Way Forward' partnership. In preparation of the Human Rights Dialogue between the Minister of Justice and Human Rights and the EU Heads of Mission, an open exchange on this topic took place at the 6th Angola-EU Ministerial Meeting, held on 10 December 2023. The following issues were also on the agenda of a technical meeting with the Secretary of State for Human Rights and Citizenship conducted in August 2023: i) Angolan National Strategy for Human Rights: state of play; ii) EU Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategy; iii) Civil and political rights (Elections; Press freedom; Freedom of assembly); iv) Gender equality, including Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights; v) Climate change; vi) Universal Periodical Review.

4. EU financial engagement: A number of EU-funded human rights projects are being satisfactorily implemented in 2023. Their key objectives include: supporting youth and women's empowerment (vocational training, support to business incubators) and combatting corruption; promoting access to justice; promoting nutrition and rural development; protecting the environment and environmental citizens' rights; fighting the negative remaining impact of the COVID pandemics. PASCAL, the EU-financed programme promoting participatory democracy at local level in the framework of the decentralisation process, is in its full implementation stage.

5. Multilateral context: Progress made with the implementation of the Universal Periodic Review recommendations is a token of Angola's commitment to international human rights standards. Angola is in its third cycle, following the Adoption of the Results Report in 2020. The next Stakeholders Report will be presented in June 2024 and the Government's in October 2024. Angola received 270 recommendations, of which 259 were accepted. To date, Angola

has not ratified the International Criminal Court Rome Statute and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

Republic of Benin

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The legislative polls of 8 January 2023, in contrast with past elections, took place in a peaceful and inclusive context. As an outcome, the new Parliament has an increased number of female members and includes the opposition after four years of absence, though the main opposition party contested the results, denouncing frauds. However, in the first months of 2024 the electoral code has been modified again in a restrictive way, raising new concerns that the opposition could be de facto virtually barred from competing in the future presidential and legislative elections in 2026, as happened in 2021 and 2019. Restrictions to the freedom of press and arrests of bloggers and Internet activists persist. Besides, two prominent opposition members, Reckya Madougou and Joël Aïvo, remain in jail, for charges related to terrorism (Madougou) and to breaching State security (Aïvo). In its report on Freedom in the World for 2023, Freedom House ranks Benin with 59 out of 100, i.e. 'partly free'. Children and women rights and good governance have seen positive developments over the last years but persistent restrictions on civil and political rights remain a source of concern. Progress has been made on adopted legislation promoting women's rights and gender equality. However, women are still exposed to various forms of discrimination and inequality, both in their professional lives and their families. While the child mortality rate decreases, Benin still faces serious challenges in the education and health sector. The government has launched several programs to improve primary and secondary education, including free of charge school canteens and special support measures for the education of girls.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The action of EU and Member States in Benin focuses on the following three strategic priorities defined in the Country Strategy.

- Fight against inequalities – Women, children and minorities rights
- Reinforcement of civic and politic space – Freedom of press, speech, opinion, capacity building for journalists, space for civil society
- Accountability of public institutions – Good governance, fight against corruption, support to the Beninese Commission for Human Rights

3. EU bilateral political engagement: There was no session of the Political Dialogue Art. 8 during 2023. However, a COAFR visit in February-March 2024 provided the occasion for several high-level meetings, included on the promotion of human rights and democracy, and confirmed the close and trustful relations established between Benin and the EU. The EU and MS take active part in the technical financial partners (PTF) sectorial groups. They maintain a regular dialogue with Beninese civil society organisations, notably on the promotion of human rights, political and civic freedoms, gender equality, and children rights.

4. EU financial engagement: EU financial engagement in Benin, along with the three co-operation priorities listed above, has been, inter alia, covered by the DH&D instrument. Under this instrument, the EU financially supports the Beninese Commission on Human Rights and its capacity building, electoral observation projects and support to civil society organisation. Several projects for women, children and minorities rights are funded via the Belgian, Dutch and French co-operation programmes.

5. Multilateral context: Benin is member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the period 2022-2024. Amnesty International stated that this appointment should foster more engagement of the country in promoting human rights, and reminded that basic civil and political rights should be protected no less than socio-economic ones, calling on the Beninese Government to stop the judicial harassment cases against opposition leading members and prominent journalists. Benin was reviewed by UPR WG 42, in January of 2023. It received 258 recommendations and it supported 224 recommendations at the adoption of its UPR outcome at Human Rights Council 53, in July 2023 (an increase of 17.27% with respect to the 3rd cycle). Supported recommendations related to legal and general framework of implementation, International humanitarian law, universal and cross-cutting issues, civil and political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights, women's rights, children's rights and rights of other specific groups and persons.

Republic of Botswana

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Botswana has long had a reputation of a stable and well-established democracy with a legal framework and institutions designed to guarantee respect for human rights in the society. Human rights complaints are addressed by courts, with government accepting decisions and implementing respective rulings. While human rights and fundamental freedoms are generally respected, concerns remain as to the death penalty, gender inequality, women rights, women political representation, rights of the minorities and indigenous people and the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. There are moreover challenges with trust in law enforcement and police violence, corruption, and transparent and free media. Botswana has seen a decline in the most serious abuses against journalists in recent years but many obstacles still hinder their work. World Press Freedom Index noted trend with respect to their role in the society and upgrade Botswana's ranking from 95 in 2022 to 65 in 2023 (out of 180 countries). Government has control over the state owned TV and radio. The allocation of advertising is also managed by the Government and it is used to exert political pressure on privately owned media outlets. Botswana is yet to create an independent National Human Rights Institution, as it remains under the mandate of the Office of the Ombudsman, which, in turn, is under the mandate of the Office of the President. Elimination of gender based violence as well as advancement of rights of women and minorities continue to pose challenge for the country. Similar situation applies to the LGBTI rights: despite decriminalization, LGBTI people often continue to face discrimination in practice. Botswana remains part of a small group of countries in Africa and globally, which continue to retain death penalty in law and in practice. The government indicated that a public debate on the application of death penalty should be part of the review of the national Constitution, for which a Commission of Inquiry was appointed by the President in 2021. The Commission published a report in 2022, which shows that citizens consulted require the death penalty for ever more crimes that has been the case up to now. Similarly to 2022, there have been no executions in 2023. As of September, there are 14 men currently on death row.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to engage with Botswana government, multilateral organizations, non-governmental organisations and the broader Botswana society in three main areas (i) death penalty, (ii) gender-based violence (GBV) and

empowerment of women and (iii) LGBTI rights as well as on (iv) support of media and (v) implementation of UPR recommendations.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In addition to ad hoc consultations and human rights-oriented outreach efforts, the EU engages with the Botswana government on human rights formally in the context of its regular Political Dialogue. The last one took place in May 2023. In parallel to government engagement, the EU pursued its dialogue with human rights oriented representatives of civil society, as well as with UN organisations and other partners of the country. The EU continues to be the driving force behind the Gender Dialogue (nominally co-chaired with UNDP and the Gender Affairs Department in the Ministry of Youth, Gender, Sport and Culture). The Gender Dialogue meeting was held in 2023 to consult and review the Country Level Implementation Plan (CLIP). The objective of the Gender Dialogue is to bring together stakeholders to discuss gender issues. On Gender Based Violence, the EU Delegation ran a social media campaign, promoting local activists and their advocacy to end GBV.

4. EU financial engagement: A call for proposals for civil society organisations was concluded in 2023 with the signature of five contracts to address issues such as the rights of indigenous people, youth empowerment and gender equality for a total amount of EUR 979.999.

Contact with non-governmental stakeholders is regular, to mobilise the participation of civil society organisations in the constitutional review process and is provided through a dedicated grant to the Botswana Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (BOCONGO). On the human rights side, the EU Delegation continued to promote the abolition of death penalty, as well as women's and LGBTI rights, and the fight against GBV.

5. Multilateral context: Botswana remains an important partner for the EU with respect to the human rights agenda at multilateral level. The country's positive role on human rights in the multilateral context would be strengthened further by initiating domestic process of reflection about the signature and ratification of several pending core human rights conventions and/or optional protocols (e.g. Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture etc.).

UPR review of Botswana concluded in 2023. The following developments were recognised by the reviewing states, among others: extension of the Ombudsman's mandate to include investigations of human rights violations; legal recognition that same-sex sexual conduct criminalization was unconstitutional; ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; development of comprehensive human rights strategy and national action plan. As per recommendations, the reviewing states expressed the need for abolishing death penalty, curb gender-based violence, end discrimination of ethnic minorities, refugees and migrants, strengthen freedom of expression, information and media.

The UN Committee against Torture conducted a review of Botswana. The report expressed an urgent concern that death sentences had been carried out without providing advance notice to the individuals on death row or to their families. The report also expressed concern that hangings were used in executions and that the bodies of those executed were not handed over to their relatives for burial. The Committee urged Botswana to commute all death sentences and to establish a moratorium on death penalty, with a view to abolishing it, while

ensuring that detention conditions for condemned prisoners do not constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Burkina Faso

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: With almost 8,000 people killed in terrorist attacks and fighting between terrorist armed groups on the one hand, and the Internal Defence and Security Forces and *Volontaires pour la défense de la Patrie* (VDP) on the other, the toll for the year 2023 is particularly heavy in Burkina Faso. At least 40% of the national territory remains under the control of armed terrorist groups, and 2.1 million Burkinabe (10% of the population) are Internally Displaced People (IDPs). The consequences of the ongoing conflict: a significant deterioration in access to schools (25% of schools closed), and to water and basic social services. The operation of public services has been disrupted in localities under blockade by the armed groups (around 46 towns, cities and villages according to Amnesty International), and the economic activities of the local populations have been severely impacted. Humanitarian actors are also increasingly limited in their aid missions, mainly because of the various restrictions imposed by the authorities in their fight against the armed groups.

The situation remains marked by a concerning increase in attacks and massacres perpetrated against civilian populations, for which the responsibility remains difficult to prove, with allegations of abuses committed by the security and defence forces and the VDP, in violation of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL). Overall, the fight against impunity remains a major challenge. While progress has been made in the ordinary courts, this has not been the case in the military courts, particularly for offences committed in the context of anti-terrorist operations, where no investigation has yet been concluded, despite numerous reports.

Overall, the two *coups d'Etat* that took place in 2022 continued to have a major impact on democracy and the rule of law in Burkina Faso in 2023. The electoral process timetable has still not been made public, making the period of return to constitutional order uncertain. Political activities remain suspended. The authorities are increasingly exerting pressure on the media, resulting in self-censorship and a lack of dissenting voices. Since September 2023, at least twenty people critical of the Transition have reportedly been requisitioned by the VDP.

Moreover, hate speech and calls for violence, mainly on social media platforms, increased in 2023, leading to verbal aggressions on discordant voices but also to the stigmatisation of the Fulani community, suspected of fuelling armed groups. The stigmatisation of the LGBTI community was also noted for the first time, on this scale, in 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, the EU and its Member States continued to politically support the priorities of the strategy for Human Rights 2021-24 for Burkina Faso. The EU also continued its partnership with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). In 2023, the OHCHR published 6 press releases with regard to massacres of civilians. These alerts led to the creation of an interministerial working group responsible for early warning and monitoring of allegations of violations of human rights in the context of the "fight against terrorism". Moreover, the OHCHR is the only international partner involved in the training of the VDP in Human Rights and IHL.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: A political dialogue was held in Ouagadougou on the 28 of February 2023. Among the issues discussed were respect for human rights and international humanitarian law in operations to counter radical armed groups. The EU also expressed its views on several occasions in 2023 on reports of flagrant violations of HR and IHL, including in January on the kidnapping of around fifty women by grouped armed forces near Arbinda (local statement), in April on an alleged massacre in the village of Karma with numerous civilian victims, including women and children (spokesperson for the High Representative), and again in December on the kidnapping of around ten women by armed terrorist groups near Arbinda (local statement), including women and children (Spokesperson for the High Representative). In November, the EU also called for light to be shed on the circumstances of the deaths of nearly a hundred civilians in the village of Zaongo, in the Centre-North region of Burkina Faso (Spokesperson for the High Representative).

4. EU financial engagement: In close coordination and cooperation with the Member States present in Burkina Faso, the EU continued its commitment in 6 areas of action: (1) security and Human rights, including international humanitarian law; (2) justice; (3) children's rights; (4) women's and girls' rights; (5) strengthening of democracy and governance in the area of Human rights; (6) strengthening of civil society and the media.

In 2023, the EU mobilised a wide range of financial instruments, as for example the Instrument for Stability and Peace, the Emergency Trust fund, and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).

The projects funded, include for example the following:

- The "Population" programme in partnership with UNICEF, aimed in particular at supporting the modernisation of the civil status (EUR 4 million). The EU has also launched a call for proposals (EUR 16 million) aimed at civil society to improve access to civil status, family planning and the fight against gender-based violence.
- The programme to support justice (EUR 10 million), had for main objective to help clear the clogging up of the thousands of criminal cases waiting to be dealt with, and to strengthen the criminal justice system to improve the performance of magistrates.
- FASOVEIL programme (EUR 4 million) aimed at strengthening civil society's capacity to intervene in the political sphere
- A project to build the capacity of journalists and local-language radio stations (EUR 610.000).

5. Multilateral context: In 2023, as part of the 44th session of the Human Rights Council, the EU also took part in Burkina Faso's Universal Periodic Review. 265 recommendations were made, mainly concerning women’s rights, gender-based violence, violence in situation of armed conflicts, education, children's rights and the protection of vulnerable groups.

Republic of Burundi

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights and democracy situation remained problematic, and structural reforms are needed. In 2023 there was some progress, namely in terms of the fight against human trafficking and the repatriation of Burundian refugees. However, serious cases of enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrest and

detention, torture and other ill-treatment, rape and sexual violence, as well as violations of civil liberties, were documented. Impunity was rampant: the Imbonerakure militia, the armed branch of the ruling party, acted without any accountability although slightly less evidently than in the past. Civil society organisations and human rights defenders were put under pressure and subject to arbitrary arrest and intimidation. President Ndayishimiye publicly commented negatively on LGBTI, who already face jail terms of up to two years if convicted of same-sex offences as well as social ostracism. Burundi hosted more than 87 000 Congolese refugee and asylum seekers. The number of Burundian refugees in the Great Lakes region remained high (around 246 000).

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU's focused on: (i) the judicial system; (ii) gender equality and women's rights; (iii) the rights of the child; (iv) independent media, access to information and the fight against disinformation (v) political parties. The EU worked to facilitate citizens' access to justice and strengthened cooperation with the National Independent Commission for Human Rights for a more systematic commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights. It supported local NGOs' capabilities so that they could better monitor, document and report on human rights violations. The EU also continued to support media pluralism and civil society organizations, in long-term perspective of strengthening democratic culture and inclusive governance.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Since 2021 bilateral exchanges on human rights with the Government and stakeholders have intensified. The EUSR for Human Rights visited the country in February and engaged with the Government at the highest level as well as with political and civil society stakeholders. The EU-Burundi Political Dialogue continued to be key in reviewing progress linked with human rights, good governance and the rule of law. The EU maintained an autonomous restrictive measures regime in place in view of the situation in Burundi, which applied against a Burundian citizen due to, inter alia, his involvement in the violent repressions of 2015 and links to the Imbonerakure militia.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023 the EU funded actions for a total of EUR 6 million focused on its key focus areas as well as technical assistance to several Ministries and Burundi's Ombudsman. Among the main activities, the Justice Program (EUR 15 million - approved in 2021), a Team Europe initiative, and an activity for the promotion of culture and strengthening of the rule of law (EUR 5 million - approved in 2023). Support to free access to health care for mothers and children under 5 continue to produce positive outcomes (Health program, EUR 55 million, approved in 2021).

5. Multilateral context: Burundi is party to several key international human rights instruments. The country withdrew from the ICC Statute in October 2017. Burundi's UPR in May 2023 resulted in 287 recommendations, of which Burundi accepted 204. Most of them addressed economic, civil and political rights, including socio-economic development, the protection of the rights of the child and of older persons, health services, basic and inclusive education for all, mitigation of disasters, and combatting sexual and gender-based violence.
Based on a resolution proposed by the EU, the UN Human Rights Council extended by a year the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi. The Burundian government continued to refuse any cooperation with the Special Rapporteur. No progress was achieved for reopening the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. In UN fora, Burundi did not align with the EU' positions on human rights.

Republic of Cabo Verde

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Throughout 2023, Cabo Verde maintained good compliance with international human rights standards and some positive developments compared to last year Human Rights report were noticeable. The country has enjoyed a good degree of political stability and has maintained a solid position in human rights and corruption perception indexes. Cabo Verde is widely recognised as a reference for the sub-region and the continent for achievements in the protection of human rights and democratic governance, including fair and transparent elections. The implementation of the 2019 Gender Parity Law contributed to a significant increase in the participation of women in Parliament from 23.6 to 38.8 percent. However, Cabo Verde continues to face challenges on gender equality and on gender-based violence (GBV). The number of GBV complaints remains high and harmful stereotypes continue to be a persistent problem in a patriarchal society, though Cabo Verde has scaled up efforts to counter GBV and support victims. In 2023, the State Budget included, for the first time, an allocation of around EUR 385.000 to the 'Victims Support Fund', as well as education and awareness-raising campaigns. Another remaining challenge concerns a draft Law on non-discrimination of vulnerable groups, including of LGBTI, still not discussed in Parliament. Child protection, including from sexual exploitation, remains a serious concern and is increasingly gaining public attention. Prison conditions also continue to be a concern and are one of the most reported issues in complaints received by the CNDHC. On human trafficking, the Government is currently drafting a National Strategy and Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons (2023–2026).

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU budget support programme includes an indicator on the development of a plan aimed at keeping girls in the school system or in vocational training and preventing school dropouts due to early pregnancy.
Following a call for proposals to CSO, three projects aimed at developing sustainable tourism in four islands (Santo Antão, São Vicente, Fogo and Brava) were selected. Implementation should begin in 2024 and include a crosscutting objective to prevent the sexual exploitation of children.

The EUDEL organised a high-level political dialogue on sexual abuse and exploitation of women and children in the tourism sector. Interlocutors included the President of the National Assembly and other members of Parliament, as well as the Secretary of State for Family and Social Inclusion, the CNDHC and the Cabo Verdean Institute for Children and Adolescents (ICCA), as well as CSO. A number of recommendations resulted from this dialogue, including the need to produce specific materials and develop training for teachers. Meanwhile, a partnership between ICCA the EU and the UNDP has been established for that purpose. Another dialogue should take place in 2024.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The final communique issued after the Ministerial Meeting of 31 January 2023 confirmed the commitment of both EU and Cabo Verde to human rights and democracy. The EUDEL and EU MS actively support gender equality and women and girls empowerment in Cabo Verde. Gender is a crosscutting priority in all political and policy dialogues between the EU and Cabo Verde. As in previous years, the EUDEL public diplomacy activities and communication gave special attention to Human Rights issues. The EU

Delegation also communicated actively during International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. The EUDEL continued to use culture and cultural events as a way of promoting Human Rights. A highlight was the open air concert organised in collaboration with the UN to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice participated in the event. Other cultural activities, carried out with the support of PROCULTURA beneficiaries (a component of the EU-PALOP/TL regional programme) included messages on gender equality, children rights and social inclusion. Human Rights also featured prominently in interventions at public events to which the Delegation is invited.

4. EU financial engagement: Assisting Government in its goal to eradicate extreme poverty is at the core of the EU ongoing Budget Support Programme. A national Strategy for the Eradication of Extreme Poverty is in place, targeting the most vulnerable. Women headed households represent 85% of the extreme poor and children below 15 years represent 37%. The number of cash transfers' beneficiaries should reach a total of more than 9000 families in 2024, as the 'Fundo Mais', a social fund financed through a percentage of the tourism tax, enters into full operation. This will increase the chances of Cabo Verde achieving SDG 1 by 2026 - four years ahead of schedule and with the EU's support.

5. Multilateral context: Cabo Verde has ratified almost all of the Human Rights treaties and their optional protocols. In November 2023, the country submitted to its fourth UPR. The Government confirmed its willingness to accept visits from all UN Special Procedure mandate holders. It also confirmed a desire to present its candidature for membership to the UN Human Rights Council for the period of 2025-2027. Several NGOs and the CNDHC presented 'shadow reports' and provided input for the UPR pre-session with civil society. Cabo Verde received 205 recommendations mainly concerning violence against women, discrimination against LGBTI persons, the situation of people with disabilities and human trafficking.
In November 2023, in the framework of the GSP+ system, the European Commission published a positive assessment of Cabo Verde implementation of 27 international conventions in the period from 2020 to 2022. This includes core Human Rights and ILO conventions. Moreover, Cabo Verde has made a number of commitments on drawing up and submitting initial and periodic reports on the implementation of international human rights treaties. An Inter-ministerial Commission established for this purpose was reinforced. In October 2023, the Government submitted the II Report on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to the UN CESCR Secretariat.

Republic of Cameroon

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The situation of human rights and democracy remained problematic. The government continued to restrict the ability of opposition parties and civil society to exercise their rights to assemble, to demonstrate peacefully and to express freely their opinions. Many political opponents and activists are still in prison since 2020, after having been arrested during peaceful protests. Press freedom and freedom of expression were restricted. Independent journalists were particularly exposed to intimidation and violence, and several journalists were killed in unclear circumstances. As the security situation in Far-North (Lake Chad Basin) and in the Anglophone North-West and

South-West (NO/SO) regions continued to deteriorate, human rights violations – including unlawful killings, murders, sexual violence and abductions - committed by armed non-state actors and members of the defence and security forces increased, mainly against civilians. Critical human rights defenders, academics, lawyers and journalists who speak publicly against atrocities in the Anglophone regions were put under pressure. While there was only limited progress in terms of accountability, security and defence forces started taking more into account human rights in the conduct of their operations. The right to a fair trial was infringed in several cases, especially in cases sentenced by military courts for terrorism-related or national security offenses. The country continued to face systemic weaknesses in terms of protecting the most vulnerable groups, notably women, children, LGBTI and displaced people. In November 2023, the government started considering the first ever law against gender-based violence. LGBTI people were victims of discrimination and under constant social pressure. The country hosted around half a million refugees and asylum seekers from Nigeria and the CAR. There was approx. 1 million internally displaced persons.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU focused on (i) abolition of death penalty, eradication of torture and cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment, and fair access to justice; (ii) protection, conflict prevention and crisis/conflict resolution; (iii) gender equality, women's rights and non-discrimination, including as regards to sexual orientation; (iv) strengthening civic and democratic spaces, good governance and accountability, transparency and fight against corruption; (v) green deal, business and human rights.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU-Cameroon regular political dialogue (last session June 2023) included exchanges on human rights, civil society and gender parity promotion. A sectoral dialogue on electoral governance was initiated in 2023 with the Ministry in charge of decentralisation and local development as well as with the ELECAM (national body in charge of elections organisation and management). A sectoral dialogue was also held with the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family, to identify how to improve gender equality via national sectorial strategies and encourage women representation in public entities. The EU actively engaged with a variety of government and non-government stakeholders to advocate for the abolition of the death penalty and to promote gender equality and women leadership. The EU carried out formal demarches on human rights and democracy issues to request support for its initiatives in UN fora.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU remained committed to reinforce the promotion of civic and democratic spaces, good governance (incl. decentralisation) and transparency. A total amount of EUR 26.5 million was committed in 2023 for actions in the areas of human rights and democracy. By way of example, an EU-funded project (EUR 1.125 million), implemented by a consortium of international and national NGOs, aims at improving detainees' living conditions and promoting fair access to justice. EUR 17 million, in partnership with GIZ (German cooperation, co-funding the project with EUR 4 million), supported the role of civil society in protection, conflict prevention and fight against gender-based violence in the North-West/South-West Anglophone regions.

5. Multilateral context: Cameroon is party to several key international human rights treaties. In 2023, it ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights relating to the rights of persons with disabilities. It also ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the

Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. It is not party to the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty nor the African Union Charter on democracy, governance and elections, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. The country has been a member of the UN Human Rights Council since 2019, and has been re-elected to a second term until 2024. The latest Universal Periodic Review took place in November 2023. Cameroon received 291 recommendations (the government's response will be known in 2024). The most prominent topics raised therein were women and children rights, refugees, persons with disabilities, LGBTI, ethnic and indigenous minorities, and the security situation in the South-West and North-West regions of the country. A large number of the remaining recommendations related to the right to health, the right to education, as well as freedom of expression and the protection of journalists and other members of civil society.

Central African Republic

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights and democracy situation in the Central African Republic continued to be very problematic, with severe and widespread violations of human rights, and difficulties translating the fight against impunity into concrete action. The implementation of the 2019 Peace Agreement and the 2021 Luanda roadmap met some success, including the dismantling of several armed groups and the disarming or surrender of over 5800 fighters. The resilience of democracy was tested by the polarisation stemming from the adoption of a new Constitution. In the lead-up to the constitutional referendum held in July, the space for free and balanced expression of different viewpoints was limited. The opposition claimed it was subject to severe intimidation and disinformation. Media freedom was under pressure, notably with detentions and attacks against journalists, and the arbitrary suspension of radio frequencies. Hate speech, disinformation and misinformation in local media as well as on several social networks remained a concern. While rebel groups were the main perpetrators of violent attacks including Gender-Based Violence (GBV), the Armed Forces and their allies (incl. the Wagner group) were also responsible, and accountability thereof was inadequate. GBV throughout the country remained a major problem: around 37% of GBV incidents were sexual in nature, and 50% of them perpetrated by armed men. In November 2023, a law aimed at protecting GVB survivors was submitted to Parliament. One of its provisions aims to abolish forced marriage, which is still common in several traditional communities. The National Commission for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms was installed in February 2023. The country also adopted its National Human Rights Policy, accompanied by an initial action plan for 2023-27. Central African Republic counts more than 500 000 internally displaced persons. The country hosted over 56 000 refugees and asylum seekers from Sudan and Chad. Over 740 000 refugees from Central African Republic live in neighbouring countries.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU focused on: (i) Protecting and empowering individuals (namely via supporting human rights defenders; promoting a safe and enabling environment for civil society; protecting and promoting freedom of expression, media freedom and pluralism; supporting the elaboration and reinforcement of the child protection system; supporting transitional justice and an independent judiciary, supporting state authorities in

providing a legal identity for all, in particular ensuring universal birth registration, promoting non-discriminatory access to affordable health care and to quality education; (ii) Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies (namely via encouraging dialogue and peaceful resolution of conflicts; improving integrity of electoral processes, and capacity building of organs managing elections).

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued advocating for greater consideration for human rights in the country, including through the political dialogue, engagement with civil society and stakeholders. The EU remained the leading partner in coordination and implementation of the Justice Sector Policy adopted in December 2019 by the Central African Republic Government. Both EU CSDP missions (EUAM RCA and EUTM RCA) implemented activities to foster EU values, promote EU action and expose violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

Under its global human rights sanction regime, the EU applied a series of restrictive measures to several individuals and entities linked to the Wagner group involved in human rights abuses in Central African Republic – the list thereof was expanded in early 2023.

The EU carried out formal demarches on human rights and democracy issues to request support for its initiatives at in UN fora.

4. EU financial engagement: Approximately EUR 8 million worth of activities, including: signature and start of implementation of a grant to a consortium of civil society organizations to support human rights defenders (EUR 1.2 million); Support to the Special Criminal Court for a period of 24 months (EUR 1 million).

5. Multilateral context: CAR is party to multiple key human rights treaties. Central African Republic has not ratified the 2nd Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights for the abolition of the death penalty. The Central African Republic stance in UN fora did not match the EU's human rights priorities.

Republic of Chad

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights and democracy situation in Chad remained problematic. Structural deficiencies were exacerbated by tensions stemming from the ongoing transition and the aftermath of a violent government repression (with many fatalities and casualties) of an opposition demonstration in October 2022. In 2023 the authorities released and pardoned many of those arrested on that occasion and in November 2023 granted a blanket amnesty for the events in questions, covering also the security services. In the context of the transition, a new constitution approved by referendum and formally adopted at the end of the year. Both process were criticised by parts of the opposition for lack of inclusiveness and technical shortcomings. The enjoyment of social and economic rights (notably access to healthcare and education) remained limited. Local conflicts, mostly between pastoralists and farmers but also for access to mining resources, continued during the year. Insecurity remained widespread, especially due to Boko Haram's operations in the Lake Chad area, responsible for numerous human rights violations. Chad hosted over 1 million refugees and asylum seekers from the region (a number rapidly

increasing due to the conflict in Sudan). Chad also had more than 215 000 internally displaces persons.

2. EU action key focus areas: The EU focused on: (1) transition to democracy; (2) civic education and literacy; (3) fight against impunity and the development of a credible judiciary; (4) reform of the security forces; (5) governance of natural resources; (6) freedom of expression; (7) vulnerable groups; (8) human rights defenders and civil society organisations.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human rights were included in bilateral political exchanges, though no formal political dialogue took place in 2023. The EU repeatedly shared with authorities its expectations that the transition be peaceful and that a transfer to civilian-led, democratic government and return to constitutional rule be accomplished as soon as possible, while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms. The EU continued to actively engage on the aftermath of the October 2022 events, calling for a credible inquiry and for accountability and reiterating the importance of the respect of human rights. The EU also actively engaged with civil society, including human rights defenders.

The EU continued its advocacy efforts to ensure respect of human rights by the Chadian forces engaged in G5 Sahel and the Multinational Joint Task force in the Lake Chad Basin.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU's specific human rights-related activities totalled EUR 3.8 million and addressed citizen participation and dialogue, women's rights, access to justice, the protection of children and the management of land rights (often linked to local conflicts). The EU also provided approximately EUR 80 million in support to the transition process and democratisation.

5. Multilateral context: Chad is party to most key human rights treaties, but not the Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture, the Second Optional Protocol against the death penalty or the Convention on Enforced Disappearance (nor Article 32). Chad completed its ban on the death penalty in 2020.

Union of the Comoros

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The overall situation of human rights and democracy in Comoros remains of concern. Human rights infringements relate to restrictions to freedom of assembly, expression, and movement, human trafficking, arbitrary arrests, and the general weakness of the judiciary. Improvements were realised in the area of human trafficking and an important law on preventing and fighting corruption was adopted, which includes the creation of an 'Anti-Corruption Chamber' within the Supreme Court. Serious gaps persist at legal level, concerning especially the rights of women and children.
The National Commission for Human Rights and Freedoms is the main actor in the area of human rights in Comoros and cooperates with institutions and civil society, while preserving its independence. Its annual report for 2023 highlighted weaknesses of the judiciary as well as gender based violence, which persists despite a positive legal framework. Due to a lack of resources, the Commission is however not in a position to follow up on its report. In overcrowded prisons, detention conditions do not respect human rights. The death penalty exists, but has not been applied since 1990. Though press freedom is enshrined in law, self-

censorship is frequent. In mid-December 2023, the EU deployed an Elections Experts Mission to Comoros in preparation of presidential and governor's elections in January 2024.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, key focus areas of EU action related to media capacity-building, empowerment of women, gender-based violence, and civil society. Ambitious communication activities have promoted the EU's values, including human rights, throughout the year, among other things a campaign on women's and children's rights. Human rights are constantly present in the EU social media and cultural activities, such as the European Film Festival.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In October 2023, the 7th Political Dialogue Comoros - EU was held and human rights issues were discussed, such as justice and women's and children's rights. Women's rights are central to EU action in Comoros, based on the strategic gender action plan for the promotion of equality between men and women, established in a participatory process. A roadmap for civil society guides EU action to promote civil society in the country.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU supported several projects in the area of human rights:

- unaccompanied minors (EUR 300.000);
- protection of women and children against violence (450.000 EUR);
- structuring civil society (EUR 400.000);
- detention conditions (EUR 400.000);
- strengthening media and information quality (EUR 350.000);
- support to domestic election observation (EUR 310.000);

France is also implementing a capacity-building program on justice (training of judges) – EUR 1 million.

5. Multilateral context: The EU regularly raises human rights issues concerning Comoros (freedom of expression, human trafficking, death penalty, gender-based violence) with UN representatives at regional and international level. Possible synergies are being explored in the framework of EU projects. Throughout 2023, the EU and its Member States continued to be supportive of the UN agencies in Comoros. Comoros undergoes the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) exercise at the 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council in April/May 2024.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights and democracy situation remained fragile. Violent incidents occurred in the context of the election campaign, which also witnessed repression of demonstrations, an increase in hate speech, and new constraints on the opposition and media. 2023 was also marked by the continuing insecurity in the East, and the persistence of the conflict with armed groups, such as the M23 and Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) with a series of new massacres and serious abuses (including

increased sexual and gender based violence) left unpunished. The continuation of intercommunal conflict in the Mai Ndombe province and sporadic ethnic incidents in different areas further contributed to ongoing humanitarian crisis. Around 6.3 million Congolese are internally displaced (IDP), mainly due to armed conflict. Women, who constitute 60% of the IDPs, have been increasingly forced to engage in high-risk practices to provide for their children, such as survival sex and begging. Over one million Congolese are refugees in neighbouring countries (about 30 000 have recently fled the conflicts in Eastern DRC), while the DRC itself hosts over 500 000 refugees, mainly from Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU focused on: (1) Promotion of the freedom of expression, demonstration and association; (2) Promotion of the democratic system as set out in the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the participation of women in political life; (3) Promotion and entrenchment of a fair and easily accessible justice system including the fight against impunity in particular for those implicated in sexual violence; (4) Promotion of gender equality particularly in public life and respect for women's rights especially for the survivors of sexual and gender based violence.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued to engage in a wide array of political actions in support of human rights, with the government, civil society at large, and international partners. Human rights were included within EU-DRC political exchanges, though no formal Political Dialogue took place in 2023. The EU advocated for preserving and protecting the public space and press freedom. The EU actively supported the adoption of a law on protecting Human Rights defenders, which is currently being reviewed. The EU played a key role in coordinating donor activities on gender-based issues and was also one of the main supporters of the President's national campaign to fight gender-based violence. In the framework of the electoral campaign, the EU stressed the importance of an inclusive, free, transparent and peaceful electoral process. The EU maintained an autonomous restrictive measures regime in place in view of the situation in the DRC, which applied against several individuals due to their involvement in human rights violations or abuses in the country.

The EU carried out formal demarches on human rights and democracy issues to request support for its initiatives in UN fora.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU provided EUR 2.5 million of support to programs and projects on the rule of law and human rights, amongst others in the justice sector, the media, the protection of human rights defenders, the gender equality and women's rights. The EU also dedicated EUR 14 million for the electoral sector through the 'United for Democracy' program, including for production and dissemination of quality electoral information and to strengthen the capacities of all stakeholders (for example on electoral disputes and electoral surveillance for political parties). The citizen electoral observation project made it possible to deploy around 15 000 domestic election observers, who documented numerous cases of irregularities and incidents during the electoral process.
The EU actively assisted human right defenders, protecting numerous of them across the country throughout the year. Almost 4 million people were reached by awareness raising activities on the respect of their fundamental rights (counts started in early 2021). The EU also supported a programme aimed at preventing torture in Kinshasa-based detention centres.

The EU was also active on promoting gender equality and strengthen women's rights: the project 'Tujenge Amani Leo' promoted the resilience of vulnerable women and youth in crisis-affected territories in Eastern DRC; EU's support to Panzi Foundation enabled over 4000 victims of sexual and gender-based violence to receive medical, socio-psychological, legal and economic assistance. A new action worth EUR 20 million called 'Unis pour l'égalité du genre', launched in November 2022, aimed to reduce women's, girls', boys' and men's vulnerability to GBV, including through vocational training, awareness rising and wider protection measures.

5. Multilateral context: The DRC is party to multiple key international human rights treaties. In the Human Rights Council, the annual resolution on the DRC, presented by the African Group on behalf of the DRC itself, was once again adopted by consensus. The resolution renewed the mandate of the International Team of Experts on the DRC for a further period of one year, and requested them to provide the DRC with technical support in the implementation of the national strategy on transitional justice. The DRC did not vote on most of the human rights-related resolutions in 2023 in UN fora.

Republic of the Congo

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights and democracy situation remained problematic. Serious violations of human rights and limited space for the opposition as well as enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and arrests were reported. The use of torture, especially in police stations and prisons, remained widespread. The conditions under which persons are detained prior to their appearance before a judge, continued to fall short of international standards. The economic and social rights of the population deteriorated due to the lack of investment in the social sector. Corruption remained a major obstacle to good governance. The country lacked an independent judicial system. Violence against women remained a serious challenge. National legislation does not discriminate sexual minorities, but no particular efforts were made to protect them against discrimination. Civil society organizations were faced with difficulties and intimidation, especially when dealing with human rights or mismanagement of national resources. The country hosted more than 66 000 refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU's focused on: (1) Effective functioning of institutions and monitoring mechanisms for democratic political life and human rights; (2) Good governance, respect for the rule of law and implementation of the necessary reforms in different areas; (3) Citizen participation in decision-making and oversight of governance, including through strengthening the role of civil society and local authorities; (4) Improving the situation of vulnerable populations (including indigenous peoples) and gender equality.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU-Congo Justice Sector Dialogue addressed the functioning of the judiciary system, the police, and prisons, the rule of law, including international obligations and the promotion of human rights, and relations with civil society. The EU engaged with a wide range of stakeholders on human rights (government, human rights defenders, civil society organisations, universities, media), with a particular focus on youth.

The EU carried out formal demarches on human rights and democracy issues to request support for its initiatives in UN fora.

4. EU financial engagement: Nine projects (total of approx. EUR 3.4 million) made satisfactory progress in their implementation in 2023. These projects cover a variety of topics such as the protection of the rights of indigenous peoples, the promotion of children's rights and the fight against gender-based violence. In addition, three projects (total of approx. EUR 2.1 million) were funded in Congo by the OSC-AL (Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities) instrument and successfully continued their activities in 2023 in their respective areas of strengthening cultural practices and revitalising civil society as a development actor in the Pool and Likouala departments. The 'Police +' project aimed at improving respect for human rights by the police in two pilot police stations made satisfactory progress. The EU supported the informal private sector through a number of projects targeting local economic initiatives, in the context of promoting social and economic rights.

5. Multilateral context: The Republic of the Congo is party to several key human rights treaties but it has not ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance or the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aimed at abolishing the death penalty.
The government prepared a positive report on the implementation of the 188 recommendations from the UPR 2018 in view of the upcoming UPR in 2024. Alternative reports presented by civil society at a pre-session on 30 November 2023 noted the low level of implementation of the recommendations from 2018, including the non-ratification of the above-mentioned international human rights conventions. The country's priorities on human rights in UN fora did not match the EU's.

Republic Côte d'Ivoire

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Despite an overall improvement of the human rights situation in Côte d'Ivoire during the past years, challenges remain numerous: access to basic social services, poor prison conditions (chronic overcrowding of around 200 %), gender inequalities and unequal access to economic, social and cultural resources, particularly in rural areas, violations of freedom of expression and assembly, persistence of child labour mainly in the agricultural and commercial sectors. The economic sector remains at 90 % informal with precarious working conditions.
On the positive side, progress has been made in promoting gender parity and criminal justice. The adoption of the Law to promote the representation of women in elected assemblies (target: 30%) is a significant milestone. However, its implementation remains limited.

Regarding the right to free and transparent elections, the National Assembly adopted in October 2019 a law restructuring the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) to be more balanced and impartial. However, the composition and appointment of the IEC and its local structures continue to raise concerns. The democratic maturity of Côte d'Ivoire is affirmed; all parties participated in the largely peaceful local and senatorial elections of September 2023, a sign of calming the political atmosphere.

Civil society in Côte d'Ivoire is fragile and needs support in terms of its structuring, capacity building and independence. Reform of the 1960 law concerning associations was delayed. A reflection on the coalitions of Ivorian NGOs is necessary as well as the continuation of advocacy for the revision of the 1960 law.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In line with the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 and the Country Strategy for Human Rights and Democracy 2021-2024, and as reiterated at the Partnership Dialogue held on 14 December 2023, the following strategic and operational priorities were identified:

- Combating child labour, child trafficking and forced labour, with particular attention to the implementation of the relevant ILO conventions;
- Contribute to the eradication of torture, in particular by improving detention conditions and implementing alternative measures to imprisonment;
- Help prevent gender-based violence, including harmful norms and practices such as female genital mutilation;
- Strengthen the rule of law, independence and the proper functioning of justice, and improve the integrity of electoral processes by following up on the recommendations of European electoral missions;
- Strengthen the role of civil society organisations;
- Contribute to equality in opportunities for women and men in all spheres of social life and step up the fight against all forms of discrimination, with particular attention to LGBTI persons and persons with disabilities;
- Improve access to public services, with a focus on vulnerable people, including through digital technologies;
- Promote freedom of expression and support efforts to combat disinformation and hate speech.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU, with the support of the Member States represented in Côte d'Ivoire, took formal steps in 2023 on human rights and democracy issues in the framework of the 78th UN General Assembly and the 54th session of the Human Rights Council.
The 7th session of the Partnership Dialogue held on 14 December 2023 demonstrated the strength of the partnership and the convergence of views, including at international level. Several topics related to the human rights situation, good governance, as well as the rule of law and the fight against corruption were discussed, and the level of EU engagement in this area could be strengthened. During this dialogue, the parties were able to reaffirm that they are aligned around values and interests.

4. EU financial engagement: As part of the Gender Action Plan 2021-2025 (GAP III), a Country-Level Implementation Plan (CLIP) was adopted in 2022. Over a 5-year period, the EU will actively be pursuing the objective of reducing gender inequalities in each of the priority areas of the GAP III while focusing on the transformation of gender power relations, and improving

the economic and social position of women. Among other actions, the EU will continue to contribute to the electoral technical assistance and support the capacity-building of Human Rights National Council (CNDH) regional offices.

5. Multilateral context: The country has ratified most of the international instruments of the UN and the AU. The government has adopted policies to combat child labour and trafficking in human beings. However, the implementation of international instruments and reporting require further improvement. The finalisation of the ratification procedure of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is expected.
Côte d'Ivoire is a member of the Human Rights Council from 2024 to 2026. In 2024, Côte d'Ivoire will participate in the Universal Periodic Review exercise.

Republic of Djibouti

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, the human rights and democracy situation has overall been stable. According to the World Press Freedom Index Djibouti has slightly improved its performance in the area of freedom of expression and information from 164/180 in 2022 to 162/180 in 2023. The Economist Democracy Index places the country as 137th out of 167 overall, marking small improvement (2 places higher than in 2022 and with an improved score of 2.74). V-Dem Democracy Index keeps Djiboutian score rather low (0,255) granting it 137th place out of 179 screened countries.
Djibouti remains a beacon of stability in an otherwise troubled region. Djibouti should also be commended for taking care of a large refugee and migrant population, which is now estimated at least 200.000 people (on a population of 1.1 million). According to Djibouti figures, it is spending 50% of its budget for the health sector on migrants and refugees, a burden for which it is asking international assistance.

Throughout the year of reporting, the Government of Djibouti has made a noticeable progress in improving access to basic services for citizens (mainly in the areas of education, health, social security, housing, justice). Some progress has also been observed in the quest for gender equality and on mainstreaming disability. Areas that may require further efforts revolve around political and civil rights, especially in the fields of freedom of opinion, expression, communication, association, belief, peaceful assembly and access to information. Some of those issues are subject of discussions under the UPR process, which Djibouti is currently undergoing. The open attitude of the government towards strengthening of the operational capacity of the national human rights institutions is to be noted.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU's Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategy focusses on five key areas: [i] protecting and empowering individuals; [ii] building resilient, inclusive and democratic society; [iii] promoting a global system for human rights and democracy; [iv] new technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges; [v] delivering by working together.
Development cooperation (NDICI) has governance as a second priority area, with particular focus on gender equality, inclusivity as well as migration. The EU has set up a desalination and drinking water plant providing 250,000 people with clean water. The EU supports access to justice. Throughout last decade, the number of judges in Djibouti has increased from 35 to 150, thus significantly improving access to justice of the population. In 2020 DJ established the

National Judicial Training School (Ecole Nationale d'Etudes Judiciares, ENEJ), which tasks include the training of judges, justice officials (lawyers, notaries, bailiffs, court clerks and police officers) and any other professionals working in the legal or judicial field. The School, which has been operational for three years, has trained in 2023 the first cohort of judges, court clerks and lawyers. The EU-funded PAJ project (EUR 4 million) has been able to, inter alia, reach out to rural areas with justice caravans. The same programme supports the work of CNDH.

The EU has also been a staunch supporter in the facilitation of the identification, referral, protection and assistance of trafficked persons as well as the validation of anti-trafficking legislation and regulations. The EU support to migration protection structures such as through the IOM-operated Migrant Response Centres (MRC) and associated shelters for returnees and victims of trafficking has resulted in significant improvements in the protection schemes. The EU is further pursuing actions of national and regional focus with migrant protection, health migration and host communities as well as strengthening migration management structures as main areas of channelling of support towards migration governance. The EU has equally supported the implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in Djibouti.

In the framework of the ongoing Support for the empowerment of women and protection of rights of women and girls (FEMFI) project (EUR 7 million), the capacities of the Ministry of Women and Families are strengthened, and the national literacy, vocational training and professional integration program has been put in place. Existing nurseries and quality family planning services have also been strengthened. Girls and women benefit from quality prevention and holistic protection services, particularly related to FGM.

Several EU-funded projects continue to empower youth through insertion in the job market. The most prominent of those focuses on the training of youth in port-related and service-oriented professions (EUR 10 million, TRANSFORM project). Through its support to the private sector (EUR 4 million) the capacities of local entrepreneurs are strengthened by improvement of their access to training and financing. A relevant project also foresees the establishment of the SME incubator in Djibouti (Center of Excellence and Leadership).

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Throughout 2023, the EU Delegation has conducted a fully-fledged and multi-layered outreach on human rights and democracy matters. In addition to this, in its regular partnership dialogue meetings the EU and Djibouti are discussing the human rights situation in the country and opportunities for cooperation. The EU is committed to support preparation for the next UPR cycle, to advance work on the review of the communication law and to strengthen the Electoral Board (CENI). The EU's justice support project resulted in important reforms such as the revision of legislation (family, civil law, civil procedure), the measures for the implementation of the reform of judicial and penitentiary assistance. The European Union supports the National Assembly in its legislative functions and in its over-view role, strengthening inter-institutional links with the Court of Auditors for better transparency on the public spending. The EU supported a complex Public Financial Management analysis exercise to strengthen public finance and future public investments. With a view to strengthen civil society, the EU Delegation has started to establish a more structured dialogue with civil society organisations.

4. EU financial engagement: Financial engagement in the area of Humans Rights is channelled through various programmes, most of which encourage democratic governance, foster resilience-building, empower vulnerable groups and promote an inclusive and equitable civic culture. In terms of direct support to civil society and human rights organisations, it continues to support rights of children, women and migrants whilst aiming at strengthening the civil society organisations in Djibouti, most notably in the area of local/communal development and livelihood creation.

5. Multilateral context: In November, Djibouti's human rights situation was examined before the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) as part of its Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Major concerns tabled by the international community revolved around the freedom of expression and freedom of the press; the freedom of association and peaceful assembly; freedom of belief; the independence of the national human right commission; human trafficking; discrimination against women and girls; GBV (in particular FGM); and discrimination of persons with disability. In the area of promoting a global system for human rights and democracy a variety of multilateral platforms (e.g. UN family, IGAD, Horn of Africa Initiative, like-minded partners' consultations) have been used by the EU to better coordinate and streamline joint responses. The EU has also been actively engaging in discussions and consultations with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) during official visits of its representatives conducted throughout 2023.
Djibouti has ratified the major international UN conventions on human rights and remains the only country in the IGAD region that has abolished the death penalty.

Despite the fact that the protection of human rights is not the core mandate of IGAD, its achievements in advocating for peace and security in the region cannot be questioned. Efforts in this direction have only intensified in 2023 under the Djiboutian presidency within the organisation. War in Sudan, regional clashes in Ethiopia, re-introduction of Eritrea into the club, security transition in Somalia and the future of South Sudan in view of upcoming elections, have (albeit to various degrees) more than fulfilled the organisation's agenda. The EU continues to meaningfully engage with IGAD by postulating a more political relationship between the two and by focusing on the areas where IGAD has demonstrated a visible added value. The EU is supportive of IGAD's peace mediation efforts on the war in Sudan which should be commended.

Republic of Equatorial Guinea

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The overall human rights and democracy situation in Equatorial Guinea remained extremely problematic, with systematic human rights violations and abuses, political and civic oppression, and high levels of corruption, limited space for civil society and opposition parties. Senior members of an opposition party were sentenced by a military tribunal to several years in prison. The use of torture, especially in prisons, continued to be reported as widespread. Freedom of expression, association and assembly were severely curtailed. Political and human rights activists faced intimidation, harassment and reprisals. Lack of equality between women and men remained a major challenge in all aspects of social, cultural, economic and political life. Gender-based violence was a serious concern.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU focused on: (1) full abolition of the death penalty (which was banned in 2022 but remains theoretically applicable under military law), eradication of torture and cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment, and fair access to justice for victims of human rights violations; (2) Opening of civic and democratic spaces, good governance and accountability, transparency, and fight against corruption; (3) Addressing social inequalities and discrimination as well as promotion of gender equality, women rights and LGBTI rights.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Equatorial Guinea is not a party to the revised Cotonou Agreement and did not sign the Samoa Agreement. In spite of not having a regular political dialogue based on these agreements, the EU has been closely following the political, social and economic situation in Equatorial Guinea and has raised human rights and governance issues in high-level exchanges with the authorities.

4. EU financial engagement: Equatorial Guinea benefited from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (approximatively EUR 350 000) with regional projects aimed at promoting gender equality, assistance to human rights defenders and other vulnerable groups, empowerment, digital education and employability of women, youth and adults at risk of exclusion. EUR 1.95 million were allocated in 2023 through the Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities thematic programme for projects in 2024 on the elimination of all forms of violence against women and on the empowerment of civil society for the protection and promotion of human rights, rule of law, gender equality and fundamental freedoms in Equatorial Guinea.

5. Multilateral context: Equatorial Guinea is party to some key international human rights treaties. It is not a party to the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, or to the Statute establishing the International Criminal Court. It has not ratified the Protocol on the Establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights nor the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.
Equatorial Guinea's last UPR was in May 2019, when it accepted 204 out of 221 recommendations, including: the ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture; the adoption of all the necessary measures to eradicate the commission of acts of torture and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice; the establishment of an independent national human rights institution and the adoption of measures to enable NGOs and human rights defenders to work safely and independently. Equatorial Guinea's priorities on human rights in UN fora did not match the EU's.

State of Eritrea

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Eritrea's human rights situation remains concerning. International organizations, including the United Nations and human rights NGOs, have repeatedly called on Eritrea to improve its human rights record, notably about conscription, freedom of expression and press, respect of Habeas Corpus and rule of law. Eritrea has ratified very few international texts and conventions relating to human rights.

The sanctions imposed by the EU Council in March 2021 under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime were renewed in December 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Thirteen EU projects are dedicated to the human rights issues: two projects in support of children (health sector) and one for women empowerment. The remaining ten are in support of people with disabilities (hard of hearing, visually and intellectually impaired). Three projects target the social protection sector, with special focus on vulnerable categories (hard of hearing, visually and mentally impaired); one contribution agreement with UNICEF addresses Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Under Age Marriage (UAM).
Internet connection for the wider public is practically non-existent. It is practically impossible to organise any online event or devise and implement a social media communication policy on human rights issues.

3.EU bilateral political engagement: There is no formal political dialogue between Eritrea and EU on human rights due to the authorities' unwillingness to discuss them. Some exchanges on human rights issues take place at the UNHRC in Geneva.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU provides support to CSOs through grants under thematic budget lines CSO/LA, EIDHR and Global DESIRA Initiative. In 2023, the EU Delegation managed 16 projects (grants) for a total value of around EUR 8 million; 15 grants are funded through two thematic budget lines (CSO/LA and EIDHR) and one under the Global DESIRA initiative.
The EU signed in 2023 six contracts: under the thematic budget line CSO, five grants for a total value of EUR 2,7 million, and under the thematic budget line HR&D, one contribution agreement with UNICEF for a total value of EUR 550 000.

5. Multilateral context: In May 2023, a report from the UN Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Eritrea was released and submitted to the 53rd session of the UN Human Rights Council. In parallel, the UN Human Rights Council extended the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Eritrea for a further period of one year. Eritrean authorities expressed their total disagreement with the report.
In December 2023, an annual report from Human Rights Watch on the situation of human rights in Eritrea was released. The main conclusions of this report are that Eritrea continue to supress basic rights, including to freedom of opinion, religion and expression, with heightened restrictions in the context of forced mass conscription.

A Universal Periodic Review process has just been completed, covered the period from 2019 to 2023, with a discussion in Geneva held early May 2024. Despite some progress on economic, social and cultural rights as well as the rights of women and girls, Eritrea's human rights situation remains concerning in the political and civil areas.

Kingdom of Eswatini

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The political and security situation in the Kingdom of Eswatini remained volatile, in the context of a polarised society. On 21 January 2023, the leader of the opposition and pro-democracy umbrella organization Multi-Stakeholder Forum (MSF), human rights lawyer Thulani Maseko, was shot dead at home. International partners' statements ensued (EU, US, UNHCHR followed by UNSG and the group of UN Special Procedures). SADC Organ Troika condemned Maseko's assassination in its

communiqué of 31 January and 'urged the Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini to conduct a swift, transparent and comprehensive investigation into the killing of Mr Maseko'. To date, the investigation did not bring concrete results.
Throughout 2023, more than 20 activists whom the authorities allege to have been behind killings between 2021 and 2023, were arrested. In 2023, gender-based violence (GBV) escalated to pandemic levels, which led to civil society demanding GBV to be declared a national emergency. On 1 June, the two former pro-democracy Members of Parliament Mduduzi Bacede Mabuza and Mthandeni Dube were convicted on murder, terrorism and sedition charges. At the time of writing, they are still awaiting the sentencing in prison, where they have been held since July 2021. In August, the registration of a NGO representing sexual minorities was denied by the Minister of Commerce, Industry and Trade.

Following the peaceful national elections in September 2023, the King called the traditional people's parliament (the Sibaya) in late October to deliberate on national issues. The citizens were guided to discuss key topics of national interest, including the economy, education, health, jobs and the political dispensation, while the King invited pre-selected candidates for ministerial posts to present their pitches and take questions from the audience. These discussions led on 4 November to the appointment by the King of a new Prime Minister, to lead Cabinet until 2028. For the government, this forum accounted for the long-awaited national dialogue, which regional and international actors had been calling for since the unrest mid-2021. The opposition considers that the Sibaya is not an open and free dialogue. The freedom of association continues to be severely restricted. While political parties cannot register, trade unions and their leaders contend that authorities harass them. On the other hand, as a result of the elections, the representation of women in Parliament rose to 29%, close to the constitutional threshold of 30%. The Commission for Human Rights and Public Administration, a constitutionally mandated body, remains severely understaffed, underfinanced and thus unable to effectively uphold human rights.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Throughout 2023, the EU action continued to focus on advocacy towards a comprehensive and inclusive national dialogue as a matter of urgency and priority. The EU called for the opening of the political space, full respect of human rights, fundamental freedoms and rule of law (including fair trial and due process for the two MPs). The EU also highlighted the need to hold all perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses accountable.
The EU actively supported the SADC facilitation role and engaged with SADC in the spirit of 'African solutions to African problems'. The Extraordinary SADC Summit of January 2023 urged the Government of Eswatini to initiate the process of a national dialogue. King Mswati III expressed critical views on a SADC Troika report during the August 2023 SADC Ordinary Summit, as he considered that the report did not take into consideration that Eswatini had returned to normalcy since the 2021 violent unrest. The King also announced that Eswatini would not welcome the visit of the SADC Panel of Elders to the country.

Throughout the year, the EU Delegation continued to observe the trial of the two MPs. In the context of the general elections in September, the EU Delegation organised a DiploWatch with the participation of EU Member States (Belgium, Finland, Italy, Portugal) and Canada. The EU DiploWatch witnessed the election process in 30 polling stations, 19 constituencies in all the four regions of the country, including some highly contested ones with pro-change candidates. The EU Delegation attended the launch of pre-election and post-election briefings and

preliminary reports by the SADC Election Observation Mission (SEOM), African Union Election Observation Mission, Electoral Commissions Forum – SADC and the Commonwealth.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: On 8 June 2023, the EU-Kingdom of Eswatini Political Dialogue took place. It addressed a wide range of issues among which political and legislative matters, human rights including freedom of association and expression, access to information, the enforcement of legislation to curb gender-based violence, the registration of a sexual and gender minorities' representative NGO, the rule of law and judicial matters.
Throughout the year, the EU continued to engage with King Mswati III, the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Cabinet ministers, the Parliament, a wide range of national stakeholders including human rights and faith-based organisations, and the media.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU pursued the implementation of projects aimed at raising awareness and advocating for the protection and promotion of democracy, human rights, rule of law, gender equality and minorities' rights. The 'Civil Society Platform for Inclusiveness' project implemented in collaboration with the Coordination Assembly of NGOs (CANGO) supported CSOs and different communities with training on human rights and democratic principles and further facilitated the development of a collective platform to promote human rights. Through the Project, CANGO was also supported to conduct an observation of the parliamentary elections. Two other projects implemented by UNICEF aimed at improving inclusion and promote human rights: the first focused on mitigating the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic Amongst Girls, Women and Other Vulnerable Groups, the seconf on supporting the Human Rights of Disabled Youths through increasing access to inclusive education. Tailored training activities were realized to empower civil society organisations. New interventions were elaborated in the framework of the Annual Action Plan as well as thematic budget lines to enhance human rights and support vulnerable groups.

5. Multilateral context: Eswatini has not ratified a number of international treaties, including the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture, the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the crime of Genocide and the Rome Statute. Despite a de facto moratorium on executions since 1983, Eswatini has not formally abolished the death penalty. Same-sex relations for men are still illegal, despite the law not being applied. Throughout 2023, the EU and its Member States continued to be supportive of the UN agencies, UNHCHR, UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP.

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: 2023 has seen a deterioration in the human rights situation in Ethiopia, mainly due to the conflict in Oromia and Amhara regions, and due to a shrinking democratic space.
Throughout 2023, but with varying intensity, government and Regional Security Forces clashed with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and other armed groups claiming their names. The UN has reported that the violence in the area has led to a drastic increase in internal displacement and the destruction of infrastructure. In Amhara region, fighting intensified in August and September between Amhara armed groups (militia and Fanos) and government

forces. This resulted in hundreds killed and injured, damage to civilian property and infrastructure, including hospitals. A six-month State of Emergency (SoE) for the region was declared by the House of People's Representatives on 4 August 2023 and extended since then. This has resulted in the reports of mass arrests in the Amhara region as well as in the capital Addis Ababa.

Civic space continued to erode in the country, with the federal government tightly controlling the environment for reporting on critical issues. Authorities have harassed and detained critical voices, forcing journalists, opposition members, and civil society activists into silence or exile. Currently, eight journalists are imprisoned (source: Committee to Protect Journalists) as well as five politicians. The World Press Freedom Index ranked Ethiopia in the 130th positon (out of 180 countries) in terms of freedom of speech, losing 16 positions in a year.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU and its Member States supported the following key strategic priorities: (i) Protection of vulnerable groups and their rights; (ii) Promotion of human rights in the context of migration; (iii) Strengthening the capacity of state institutions working with human rights and electoral activities; (iv) Supporting civil society organisations (CSOs), local and non-state human rights actors; (v) Promoting international legal frameworks and respect of international human rights standards; (vi) Strengthening the role of media; (vii) Committing to more joint programmes.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU adopted Council Conclusions (CC) on Ethiopia in April 2023. The CC re-emphasised the call for accountability and transitional justice for human rights violations during the conflict in northern Ethiopia, also as central component in the process of normalising EU relations with Ethiopia. The EU has called during the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) to live up to its commitment to bring forward a solid accountability and transitional justice policy framework. Independent, transparent and impartial investigations into all allegations of violations and abuses of international human rights law, and violations of international humanitarian law and international refugee law, committed by all parties, are essential.
Key high levels visits to Ethiopia in 2023 were: DG ECHO acting Director General Michael Köhler in January; EP Special Committee on COVID-19 pandemic in February; EU Council President Charles Michel in February; EEAS DSG Enrique Mora in March; COAFR Directors in April; PSC Chair Ambassador Delphine Pronk in September; EU Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen in October; EEAS MD Africa Ambassador Rita Laranjinha in November; EP Sub-Committee on Human Rights in December.

4. EU financial engagement: In October 2023, EU Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen launched the EU's Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) with Ethiopia for the period 2024-2027, structured around three areas: Green Deal (EUR 260 million), Human Development (EUR 228 million), Governance and Peacebuilding (EUR 156 million).
The EU has continued implementing its 'EU democratic package', which covers the full electoral cycle and is composed by several interventions working with a variety of actors. Implementation started in 2019 and has been extended until March 2024. The total EU contribution amounts to EUR 29.73 million.

The EU supports the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) with two programmes worth EUR 3.5 million. Assistance is focused on; i) supporting this body in gaining full independence as well as becoming an effective organisation holding enough expertise to strategically lift its

mandated tasks, and ii) supporting the EHRC in enhancing its capacity to provide oversight, redress for victims of human rights violations of users of the criminal justice system, and to hold justice institutions to account. It also aims at increasing the coordination of the provision of legal aid in criminal cases by NGOs, university-based law clinics, and other legal aid service providers.

5. Multilateral context: Concerning the numerous serious human rights violations witnessed on the ground and based on the outcomes of the joint Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights /Ethiopian Human Rights Commission report of (3) November 2021, in (17) December 2021, at the request of the EU, the Human Rights Council adopted in Geneva a resolution establishing an international commission of human rights experts (ICHREE) to conduct an investigation into allegations of violations and abuses committed in Ethiopia.
The ICHREE issued its final report in September 2023, in which it identified grave and systematic violations of international law and crimes committed in Tigray, as well as Amhara, Afar and Oromia regions. Violations include mass killings, rape, starvation, forced displacement and arbitrary detention.

During the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in October 2023, the EU expressed its concern about the findings of the ICHREE in Ethiopia, took note of the Government's strong commitment to bring forward a solid Transitional Justice Policy Framework and stressed its expectation that the Government would fulfil that commitment and ensure that the future policy would meet regional and international human rights standards.

There were no public discussions on Ethiopia at the UN Security Council in 2023.

Gabonese Republic

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The overall human rights and democracy situation in Gabon, where a coup d'état took place at the end of August 2023, remained one of concern. Freedom of association and assembly were de facto very limited. The country's Communication Code includes restrictions that hinder the ability of journalists to work independently. It prohibits any person residing outside the country to manage media published in Gabon. Newspapers linked to the opposition were nevertheless able to publish on any subject of their choice, including criticism of the former government and President. Ill-treatment, poor food and health conditions in prisons remained a challenge. The phenomenon of ritual crimes (abduction and murder of children and women) continued. Legislation has been in place since September 2021 to protect women against all forms of violence and discrimination and to advance gender equality. Women still represent 90% of victims of sexual violence and 83% victims of economic violence. Only few services provide medical, psychological and judicial care for victims such as the Centre for Victims of Violence. Despite legal provisions on quotas, women continued to be under-represented in the public and private sector. The coup d'état was for the most part not accompanied by large-scale violence. The transition regime announced major constitutional, election and penal code reforms, a new attention to human rights and democratic concerns (including elections) and

a fight against systemic corruption. Some political prisoners were released. Gabon hosted approximately 300 refugees and asylum seekers.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU focused on: (1) democracy and governance; (2) fight against corruption; (3) harsh prison conditions and lengthy pre-trial detention; (4) torture and forced disappearances; (5) ritual crimes; (6) women and children rights. These priorities went hand-in-hand with action aimed at strengthening civil society, support to credible, inclusive and transparent elections, freedom of expression and association and the enjoyment of all political rights.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: There was no political dialogue in 2023 but exchanges on human rights issues with the authorities and stakeholders were regular. The EU condemned the military coup and called for respect for the principles of the rule of law, constitutional order and democracy in resolving the challenges Gabon is facing. It expressed concern about the organisation and conduct of the electoral process that preceded the military coup. The EU carried out formal demarches on human rights and democracy issues to request support for its initiatives in UN fora.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU's engagement for new actions for combatting all forms of gender-based violence against women and girls, including the improvement of care for victims, and the protection of children amounted to EUR 1.050 million. These projects support civil society organizations and will be launched in early 2024.

5. Multilateral context: Gabon is party to almost all key human rights treaties. It has not yet ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Gabon abolished the death penalty in 2007. The last Universal Periodic Review took place in January 2023. It concluded that many challenges remain in terms of political and civic space, in particular related to combatting child marriage, women rights, freedom of expression (online and offline) and independence of journalists, and detention. Gabon supported 230 out of 259 recommendations. The country's stance on human rights issues is usually reflected through its regional groups, both on country and thematic resolutions. These did not always match the EU's priorities.

The Republic of The Gambia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The track record in upholding human rights principles as well as democratic reforms in The Gambia for 2023 offers in general a positive picture in a regional troubled context facing anti-democratic trends. With regard to the ambitious transitional justice reform underpinning a promising national reconciliation process, 2023 showed encouraging signs with adoption of two instrumental bills in November on Victims Reparations and Ban from Public Office. In addition, local elections in April-May 2023 were hold peacefully and democratically, and completed a full electoral cycle since President Barrow re-election in December 2021. The reform of the Constitution (inherited from Jammeh dictatorship) is tabled to be submitted at National Assembly in 2024 before moving to the next step: final adoption by referendum. On 21 December, the National Assembly passed an Anti-Corruption Bill, which represents a positive step for improving good governance and fight against corruption.

However, on other aspects The Gambia presents a more mixed picture: first, the key Security Sector Reform underpinning the democratic consolidation process and closely linked with constitutional and transitional justice reforms, proves to advance at a very slow pace. Secondly, if media freedom overall largely prevails with the Gambia ranking 46th in latest Reporter Sans Frontière ranking (out 180 countries) and 5th in Africa, a number of statements and actions to restrict media freedom cast a more concerning shadow on the situation.

At last, in 2023 a bill seeking to repeal the law (2015) banning FGM was tabled at the National Assembly (NA). A first reading took place on 4 March 2024 and on 18 March the bill was moved to the next parliamentary stage (submission to NA Committee for scrutiny) before a vote in plenary. If the bill would be adopted, it would deprive young women from existing legal protection, which would represent a substantial setback for the status of women in the country.

2. EU action - key focus areas:

- Protecting and empowering individuals: especially young people and women.
- Building Resilient, Inclusive and democratic societies: through a significant support to the three key reforms underpinning democratic consolidation since 2017 (Constitutional, Transitional Justice and Security Sector reforms).
- Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy: close cooperation between The Gambia and the EU in international in support of a rules-based international order

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU and The Gambia held a Political Dialogue on 10 January 2023. The EU and The Gambia discussed developments in the area of consolidation of Democracy, with the three key reforms: Constitutional, Transitional Justice / Rule of Law and Security Sector. The EU and The Gambia highlighted their commitment to further strengthen their political partnership and continue joint efforts towards the full implementation of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and promotion of the rules based international order and effective multilateralism with the UN at its core.

4. EU financial engagement:

- The EU-UNDP GREAT initiative (NDICI, EUR 9 million) leads these efforts, focusing on equitable justice systems, healing and reconciliation post-conflict, and enhancing local governance.
- The EU CODE project (Human rights & Democracy funds, EUR 1.5 million) supports key democratic institutions, including the National Assembly, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the Gambia Press Union, reinforcing legislative functions, human rights protection, and press freedom.
- Security Sector Reform (SSR) projects (NDICI, EUR 6 million), in collaboration with GIZ and DCAF, are advancing into their second phase. These projects concentrate on civilian oversight of security institutions, combating sexual and gender-based violence, and establishing model police stations both in the urban and rural areas. Tackling SSR is part of the transitional justice efforts.

- EU-UNDP Insider Mediation (FPI regional) project also plays a vital role in conflict resolution, promoting peace and stability by empowering national mediators.

5. Multilateral context: Under UPR mechanism, several countries (including African countries) recommend to intensify the application of the 2015 and 2016 laws that criminalize child marriage and female genital mutilation. Also under UPR mechanism, The Gambia should take action on abolishing the death penalty, in line with its stated intentions and the UPR 2019 recommendations to that effect. In fact, despite the establishment of an official moratorium on executions, and the country's accession to the Second Optional Protocol to the ICCPR aiming at the abolition of the death penalty, courts continued to hand down death sentences. Prison and detention conditions in The Gambia can still be inhuman and degrading.
Close cooperation between The Gambia and the EU in international in support of a rules-based international order and effective multilateralism with the UN at its core. The Gambia is member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) until October 2024 and proved to be very active.

Republic of Ghana

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Amidst an increasing volatile region, Ghana remains a fairly stable and secure democracy. The country generally protects human rights by law and in practice, and took significant steps in 2023 towards the abolishment of the death penalty. Ghana demonstrates a strong record in upholding civic, political and other human rights. However, challenges remain about the monetization of politics, the protection of vulnerable communities, and the gradual closing of freedom of speech and association. The 2023 Freedom in the World Index classifies Ghana as a 'Free' country, with a global freedom score of 80/100. While encouraging, this figure obfuscates the increasingly restricted freedom of assembly. Despite this shrinking space, CSOs remain active and vocal in Ghana. By continental standards, Ghana has some of the lowest female political representation, only 4.1% of the elected officials were women in the December 2023 local assembly elections. LGBTI persons continue to face discrimination, physical attacks and harassment. On 28 February 2024, Ghana's Parliament passed the Human Sexual Rights and Family Values Act, a private member's bill aimed at proscribing LGBTI activities, as well as the promotion thereof. Debated since August 2021, the Bill still requires the presidential assent. The constitutionality of the bill has been challenged since 7 March, and is currently being scrutinised by the Supreme Court. The continued pressure on freedom of assembly, the poor representation of women in politics, and pending legislation that would criminalise sexual and gender minorities, risk jeopardising Ghana's positive image on human rights. Ahead of the 2024 general elections, despite the solid track record of the Electoral Commission, its credibility, convening power and general performance of the Election Commission will be critical.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In line with the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 and the Country Strategy on Human Rights and Democracy 2021-2024, the six priority sectors of the EU are:

- Children's rights: Child labour and trafficking is still pervasive in Ghana, in particular in the fisheries, mining and cocoa sectors. To address some of these issues and as a result

of the Human Rights and Democracy (HRD) call for proposal of May 2023, the EU selected an action seeking to address child labour in the fishing and cocoa production areas in the Oti and Volta Regions.

- Non-discrimination, including on the basis of sexual orientation and disability: Despite general respect for democratic freedoms and human rights in Ghana, certain social groups, including LGBTI, persons with disabilities, minorities and refugees remain inadequately protected and respected. In 2023, there was a notable increase in anti-LGBTI statements by senior officials and religious or community leaders. Individuals with disabilities continue to encounter significant barriers in accessing essential services such as education, healthcare, employment, and social support on an equal basis. Members of the Fulbe community have long been denied legal rights, such as the right to citizenship or right to vote. The handling of refugees from Burkina Faso also presents a rising challenge.

- Gender equality and women's rights: Ghana continues to suffer from low representation of women in governance and decision-making and persisting violence against women and girls. Women represent 14.5% of the total number of Parliamentary seats (275) in Ghana, standing below the 30% UN-SDG minimum target.

- Freedom of expression: Freedom of expression, including for the press, and other media. In general, the freedom of expression, including for the press and other media is respected, although the number of abuses is rising. Despite this shrinking space, CSOs remains active and vocal in Ghana. The prospect of a new NGO bill is causing concern as it may create new registration requirements and enforcement mechanisms. The EU engages in regular dialogues with CSOs.

- An efficient and accessible justice system: On 25 July, Ghana's Parliament passed an amendment to the Armed Forces Act, 1962 (Act 105), substituting the penalty of life imprisonment for the death penalty for ordinary crimes. Both the Armed Forces (Amendment) Bill and the Criminal Offenses (Amendment) Bill, when assented by the President, would have to apply together to formalize the death penalty removal. President Akufo-Addo withheld his assent on the Ghana Armed Forces Amendment Bill, but committed to reintroducing the Bill in 2024. This step would take Ghana closer to becoming an abolitionist state. Ghana had not carried out an execution since 1993. However, on 24 January 2024, the High Court of Accra sentenced six Ghanaians to death for high treason for their involvement in an alleged plot to overthrow the government in 2021.

- Institutional reform: The 2020 EU Election Observation issued 18 recommendations including a mix of proposals for important legislative and regulatory change as well as a series of technical recommendations targeted at the Electoral Commission's management of the process. The 2023 Election Follow-up mission noted very limited progress in addressing these recommendations.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Ghana is a preferential partner for the EU which partnership has deepened in recent years as illustrated by the visit of HRVP Borrell in October 2023. In December 2023, Ghana also hosted the United Nations Peacekeeping Ministerial that counted with the participation of high ranking EU official.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU has financial engagements in each of the areas of EU action (see above).

5. Multilateral context: Ghana's priorities at the multilateral level tend to align with the EU, particularly in the field of democratic governance, peace and security. Ghana has ratified 13 of the 18 key international human rights treaties. In 2022 and 2023, as non-permanent member of the UNSC, Ghana has been long advocating for UNSC reforms and played a leading role for the adoption, on 22 December, of the UN resolution on assessed contributions for African led peace support operations. In 2024, Ghana will trade its role as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for a seat at the UN Human Rights Council where it has been elected for three years.
The UN Universal Periodic Review for Ghana took place on 24 January 2023, with the report issued on 24 March 2023. The primary recommendations by the participating states focused, i.a., on:

- Ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography;
- The abolishment of the death penalty through the signature and ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and
- Strengthening measures to eradicate gender-based violence, including by fully implementing the 2007 Domestic Violence Act.

Republic of Guinea

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: After more than two years in power, the transitional authorities maintained control over civic space, in particular by restricting access to the internet and social networks in mid-November 2023, as well as to the country's main private radio stations. This tightening of control came after the four main protagonists in the 28 September trial escaped from Conakry central prison on 4 November 2023. Despite these events, the 28 September trial continued and its holding in 2023 was hailed by observers as a significant step forward in the fight against impunity in the country.
The lack of dialogue between the main political formations within the *Forces Vives de Guinée* and the transitional authorities continues to cause recurrent tensions. In 2023, incidents with the security forces, mainly in Conakry, resulted in the loss of around thirty lives. The ban on protests decreed in May 2022 is still in force. As regards the fight against corruption, results remain insufficient given the endemic nature of the phenomenon.

The implementation of the timetable agreed with ECOWAS has not seen any significant progress in 2023. The President of the Transition is committed to holding a constitutional referendum in 2024, and publication of the preliminary draft constitution is expected in the first half of the year. The consequences of the explosion of the country's main fuel depot in December 2023 are likely to weigh heavily on the country's social and economic situation.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Guinea remains a country marked by several Human rights violations, ranging from violations of political rights to children's rights. Women's positon in

Guinean society remains a cause of concern. The level of representation and inclusion of women in the transitional institutions is very low. None of the 33 prefects and 304 sub-prefect appointed since the beginning of the transition is a women. Regarding gender-based violence, rapes, which have mainly under-aged girls as victims, and female genital mutilation remain a terrible wound, and the efforts to combat these crimes are largely insufficient despite some legislative progress. Children are expose to the risk of trafficking, especially girls due to the "*confiage*" practise. Women and children trafficking is often linked to exploitation and sexual violence. In general, and despite a relative protective legislation, its implementation is unsatisfactory and Guinea still does not have a strategy to promote Human rights despite political commitments to this end.

With regard to the main indicators for 2023:

- Guinea is ranked 118th out of 142 states analysed by the Rule of Law Index. It ranks 88th out of 142 countries surveyed in terms of fundamental rights, and 128th and 125th respectively for civil and criminal justice;
- Guinea is ranked 85th out of 180 countries in the world press freedom index published by RSF in 2023, and remains a country in which journalists are subject to recurrent threats. The country has fallen 26 places since 2021.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU maintains a continuous dialogue with the Guineans authorities and all the socio-political players, in particular civil society.

4. EU financial engagement : Trial of the 28 September 2009 massacre – This trial is major achievement for human rights in Guinea. After 13 years of waiting, the trial aimed at bringing justice to the hundreds of people killed and/or disappeared, as well as the 150 women and girls raped, began in September 2022. Throughout 2023, the EU provided legal, psychological and security support for the survivors and families of the victims. As has been the case for the last ten years, the EU's support for the victims will continue throughout the duration of the trial through various ongoing and future projects.

A structured dialogue framework (Cadre de dialogue structuré) for civil society has been taken place since 30 September 2022. The initial phase of EU's support to this dialogue ended in February 2023. 25 members and 25 alternates, in equal numbers of men and women, with a good representation of young people and people living with disabilities, attended the training courses and dialogue sessions held every week. In total, 18 topics and themes linked to the transition and electoral process were debated, resulting in 50 recommendations elaborated by the members of the structured dialogue framework. On 5 April 2023, these recommendations were presented to the representatives of the transition authorities (Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation, National Transition Council, Supreme Court, High Authority for Communications) and the Facilitators of the Inter-Guinean Dialogue Framework, invited by the EU Delegation to a feedback workshop.

Tackling gender-based violence (GBV) – The EU has implemented actions aimed at eliminating violence against women and girls, in particular awareness-raising activities in favour of women's and girls' rights. Five women's centres in the main regions of Guinea provided training for social and criminal justice actors on how to deal with victims of GBV as part of a

project funded by the EU and implemented by a local NGO, which came to an end in 2023. A call for proposals was launched in 2023, with the specific aim of combating impunity for the perpetrators of GBV in order to promote victims' access to justice and the conviction of the perpetrators of such violence, but also to encourage a change in behaviour on the part of the authorities and the general public.

Justice and accountability initiatives – To address the challenges caused by the lack of access to justice, essentially due to the insufficient financial funds and the lack of trust in the institutions, the EU funded two projects to build the capacity of local justice stakeholders and provide free legal aid services. As part of these projects, a team of 10 legal experts and 2 pools of lawyers handled more than 3,000 criminal and correctional cases. 6.547 people benefited from legal support through these "Legal Clinics". More than 240 local justice professionals, human rights advocates, civil society organisations and journalists were also trained in different topics related to human rights. The budget for these projects is around EUR 2 million.

Republic of Guinea-Bissau

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Guinea-Bissau is a fragile West African country where most people live with less than two euros per day and face many challenges impeding the improvement of their living conditions as well as the full enjoyment of their human rights. The country is marred by longstanding political instability, with governance and security issues. However, legislative elections on 4 June 2023 were remarkably peaceful and reasonably fair, to the point that the victory went to the coalition opposed to the PR, which was then able to form a Government in August. Yet, some frictions emerged soon in the 'cohabitation' between a PR and a PM of two opposed political sides, which on 1 December 2023 precipitated on open clashes (involving several casualties) between a paramilitary group linked to the coalition and the regular armed forces loyal to the PR. The latter denounced then an 'attempted coup' and dissolved the Parliament, without fixing yet a date for the new legislative elections. A new Government was sworn in on 21 December. In the last two years, several opponents to the President have been arrested, or have left the country and face legal prosecution should they return. Freedom of the media remains an issue. Radio stations and other media that are critical of the regime may be closed or aggressed. Other significant human rights issues include cases of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; significant acts of corruption; lack of investigation of and accountability for crimes of violence against women and girls; trafficking in persons; and the worst forms of child labour. Members of the security forces are reported to have committed some abuses – the Government has mechanisms to investigate and punish them, but impunity remains a serious problem.

2. EU action - key focus areas:

- **Protecting and empowering individuals**. Civil Society is very active in Guinea-Bissau but suffers from a lack of resources and capacity, in spite of the support of the International Community, including the European Union. The empowerment of women remains a key challenge. The human rights of persons with disabilities and children should also be enhanced, alongside those of LGBTI people. The EU continues

to support projects to build the capacity of civil society to combat and prevent child and forced marriage and gender-based violence, with a holistic approach including psychological, legal, health, economic and social empowerment support. Other projects support the right to health and WHO objectives of universal health coverage and the improvement of health professional's performance, the rights of persons with disabilities and access to justice.

- **Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies**. The six-point road map entitled 'Agreement on the Resolution of the Political Crisis in Guinea-Bissau', if correctly implemented following the Conakry Agreement, should pave the way to the reforms of the justice system, the security sector and the constitution, and therefore contribute to building a resilient, inclusive and democratic Bissau Guinean society. Several projects aim at consolidating economic governance and public finance management systems, as well as the rule of law in Portuguese speaking countries.

- **Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy**. Guinea-Bissau should establish an independent human rights commission, which could join the NHRI network. Similarly, efforts to be part of Inter-Parliamentary networks should be encouraged. Regarding Freedom of the Media, an EIDHR project supported the protection and promotion of the human rights of journalists and professionals of social communication. Another pilot EIDHR project aims to create adapted and formal programmes in the area of citizenship and human rights education. Finally, an EDF project aimed at 'Strengthening the resilience of local communities in defence of human rights and consolidation of the rule of law' involves the Human Rights League, as well as relevant actors from civil society and security forces.

- **New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges**. The main challenge is digital penetration that remains low and commensurate to the low level of development in Guinea-Bissau.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: There is no formal political dialogue between the EU and Guinea-Bissau since 2015, and no human rights dialogue. Human rights issues are raised on an *ad hoc* basis. Recently, Bissau-Guinean authorities have flagged their desire to restart the political dialogue.

4. EU financial engagement: AAP 2023 for Guinea-Bissau, in line with the MIP 2021-2027, allocates EUR 19 million for Human Rights, Democracy and Good Governance projects, divided into EUR 14 million for the action *Strengthening the security and justice sectors to ensure quality service delivery in Guinea-Bissau* and EUR 5 million for the action *Transparent and accountable economic governance*.

5. Multilateral context: Guinea-Bissau is a party to the eight core international human rights instruments, is expected to ratify a number of Optional Protocols and has been asked to establish an independent National Human Rights Commission. The last UN Universal Periodic Review took place in January 2020, and Guinea-Bissau agreed to examine 197 recommendations. The next UPR will take place in 2024.

Republic of Kenya

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Kenya is widely perceived as a peaceful and functional democracy, characterised by relatively strong and stable institutions. In 2023, the country has continued to maintain human rights and democratic standards as enshrined in its 2010 Constitution. Free expression and civil liberties are broadly respected, albeit with some restrictions. Kenya's media is free, even if editorial lines may be influenced by political interests. The higher echelons of the judiciary are independent and function to a high standard. In spite of a comparatively positive picture, Kenya continues to face a series of challenges. On constitutional matters, the weakening of independent institutions and oversight bodies has been an issue, with strained relations between parts of the executive and the judiciary and increased control over the legislative and parastatal companies by government. Over the year, there were also other signs that respect for the 2010 Constitution is eroding, such as the strong negative public reaction to the Supreme Court Decision of February 2023 on the right of LGBTI organisations to register and the constitutional amendments proposals of the National Dialogue Report of November 2023.
Indigenous peoples land rights have been challenged, with the eviction of the Ogiek community from the Mau forest in violation of an international court ruling. Human rights organisations continued to trace extra-judicial killings and disappearances. Corruption and the perception of a culture of impunity at all levels of government have also remained a major problem. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2023 ranked Kenya 126/180.

The results of the August 2022 elections continued to be disputed in 2023, with the opposition staging large protests between March and July against the background of rising social tensions due to the worsening economic situation. Kenya's rank in gender equality profile is down from 57/146 in 2022 to 77th in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index. In 2023, Kenya started to draft a new Gender Equality Strategy, due to be published in 2024. Gender-based violence, including FGM and teenage pregnancies, and harassment against women remains highly prevalent. Kenya has an active civil society but NGOs have reported growing obstacles in recent years.

Harassment of activists and repeated Government attempts to deregister organisations for alleged financial violations have constrained civic space. National legislation criminalises same-sex sexual relations and abuse of the rights of LGBTI people is widespread. In April 2023, Member of Parliament Peter Kaluma tabled a Private Bill on Anti-Homosexuality and Family Protection, which however has not advanced in the legislative process to date. Kenya currently hosts over 700,000 refugees and asylum seekers. While the Government has continued to develop a new integrated approach to hosting refugees and to work on the legal framework of the asylum system, it is yet to finalise the implementing regulations

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, the EU has continued a positive trend of implementing the priorities set in the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024) and focused its human rights engagement with Kenya on six key thematic areas: democratic governance and elections; rule of law; freedom of speech and of the media; rights of the persons in vulnerable situations; human rights defenders and civil society; and rights in response to climate change as well as business and human rights.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Throughout the year, the EU continued to engage actively with the government, in particular through the EU-Kenya Strategic Dialogue. The visit of President Ruto to Brussels in March 2023 and his keynote address to the European Parliament in November were new opportunities for political engagement at the highest level, following a Senior Official Meeting held on 22 February during the visit of former EEAS Deputy Secretary Helena König to Nairobi, which re-confirmed the interest of Kenya to partner with the EU. In October, the EU and Kenya held their first joint sectoral consultations dedicated to security and defence matters. On 18 December, the EU and Kenya signed an Economic Partnership Agreement, with ambitious sustainability provisions. Many high-level bilateral meetings took place throughout the year between Kenyan government officials and EU Commissioners, as well as EU Heads of States and Ministers.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU continued to implement the Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027 for Kenya in which 'Leaving no one Behind' and 'Democratic and Economic Governance' feature as priority areas. In March, implementation of the second phase of the Programme for Legal Empowerment and Aid Delivery (PLEAD) started in Kenya, the largest access to justice programme in Sub Saharan Africa. With a EUR 35 million budget, this new phase has a stronger focus on the fight against corruption, digitalisation and access to justice for sexual and gender-based violence victims and children. On freedom of speech and media, the EU awarded two grants on digital democracy in December 2023 with a total budget of EUR 2.6 million to promote safe and responsible use of online media tools and to prevent hate speech and disinformation, and a grant was awarded to advance electoral reforms. In 2023, the EU Delegation chaired the Refugee Donor Group and finalised new contracts totalling EUR 27 million to be implemented between 2024 and 2027. The EU also signed a new regional grant of EUR 1 million to support LGBTI organisations in their work. On the follow-up of 2022 elections, the EU supported the UNDP Deepening Democracy Basket Fund, the domestic elections observer group ELOG, and the inclusive political participation project led by Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD). The EU also closely followed the National Dialogue discussions and organised a briefing on the NADCO report upon publication. Two large actions with important features in terms of mainstreaming business and human rights continued implementation: the EUR 25 million Business Environment and Export Enhancement Programme (BEEEP) and the EUR 20 million Digital Land Governance Programme (DLGP).

5. Multilateral context: The EU Delegation delivered a number of demarches to the Government of Kenya related to human rights issues, including on the EU priorities for the UNGA 78 Third Committee and the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Regarding the Third Committee, Kenya indicated that while very supportive of the human rights agenda, most of Kenya's previous voting positions change only rarely. Kenya's position to the Human Rights Council's resolution to establish an international commission of Human Rights experts on Ethiopia was a rare example of a situation when Kenya's position had changed. Overall, Kenya is interested in ensuring that implementations of Human Rights resolutions passed by the third committee and in Geneva are adequately resourced. Ukraine-related human rights issues arose in discussion at UNEP and UN Habitat HQ in Nairobi.

Kingdom of Lesotho

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: On 29 September 2023, Lesotho held its 4th local elections in a peaceful environment. However, on 16 October, the opposition swiftly moved a no-confidence motion in parliament against the Government of Prime Minister Matekane, which triggered a joint statement by the Heads of the security forces declaring their opposition to any change of Government. The statement sparked controversy and fear of a possible coup. The Government countered the no-confidence motion in securing its majority in parliament through the enlargement of the ruling coalition to four opposition parties.
In November 2023, the Court of Appeal ruled that the tabling of the reform Bill in the form it had before the dissolution of the previous Parliament was not constitutional. Accordingly, the full parliamentary procedure will have to be re-instated, delaying the adoption of the long awaited political and electoral reforms.

Observing and respecting human rights remains critical in Lesotho. Brutality by police and other security forces and gender-based violence are significant human rights challenges that persist in the country. Additionally, a lack of good governance and weak judicial institutions hamper Lesotho's development. Politically sensitive cases in relation to the attempted Coup d'état in 2014 are still ongoing, with one foreign judge and national judges on the cases.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, the EU focused its human rights engagement with Lesotho on 2 key focus areas:
(1) Protecting and empowering individuals (the EU supported communities and especially vulnerable population, with a series of actions targeting women and girls, victims of trafficking, people with disability, and children);

(2) Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies (The EU supported the Ministry of Justice with a programme aimed at (i) increasing efficiency and quality of justice service delivery, (ii) improving access to justice for all, in particular for women, children and groups in vulnerable and marginalised situations and (iii) increasing accountability, transparency, integrity and credibility of justice and governance institutions. The EU also supported national authorities for the enhancement of social assistance and protection, especially for households with children under five).

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU in Lesotho engaged with the Government on both national and regional political issues, and maintained good relations with the Government and other political stakeholders. The annual Article 8 political dialogue was held on 17 May 2023 and allowed in-depth discussions on the National Reforms Process, on the follow up of the implementation of the recommendations of the EU Electoral Observation Mission (EU EOM) deployed in 2022, on the impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, as well as on Human rights and GBV related issues. Moreover, throughout the year, bilateral exchanges on an ad hoc basis were held with the authorities and civil society in the areas of health, social protection, justice and access to basic services (such as hygiene and water).
In November 2023, the EU updated the Country Level Implementation Plan (CLIP) of the Gender Action Plan III (2021-2025), in consultation with national authorities, Member States, International partners and CSOs. On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the EU Delegation launched an EU Governance campaign to inform the

general public about its support and on how to access justice and social protection services. As part of the campaign, a pledge wall against GBV was circulated and signed in various events.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU remained committed to support three strategic priorities: (1) The implementation of the National Reforms Process: given the stall of the reform process, UNDP, as implementing partner, was only able to carry out a limited part of the programme, namely the functional reviews of selected ministries. The EUR 2.5 million programme remains otherwise suspended until finalisation of the reform approval process.

(2) The Justice System: the EU implemented a support programme amounting to EUR 5.15 million.

(3) Better service delivery and access for the vulnerable population: the EU approved a EUR 27 million programme that will support sanitation systems and water supply to vulnerable and rural population and will contribute in improving the access of disabled children and girls to schools. The EU also renewed its EUR 6 million support to Social Protection, with the aim of enhancing the effectiveness of social assistance and improving the well-being and development of children under five.

Moreover, as regards human rights and democracy: the EU continued to provide support to national and international CSOs through the 11th European Development Fund (EDF) as well as through the thematic instruments on Civil Society, Democracy and Human Rights for a total of EUR 3.66 million. The EU prioritised CSOs working in the areas of Gender Based Violence' prevention and related to the respect of Human Rights by public officials.

5. Multilateral context: Lesotho is not a signatory to the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty. However, there has been no execution since 1995 and normally, death sentences are converted into life sentences. Lesotho is also party to major international human rights instruments even though it did not ratify some of them. In March 2023, Lesotho ratified three ILO conventions relating to labour relations, occupational safety and health, and violence and harassment at work. The country's last Universal Periodic Review session was held in 2020 and identified considerable strides made by Lesotho such as the adoption of the Anti-Trafficking Bill of 2020. The Government enacted the bill in 2021. In 2023, the Human Rights Council adopted concluding observations on Lesotho's second periodic reporting on the ICCPR. While welcoming the adoption of various instruments and legislative policy measures, the Council expressed some concerns mentioning the limited autonomy of oversight and justice bodies, human rights violations, and the lack of a National Human Rights Commission, which is expected to be established once the national reforms are adopted.

Republic of Liberia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The overall positive environment for civil and political rights continues in 2023. Liberia is a country with a functional democracy and a general acceptance of fundamental rights and rule of law. This being said, Liberia still remained a vulnerable country, particularly in terms of its economic and social conditions (low human development, high levels of poverty and inequality, poor services and infrastructure) and also in terms of its substantial institutional fragility and governance challenges.

2023 was an election year with the legislative elections and first round of the Presidential elections held on 10 October. A European Union Observation Mission with circa to 100 election observers reported from 326 polling places in rural and urban areas in all 15 counties and 63 out of 73 districts. Liberia saw its first peaceful transition of power of an incumbent President seeking re-election when George Weah conceded defeat to President-elect Joseph Boakai. This was the first fully Liberian-owned elections since the departure of UNMIL, where the National Elections Commission demonstrated its capacity to independently conduct the elections.

Women's rights remain the major outstanding human rights challenge. Liberian women and girls continue to suffer from different forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), FGM as well as child marriage and teenage pregnancies. The 2-year roadmap with recommendations to fight SGBV adopted in September 2021 is yet to be fully implemented. However, the EU-funded Spotlight Initiative greatly contributed to open the discussion on the matter and was instrumental in the total ban on the practice that was declared on 6 February 2023 by Chief Zanzan Karwor, the Chairperson of the National Council of Chiefs and Elders, in the counties of Montserrado, Grand Cape Mount, Bong and Nimba. There is a high risk of lack of practical implementation. On transitional justice, implementation of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) issued in 2009 on post-conflict reconciliation, including the establishment of a war and economic crimes court remains poor. Two Liberian war crime cases were judged in EU Member States with the acquittal of Gibril Massaquoi in Finland and the sentencing to a life term of Kunti Kamara in France for war crimes committed in Liberia. An ongoing appeal in the Finnish case saw further hearings in Liberia in 2023 while the Kunti Kamara case in France will have an appeal in early 2024. The EU-delegation has locally facilitated some aspects of both trials. Liberia has a relatively longstanding tradition of freedom of expression and press freedom without any major incidents since 2020-2021: this year, the country has increased its rating in the Reporters without Borders Press Freedom Index. Liberia has an extensive legislative framework in areas related to business and human rights, including labour rights, and the environment and there is a willingness of the outgoing Government to develop a National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (NAP).

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, the EU and member states continued implementing the priorities established in the HRDCS. Issues of good governance, accountability and transparency, as well as human rights (notably SGBV, FGM) were included in the agenda of the EU-Liberia Partnership Dialogue held on 22 June.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU acknowledged the Government's commitment to fighting SGBV, but recalled that still too many Liberian women and girls continued to be subject to high levels of violence. The EU stressed that FGM is a grave human rights violation, and expressed regret that FGM was not included in the Domestic Violence Act passed in 2019, but also confidence that it's possible to bring all actors together to end FGM in Liberia, encouraging the Government to issue an executive order while working with the Legislature to ban FGM. The EU recognised the ongoing dialogue with traditional actors, but emphasised that a law criminalising FGM is also necessary, as other countries in the region have done. Traditional leaders have made local bans in four counties during 2023. In November-December, the EUDEL and EU MS supported the 16 Days of Activism against SGBV campaign. The EU, Sweden, Ireland and Germany continued to support projects implemented by CSOs

to address SGBV, FGM, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and to strengthen CSOs' capacities to advocate for access to justice for SGBV victims.
The EU continued efforts to launch a regular political dialogue with the House of Representatives and the Senate. Additionally, the EU concluded a Contribution Agreement with UNDP to implement a programme (EUR 14 million, 2023-2026) to strengthen inclusive and accountable democracy.

The EU continues its support to the rule of law and the respect of the fundamental human rights of the most vulnerable prisoners in Liberia, as well as its support to improve living conditions in correctional facilities, to provide legal aid and representation for prolonged pre-trial detainees, and to provide actions on rehabilitation paths and awareness on detainees' rights.

Under the 'EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Liberia' adopted in 2018, EUD continued to support the organizational and advocacy capacity of Liberian CSOs. The EU also continued to support the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA), strengthening civil society's role in forestry management.

4. EU financial engagement: Liberia is one of the eight African countries chosen to be a Spotlight partner. The four-year programme is implemented by the UN, the Liberian Government, CSOs, traditional actors and the private sector, with an EU contribution of USD 17.7 million for the first 2 years. The EU, in partnership with Sweden and the UNDP, additionally donated forensic equipment to support prosecution of perpetrators of SGBV, although courts continue to reserve the right to not admit DNA evidence in rape cases even when the evidence gathering procedure has been correctly followed by the Police and medical institutions. Under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), three projects were active in 2023, focusing on i) freedom of information (FOI) and freedom of expression, and ii) addressing the human rights of detained people in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice.

5. Multilateral context: Despite challenges, the Liberian society is resting on a democratic foundation with respect for fundamental rights. Liberia has displayed shared values with the EU and other countries on multilateral issues. In particular, Liberia has supported, and in the more recent cases co-sponsored, all UN resolutions on the war in Ukraine. Notably, the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba was awarded Grand Commander of the Order of the African Star as a guest of honour during the 176th Independence Day. Liberia, and former President George Weah, have played a constructive role in support of peace, stability and democracy in the West African region.

Republic of Madagascar

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The situation in Madagascar presents a number of challenges, including extreme poverty, widespread corruption, vulnerability to climate change, increasing insecurity, mainly in rural areas, poor access to primary healthcare and education, food insecurity, and very poor detention conditions.
Presidential elections took place on 16 November 2023 in a tense environment. The incumbent, Andry Rajoelina, was re-elected in the first round. Serious obstacles to the

campaign possibilities of opposition candidates and limitations to peaceful demonstrations have been noted, as well as a disproportionate use of violence by security forces in the run-up to elections. Finally, 10 out of 13 presidential candidates called on voters to boycott the polls. Previous recommendations for adaptations to the electoral framework, including by EU Elections Missions, had not been implemented. Criticism of the election process, including by the biggest domestic observation platform 'Safidy' (supported by the EU) referred to irregularities, among other things, and civil society groups doubted the overall credibility of the elections. An EU Election Experts Mission noted flaws in the elections framework and process. Several international election observation or experts missions underlined the necessity to establish a dialogue in order to create favourable conditions for upcoming parliamentary and local elections.

Progress has been made in the field of protection of women against gender-based violence with the publication of a new decree completing the legal framework and of an operational guide (supported by the EU) for services to victims. Nevertheless, the low quality of such services remains a challenge. New national policies on gender issues are under preparation. The influence of business people and politicians, who own most media outlets, is an obstacle to impartial coverage of political events. Access to information is limited and cases of violence and intimidation against journalists have been noted, especially in the electoral context. The nutrition crisis continued with the number of food insecure persons increasing by 38% in 2023. While the situation in the 'Grand Sud' slightly improved, the situation in the 'Grand Sud-Est' deteriorated. In 2023, an increase in cases of HIV was noted. While the country still has a very low percentage of infected persons (less than 0,5%), a serious increase might happen, if the problem remains neglected. The environment for civil society activism has become more difficult amid cases of pressure and intimidation, including in the area of conflicts around land, but also in the electoral context. Efforts to address the problem of overcrowded prisons, prison conditions and a high proportion of persons in pre-trial detention have been undertaken. A programme was launched by the Ministry of Justice (financed by AFD) to improve detention conditions, prison administration and social re-integration of detainees. Judges have been encouraged to choose alternative measures to pre-trial detention and to speed up trials. New or extended prison facilities are intended to mitigate overcrowding. Nevertheless, current prison conditions do not respect international standards. A persisting and significant problem is corruption, including at high level. Whistle-blowers and human rights defenders lack efficient protection and a draft law to protect them is still pending. Violence linked to criminality is increasing, especially in rural areas, leading to mob justice and cases of security forces killing suspects.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, EU action aimed at building a resilient, inclusive and democratic society via support to institutions and civil society, including in the context of the presidential elections. Concrete action was taken for example in the areas of accountability of the state, health care, and professional training with a gender component. Strengthening of civil society is another focal area. A new project has been signed in the area of children's rights. Ongoing projects are related to supporting dialogue via the media, the fight against corruption, election observation, active citizenship, and gender-based violence.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Respect for human rights is an essential element of the EU's political dialogue with Madagascar. At the fifth political dialogue meeting under the presidency of Andry Rajoelina in August 2023, the EU encouraged improvements to the

electoral framework. The EU also highlighted specific human rights issues, such as the rights of whistle-blowers, of human rights defenders and the right to information. These and other human rights issues have also been highlighted during several meetings with representatives of the Malagasy authorities and of civil society throughout the year.
The EU worked with various like-minded actors via co-ordinated or joint meetings and demarches in the area of elections, and other human rights related issues. In April, a declaration was released on the subject of disproportionate limitations to the right to peaceful assembly Four joint local statements on issues related to the Presidential election have been published between September and December. Furthermore, the EU High Representative/Vice President published a statement on 11 November calling upon all actors to refrain from violence, encouraging dialogue and underlining the importance of respect for civil liberties and a transparent and credible electoral process.

4. EU financial engagement: The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and CSO country allocations funded various projects accompanying vulnerable populations: persons with disabilities, children, women, youth. At the end of 2023, a new project focused on promoting and protecting the rights of ' children in conflict with the law' ' in five regions of Madagascar was launched. Madagascar was also included in the project 'Action against child labour', on EIDHR regional funds. Projects funded by the CSO-EIDHR continued their journey, including those supporting free and fair information, active citizenship, fight against corruption, and support to the Electoral observation by Malagasy civil society.

5. Multilateral context: Madagascar has ratified the main international instruments for the protection of human rights, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. At regional level, Madagascar is a signatory to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights as well as the African Charter on Democracy, elections and governance. Throughout 2023, the EU and its Member States continued to cooperate with and be supportive of the UN agencies represented in Madagascar.

Republic of Malawi

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights situation in Malawi throughout 2023 was relatively stable, with few highlights and emerging concerns. Malawi was overwhelmingly re-elected for a second term to the UN Human Rights Council. Despite losing some momentum, the implementation of the governance and rule of law reforms, embarked on by President Lazarus Chakwera's administration, continued to advance while Malawi was facing multiple pressing needs and acute crises. In order for the process to continue, the EU is beefing up its support to the key governance institutions that have a pivotal role to play: the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), the Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA), the Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC), and the National Assembly.
As regards economic and social rights, Malawi's economy is in dire straits, and grappling with a continuing and compounding forex, fuel, food, pharmaceuticals and fertiliser crises, partly

as a result of external shocks but also due to structural challenges. Moreover, on 9 November, in an effort to stabilise the exchange rate and rebuild depleted foreign reserves, the Reserve Bank of Malawi devaluated the Malawi Kwacha by 44%, fuelling inflation. The impact of these developments is most acute for rural families and has resulted in an increased poverty rate and fewer available resources for essential government services. At the end of the year, 40% of Malawians were deemed to be food insecure. In prisons, inmates continue to face food shortages that further worsened their degrading conditions.

The controversial Malawi's policy of re-encampment of refugees appeared amongst the most prominent human rights issue in 2023. While domestic law requires refugees and asylum seekers to remain within the official camp, the enforcement of this policy was flawed with accusations of human rights abuses. The matter is currently under investigation by Malawi's Human Rights Commission (MHRC). With respect to the situation of the estimated 134,000 persons with albinism (PWA) who are living in the country, notable progress has been achieved to reduce social stigma and to increase their integration in communities. However, Malawi still accounts for over a quarter of the reported incidents against PWA in Africa despite progressive laws and policies advocating for their rights.

The momentum towards the abolition of the death penalty continued with the de facto moratorium remaining in place. At the occasion of the World Day against Death Penalty, the Minister of Justice made a strong plea in favour of abolition. In July 2023, the Constitutional Court began hearing a case that could decriminalize same-sex relations. The case triggered swift and harsh reactions from several Churches leading nation-wide protests against the perspective of a legalisation.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU focused on:
(1) Governance and fight against corruption

In view of the 2025 elections, the EU, with UNDP and other partners, embarked on an electoral support project, which will be carried out in parallel of an initiative supporting the issuance and dissemination of the National ID card (National Registration and Identification System). Considering that the National ID card will be the sole valid mean of identification for the voter registration process, its accessibility to Malawians will be essential to uphold democratic rights all across the country. The fight against corruption continued to be a key focus area of intervention for the EU with the aim of providing capacity building to key Ministries and institutions and at improving the transparency and the efficiency of the public financial management system.

(2) Human rights and democracy

As part of its Human Rights and Democracy thematic program for 2021–2025, the EU has prioritised the safeguarding and promotion of the rights of individuals with albinism. Under the same instrument, three new actions were also implemented: 1) Support to the Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC) in relation to the widespread reports of abuses on refugees during the re-encampment enforcement; 2) Support for the improvement of living conditions and treatment of prisoners in Malawi; 3) Support for the improvement of awareness of citizens and their participation in Parliamentary proceedings.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU Delegation worked closely with Member States embassies, other like-minded partners and non-resident Member States to coordinate and share perspectives on developments related to human rights and democracy coordinating joint approaches, joint outreaches and meetings with Malawian authorities. Throughout the year, the EU continued to engage actively with Government, including through two political dialogues held on 26 January and 7 September 2023, flanked by a dense calendar of bilateral meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and all relevant line ministries. The political dialogues touched on issues of corruption, prison conditions, death penalty abolition, electoral reforms, public finance management and regional developments, among others. Moreover, in December 2023, a visit of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) took place in the country; the situation of human rights and democracy were thoroughly discussed with the Malawian interlocutors from the government and civil society.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU commenced the implementation of its EUR 17 million Malawi Democratic Governance Programme. The EU continues to support democratic governance and the rule of law through its programmes/projects focusing on access to justice, human rights for vulnerable groups (in particular people with albinism, refugees, and prisoners), public finance management and promoting the civic space in Malawi. In 2023, the EU shifted its focus in the area of protecting and promoting the rights of persons with albinism by launching a new project aimed at health care especially for people with albinism (My Rights, EUR 200 000). Other contracts working on improving prisoners' rights and detention, refugee rights and other migrants, inclusive democracy and parliamentary oversight were signed.

5. Multilateral context: In 2023, Malawi renewed its 3-year term of office on the United Nations Human Rights Council, and took every opportunity to spearhead a strong stance. In other international fora, notably at UN-level, Malawi continued to consistently align with the EU to support resolutions condemning the Russian aggression in Ukraine and on other human rights topics such as upholding the moratorium on the death penalty. Malawi's seat on the UN Human Rights Council provides renewed opportunities to work together closely on human rights-related matters. This illustrates that the partnership between the EU and Malawi remains firmly based on the shared foundations of democracy and human rights.

Republic of Mali

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The year 2023 was marked by the adoption of a new Constitution. The new text strengthens the powers of the President, condemns coups d'Etat but pardons all acts committed prior to the new text, creates new institutions (a Senate and a Court of Auditors) and reserves a place for traditional authorities. The presidential election initially scheduled for February 2024 has been postponed indefinitely for "technical" reasons. The human rights situation in Mali remains a cause for serious concern, with violations reported in the Centre and North regions, mainly attributed to armed terrorist groups, the Malian Armed Forces and the Wagner group, as well as attacks on fundamental freedoms, in particular freedom of expression and of the press. In the justice sector, a number of texts have been adopted or are in the process of being adopted, such as the revision of the Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure, the adoption of the national anti-corruption strategy and the recruitment of 100 magistrates. However, confidence in the judicial system remains low, detention conditions often fail to meet established standards, and procedures for accessing justice are poorly understood, costly

(impacted by corruption), lengthy and complex. Vulnerable groups, such as women and minors, are particularly impacted by these deficiencies. In 2023, there was also an overall reduction in the involvement of technical and financial partners and the emergence of new players. Civic space shrank in 2023, with threats and repression of dissenting voices. In particular, the fight against corruption and the law against cybercrime were used to repress online expression. The arrests of public figures for "damaging the credit of the state" are particularly noteworthy, including Adama Diarra, known as "Ben le cerveau", leader of the pro-junta movement "Yerewolo - Debout sur les remparts". In December 2023, the Citizen's Observatory for Elections and Good Governance was dissolved after claiming that Mali was ready for elections, raising questions about the continuation of the transition. The environment for human rights organisations and defenders is difficult, as demonstrated by the suspension of the activities of Amnesty International and the International Federation for Human Rights in Mali due to "pressure and attempts to infiltrate their local branches by the military junta". In May 2023, the UN published a report accusing the Malian army and foreign soldiers of executing at least 500 people in March 2022 during an anti-jihadist operation in the centre of Mali. According to the report of the High-Commissioner for Human rights, based on an investigation held by the Human rights division of the MINUSMA, these incidents could constitute “war crimes” and crimes against humanity. Shortly afterwards, MINUSMA was forced to suspend its activities after 10 years of operations, following the request for "immediate withdrawal" made by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the UN Security Council in June 2023. While the consequences of the withdrawal from MINUSMA are still difficult to evaluate, this decision seems to suggest major consequences for Mali, particularly in the field of justice and human rights, where the mission played a major role, especially in the North.

2.EU action - key focus areas/ EU bilateral political engagement: The strategy for democracy and Human rights 2021-2024 sets out 3 thematic priorities:

- Preservation of the rule of law and fight against impunity. In 2023, the EU supported the National Human Rights Commission in setting up a framework for dialogue between internal security forces and CSOs in an attempt to restore a climate of trust between ISFs and populations. In the field of justice, the EU closed its direct collaboration with the Malian State (end of the PAJM2 in January 2024) and conducts access to justice and media support interventions with international NGOs and local CSOs.
- Women’s rights. The goal is on the one hand to encourage the socio-economic development of women and on the other to strengthen the respect of women’s rights by the judicial institutions. Achieving these goals requires further dialogue with Malian institutions on gender inequalities and other discriminations, as well as EU involvement in the revision of the Family and Persons Code. As part of the NDICI mid-term review, the National Implementation Plan (CLIP) of the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) was consulted with Member States, the United Nations, civil society and the national side, which confirmed the relevance of the thematic objectives and priorities already set. After four years of implementation, the programme « Spotlight Initiative » funded by the EU came to an end. As part of its thematic programme Democracy and Human Rights, the EU supported interventions for women’s empowerment and capacity building for women’s rights organisations. At the end of the year, the EU selected new projects aiming to promote and manage sexual and reproductive health and to fight against gender-based violence. The European Delegation regularly

participates in the Technical and finance partners dialogue on Women's Empowerment, co-chaired by UNFPA and Canada.

- Children's rights. The objective is to end child labour, especially in artisanal mines, while eradicating habits in clear violation of Mali's international human right's commitments, such as female circumcision, pregnancy and early marriage (notable through the revision of article 6 of the Mali's Family and Personal code on the marriage of girls aged 16 to 18.) The EU has supported the fight against child labour and in particular its worst forms, in the Mopti region, notably through a World Vision Netherland project as well as through the regional JOFA-ACTE (Action against Child Labour) project, which aims to combat child labour, particularly at the level of gold-laying sites in the Sikasso region. Through its partners, the EU has been involved in advocacy against national authorities for better public policies and legislation against child labour. To this end, EU partners participated in the development of the new National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labour in Mali 2023-2027. The EU has continued its efforts to protect children in street situations, or migrants, through school and economic reintegration.

3.EU bilateral political engagement: Public communication on human rights is a key element of the EU's diplomatic activity in Mali: the EU's engagement with different groups in society, through digital diplomacy, is an essential way to promote both EU values and the work of civil society actors, including through social media (in particular the Twitter account and the Delegation's facebook page). The EU contributes to raising public awareness of its activities and positions in the promotion of human rights. The EU, the Member States and likeminded partners meet in monthly meetings of the informal group of friends of human rights to discuss current events and their respective programming. The EU continues its regular talks with the National Human Rights Commission to discuss developments in the human rights situation in Mali, including ongoing reforms.

4. Multilateral context: 2023 was marked by the suspension of MINUSMA's activities and its full withdrawal by the end of December. In May 2023, during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the Permanent Representative of Mali presented the Malian government's efforts to implement the 275 recommendations made to the country. He highlighted ongoing judicial investigations into allegations of rights violations, as well as the establishment of a National Security Sector Reform Strategy (2022-2024) including new security entities and detention centres. He stressed insecurity as the main factor in human rights violations, calling for increased stabilisation efforts for the return to peace. Mali has only "taken note" of recommendations made in the fight against gender-based violence reminiscent of the country's social and cultural realities and mentioning efforts to prevent gender-based violence. The Malian Human rights national commission encouraged the government to reconsider certain recommendations partially or totally rejected. These include the accession to the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty, and the revision of the Family and Persons Code to address inequalities affecting women and girls. The Commission called on the government to combat impunity by investigating human rights violations, particularly in conflict zones, and to make the results of investigations public. Finally, it alerted the government to the shrinking civic space in Mali.

Islamic Republic of Mauritania

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In recent years, Mauritania has made concrete progress in the field of human rights. Several legislative provisions were revised or adopted in 2023 to harmonise national legislation with international instruments. National strategies have also been developed for humanitarian action and the promotion of civil society. However, a bill on gender-based violence, supported by the Ministry of Justice, was twice rejected by Parliament and remains pending. As a result, no progress has been made in the adoption of the Law against Violence against Women and Girls, although progress has been made in this area, including the effective establishment in 2020 of the National Observatory on the Rights of Women and Girls, and multisector platforms to combat violence against women and girls in 8 wilayas across the country. A UN expert group on discrimination against women and girls made its first official visit to Mauritania in 2023, and will present its report to the Human Rights Council in June 2024. Following the visit, the Group stated that Mauritania had made considerable efforts to empower women and girls by increasing the electoral quota and legislation prohibiting harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, but that gaps remained and continued to impede progress.

Although few sanctions are imposed under the law, the government appears to be engaged in the fight against slavery with the training of magistrates, the holding of a multi-stakeholder round table on law enforcement and the organisation by the National Human Rights Commission of awareness-raising caravans. Mr. Tomoya Obokata, Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, presented his report on Mauritania at the 54th session of the Human Rights Council held in Geneva in October 2023, noting that Mauritania has made progress in strengthening its legal and institutional framework to prevent and combat slavery. He noted, however, that descent slavery persisted in some parts of the country, as did other contemporary forms of slavery, and drew attention to social, economic and political exclusion.

The reforms announced to improve prison conditions are slow to materialise, although some progress has been made, particularly with regard to reducing prison congestion. While the death penalty is provided for under Mauritanian criminal law, a moratorium on its application has been in place in the country since 1987. Regarding migration rights, Mauritania has launched a campaign to regularise migrants in the country by improving access to basic services and economic opportunities for migrants in the country. Mauritania has made significant progress in its ranking in the 2023 Press Freedom Index published on 3 May by 'Reporters Without Borders' from 97th place to 86th place globally and 2nd place in the Arab world behind the Comoros. A draft law establishing a "professional journalist's status" was passed in December. Several arrests of journalists/bloggers, notably under the law on state symbols, are however to be deplored in 2023.

2.EU action - key focus areas: A new Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategy 2021-2024 has been developed with EU Member States. Based on the analysis of the human rights situation in Mauritania and the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, eight priority areas have been identified: women's rights, non-discrimination and equality, strengthening migration governance, civilian participation, support rule of law and good management of justice, strengthening of social and economic rights, support to civil society and national human rights defence institutions and promotion of media pluralism and independence as well as the fight against disinformation. Many activities contributing to the

achievement of these priorities were carried out in 2023 by the EU and the Member States in Mauritania.

3.EU bilateral political engagement: In 2022, Mauritania completed its three-year mandate (2020-2022) at the UN Human Rights Council. The latest review of the human rights situation in Mauritania at the UN dated 19 January 2021 at the UN Human Rights Committee during its third universal periodic review. The positive developments in the human rights situation in Mauritania were welcomed, while stressing that much remained to be done. Mauritania accepted 201 of the 266 recommendations received and noted the remaining 65 considered incompatible or unconstitutional. The recommendations on the ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aimed at abolishing the death penalty and acceding to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court have not been accepted, but Mauritania has announced to maintain the de facto moratorium on the application of the death penalty in force in the country since 1987.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU Delegation continued to promote human rights through political dialogue and public diplomacy actions. The topic of human rights was placed on the agenda of the official political dialogue meeting (Article 8) between the Mauritanian authorities, the EU and its Member States. The political dialogue provided an opportunity to take stock of human rights issues, to communicate the priorities of the EU and its Member States at the highest level and to reiterate the willingness of the European side to support the efforts of the authorities in this area. The frank dialogue with the authorities has made it possible to convey strong messages. Bilateral hearings with national authorities, in particular the Ministers of Justice and Social Affairs, Children and Family Affairs, Islamic Affairs and Original Education or with the Commissioner for Human Rights, provided an opportunity to engage in strong advocacy for human rights, in particular in view of the adoption of the law against violence against women and girls and the strengthening of civil society. The main international days were celebrated by publications on social networks or by cultural activities (photographic exhibitions, creation of a mural).

5. Multilateral context: In 2022, Mauritania completed its three-year mandate (2020-2022) at the UN Human Rights Council. The latest review of the human rights situation in Mauritania at the UN dated 19 January 2021 at the UN Human Rights Committee during its third universal periodic review. The positive developments in the human rights situation in Mauritania were welcomed, while stressing that much remained to be done. Mauritania accepted 201 of the 266 recommendations received and noted the remaining 65 considered incompatible or unconstitutional. The recommendations on the ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aimed at abolishing the death penalty and acceding to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court have not been accepted, but Mauritania has announced to maintain the de facto moratorium on the application of the death penalty in force in the country since 1987.

Republic of Mauritius

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Mauritius remains among the top countries in the overall governance rankings in Africa according to international standards and has a strong record of respecting and promoting human rights. However, recent reports by several international benchmark organisations have been pointing to a deterioration of democracy and increased corruption perception levels.
Mauritius has ratified most international human rights treaties. However, several conventions are still outstanding: the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families; the International Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances; the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons; the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness; the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

With regard to the rights of the LGBTI, the Supreme Court delivered in October 2023 two landmark judgments declaring unconstitutional Section 250(1) of the Penal Code, which criminalised same-sex relations. However, societal stigmatisation and advocacy possibilities are still a matter of concern.

As far as trafficking in persons is concerned, in line with UPR3 recommendations, an amendment to the Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act was recently passed in Parliament, establishing a more effective institutional framework while also providing for more severe penalties.

Concerning women's rights, implementation is ongoing regarding the National Gender Policy (2022-2030) and the National Strategy and Action Plan on the Elimination of Gender-Based Violence. A Domestic Abuse Bill is under preparation.

Regarding the rights of persons with disabilities, a Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill is under preparation, whose aim is to domesticate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other international instruments to which Mauritius is a party.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU is Mauritius' main partner as far as protection and promotion of human rights are concerned. Governance is one of the two priority areas of intervention under the EU-Mauritius 2021-2027 Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP). Priority sub-sectors are democratic governance, gender equality and promotion of human rights.
Programme activities focus on the improvement of trust in representative democracy, the promotion of the rights of the most vulnerable groups and the fight against corruption. The EU supported direct actions with civil society including initiatives aiming at fighting domestic violence; teenage pregnancy; promoting women's participation in politics, women and youth employability and advocacy for the rights of LGBTI persons. With regard to anti-corruption and the accountability architecture, the EU-funded project with Transparency Mauritius continued raising awareness among the public on anti-corruption principles.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU is promoting human rights in Mauritius through a three-tier approach at the level of Government (legislation), HR institutions (implementation

of HR in administration and population at large) and CSO/NGOs (addressing vulnerable groups).

4. EU financial engagement: The EU-Mauritius MIP for 2021-2027 (EUR 8 million) has Governance as one of its priority areas, for which EUR 1 million have been set aside. Additionally approximately EUR 0.3 million has been contracted in support to the Ministry of Gender and Family Welfare's work for the promotion of gender equality. Calls for proposals under the CSO and HR budget lines in 2023 saw a total of five contracts worth EUR 2.1 million committed to various human rights democracy related issues (incl. transparency, prisoners' rights, CSO development, and sexual reproduction and children's rights). Successful projects on LGBTI rights (EUR 0.2 million) and in support of the Children's Ombudsperson (EUR 0.2 million) were completed in 2023

5. Multilateral context: Mauritius is a key ally on the multilateral stage to support an international rules-based order with the United Nations at its core. Mauritius is a like-minded country on issues relating to global challenges, including pandemics, climate change, environment and biodiversity protection, poverty and inequality. The EU and Mauritius regularly exchange on regional and international matters of common interest.

Republic of Mozambique

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The overall human rights and democracy situation in Mozambique remained challenging in 2023. A focus of great concern continued to be the security and humanitarian crisis in the Cabo Delgado province and neighbouring provinces of Niassa and Nampula, where acts of terror and extreme violence resulted in over 4,500 deaths and, approximately, one million of internally displaced people since 2017. Notwithstanding an improvement in the security situation in Cabo Delgado province during 2023, the armed groups continued to be accused of severe human rights crimes and abuses, including the recruitment of children, kidnappings, beheadings, and sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls. Mozambican and international journalists continued to report restrictions to their work, in particular in Cabo Delgado. Activists and human rights defenders continued working in a very complex environment with actions of intimidation, kidnapping and assassinations yet to be investigated. Some potentially restrictive laws (on media, broadcasting and on Non-Profit Organisations) were submitted to the Parliament for approval and then removed after efforts of the civil society and international community. The sixth municipal elections held on 11 October 2023 were conducted amid allegations of widespread irregularities and civil unrest. The Disarmament and Demobilisation phase of the 2019 Maputo Peace and Reconciliation Agreement was completed, with the last military base of the ex-combatants closed in June 2023 and the approval of a decree extending a pension to eligible women and men demobilised as part of implementation of the Peace Agreement in March 2023 that started being implemented in November.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to focus on key areas such as peace building and good governance. There was also a particular focus on fighting gender-based violence. The EU continued to implement its integrated approach (encompassing humanitarian aid, development cooperation, peace building and security) to support the Mozambican

authorities' efforts to address the security and humanitarian challenges in Cabo Delgado, with a strong commitment to the respect for human rights and the rule of law. Under the security component of the integrated approach, the EU military training mission to Mozambique (EUTM) trained 10 out of the 11 Quick Reaction Forces of the Mozambican army (FADM), as per its mandate. The much-needed non-lethal equipment was also distributed. In addition to military and tactical training, a substantive part of the EUTM training programme continued to focus on human rights and international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians, particularly women and children affected by armed conflict. This was conducted in cooperation with the ICRC and relevant UN organisations and was seen as contributing to an improvement of the image of FADM forces from the local population of Cabo Delgado province. As complementary measures in the spirit of 'African solutions to African problems', the EU continued to support the deployment of both the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) and the Rwanda Defence Force deployment, equally with strong human rights and rule of law requirements.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU engaged with the Government of Mozambique in two Political Dialogues (15 June and 11 December). The agenda included international human rights and international humanitarian law as overarching principles of the EU integrated approach as well as the overall efforts towards permanent peace and rule of law across the country. The implementation of the 2019 EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) and the 6th municipal elections of October were also discussed during the December Dialogue. Commissioner K. Simson, who visited Mozambique on 21-23 November 2023, took part in the first EU-Mozambique Investment Forum and met among others President Nyusi, Prime Minister Maleiane, Foreign Minister Macamo and Energy Minister Zacarias.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU supported a number of projects with a view to strengthening civic and political space: The project 'Support to the consolidation of democracy' implemented by I-IDEA followed up on the implementation of the 2019 EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) recommendations, in particular with the finalisation of a proposal for legislative reform that would address several of the recommendations. The programme also contributed to the local observation by supporting the establishment of 'Mais Integridade', a consortium of civil society organizations involved in the process of monitoring the electoral process. The consortium focuses on four pillars: Electoral Observation; Civic and Electoral Education; Monitoring and Reducing Electoral Conflicts; Advocacy. 'Mais Integridade' engaged in local Election observation in 2023, especially in municipalities considered as electorally competitive.
The EU 'Programme to Support Non-State Actors– PAANE II' continued engaging public authorities and civil society in a constructive dialogue to enhance effective civic participation in the elaboration and monitoring of public policies, as well as strengthen the capacities of civil society organisations to play a role in contributing to democratic life. This programme contributes to improving quality standards in public service delivery, citizen access to information, and the use of participatory mechanisms and of evidence-based advocacy in national and local policy-making.

The EU supported the protection of people in conflict-affected areas, contributing with over EUR 25 million of humanitarian assistance to people of Cabo Delgado in 2023. The EU's portfolio of peacebuilding projects in the Northern provinces amounts to over EUR 10 million, amongst them a new project with UNODC (EUR 2 million) aimed to strengthen criminal justice

responses to terrorism, including capacities for collecting, preserving and sharing of evidence in line with human rights standards. A specific action 'Resilience in the North' (EUR 35 million) to support the development strategies of the Government of Mozambique in an integrated manner was also adopted.

The EU continued to support the peace process between the Government and the main opposition party RENAMO. The EU continued supporting the process politically and operationally, with the mobilisation of additional funding (NDICI, EUR 0.5 million on top of the EUR 4 million already provided) to accompany the end of activities and closure of the UNOPS managed Basket Fund. Work continued also on the Reintegration and Reconciliation aspects.

5.Multilateral context: Since 1 January 2023, Mozambique is a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the period of 2023-24 and held the presidency during March 2023. The next one will be in June 2024. Throughout 2023, the EU and its Member States continued to be supportive of the UN agencies, UNHCHR, UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM and WFP, in particular in connection with the security and humanitarian crisis in Cabo Delgado.

Rebublic of Namibia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: As Namibia's democracy is developing and maturing, the country's good track record on human rights and democracy continued in 2023. The re-election of the Deputy Prime Minister in November 2022 as the Vice-President of the SWAPO, makes her the presumptive and first female candidate to lead the ruling party in the November 2024 Presidential elections. Namibia is a remarkable example of press freedom, ranked at the top position for Africa, and 22nd out of 180 countries globally in the World Press Freedom Index (WPFI). In terms of social and economic rights, rampant unemployment, poverty and social inequality continue to be key challenges for the country. According to the OECD criteria, Namibia is one of the wealthiest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and an upper-middle income economy, though at the same time it classified as the second most unequal country globally (after South Africa) with a Gini Index of 58 forecasts for 2023. Over 15% of households are categorised as poor or severely poor. Moreover, women and girls in the country are still vulnerable and fall victim to violence and discrimination. Namibia's high inequality rate takes a toll on the Namibian children. According to a UNICEF study, on average, 51.3 percent of the children aged 0-17 years are living in multidimensional poverty, compared to 37.4 percent for adults (18+ years) and the national average of 43.3 percent. The government is currently preparing a series of new family and child protection laws, instrumental in improving the protection of children and in enhancing their rights and security. According to the recommendations issued during Namibia's third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2021, despite overall progress, several areas require targeted action, including sexual and gender-based violence, gender equality, access to education, unemployment, children's rights, indigenous people's rights, discrimination of LGBTI persons, prison conditions, human trafficking, access to education, adequate housing, and access to safe drinking water. The next UPR for Nambia is scheduled for 2026. The topic of corruption continues to be a prominent concern in public opinion. The judicial investigations into the Fishrot corruption scandal have triggered a drop of Namibia by seven positions (from 52nd to 59th out of 180 countries) in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index between 2018 and 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to support human rights and democracy in Namibia through cooperation programmes in the following strategic priority areas: (i) promotion of good governance and accountability, directly relevant to the realisation of economic, social and cultural rights; (ii) promotion of women's rights, including combatting gender-based violence; (iii) promotion of children's rights; (iv) promotion of the rights of persons belonging to minorities, with special attention to indigenous/marginalised people; (V) strengthening of the democratic political system, in particular civil society's role and capacities. The EU and EU Member States in Namibia carried out a number of public diplomacy activities with the aim of promoting specific human rights issues.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: As in previous years the EU Ambassador hosted in May a meeting with the Minister of Justice, joined by the EU Member States. This meeting allowed for a follow-up exchange on the UPR challenges and perspectives, and confirmed the continued strategic relevance of the EU strategic priorities.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU Delegation and EU Member States supported projects and initiatives that work towards the achievement of human rights priorities in Namibia. In 2023, a number of EU projects reached their conclusion. These focused, among others, on strengthening the roles of CSOs and women in democracy; enhancing the rights of minority groups; curbing GBV; empowering women and children living in informal settlements; and improving sanitation in informal settlements. A number of new projects aimed at improving the human rights situation and strengthening democracy were launched. Examples include:

- The 'Empowering the San: Legal Capacity Building for Human Rights Access' project (EUR 330,862) which is implemented by the Legal Assistance Centre and aims at empowering the San people by enabling them to independently exercise their rights, fostering accountability, and enhancing community structures for advocacy, ultimately ensuring the realisation of their rights.

- The 'Strengthening democratic participation – Namibia needs me (NNM)' project (EUR 450,000), implemented by the Hanns Seidel Foundation and the Namibian Institute for Democracy, aims to enhance democratic participation.

- The 'Promoting Gender Equality and Combating GBV' contribution agreement (EUR 1.4 million), implemented by UNFPA, aims at reducing GBV in targeted regions in Namibia.

Among the continuing projects is among others, the 'Enhancing Participatory Democracy Programme', which aims to strengthen the capacity of CSOs to contribute to the implementation and monitoring of public policies. In December 2023, the EU organised a study visit to Brussels for journalists from Namibia (as well as Lesotho, Botswana and Zambia) providing them with valuable insights into EU operations, decision-making processes, and the importance of fundamental rights in EU foreign policy. The EU also sponsored a video collaboration with the Women's International Peace Centre on positive masculinity, with the aim to amplify messages on promoting prevention, empowerment, social norm change, and healthy relationships, which was featured within the EU 'Combating GBV campaign' during the '16 Days of Activism.'

5. Multilateral context: Namibia is a strong and active supporter of the multilateral system, sponsoring several thematic resolutions such as the fight against racism. Namibia is actively speaking up and aiming to find a solution to resolve the conflict in the Middle East. Further,

the President of the United Nations General Assembly appointed the Namibian and German permanent representatives as co-facilitators for the 2024 Summit of the Future, aiming to reinforce the UN and global governance structures to better address old and new challenges. Namibia is currently working towards joining the family law conventions of the Hague Conference on Private International Law. Namibia spearheads the UN agenda of Women, Peace and Security (WPS), under the UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions, as demonstrated by the progressive development of the WPS centre which offers opportunities for international cooperation.

Republic of Niger

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Since the success of the triple electoral process in 2020-2021, President Bazoum had sent strong signals of commitment to democracy, inclusive and transparent governance, the development of human capital and the desire to improve the security and social conditions of the population. With the *coup d'État* of 26 July 2023, the situation of human rights and democracy changed radically. Several senior officials (ministers, senior officials, deputies) of the deposed regime were placed in pre-trial detention. President Bazoum himself and his wife and son were also taken prisoner in the presidential palace.

In this crisis context, freedom of speech has been greatly reduced. Public communication is controlled by the power in place, whether on the balance sheet of the military operations as on other political subjects. The Cybercrime Act[18] is a tool to control online media. The arrest and the disappearance of a female blogger for a few days in September 2023 illustrates this trend. On August 3, 2023, the broadcast of RFI and France 24 – accused of being "instruments to promote France's foreign policy in Africa", were suspended in the country.

As a reaction to the coup, ECOWAS closed the borders between Niger and the organisation's neighbouring countries, suspended commercial and financial transactions and froze the country's assets in the central banks of ECOWAS countries. These sanctions have led to a rise in commodity prices and restricted the access to liquid assets (cash). This aggravated the humanitarian situation (4.6 million[19] people in need of humanitarian assistance, 3.2 million in severe food insecurity and 400.000 children in acute malnutrition) and jeopardized the respect of the most fundamental human rights.

Since the coup, the EU has supported ECOWAS's firm and leadership position. In October 2023, Member States decided to put in place a legal framework for an autonomous sanctions regime against the main putschists, which includes a humanitarian exemption.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In the area of democracy and electoral governance, the EU had focused its support on institutions for the facilitation, regulation and control of democratic life with the broader objective of strengthening institutions and political actors. In the field of human rights, prior to the coup, the EU focused its support on the National Human Rights

[18] Law 2019-33 of 03 July 2019 on the repression of cybercrime is still in force in Niger.
[19] Overview of humanitarian needs and response plan Niger 2024

Commission (CNDH), the cornerstone of the national human rights promotion and protection system. In the field of justice, EU support in 2023 continued to support the implementation of the National Justice and Human Rights Policy and its ten-year action plan 2016-2025.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU-Niger political dialogue of July 2022, highlighted the difficulty of deepening exchanges on some sensitive topics (women's and girls' rights, death penalty, LGBTQI rights), essentially due to socio-cultural reasons. Following the c*oup d'Etat* of July 26*,* the EU interrupted the political dialogue, froze its budget support, defence and security cooperation and nearly 80% of the development cooperation, including its support in the field of human rights.

Democratic processes have been interrupted and institutions to ensure respect human rights were dissolved, including the National Commission for Human Rights, the National Assembly and the High Authority for Combating Corruption and Similar Infringements. The suspension and/or reduction of the cooperation of the EU and Niger's main partners negatively affects the monitoring, compliance and protection of human rights. This is particularly the case in the field of respect for human rights by the armed forces, with very limited access to areas of military operations.

4. EU financial engagement: In the first semester of 2023, the EU intervened in 7 main areas: (1) democracy and electoral governance; (2) human rights; (3) justice; (4) Civil state; (5) women's rights; (6) fight against corruption; (7) migration.
However, after the coup d'état of 26 July, a large majority of funding was suspended, some of which benefited from good momentum, including:

- Support to the justice sector through projects and budget support 2022-2024, with a focus on access to justice and the provision of quality judicial services (training and deployment of judicial staff in and functionality of courts) and the judicialisation of the fight against terrorism and transnational organised crime.
- The EU's commitment to strengthening the bonds of trust between populations and the Internal Security Forces, accountability and respect for human rights, support for the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the fight against impunity.
- Support for the modernisation of Niger's civil registry system in partnership with UNICEF.
- EU support for capacity building of the Ministry for the Advancement of Women and Child Protection and the establishment of the "Fada des filles" (an innovative initiative of young female students who have chosen to raise community awareness for the realisation of girls' rights in Niger).
- Assistance to migrants through IOM's voluntary return programme, 11 transit centres and the organisation of their return to their country of origin.
- Support to the Joint Investigation Team to combat criminal networks linked to irregular immigration, human traffic and migrant smuggling.

5. Multilateral context: Not recognised for several weeks by the United Nations system, the transitional authorities were unable to represent Niger at the UNGA in September 2023. On 11 October 2023, the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Niamey was declared *persona*

non grata. Finally, on 6 December 2023, the United Nations Credentials Committee recognised the legitimacy of the government resulting from the events of 26 July 2023.

Federal Republic of Nigeria

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Nigeria continues to face an unprecedented wave of different and overlapping security crises, including banditry, crime and kidnapping, extremist insurgencies, secessionist agitations, terrorism and farmer/herder conflicts. Almost every part of the country is now afflicted by violence and crime. Security Forces are deployed in 32 out of the 36 States of the Federation. The deteriorating economic situation, very poorly spread and managed wealth, widespread reported corruption and ongoing unregulated competition over natural resources further contributed to the surge in violence. Nigeria went, in 2023, through an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis, with inflation in December running at 28.9% y.o.y. and the government having declared a humanitarian emergency situation in July. Oil theft and pipeline vandalism in Nigeria's South affected oil production output and deprived the national budget of much-needed income. There continued to be a high civilian toll from Nigerian defence operations also in 2023, with the defence forces recognizing errors in at least two instances of air strikes with civilian victims: on a cattle-herder group in Nasarawa state on 24 January 2023 (at least 39 dead) and on a Muslim religious procession in Kaduna on 3 December 2023, (at least 85 dead).
Nigeria held general elections in February-March 2023, which the EU Electoral Observation Mission did not find well run, transparent and inclusive. The EU EOM report found that fundamental freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, while constitutionally guaranteed, were not always well protected. Worrisome individual cases already signalled by the UN Special Rapporteurs or the Human Rights Council Working Groups (e.g. witnesses in the Lekki Gate police brutality during the #EndSARS movement, individuals accused of blasphemy in the country's north, or leaders of proscribed secessionist groups) continued not being addressed.

2. EU action - key focus areas:

- Gender equality and women's empowerment: Gender equality and women's empowerment is mainstreamed in all EU programmes and gender is reflected as a key priority in all political and policy dialogues with the Nigerian government and in the regular consultations held with civil society actors.

- Rights of the Child: The EU continued to advocate for better protecting children's rights in Nigeria, especially in contexts of armed conflict. The EU's focus has been on the protection, de-radicalization and reintegration of children in these contexts. The EU launched a sizeable education programme in 2023 aimed at the reintegration of out-of-school children in Nigeria's North-West. It continued to support the UN and Nigerian authorities to improve child protection mechanisms in contexts of terrorism and to prevent child recruitment by terrorist groups through the Strive Juvenile project.

- Rights of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Intersex and Queer (LGBTI): In 2023, the Delegation continued to engage actively with the LGBTI community and civil society organisations (CSOs) for consultations and events, such as the screening of the

Nigerian film 'Ìfé' for IDAHOT, followed by a panel discussion. In August 2023, a new action was launched for 'Promoting Acceptance of Nigerian Diversity and Organizing in a Right-based Approach' (PANDORA), implemented with Synergia – Initiatives for Human Rights. It addresses the direct needs of Nigerian LGBTI movements and activities that seek to expand and deepen the relationships that LGBTI movements have with mainstream stakeholders.

- Freedom of Religion and Belief: The EU Delegation has engaged with faith actors and communities across the key priority areas of its cooperation in Nigeria. In 2023, two new projects focused on protecting and promoting freedom of religion and belief, religious tolerance, respect for human rights, and inter-faith dialogue started working: 'Faith for Peace' in Gombe and Nassarawa states, and 'Inclusive Religious Engagement in Nigeria Enhanced by Women' in Plateau and Kaduna states.

- Human Security, protection of civilians and the rights of IDPs: The EU continued to support the government of Nigeria to promote peace, security and stability in the country and the wider lake Chad Basin. It supported programmes for the disengagement, disassociation, and reintegration of former members of extremist groups, the protection of civilians, resilience to violent extremism, as well as reconciliation programmes. In a regional perspective, Democratic consolidation and support for elections: The EU deployed an Election Observation Mission to observe the 2023 general and Gubernatorial elections in Nigeria. The report offered 23 recommendations for consideration by the Nigerian authorities. Long-standing EU cooperation programmes focus on improving governance and democratic processes in Nigeria, including the implementation of such recommendations. The 'EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN)' is one of such flagship programmes which has enabled the expansion of voter access through the management of 56,872 more polling stations in the 2023 elections (a 47% increase on the previous elections).

- Digital rights: the EU continues to support the protection and promotion of human rights on and offline, as well as data protection. With EU support, Nigeria adopted the data Protection Bill in June 2023, after which the EU continued to remain engaged through capacity building for the Nigerian Data Protection Authority and data protection enforcers. Through a new project on enhancing digital rights in Nigeria in cooperation with Avocats sans Frontieres, the EU has renewed its commitment to the protection of human rights defenders and the population more broadly.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU engaged early and comprehensively with the incoming Nigerian government after their appointment in August 2023. EEAS Deputy Secretary General was in Nigeria and met 8 Ministers to exchange on their priorities in the area of peace and security, defence, the digital economy, socio-economic development, and justice and home affairs. The engagement was followed up by a Senior Officials Meeting on 5-6 September and a Strategic Dialogue led by Commissioner Urpilainen on 19 October. The 6th EU-Nigeria Human Rights Dialogue was held in February 2023.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU has financial engagements in each of the areas of EU action (see above).

5. Multilateral context: Nigeria goes through the fourth UPR cycle in December 2023-January 2024.

Republic of Rwanda

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights and democracy situation in Rwanda remained challenging. Rwanda continued to perform well on social and economic indicators, in particular on health, education, access to water and electricity, thanks to increased social spending over the past years. Rwanda also performed well on the fight against corruption. The Government continued to face allegations of serious human rights violations, including arbitrary detentions and use of inhuman or degrading treatments in detention facilities. In 2023, there were fewer reports of extrajudicial killings and unexplained disappearances. Freedom of expression remained limited: charges for inciting insurrection, spreading rumours or false information, genocide minimization, and others, stifled public dissent or criticism. Journalists, bloggers and citizens engaged in self-censorship for fear of consequences. Freedom of association continued to suffer from burdensome and often discretionary registration processes. While the legal framework addressing women's rights in Rwanda is generally positive, the weak implementation of laws and policies coupled with discriminatory social norms remained a challenge, especially in rural areas. Rwanda is the only country in East Africa that does not criminalize consensual same-sex relations, but has no provisions to protect LGBTI individuals from discrimination. Rwanda hosted around 135 000 refugees from DRC and Burundi, who enjoyed the right to work, move and settle freely. It continued to host an Emergency Transit Mechanism for the evacuation and processing of asylum-seekers from Libya pending resettlement, with a capacity of around 700 persons at a time.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU focused on six areas: (1) non-discrimination and protection of marginalised groups; (2) women's rights and the elimination of violence against women; (3) access to food and the fight against child malnutrition; (4) freedom of expression, regulation and capacity-building in the media sector; (5) freedom of association and promoting an enabling environment for civil society and citizen participation; (6) respect for human rights in the justice system (including countering arbitrary detentions, torture and enforced disappearances).

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued to engage on human rights and democracy within the framework of regular political exchanges (including the political dialogue), sectoral dialogues and public diplomacy. The EU and Rwanda addressed the situation in prisons, allegations of torture, Rwanda's human rights action plan, and mainstreaming human rights in Rwanda's next National Transformation Strategy. The EU and Member States conducted a number of joint advocacy campaigns, e.g. marking IDAHOBIT day and raising awareness across the country on SGBV. The EU carried out formal demarches on human rights and democracy issues to request support for its initiatives in UN fora.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU supported several actions in line with the above priority areas, for a total amount of EUR 17 million. Among these, EUR 580 000 to support Rwanda's civil society and legal defender community and national institutions to eradicate torture and arbitrary detention. In late 2023 the EU signed nine new projects with CSOs with approx. EUR

3.4 million for disability, primarily focusing on youth with mental and intellectual disabilities; two projects for approx. EUR 500 000 aimed at fighting sexual and gender based violence and combating teenage pregnancies at community level and two projects totalling over EUR 1 million aimed at promoting labour rights and decent work, especially in the mining sector. Fourteen new projects worth EUR 10 million kicked off in 2023 under the 'Kungahara' programme, aiming to increase food security as a response to increased inflation. Two new projects signed in 2023 for EUR 1 million, aimed to promote responsible freedom of expression online, e.g. through enhanced digital literacy of citizens and media practitioners alike. The EU supported the National Commission for Human Rights to bolster its mandate as the National Preventative Mechanism against Torture, as well as to work on the UPR.

5. Multilateral context: Rwanda is party to all key UN Human Rights Conventions, with the exception of the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the Statute of the International Criminal Court and most optional protocols. Rwanda was overall aligned with the EU's priorities on human rights in UN fora.

Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The overall human rights and democracy situation in São Tomé and Príncipe is good. São Tomé democracy is still grappling with the aftermath of the November 2022 coup attempt that resulted in the unlawful detainment, torture and death of four individuals. Investigation reports were published in February and March 2023, and São Tomé judiciary sentenced the only civilian involved in the coup in December 2023. A new military tribunal will try the soldiers involved in the attack and deaths. A number of issues continued to face significant challenges, including women and children rights, corruption, access to justice and independence of the judiciary, access to health services and safe water.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU focused on the following priorities: (1) strengthening the human rights protection framework; (2) promoting rule of law and improving access to justice, the quality and independence of the justice system; (3) promoting economic, social and cultural rights; (4) support democracy and good governance, including the integrity of electoral processes; (5) rights of the child; (6) women's rights and non-discrimination on the basis of gender; (7) environmental rights.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human rights and democracy including the follow-up of the recommendations of the EU EOM were discussed as part of the regular EU-São Tomé and Príncipe political dialogue (latest session in March 2023). The EU carried out formal demarches on human rights and democracy issues to request support for its initiatives at the Human Rights Council and UNGA Third Committee.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU's engagement for new actions on the prevention and fight against gender-based violence, strengthening the role of CSOs in their participation in good governance; promoting dialogue between CSOs and public institutions, and capacity building of women organisations amounted to EUR 2.9 million.

5. Multilateral context: São Tomé and Príncipe is party to most of the key human rights treaties. It has not yet signed the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. It abolished the death penalty in 1990. São Tomé and Príncipe overall converged with the EU on human rights issues in UN fora.

Republic of Senegal

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Senegal has ratified the major conventions on human rights, and the authorities are open to discuss and engage in improving women rights and the rights of the child, yet room for progress exist on these topics, and others (LGBTI in particular). The rights of women remained a concern over the period, particularly in rural areas, where women's access to protection, health and education services but also to employment, land, credit and justice is limited. The situation of children's rights has remained worrying over the reporting period. Senegal has still not adopted the Children's code (reform that is supported by the ongoing EU budget support program which includes such a reform for 2025). Child exploitation remains a reality. In the course of 2023, there was also no progress on the rights of sexual minorities, and the situation of these people is particularly fragile.
Over the period, no reforms where adopted to improve the legislation (whether in the Penal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code, the Press Code or the Cybercrime Law) regarding freedom of expression (such as a law on the access to information to enable journalists and citizens to access public information, as called by civil society activists). If in 2019, Senegal occupied the 49th place out of 180 countries in the world press freedom ranking, in 2023 it has fallen to the 104th place. Furthermore, civil society has denounced the overall shrinking of civil space. Following the February and June 2023 violent protests, the authorities took a number of measures for security reasons, restricting civil liberties including freedom of assembly and expression (eg: ban on most demonstrations and political rallies, arrests of protesters, opponents and journalists, the temporary or permanent suspension of social networks, TV channel and internet mobile).

As regards the strengthening of the judicial system, Senegal has not taken any particular steps during the year under reporting. However, the year has been marked by the judicial developments involving opposition leader Ousmane Sonko that had an impact in terms of social unrests, as well as on his inability to run for the 2024 presidential elections. According to human rights organisations, these developments contributed to weaken the level of trust in the independence of the judiciary, especially among the youth. Furthermore, no particular mechanisms to combat money laundering and prevent corruption were put into place.

As regards human trafficking, it is important to note that in 2023 there was a substantial increase in the number of migrants seeking to travel to Europe from Senegal via the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands compared to the previous year. A record number of more than 40,000 migrants (increase 161 % compared to 2022) are reported to have arrived in the Canary Islands, particularly during the second half of the year, among them numerous Senegalese nationals.

2. EU action - key focus areas:

Key focus areas include women and girls' rights, children's rights, strengthening civil society and the judicial system and human trafficking.

3. EU bilateral political engagement:

- Women and girls rights: The EU has engaged in various communication and outreach activities to raise awareness about the challenges faced by women and girls and the need to step up action to address them.

- The rights of children have also constituted a strong focus of our dialogue and support in Senegal in the course of the reporting period.

- Strengthening the action capacities of civil society: the EU has been particularly engaged in strengthening Senegalese civil society, through the 'Programme d'appui à la société civile (PASC)' . The structured and regular EU-civil society dialogue, which first session took place in October 2023, aim to allow civil society to share their innovative practices and viewpoints on public policies and EU programmes focussing on youth employability.

- Strengthening the judicial system, combating money laundering and preventing corruption: the EUD continued also to support the strengthening of the rule of law, through support for the administration of justice, and the fight against corruption and money laundering.

- Human trafficking: The EU contributed to the fight against human trafficking and smuggling of migrants in Senegal by financing the 'Partenariat opérationnel conjoint (POC)' implemented by CIVIPOL and FIIAPP.

4. EU financial engagement:

- Women and girls rights: Political advocacy was carried out aiming at promoting the popularization and application of all existing legislative and regulatory texts aimed at the physical and moral protection of Senegalese women and girls. The EU has also promoted the full implementation of the law on parity (2010).

- Rights of children: the EU's intervention approach has been based on viable actions aimed at supporting the initiatives of civil society organizations in Senegal in order to (i) contribute to the promotion and respect children's rights and (ii) continue our action to popularize the law criminalizing rape and paedophilia in Senegal and to promote its effective application. Two projects were signed to this aim at the end of 2023 for a total amount of EUR 650.000.

- Strengthening the judicial system, combating money laundering and preventing corruption: budget support, exchanges have been initiated to support national organisations responsible for recovering criminal assets, fighting corruption and money laundering. Moreover, the EU has carried out the OCWAR-M project, a EUR 6.75 million project implanted by Expertise France helping to combat money laundering and financing of terrorism at regional level.

- Human trafficking: The first POC ended in July 2023 and was followed by the launch of POC 2 (budget EUR 5.75 million) in December 2023. It is connected to other POC projects in the region by the NETCOP project which also entered into its second phase in 2023 (budget EUR 2 million). The EU also co-financed the OCWAR-T project aimed at strengthening national and regional capacities and frameworks to tackle transnational organized crime and trafficking, financed through the Permanent follow-up mechanism of the Niamey declaration.

5. Multilateral context: During Senegal's Universal Periodic Review to the Human Rights Council in Geneva, which took place on 22 January 2024, Senegalese Minister of Justice announced the reform of the Senegalese Human Rights Committee to make it compliant with the Paris principles and regains its 'A' Status, lost in 2012 because of the lack of independence, resources and funding of the institution.

Republic of Seychelles

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Seychelles is a role model in Africa in terms of democracy, the rule of law and the respect and promotion of human rights according to international standards. Seychelles set up a Human Rights Treaty Reporting Committee to facilitate reporting obligations under the UN and the UPR systems.
A consultation process for the review of the 2016 National Gender Policy and its Plan of Action is ongoing. Sustained efforts are needed to address gender-based violence, in line with the 2022 Gender Country Profile. A number of measures were adopted to tackle the issue and to promote women and girls' empowerment. These include the establishment of a Domestic Violence Shelter and of a Domestic Violence Technical Committee in charge of supervising the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act. The Technical Committee is looking into amendments to be made to the legislative framework and is working on the development of a manual to enhance collaboration between stakeholders to provide support/services to both victims and perpetrators. Several advocacy programmes have been carried out in collaboration with civil society and schools.

Seychelles made some progress with regard to the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly as far as the improvement of timely access to services is concerned. Seychelles is engaged into reforming the penal/prisons system in compliance with the Nelson Mandela rules. New remand facilities are being set. This aspect is of particular importance in light of the signature in 2023 of the EU-Seychelles 'legal finish' agreement.

In March 2023, the Truth, Reconciliation and National Unity Commission (TRNUC) produced a report encompassing recommendations for settling past political divisions, grievances and human rights violations committed in relation to the 1977 coup which has been adopted by the National Assembly. The implementation of such recommendations remain of importance.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU is an important Seychelles' main partner as far as protection and promotion of human rights are concerned. Governance is one of the two priority areas of intervention under the EU-Seychelles 2021-2027 Multiannual Indicative Programme.

In 2023 the EU continued to support human rights and democracy in Seychelles through two cooperation programmes in the following priority areas:

1) Institutional strengthening of human rights and governance related institutions and supporting the implementation of the National Action Plan on Human Rights;

2) Fight against corruption, by supporting the Financial Investigation Unit and the Attorney General's Office.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU is promoting human rights in Seychelles through a three-tier approach at the level of Government (legislation), HR institutions (implementation of HR in administration and population at large) and CSO/NGOs (addressing vulnerable groups).
The 10th EU-Seychelles Article 8 Political Dialogue took place in Victoria in October 2023. The parties had substantive exchanges on a broad range of issues of mutual interest, including rule of law, good governance, the protection and promotion of human rights, as well as peace and security.

4. EU financial engagement: An action of EUR 0.35 million for the Seychelles Financial Intelligence Unit and the Attorney General's Office in support of transparency as well as a EUR 0.2 million project supporting the work of the Seychelles Human Rights Commission were both completed in 2023.
The EU-Seychelles 2021-2027 Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) has an envelope of EUR 2 million. Governance is one of its two priority sectors. The entire MIP will be implemented from 2024 onwards through a single Cooperation Facility.

5. Multilateral context: Seychelles is a key ally on the multilateral stage to support an international rules-based order with the United Nations at its core. The EU and Seychelles share willingness to work together at Pan-African and regional levels with the African Union, the Regional Economic Communities (such as SADC and COMESA) and the Indian Ocean Commission in order to promote peace and stability in Africa.

Republic of Sierra Leone

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Since the end of the civil war more than 20 years ago, Sierra Leone has made significant progress, internationally recognized, in consolidating peace and democracy. Sierra Leone is now a rather stable democracy, although the political and socioeconomic context remains fragile, marked by high polarization between the two main political parties (ruling SLPP and opposition APC). Political and social challenges remain high, in a context of serious deterioration of economic and social conditions, with persistently high inflation (52% in December 2023 as compared to a year before, including 57% in food prices). The media landscape continued to be pluralist and generally independent. Journalists worked in a relatively safe environment, though not completely free from police harassment and arbitrary arrests. In the 2023 Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index, Sierra Leone moved back down 28 places, to the 74th position.
As the country headed towards Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Council Elections on 24 June 2023, political polarization and tensions remained high. The opposition lamented a shrinking space, including police and judicial proceedings against opposition politicians. During

the electoral campaign, there were localized violent incidents (harassment and attacks), particularly in the southeast (stronghold of the SLPP). The elections overall were held peacefully, however the official election results were questioned by national and international observers. The official results declared incumbent President Bio as winner in the first round, with no need for a second round, having obtained more than 55% of the vote (56.1%), ahead of APC candidate Samura Kamara (41.2%).

On 18 October 2023, an 'Agreement for National Unity' was signed between the Government and the opposition APC, with the facilitation of national actors and international partners. This agreement ended the opposition's boycott of elected institutions. On 26 November 2023, armed assailants attacked an armoury in a military barracks, the main prison and other detention facilities in Freetown, freeing inmates, and resulting in 21 dead (including 18 members of the security forces and 3 assailants), around 60 arrested (most of them members of the military), with 2,213 prison inmates escaped or unlawfully released. The Government described the events of 26 November as a failed attempted coup. On 3 January 2024, former President Ernest Bai Koroma (2007-2018) was charged for treason before the Supreme Court over his alleged involvement in 26 November events. Prison conditions remained a cause of concern, with detention facilities overcrowded and short of minimum international standards regarding access to food, water, sanitation and healthcare.

Women and girls remained at risk of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), including rape, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), child marriage and teenage pregnancies. Women continued to face high levels of gender inequality, marginalisation and discrimination, particularly for education, employment, access to and control over resources, decision-making and political participation. As positive steps, a Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act was signed into law by President Bio on 20 January 2023. Following the GEWE Act and the revised 2022 Public Elections Act, the June 2023 general elections advanced women political participation: women made up 30% of candidates on parties' electoral lists, and this resulted in women filling 30% of elected MPs seats, 41 out of 135 (20 SLPP and 21 APC). The new Government appointed 10 female Ministers out of 31 (32% of the Cabinet). In 2023, increasing environmental degradation, in particular deforestation, remained a cause for concern, with clear evidence that illegal activities continued in and around protected areas.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, the EU and EU member states continued to work on the human rights and democracy focus areas of gender equality, women's and girls' rights, rights and role of children and youth, combat against poverty and social exclusion, environmental protection and fight against deforestation, prevention and fight against corruption, integrity of electoral processes and Parliament strengthening.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: EU political engagement with Sierra Leone continued to be intense. During the 2023 electoral process, the EU and EU Member States (MS) encouraged and supported efforts towards peaceful, inclusive, transparent and credible elections, engaging at multiple levels, with the Government, opposition, electoral management bodies (including the Electoral Commission), political parties and civil society organizations. In these engagements, the EU and EU MS encouraged transparency and trust building towards the integrity and credibility of the electoral process. Following the invitation by the Electoral Commission and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an EU Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) was deployed in Sierra Leone from 11 May to 13 July 2023. The high-level EU-Sierra Leone Political

Dialogue held on 17 October 2023 strengthened Team Europe engagement with the Government after the elections, combining a constructive partnership with a frank dialogue on fundamental values and governance. At the Dialogue, the EU and EU MS exchanged openly with the Government on several topics, including democracy and governance issues (inclusive governance, dialogue with the opposition, electoral reform), as well as human rights. The EU encouraged and expressed readiness to support the implementation of the EU EOM recommendations. The EU and EU MS encouraged and supported sustained efforts by the Government and the opposition to build trust and implement the 18 October 'Agreement for National Unity', in particular progress in the work of the Electoral Systems and Management Bodies Review Committee.

4. EU financial engagement: The MIP 2021-27 identifies three priorities: (I) a green & resilient economy; (II) human development; and (III) good governance & fundamental rights. The MIP is worth EUR 245 million for 2021-24. The intervention strategy for the new Global Europe programme. 15% of the MIP (36.75 million €) are earmarked for actions on governance and human rights. Support to good governance is key to face the multiple challenges that hamper socio economic progress. In 2023, the EU continued to support human rights and democracy through programmes under the 11th European Development Fund, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and instruments in support of civil society organizations (CSOs) and local authorities. EU financial and technical assistance was provided to State and CSOs-led initiatives to enhance gender equality and women empowerment, including political processes, and in the fight against SGBV. Other actions were implemented to strengthen public finance management (PFM) and procedures to prevent corruption; to fight poverty and social exclusion; to promote children rights and youth inclusion; to support the implementation of electoral reforms and the conduct of transparent, inclusive and peaceful electoral processes, as well as domestic observation of electoral operations; and Parliament's strengthening and CSOs' oversight.

5. Multilateral context: During 2023, EU, EU member states and the Government of Sierra Leone strengthened their dialogue and cooperation on multilateral issues, including on Ukraine-related resolutions and on Human Rights resolutions and initiatives presented at the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly. Multilateral issues, including Sierra Leone's priorities as a member of the UN Security Council in 2024-25, were part of the EU-SL Political Dialogue held on 17 October 2023. Sierra Leone confirmed her alignment with the EU on Ukraine, and a focus on peace and security of the West African and Sahel region.

Federal Republic of Somalia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Somalia has continued to grapple with political instability, insecurity, and the enduring impact of long-standing conflict. Security issues, including a strong focus on operations against al Shabaab, have delayed the required development of democratic institutions and processes. Despite these challenges, the government remains committed to constructing a more participatory democratic system, with a vision towards direct elections. A positive development in democratization was observed on 25 May 2023 when the federal member state of Puntland held its first state-wide direct elections at local level. With persisting violent conflict, severe droughts, food insecurity and famine-like conditions, human rights has been under significant pressure in Somalia. With weak governance structures, the country experiences a lack of rule of law, very limited access

to justice and no guarantees for a fair trial. Somalia is consistently ranked as one of the bottom five countries in terms of gender inequality and remains one of the few countries that has not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Gender-based violence, including sexual violence and domestic abuse, as well as FGM, remain a significant concern.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Implementation of five projects on support to media and promotion of women and girls' rights, (fight against FGM and Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV)), for a total of EUR 2.4 million continued in 2023. Final results from one of the four gender contracts that concluded in late 2022 reported reaching over 2,000 community members and established four women and girls' centres in the target areas. Four new contracts (EUR 2.3 million) were also signed, with the aim is to use arts, culture and sports as a vehicle to promote and protect human rights, foster freedom of expression, enhance peacebuilding, and social cohesion. A new contract (EUR 2.5 million) to support Somalia's first women-only media team was signed in late 2023 and implementation is expected to start in 2024.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Throughout 2023, human rights consistently formed part of the agenda in bilateral and multilateral dialogues with Somali authorities and other non-state actors. This dialogue was accompanied with concrete EU support to development partners, including civil society organisations working on the promotion of human rights, including on gender equality and women's and persons with disabilities' rights, ending violence against women and children, supporting the democratisation agenda and media as well as providing support to building the capacities of Somali security actors to improve the respect for human rights. Regarding the EU CSDP missions in Somalia, human rights courses are systematically provided in EUTM and EUCAP training sessions.

4. EU financial engagement: The main EU financial tool to address human rights issues in Somalia is the Human Rights and Democracy Thematic program. Other instruments, including the CSO thematic programme, EDF and the NDICI global Europe, complement this.

5. Multilateral context: Somalia is currently member of the UN HRC. The UN Independent Expert Isha Dyfan conducted an official visit to Somalia in November 2023. Somalia is not a party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Republic of South Africa

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: South Africa is a mature and vibrant democracy with a progressive constitutional and legal framework designed to ensure respect for human rights in society. The government, active and robust media, civil society, and an independent judiciary all play their roles in monitoring and addressing human rights violations as well as preserving democracy. However, corruption continues to be a major threat to the country's development. Despite efforts from both the National Prosecution Authority and the Judiciary to reduce impunity, a lack of prosecutions and accountability remains an issue. The realization of socio-economic rights and elimination of inequalities are still major challenges. South Africa continues to rank as the world's most unequal country. One of the main issues regarding human rights and democracy continues to be socio-economic rights and the dichotomy between the country's strong and progressive legal framework versus lived realities. Patriarchal norms and extraordinary levels of poverty,

unemployment, and inequality have led to continued high levels of Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBV/F), hate crimes against the LGBTI community, and a worrying rise in xenophobic attacks.
However, the Government continues to demonstrate strong political commitment to fighting GBV/F. The Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Bill was passed by Parliament, establishing a National Council to manage the implementation of a National Strategic Plan. In November, the Department of Home Affairs released the draft White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration, and Refugee Protection. It recommends that South Africa withdraw from earlier unreserved commitments to both the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, to instead accede to them with reservations. The National Council of Provinces has passed the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill, which is back in Parliament for amendments. This Bill creates the offenses of hate crimes and hate speech and puts in place measures to prevent and combat those offenses. The President, in April, signed amendments to the Electoral Act, allowing independent candidates to stand in the 2024 election. A Climate Change Bill has been passed by the National Assembly, aimed at addressing climate change and implementing a fair, long-term energy transition plan to foster a low-carbon, climate-resilient economy. The often difficult situation of human rights defenders (HRD) and whistle-blowers remains a matter of concern.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU collective action in 2023 focused on maintaining dialogue, providing support, offering assistance, and engaging a broad range of stakeholders in the areas of (i) elimination of discrimination and exclusion, (ii) protection of human rights defenders, freedom of expression, and digital space, (iii) combating inequalities, (iv) closing the accountability gap, and (v) strengthening the partnership with South Africa to advance human rights and democracy.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued to engage the government, civil society, and the broader public in South Africa on human rights both formally and informally. The EU Delegation participated in several public events to promote human rights, with a particularly strong focus on women's rights, the fight against discrimination and exclusion, the rights of the LGBTI community, refugees and migrants, the role of human rights defenders, and support for democracy. This included participating in a Pride march in Soweto with EU member states embassies, social media and communication initiatives to mark IDAHOT and the 16 Days of Activism against GBV. The Gender Development Partners' Group, chaired by the EU Delegation, continued to hold regular discussions with the South African government and civil society to track developments in this thematic area. The EU Delegation held events on the human rights situation in Lesotho and Eswatini, and an event on Women, Peace, and Security together with the former Vice-President and former UN WOMEN Executive Director. The EU Delegation also hosted a webinar on women in collaboration with local actors. The project organized a public debate on narratives of migration and xenophobia and inaugurated an EU-funded photography exhibition on the same topic (with over 5,000 visitors). All events saw good participation from South African and regional stakeholders.

4. EU financial engagement: Implementation of projects launched in previous years to support action in different priority areas of the Democracy and Human Rights Country Strategy continued in 2023. The EU Delegation awarded four new Civil Society contracts (EUR 3.2 million) for projects to enhance women's economic empowerment and to prevent GBV/F. Under its Human Rights and Democracy thematic program, the EU Delegation awarded grants

to the Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network as well as Democracy Works Foundation for its activity (with Whistleblower House) to protect whistle-blowers. A joint EU-ILO project to address child labor in the agricultural sector in SA was formally launched in November. Two more EU grants addressing child labor and trafficking in SA and the neighbouring countries were signed in late 2023/early 2024. The second batch of grants under the 'Enhancing Accountability' program was signed, bringing the number of projects to 9 and that of implementing organizations to 26. The Technical Assistance Facility, which supports capacity development, research, and dialogue, also started its work and supported various initiatives to enhance accountability and address corruption.

5. Multilateral context: South Africa served in the Human Rights Council (2023-2025). Although most resolutions are tabled by the entire African Group, South Africa is one of the leading voices on some topics, particularly in the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and the rights of people of African descent, inequality and discrimination, equal pay, the right to social security, discrimination against women and girls in sports, sexual orientation and gender identity, private military and security companies, business and human rights, and transnational corporations. Professor Dire Tladi was elected as a judge of the International Court of Justice, and Mr. Graeme Reid was appointed UN Independent Expert on Protection against Violence and Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. South Africa concluded the report of its 41st Universal Periodic Review held in 2022, accepting a majority of recommendations made.

Republic of South Sudan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The transitional period should lead the country towards democracy with the holding of elections, scheduled in December 2024, and the passing of a permanent constitution. Both processes are largely behind schedule. President Kiir re-established, in August 2021, a two-chamber legislature with the Transitional National Legal Assembly and the Council of States. Articles 10 to 34 of the Transitional Constitution protect the enjoyment of Human Rights, but due to lack of enforcement as well as persisting violence by subnational militias, the reality is in stark contrast to these ambitions.

Freedom of expression and association continues to be under pressure and human rights activists and journalists continue to be intimidated and arbitrarily detained. The National Security Service retains its broad executive powers, including those to arrest any persons suspected of wrongdoing without arrest warrants. Access to justice and independence of the justice system remain challenging for most citizens of South Sudan. Sexual Gender Based Violence is one of the greatest challenges among the human rights violations and abuses occurring in South Sudan. Some of these crimes are prosecuted, yet the majority of them are not. The Government has adopted a SGBV action plan, which has nevertheless expired at the end of 2023. With regard to concerning grave violations of children's rights, some improvements occurred in recent years, and the SSPDF runs a child protection unit in its headquarters. Some faith-based organisations took up advocacy for children's rights, e.g. the South Sudan Council of Churches championed the world day against child marriage. The Government does little to ensure the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. It is underinvesting in providing social services.

2. EU action - key focus areas:

- Judiciary reform, support to rule of law, fight against impunity including technical support for transitional justice and constitution-making through exchange and analysis.

- Gender Based Violence including the empowerment of victims of sexual violence to recover and reach their full potential as meaningful agents in society; promotion of women-driven advocacy and increased access to justice of victims through legal information, advice and representation; trauma management for SGBV survivors and protection of those affected by human trafficking and vulnerable migrants.

- Support of political rights, freedom of the media and expression and enable journalists to enhance professionalism, including access to accurate, quality and unbiased content in order to enable South Sudanese citizens to form their own opinions and make informed decisions.

- Support, monitor and assess the situation of civil society and Human Rights Defenders through awareness raising, research and advocacy, capacity building to support and protect human rights defenders and to promote and ensure accountability for human rights violations.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU is providing political and financial support to the peace process and the implementation of the peace agreement with a view to contribute to a successful transition of South Sudan from conflict to a stable, democratic and peaceful country. In this context, the EU is supporting the ceasefire transitional security arrangements monitoring and verification mechanism (CTSAMVM) as well as the revitalised joint monitoring and evaluation commission (RJMEC) to monitor the cease-fire and the implementation of the peace agreement. The EU is also chairing a RJMEC working group on constitutional affairs.
Concerning elections, the EU is supporting an enabling environment for holding elections through its support for the National Election Commission, the Political Parties Council, the National Constitutional Review Commission and civil society.

Concerning human rights, the EU is encouraging South Sudan to ensure the ratification of key human rights conventions and instruments as well as towards the abolition of the death penalty, starting with a moratorium and ensuring a fair trial to those detained on charges where the death penalty is a potential sentence. In March 2023, the EU listed two South Sudanese for grave human rights abuses under the EU Global Human Rights sanctions regime.

4. EU financial engagement: The financial engagement of the EU and its member states for Human Rights projects amounted to EUR 20 million, including EUR 10 million for projects managed by the Delegation of the EU.

5. Multilateral context: In 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Council established the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan. In 2023, the Commission reported on the curtailment of democratic and civic space and recommended to engage the Government to support efforts, capacities and security of civil society. South Sudan figures on items two and ten of the Council. Technical cooperation with the OHCHR is taking place under item ten of the HR Council.
In September, South Sudan ratified the Convention against transnational organised crime. In December 2023, South Sudan ratified the 1954 Convention relating to the status of stateless

persons and the 1961 Convention on the reduction of statelessness. In February 2024, it ratified the two UN Covenants on civic and political rights and on economic, social and cultural rights.

Republic of the Sudan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Since the adoption of the non-engagement policy following the military coup of October 2021, the EU and the Member States have had to work differently but continued to engage strategically with human rights activists. The protection of civilians, respect for international law and human rights law and demanding accountability have been at the heart of our response to the conflict which erupted in April 2023. Incidents related to mass demonstrations following the 2021 military coup were substantially in decay at the beginning of 2023, although serious human rights violations continued, including torture and sexual violence against detainees and the denial of fair trials. The conflict which broke out on 15 April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) stems directly from the October 2021 military coup and has its roots in failures to respect the rule of law, follow good governance, respect human rights or end impunity for human rights violations. The conflict has killed almost 15,000 civilian with over eight million people displaced inside and outside the country. Sudan has thus become the world's largest displacement crisis, with about three million children displaced. Before the war there were already over one million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and more than 1.6 million refugees in neighbouring countries. The conflict has revived ethnic tensions and is marked by sexual violence and widespread looting. In the absence of a ceasefire or a viable peace progress, displacement will accelerate at an alarming rate. On several occasions in December 2023, the SAF vowed to continue fighting to regain control of all the areas lost at the hands of the RSF. At the time of writing, SAF has encouraged civilians to take up the arms and engage in fighting. The country's ethnic diversity can be easily manipulated and could lead to civil war. Before the conflict, the situation of children was already dire. Sudan had one of the highest rates of malnutrition among children in the world. Since the conflict started, Sudanese children have been subjected to all types of human rights violations such as killing, abduction, the denial of access to food, sexual violence, recruitment into armed groups and no access to schools and hospitals. OHCHR has documented new restrictions on civic space, including freedom of expression, particularly in Aljazirah State, Kassala State, White Nile State, and Blue Nile State. Journalists and CSOs were particularly affected.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU and its Member States have been vocal in numerous statements in demanding accountability for violations, the protection of civilians, respect for international law and human rights law and access for human rights violations. The EU Delegation engaged with CSOs, human rights organisations, women organisations and human rights defenders throughout the year. Separate meetings were organised with civil society, with youth groups and with women's groups in March during a joint visit to Sudan by the Special Envoys of the EU, France, Germany, the US, the UK and Norway. The Delegation celebrated International Women's Rights Day on 8 March 2023 with the EEAS Managing Director for Africa, Rita Laranjinha, as guest of honour. Two separate meetings with human rights defenders and women's groups were organised on the same day. These events offered

opportunities for young women rights defenders to engage with each other. The Delegation's Governance Team and Human Rights Focal Point met the Omdurman Emergency Lawyers Group to discuss human rights violations and the administration of justice. Since the evacuation in April, the Delegation's Human Rights Team has kept in regular contact with human rights organisations, women's organisations and youth groups on the human rights situation. The Delegation is in regular contact beneficiaries under EIDHR programmes, those monitoring and documenting human rights violations such as OHCHR, the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies (ACJPS) and Redress. The EU is a founder, together with OHCHR, of the network of Sudanese human rights defenders and the Ambassador addressed the network in July. The EU has also provided support through INTPA HRD programme. Forthcoming Priorities :

- support accountability and ending impunity;
- support for women and girls and tackle SGBV;
- support Transitional Justice;
- support for Human Rights.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The HRDCS for Sudan was put together with the ambition of re-engaging with the new transitional government which was expected to be established during the political process started by the Framework Agreement of December 2022 and a preliminary plan for re-engagement was set out in the EU HoMs report of March 2023. Also in March the EEAS Managing Director for Africa and the Ambassador met General Burhan, the Chairman of the self-styled Transitional Sovereignty Council and Commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces, and challenged him on the lethal use of live ammunition against peaceful demonstrators and reminded him of his obligation to protect the celebrated prisoner known as 'Tupac' during his pre-trial detention. The April 2023 war has dramatically affected plans for cooperation with the national authorities. The evacuation of the EU DEL and Member States together with the donor community as a whole has been a serious hindrance, coupled with the high turnover of staff and the Human Rights Working Group has stopped functioning. The EU adopted a framework (Council decision 2023/2135) on 9 October 2023 for introducing restrictive measures (sanctions) in view of activities undermining the stability and political transition of Sudan. These measures allow the EU to sanction those who fuel the fuel the conflict, block the transition to civilian rule, hinder humanitarian access or engage in human rights violations. The EU has continued to support CSOs and UN agencies engaged in human rights actions by allowing flexibility in projects and by adapting to the unstable situation on the ground. The needs are many that the EU continues to provide support as far as feasible and this is highly appreciated by both the Sudanese themselves and the Implementing Partners.

4. EU financial engagement: In addition to the ongoing EIDHR projects before the eruption of the war, the Delegation contracted the following projects in 2023 within the NDICI-GE Individual Measures package 2:

- EUR 10 million for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Sudan for monitoring and reporting on violation of human rights during the conflict.

- EUR 5 million with Penal Reform International (PRI) for the improvement of conditions in detention centres.

5. Multilateral context: The mandate of the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) expired in February 2024 after the Sudanese authorities argued against extending the mandate and declared the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (and Head of UNITAMS), Volker Perthes, persona non grata. In addition to the grant to the OHCHR, the EU supports all UN mandates and positions related to investigations of human rights violations, namely: (i) the mandate of the Designated Independent Expert in Sudan (Mr Radhouan Nouicer); (ii) the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (composed of Mohamed Chande Othman, Joy Ezeilo, Mona Rishmawi); (iii) the Personal Envoy for Sudan of the UN Secretary-General (Mr. Ramtane Lamamra). The EU supports the International Criminal Court (ICC) on alleged genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in in Darfur since 2002 ((when the Rome Statute entered into force). The ICC mandate on Darfur began in 2005. The monitoring and reporting activities by the OHCHR in particular are expected to feed the work of these investigative mechanisms, which in turn should provide evidence for the ICC Prosecutor's work.

United Republic of Tanzania

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Vocal calls for a new Constitution and electoral reforms dominated national debate in 2023. Political opposition, civil society and the work of a Presidential Commission on Reforms raised demand for an independent electoral body before upcoming elections in 2024 and 2025. President Samia Suluhu Hassan sustained throughout the year a narrative of '4Rs' representing Reconciliation, Resilience, Reforms and Rebuilding, aimed at maintaining peace and stability in Tanzania, which she defined as a democratic country. Overall, the human rights situation of the country still presents challenges, in particular for some categories of HRDs, for key vulnerable and marginalised population (pastoralist communities, PLWD, LGBTI, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, prisoners), women (especially adolescent girls) and journalists.
A number of key national strategies or reforms are still in process: a second National Human Rights Action Plan; the new Business and Human Rights Action Plan. The Child Marriage Act was also not amended yet, with approximately over 30% of girls married under 18. Several challenges remain due to widespread poverty and substantial weaknesses in protection systems, especially in the rural areas, also because of weak community awareness about some forms of violence (FGM, child marriage, corporal punishment, domestic violence, trafficking of minors). In October 2023 Tanzania hosted the 2nd International Conference on Female Genital Mutilation, organised by the African Union, with support of the EU and UN agencies. Gender equality and women's empowerment is a clear priority for Tanzania under President Samia. Tanzania's advancements include the re-entry policy for girls in the education system (particularly those pregnant), the approval of the new National Gender Policy as well as preparation of revised plans to fight Gender based Violence and the increase of legal aid provisions. The number of women holding top positions (including the Ministers of Defence, Constitutional and legal affairs, Health, Industry and trade, Natural resources and tourism, Community development and gender) clearly bears witness to this engagement.

The Presidential Commission on Criminal Justice Reforms presented in 2023 a report addressing gaps in the criminal justice system. Recommendations included a proposal that death sentences that are not implemented within three years should automatically turn to life sentences. The EU Delegation, Belgium and Ireland also sponsored a multi stakeholder consultation on the abolition of the death penalty organised by the Bar Association. In December 2023, the European Parliament passed a resolution on the Maasai communities in Tanzania, calling on the government to recognise and protect the rights of IPLCs. Freedom of expression continued to be a challenge as seen on the critics of the agreement between UAE-based DP World and the government on the Dar es Salaam port were detained by authorities but later released. The Forum on Internet Freedoms in Africa was held in September 2023 with the Ministers for Information of Uganda and Tanzania, the latter promising that internet will not be shut down at elections time. Same-sex relations are illegal and there is no political will to decriminalise. At least three people received a 30-year prison sentence as part of the LGBTI crackdown in the country (two of them successfully appealed and were released).

2. EU action - key focus areas:

- Protecting and empowering individuals: EU Delegation and Member States have taken gender equality and women empowerment as one of the main priority for this programming period. Gender Based violence, women leadership are prioritized throughout several EU and Member States' programmes and outreach activities. Moreover, the EU continued implementing projects on human rights, in particular related to HRDs and business and human rights in the mining sector.

- Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies: EU Delegation continued to implement projects in the area of Rule of Law, fighting corruption and providing legal aid; democracy and raising voices of youth and women. The EU supported interparty dialogue in Zanzibar, focusing on youth and women members of all main political parties.

- Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy: The EU continued to follow and promote dialogue among civil society engaged in the electoral cycle and between civil society and public authorities on recommendations from election observation and monitoring.

- New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: EU Delegation efforts focused on the digitalisation sector with a newly approved NDICI programme. EU also continued its support to the media sector including in the digital/on-line sphere through civil society.

3.EU bilateral political engagement: The EU and Tanzania held in February 2023 a political dialogue and addressed issues of mutual interest including human rights and democracy, the need to enhance cooperation on gender and youth, and to continue promoting rule of law and fundamental rights.

4. EU financial engagement: Under the NDICI MIP for Tanzania, EUD pursued the implementation of a programme tackling all six priorities of the EU Gender Action Plan III, for an amount of EUR 70 million with an additional EUR 20 million on girls' education. Specific

projects under NDICI-HR / EIDHR and CSO allocations were directed to Human Rights and business in the extractive industry, and the promotion of Human Rights.

5. Multilateral context: Tanzania presented in 2023 a Voluntary National Review of the 2030 Agenda. It reports, among other things, that the NHRI investigated almost 10,000 cases and 'resolved' 5,000 of them. Tanzania has not ratified the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). Tanzania submitted the latest State Party report to the HRC in 2009. On the list of issues prior to reporting related to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICPR) Cycle, the Tanzania report was due in April 2022, UN OHCHR is supporting the preparation of the report thought a dedicated roadmap. The State Party Report was scheduled for submission at the end of 2023. The Government still works of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) report, due since March 2020. The report on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRDP) is under finalisation but still due. Likewise, the reporting on the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) and others are still due. It should however be noted that the 77th Ordinary Session of the AfCHPR in October 2023was hosted and financed by Tanzania. As a follow-up to the UPR, the UN in Tanzania will be supporting the Ministry of Constitutional and Legal Affairs in defining a strategy on mid-term review and reporting 2024 and support to National Consultations. CSOs have elaborated a matrix to follow up the implementation of UPR recommendations. The 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was commemorated with the presence of the East Africa Regional Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who also engaged with authorities. The EU and Member States collaborated with UN Women, UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF in activities and campaigns against gender-based violence, including child marriage.

Togolese Republic

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The Human rights and democracy situation in Togo did not really improve in 2023. The country has seen no real political alternation for 57 years, and is ruled with a presidential system. At present, the National Assembly is re-examining (after having approved it a first time) a proposal to reform the Constitution, which will change the country system from presidential to parliamentarian, thereby giving the effective power to a President of the Council of Ministers (PCM), while the President of the Republic would have only a ceremonial role. However, the timing of the proposal (voted after the end of the mandate of the Assembly) and the lack of a real public debate on its main features raises doubts on the legitimacy of this process. In the new system, there would not be limits for the number of mandates for the PCM. In this context, tensions between the presidential majority and the opposition have increased, protest manifestations were forbidden and some opponents were arrested. Three political opponents remain in prison despite a judicial ruling ordering their release, and the rulings of the ECOWAS Court of Justice condemning the Togolese government for torture and arbitrary detention have not been executed.

The freedom of press and media is limited. Independent media are often shut down, and there is evidence that the spyware Pegasus has been used against journalists and human rights activists. In February 2023, two newspapers were suspended for three months, and in March,

a court found *L'Alternative* director Ferdinand Ayité and editor in chief Isidore Kouwonou guilty of criminal insult and false news and sentenced them to three years in prison. Both men fled the country. Space for civil society has also been shrinking, notably with the entry into force in April 2023 of a decree requiring NGOs to align their activities to the Government development priorities and to notify local officials of their activities. The terrorist emergency in the North, with the militarisation of border areas, could lead to further limitations. Legislative elections were planned for 20 April 2024, but then postponed, so far without a specific date, together with regional elections that have kept being postponed since 2021.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU is actively engaged to promote dialogue, de-escalate political tensions and promote human rights in Togo. The EU Delegation closely follows the evolution of the situation and encourages all the Togolese political actors to choose dialogue in order to reach ultimately sustainable solutions based, as much as possible, on consensus, for the challenges that the country is facing. EU action in support of human rights and democracy in Togo focuses on:

- improving social cohesion in the North of the country
- capacity-building of civil society and human rights organisation as well as local authorities on human rights and gender mainstreaming
- promoting women leadership and improving their economic power
- empowering civil society in areas like freedom of expression and freedom of assembly

3. EU bilateral political engagement: On 9 October 2023, the EU and Member States held the 24th Partnership Dialogue meeting with the Togolese authorities. In general, the meeting confirmed the good relations between EU and Togo and saw some more openness (compared e.g. to the previous year) from the Togolese counterpart to discuss human rights related matters, though without dramatic progress in this field. Togolese authorities stated their availability to consider decriminalising opinions expressed by journalists in social networks and accessing the optional CEDAW Protocol.

4. EU financial engagement: Consistently with the Programming Joint Document (2021-2027), the EU, Germany and France adopt a joint-cooperation strategy along three priority areas aligned with the Government 'Togo 2025 roadmap' , and three Team Europe Initiatives (TEI) for the period 2021-2024:

- Support for socio-economic inclusion and human development, through support for widespread access to and quality improvement of public services (water, sanitation, education, health, culture, energy, connectivity): EUR 50.75 million
- Support for the development of sustainable agro-industries, the management of natural resources and the protection of biodiversity: 50.75 M EUR
- Support for the consolidation of a peaceful and resilient society, with a particular support for peace and security, the rule of law, the modernisation of public action and decentralisation: EUR 29 million

- supporting measures for the Cooperation Facility/support to the civil society: EUR 14.5 million
- TEI 'energy and connectivity': EU 35.3 million
- TEI 'sustainable agribusiness': EUR 41.1 million
- TEI 'Decentralisation and Local Governance': EUR 29.5 million

5. Multilateral context: In promoting human rights and democracy, the EU Delegation and Member States Embassies work together to build a conducive political dialogue with both Togolese authorities and other stakeholders in the framework of the Cotonou agreement between the EU and ACP countries. The coordination of international engagement in Togo is especially ensured by the so-called 'Group of the Five' (G5), which includes the ambassadors of Germany, France, and United States, the UN system coordination mechanism, and the EU Delegation itself. Last UPR on Togo was in 2022, next one is scheduled for 2026.

Republic of Uganda

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Despite avenues for independent media, religious expression and the activities of civil society organisations, respect for human rights and democratic principles continues to be impeded in Uganda. The Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023, enacted on 26 May introduced strict penalties for same-sex relations, including the death penalty for 'aggravated' homosexuality. Following its enactment, human rights organisations documented an increase in attacks against the LGBTI community. Despite progressive policies aimed at gender equality, gender-based violence, teenage pregnancies and child labour remain at high levels. The government's strategies to combat these challenges highlight a commitment to improvement, though effective implementation remains lacking. Political and civic space remained tightly controlled, with the police's suspension of a nationwide opposition mobilisation campaign highlighting the use of public order concerns to curtail freedom of association and peaceful assembly.
Legacy issues since the 2021 elections, including opposition supporters who are still missing, continue to provoke calls for transparency and accountability. The government allows thousands of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to operate freely, albeit under a heavy bureaucratic burden and with a special focus on the operations of those focusing on governance, human rights, and environmental activism. The Constitutional Court overturned certain restrictions on online speech, which arose from the Computer Misuse Act. However, obstacles remain, including the levying of taxes on data and limitations on social media platforms, affecting media freedoms and the right to digital expression.

Efforts to ensure transparent judicial appointments and uphold the principles of separation of powers must be reinforced to develop trust in democratic institutions. Despite these hurdles, religious groups generally enjoyed the ability to practice freely, contributing to a diverse societal fabric. Meanwhile, land disputes and social inequalities illustrate the complex relationship between development, resource allocation, and community rights.

Regional disparities in access to education, health, and economic opportunities underscore the need for increased efforts to distribute resources more evenly across regions in order to

reduce inequalities and promoting inclusive growth. In terms of democratic institutions, concerns about the independence of Parliament and the capacity of lawmakers to effectively carry out their duties persist. At the lower government level, District Governments routinely complain of a chronic lack of resources while the Electoral Commission in 2023 failed to organise elections for thousands of village and parish-level positions, due to a delay in the release of funding from the central government. A district chairperson by-election in the east of the country in June was marred by allegations of intimidation and irregularities.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, the Team Europe Initiative Gender for Development (G4DU) finalized its action, allocating EUR 40 million to address key barriers to adolescent girls' education, including financial hurdles, WASH facilities, and the need for gender-responsive teaching. An additional EUR 20 million focuses on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and gender-based violence (SGBV), underlining their impact on education. High-level visits and advocacy efforts emphasized education investment and SRHR support. The EU advanced land and environmental rights through public advocacy and project funding, including legal aid for land rights defenders and initiatives promoting secure land tenure. Dialogues with TotalEnergies and engagement in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) underscored the EU's commitment to human rights compliance in business practices. Significant efforts in forestry conservation and sustainable land management were highlighted. Civic and political space received attention through support for human rights defenders (HRDs) and the launch of Phase II of the Civil Society in Uganda Support Programme (CUSP II). The EU facilitated dialogue for a conducive civil society environment and responded to challenges posed by the Anti-Homosexuality Act by increasing support for affected organizations. Business and human rights (BHR) activities included engaging with businesses and government to promote human rights compliance, highlighted by a conference on BHR in East Africa and workshops focusing on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive. Projects aimed at ending child labour in supply chains and ensuring responsible land governance were initiated, emphasizing sustainable and rights-respecting business practices. Digital rights and internet governance efforts focused on promoting open regulation, evidenced by support for digital service provision and multi-stakeholder dialogues on digital for development (D4D) initiatives. These comprehensive actions across various sectors illustrate the EU's multi-faceted approach to promoting development, human rights, and sustainable practices in Uganda.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU took several steps to address issues with Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023. Throughout the year, the EU and its member countries participated in various public activities and discussions to promote human rights and democracy. They marked special days like the International Day of Democracy and World Press Freedom Day, and also held a ceremony to honour human rights defenders and award one recipient with the EU Human Rights Award.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU Delegation secured approval for a new EUR 15 million programme on governance and accountability. The overall objective of this new funding is to strengthen the social contract between the State and Ugandan citizens through more accountable public administration, improved governance mechanisms and the advancement of human rights. In 2023, the EU Delegation also signed grant contracts with seven CSOs for a total of EUR 3.9 million. These projects are aimed at increasing capacity for human rights monitoring, documentation and reporting and also combatting child labour.

5. Multilateral context: In August, the Uganda country office of United Nations Human Rights was shut down ending an 18-year mission. Uganda's human rights situation was scrutinised during the 138th Human Rights Committee Session in Geneva in June. Despite noting some improvements, the Committee expressed concerns including the Anti-Homosexuality Act, police brutality, and judicial corruption. Their recommendations, issued in July called for substantial reforms, including bolstering the national human rights institution, repealing laws discriminating against LGBTI individuals, and improving detainees' legal rights and conditions. At the 77th ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, Uganda presented its 2013-2022 report, highlighting legislative reforms, anti-discrimination efforts, and the restriction of the death penalty to severe crimes. The report also acknowledged ongoing challenges, such as climate change effects, resource constraints, and the complexities of technological advancements. In December, Uganda co-hosted the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva, showcasing its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF).

Republic of Zambia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: After initiation of important democratic reforms in 2022 (abolition of the death penalty, abolition of the criminal offence of defamation of the President from the Penal Code, adoption of Child Code), 2023 has seen a more moderate progress in implementing reforms. Adopting a long awaited Access to Information Act in December 2023 marked a major positive achievement. The Public Order Act repeal and replacement preparatory process has reportedly advanced, but the draft has not been formally submitted to the National Assembly. Meanwhile cases of selective use of the current Act by law enforcement to restrict freedom of assembly and freedom of expression have been reported, in particular in situations involving activity of opposition political parties. There has been limited progress on electoral reform, with only 2 out of 22 EU Election Observation Mission recommendations implemented since 2021. Access to justice was still problematic for the majority of Zambians, mostly due to lack of awareness, financial resources and access to legal services. The conditions in detention facilities remained problematic. A prison audit commissioned by the Government identified key challenges to be addressed, including persons kept in pre-detention for extended periods of time without charges or issues related to juvenile justice. No progress was made towards a law criminalising torture. Rights of women and girls continued to be restricted, with a high prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence and under-age marriage. Women experienced significant challenges in participation in the political, social and economic spheres. Sexual and reproductive health and rights remained a key issue, reflected in the country's alarmingly high adolescent pregnancy rate. In December 2023 a New Gender Policy was adopted. The issue of LGBTI persons has been highly politicised and consequently highly sensitive to address. Consensual same-sex relations continue to be criminalised in the Penal Code. The rights of persons with disabilities remained restricted with regard to access to basic social services. The Zambia Agency for Persons with Disabilities remains insufficiently funded.

2. EU action - key focus areas:

- The enhancement of good governance practices, including the fight against corruption, improved civic and political rights, and natural resource management;

- The promotion of a fair, independent and efficient justice system, including the fight against impunity, the right to a fair trial, the rights of persons in detention, and the abolition of the death penalty (achieved during the reporting year);

- The advancement of women's and girls' rights, including sexual and reproductive health rights and the fight against gender-based violence;

- The promotion of economic, social and cultural rights, including for children and their right to good education and good health;

- The cultivation of an environment of non-discrimination, with a focus on the rights of marginalised groups.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In 2023, human rights and democracy issues continued to feature prominently in political dialogues with the Government and interactions with key stakeholders. The Zambia-EU Partnership Dialogue took place in January 2024, covering a wide range of bilateral and multilateral issues, including governance, rule of law, human rights and gender equality. The EU has also engaged regularly with human rights defenders, civil society, media organisations and oversight institutions. The EU Delegation joined with dedicated events a number of international human rights campaigns, including the Press Freedom Day, 16 Days of Activism against Sexual and Gender-based violence and 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU and the Member States are among the key development partners for Zambia. Dedicated projects are in place to support different categories of rights. EnACT programme is dedicated to Access to Justice, Civil Society participation and Transparency (over EUR 20 million, co-funded by Germany, implemented by GIZ). Democracy Strengthening in Zambia (EUR 11 million co-funded by Germany, Sweden, Ireland, France, EU, USAID, FCDO and UNDP, implemented by UNDP) supports various electoral and governance stakeholders. The EU provides technical assistance to the National Assembly to support its budgetary oversight mandate and communication. The Anti-Corruption Commission and the Office of the Auditor General are supported through Twinning with specialised public institutions from Finland, Austria, Germany and Croatia. The EU and the Government of Zambia agreed to start a budget support programme focusing on health, education and public procurement. Early childhood education, SGBV protection and promotion of sexual and reproductive health rights are also the main focus of a new EUR 50 million action approved in 2023. EU's support to women's and girls' rights through Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Programme (NATWAMPANE, EUR 24 million) concluded in 2023 provided legal and psychological assistance to more than 54.000 victims of domestic violence in Luapula and Northern provinces. At the community level, the EU helps advancing the rights of the child through inclusive education. Through the Human Rights and Democracy Instrument, the EU provided grants to five Civil society organisations (CSOs) promoting environment of non-discrimination. At the end 2023, EU awarded new grants to support protection of environmental rights in the mining sector and strengthening Zambian CSOs. In 2023, EU approved a new Initiative Nexus Water Energy Zambia (NEWZA) of the total budget of over EUR 110 million supporting rights to water and sanitation and started a land governance project and a land audit to support strengthening of land rights in Zambia.

5. Multilateral context: Zambia had an active multilateral engagement in 2023, being the Chair of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security as well as the Chair of the African Group of Negotiators at the UNFCCC. The EU reached out to the Zambian government regarding a number of multilateral initiatives, including COP 28 in Dubai. President Hichilema participated in the Paris Summit for a 'New Global Financial Pact' in June 2023 as well as the G20 Compact with Africa summit in Berlin in November 2023.

Republic of Zimbabwe

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Since gaining independence in 1980, the ruling party, ZANU-PF, has been in power. The recent elections, including presidential, parliamentary, provincial and local authorities' contests, took place on 23-24 August 2023. While relatively peaceful on the surface, the elections faced internal and external criticisms, raising concerns about the country's democratic processes and the need for electoral reforms. In the months leading to and in the aftermath of the elections, human rights monitoring organisations documented an increase in human rights violations, including threats, harassment, intimidation, assault and discrimination. The democratic and civic space has considerably further contracted, culminating with the Government enacting amendments to the criminal code to impose harsher penalties for 'unpatriotic acts'. Furthermore, the Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill passed through both the Assembly and Senate, and even without being signed into law, resulted in mounting pressure, fear and self-censorship among civil society. In addition to this intimidating environment for civil society organisations (CSOs), it has become increasingly difficult for them to access communities due to a multi-layered structure of official requirements imposed by central and local government authorities. Zimbabwe's socio-economic situation remains dire and is worsening. Despite some positive macro-economic indicators, the rise in poverty and food insecurity that the country has experienced over the last decade is concerning and impacting directly and indirectly on economic, social and cultural rights of the Zimbabweans.

2. EU action - key focus areas:

- Protecting and empowering individuals

The EU is engaged in supporting the Zimbabwean Human Rights Commission to enhance its capacity to deliver in its mandate. This includes facilitating access to national documentation, promoting a human rights-based electoral process and advocating for good governance.

The EU is collaborating with the United Nations on the Spotlight Initiative, to eliminate GBV. It also supports initiatives such as the Musasa Project, focusing on enhancing the protection and safety of women and girls affected by GBV.

Youth inclusion stands as a key priority, evident in the ongoing efforts through the Team Europe Youth Sounding Board for Zimbabwe. Comprising youth from all ten provinces of the country, this group plays an important role in advising, monitoring and informing the EU on matters of youth inclusion, ensuring diverse perspectives are considered.

- Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies

Continuing its firm support for the protection of human rights and the enforcement of the 2013 Constitution, the EU has extended assistance to the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human

Rights. This support provides legal services and litigation, provision of medical and psychosocial support, rights literacy, as well as dedicated research and advocacy.

In the area of social cohesion and conflict resolution, the EU is collaborating with DanChurchAid. The ongoing support focuses on inclusive civic participation activities and aims to enhance the capacities of local peace structures.

- Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy

A significant EU effort was the support, through UNDP, for the Capacity Building Project of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), aimed at ensuring its independence, impartiality, transparency and professionalism. However, EU support was terminated following evidence of lack of independence and transparency of the ZEC in the run up to and during the elections.

The EU supports the Zimbabwe Institute for the 'Supporting Dialogue in Zimbabwe – Interparty Dialogue, Civil Society Strengthening and Engagement' project. The focus is on fostering inter-party political dialogue and training polling agents.

3.EU bilateral political engagement: The EU has maintained close contact with and supported a wide range of CSOsThese interactions occurred both bilaterally and jointly within the EU Member States. In 2023, the focus on the elections resulted in particularly robust engagement with electoral CSOs leading up to, during, and after the elections. The EU Exploratory Mission and the EU Electoral Observation Mission played a crucial role in intensifying EU collaboration with human rights CSOs throughout the country. The "Arrears Clearance and Debt Resolution" dialogue platform is a government-led initiative initiated by the President and facilitated by a former President of Mozambique, and the President of the African Development Bank Group. The EU Ambassador co-chairs one of the three tracks of the process, on Good Governance reforms, along with the Minister of Justice. To date, this political process has successfully identified 16 specific sub-indicators from independent and internationally recognised indices, which are included in the National Development Strategy to measure progress in governance reforms. It is noteworthy that various CSOs have been incorporated into the process, although their participation could be improved. The process was paused before the elections and it is likely to be fully resumed in 2024, factoring in the additional challenges identified during the elections.

4. EU financial engagement: EU development cooperation in Zimbabwe will contribute to improving the civil and political, as well as the economic, social and cultural rights. The NDICI Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2021-2024 amounted to EUR 148 million and is complemented by thematic instruments.

5. Multilateral context: Zimbabwe is part of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process and the Human Rights Council conducted its review in January 2022, with the outcomes adopted by the Human Rights Council in July 2022. During this review, Zimbabwe received 264 recommendations, of which the government accepted 168 of them and noted 96. During the intense 2023 electoral year, the Government has not communicated further follow-up to the UPR recommendations.

Zimbabwe has ratified the majority of the UN Human Rights Treaties, with the exceptions being the Convention against Torture and the Convention against Enforced Disappearances. While the country has traditionally lagged behind in fulfilling reporting obligations under

international treaties, the government has recently made some efforts, resulting in the submission of several reports in the last two years.

Arabian Peninsula

Kingdom of Bahrain

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, Bahrain continued to improve its human rights record, notably in the area of social and economic rights and women's rights, largely according to recommendations from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2022.

Since 2012, Bahrain has taken a number of steps, establishing three Human Rights Institutions: the National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR), the Ombudsman in the Ministry of the Interior and the Committee for the Rights of Prisoners. These institutions record complaints, refer suspected cases of human rights violations to the law enforcement authorities and conduct unannounced prison visits. Bahrain's NHRI is undergoing accreditation process in order to comply with the Paris principles.

The country scheme of alternative sentences, extended since 2017, has been benefitting almost 6,300 people so far. Alternative sentences may include community service, home detention, exclusion orders, non-contact orders, electronic tagging, rehabilitation programs or compensation.

Bahrein is implementing its National Action Plan (2022-2026) – the first of such document in the region - setting out a roadmap with 102 priorities for the next five years in various areas such as civil, economic and social rights. 33 projects identified in the strategy have been implemented.

Most death sentences were commuted to life sentences. There are currently 26 individuals on death row - having exhausted all legal remedies. However, there have been no executions in the country since 2019.

Bahrain continued to promote interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence. Given country's unique multicultural concept of tolerance and coexistence, religious and expatriate minorities can practice their religion. Freedom of expression and association remains limited in Bahrain even if freedom assembly is more respected. Non-violent demonstrations took place in 2023 without any reported incident.

Bahrain continued to promote women's rights and gender equality throughout government policies. Women's participation in labour force has reached 44.3% in 2023. In May 2023, Bahrain abolished Article 353 of the Penal Code, a provision that allowed rapists to get their charges dropped if they married their victims. Nationality law still contains gender discriminatory features.

2. EU action - key focus areas: *Protecting and empowering individuals:* In the context of the EU-Bahrain human rights dialogue held in October 2023, the EU raised individual cases of people serving lengthy prison terms since their arrest in 2011. The EU welcomed Bahrain's

active engagement in the last cycle of UPR in 2022. In August 2023, a number of prisoners in the Jau Rehabilitation and Reform Centre started a hunger strike to protest against their conditions of detention. The ombudswoman deepened her investigation and made recommendation to improve the detainee detention conditions. Bahraini authorities agreed to offer prisoners extra rights, such as the increase of the amount of phone calls, the duration of visits and time spent outdoors, reduced communication costs as well as increasing the number of inmates allowed to study.

Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies: Bahrain holds elections every four years since 2002. The latest elections were held in November 2022 where the representatives of the Majlis An-Nuwab, the lower house of the national assembly, were renewed. The elections witnessed an increased participation of voters in comparison to the 2018 vote, but previously dissolved opposition political societies ''Al Wefaq'' and ''Wa'ad'' were not allowed to run nor were their former members. The EU has commended the ongoing efforts of Bahrain in promoting interfaith dialogue, and has committed to continue supporting its efforts to foster the inclusiveness and openness of the society. The EU co-organised a second edition of its high scale conference promoting religious freedom and belief on 2-4 May 2023 in Manama.

Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy: Bahrain is a party to the core UN human rights treaties but has not ratified the Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture, the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on the abolition of the death penalty, nor the Convention on Enforced Disappearances. The EU Delegation has maintained communication with the UN Office in Manama and has coordinated common messages on the ratification of these conventions, as well as on reforms related to the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: The EU has highlighted to Bahraini authorities that freedom of expression both offline and online remains a foundation for democracy and stability, inviting to oppose any legislation, prohibiting freedom of expression, as well as condemning intimidation. The EU welcomes the decision to include 11 projects dedicated to enhancing digital rights in the National Human Rights Plan 2022-2026.

Delivering by working together: The EU and the Member States worked closely in monitoring the human rights situation in the country, including as a follow up to the EU-Bahrain human rights dialogue.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The seventh EU-Human Rights dialogue covered a broad range of topics such as freedom of expression and association, rule of law, the right to a fair trial, including certain individual cases, and the death penalty. The EU welcomed the progress made by Bahrain on women's rights, as well as the ongoing efforts to promote interfaith dialogue, and to counter human trafficking. The EU encouraged Bahrain to continue along this path, and to maintain its wider human rights obligations, especially as regards to human rights defenders. The EU also noted the ongoing efforts to implement the National Human Rights Action Plan. Cooperation in multilateral fora was also discussed. The EU encouraged Bahrain to ratify the remaining core international human rights instruments.[20]

[20] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/bahrain-7th-eu-bahrain-human-rights-dialogue-held-brussels_en

4. EU financial engagement: Under the FPI funded "Enhanced EU-GCC Political Dialogue, Cooperation and Outreach", women empowerment remains one of the priorities identified for projects. During the latest Human Rights Dialogue, the possibility for the EU to support Bahrain's National Human Rights Action Plan was discussed.

5. Multilateral context: Bahrain is forging synergies between recommendations made during the 41st session of the UPR in November 2022 and its National Action Plan. Bahrain seems also ready to consider recommendations, which had been "noted" during the previous UPR exercise. The abolition of Article 353 of the Penal Code (allowing rapists to marry their victim to avoid criminal liability) is a good example.

In the 54th session of the Human Rights Council, the EU welcomed recent improvements of the human rights situation in Bahrain, including on women's rights, encouraged Bahrain to continue along this path and to maintain its wider human rights obligations, especially as regards human rights defenders.

Republic of Iraq

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The establishment of the Government of Prime Minister Sudani in October 2022 has set Iraq on a new path of greater stability, allowing it to exit the political deadlock of the previous year. The Ministerial programme presented by PM Sudani and approved by the Parliament places the fight against corruption as its top priority, and it includes actions to advance Human Rights and the empowerment of women.

In December 2023, elections took place for provincial councils in 15 Governorates of Iraq (excluding the 3 Governorates of the Kurdish Region). While the turnout was modest (41%), the vote took place in an overall orderly and peaceful manner.

Although Iraq has made some steps in the right direction, the overall situation in the country is still of great concern. Freedom of expression, association and assembly continue to face challenges, including the targeting of activists and HR defenders. Civil society organisations and NGOs have been facing obstacles to perform their activities freely. Gender equality is still significantly held back in Iraq, including in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) where existing legislation is not implemented. The position of LGBTI people in Iraq has further deteriorated, with renewed discussions in Parliament to introduce legislation that criminalises homosexuality and provides for the death-penalty for LGBTI+ individuals. Moreover, death penalty continues to be applied under the Law on Counterterrorism. Despite serious concerns on due process in trials, authorities carried out at least 13 judicial executions in December 2023.

In the KRI, the human rights situation remained very difficult in 2023, especially concerning freedom of expression and the promotion of gender equality and equal rights. The judiciary continues to be subject to political pressure and there is no meaningful oversight of the

security forces. The ongoing political and economic crisis, including the continuous postponements of the regional elections, has contributed to a poor human rights situation.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU´s human rights policy in Iraq continued to focus on support to strengthening democratic institutions and supporting the fight against corruption and socioeconomic reforms. The EU further engaged on the protection of HR defenders, women's empowerment, the protection of communities, as well as national and social reconciliation. The EU regularly advocated for Iraq, including the KRI, to adhere to the core tenets of international human rights law. The European Union Advisory Mission to Iraq (EUAM) continued to work with the Government of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government to mainstream human rights principles within the civilian security sector.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In 2023, the greater political stability following the government formation and the increasingly positive trajectory of EU-Iraq relations gave a renewed impetus to fully engage on a number of topics, including political and Human Rights dialogue. In July 2023, Iraq and the EU held the 4th Sub-Committee on Human Rights and Democracy in Brussels, under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. The meeting took place in a constructive and friendly atmosphere with Iraq showing willingness to openly engage with the EU, and both sides raising issues of concern[21]. Throughout the year, the EU has engaged in regular meetings with civil society organisations active in the promotion of HR all over the country and has continued its political dialogue on HR matters with the Iraqi authorities, both federal and the KRI.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU supported an array of activities falling within the eight priorities identified in the Iraq HRDCS 2020-2024, through various EU financial instruments.

Priority 1: Right to Fair Trial, Detention Conditions, and Abolition of Death Penalty: The EU has been implementing since 2022 a project with Norwegian People's Aid entitled "Promoting the right to fair trial, improving detention conditions and abolishing torture in Iraq".

Priority 2: Protection of Human Rights Defenders: Throughout early 2023, the project entitled "Protecting Human Rights Defenders: Securing a movement for Human Rights" implemented by the Iraqi Al Amal Association provided important support to HR defenders.

Priority 3: Promoting Gender Equality and Equal Rights: The EU continued to reinforce the actions mainstreaming women empowerment across all programming. In addition, a dedicated Financing Decision will support access to quality education for girls.

Priority 4: Freedom of Expression, Independent Media and Access to Information: While dedicated projects were discontinued in 2022, an approach of mainstreaming was adopted pending the commissioning of a new project dedicated to promoting freedom of expression planned for 2024.

Priority 5: Accountable Institutions and Fighting Corruption: In 2023, the EU funded the project "Support to justice initiatives curbing corruption and promoting commercial dispute

[21] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-statement-4th-eu-iraq-subcommittee-human-rights-and-democracy_en

resolution". In addition, the EU-funded project in the thematic areas of public finance management and financial sector reform continued in 2023 to work on critical aspects of corruption. The EU-funded project for private sector development continued the engagement for the promotion of integrity of businesses.

Priority 6: Rule of Law and Security Sector Reform: The EU funded the anti-corruption and commercial justice project implemented by UNDP "Support to justice initiatives curbing corruption and promoting commercial dispute resolution" In addition, the EU funded the project with Norwegian People's Aid "Promoting the right to fair trial, improving detention conditions and abolishing torture in Iraq".

Priority 7 Economic, social and cultural Rights, including Education: In 2023 the EU remained fully committed to mainstreaming economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to education through its large cooperation portfolio of national reform programmes. As regards economic rights, the labour governance project with ILO "Enhancing Labour Governance, Inspection and Working Conditions in Response to COVID-19" concluded in 2023 with important deliverables. To continue the successful engagement, the EU contracted a new project at the end of 2023 "Building Equitable and Inclusive Transformation (BEIT): Towards Decent Work and Affordable Housing in Iraq" that will continue the promotion of decent work conditions, seek to end child labour in Iraq, but also support public works and affordable housing. In relation to social rights, the EU funded in 2023 the social protection programme with UNICEF, ILO and WFP "Social Protection Programme for Iraq: Leveraging Effective Response and Accelerating Reform". Concerning the right to education, and with large previous engagement concluded at the end of 2022, the EU focussed on the preparation of a new large programme in support of the implementation of the Iraq National Education Strategy with UNESCO and UNICEF through the project "Equitable Quality Education in Iraq: Improved Teaching and Learning and Enhanced Educational Management ITALEEM".

Priority 8: Political Participation, Free and Fair Elections, and a Functioning Parliament: In late 2023, reflections started on a new project that will be contracted in 2024 aimed at supporting Political Participation, Free and Fair Elections, and a Functioning Parliament as well as Independent Media and Access to Information.

5. Multilateral context: Iraq is a State Party to the main international human rights instruments, although it has not implemented all of them. The EU Delegation together with Member States' Missions conducted several demarches with Iraqi authorities on Human Rights issues in the context of the UN fora. Iraq expressed its intention to apply for UN Human Rights Council membership for the period 2026 – 2028.

State of Kuwait

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The Kuwait parliament plays a strong role in the national governance system, which is unique in the region. The last snap elections took place on 6 June 2023 to elect 50 of the 65 members of the National Assembly, with no significant irregularities noted.

On the empowerment of women and girls, Kuwait achieved positive developments. Although women outnumber men in workforce, the political representation of women remains a challenge, as Kuwait had only one female member of parliament and no female ministers at the end of the year compared to higher representation previously. Women's representation in senior Government positions and state owned companies improved in 2023. The World Bank's*Women, Business, and the Law Index* in 2023, as well as in 2022, gave Kuwait 35.0 points out of 100 (an improvement from the 28.8 points in 2021). Kuwait established a National Committeeon protection from domestic violence. However, there has been an increase in gender-based violence cases. Efforts are still underway to abolish Article 153 of the Penal Code, which establishes a reduced sentence for "honour killings" targeting women.

In its fourth periodic review on Kuwait's implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in November 2023, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern about exceptions to Article 29 of Kuwait's Constitution, which prohibits gender-based discrimination, particularly those provided for in the 1984 Personal Status Law and leading to unequal treatment of women, notably in matters of marriage, divorce, parental authority, inheritance, testimony value in courts, and inheritance rights.

In July, Kuwait executed five persons. The EEAS issued a statement[22] noting with concern the increasing use of capital punishment in the country. The UN Human Rights Committee noted that death penalty sentences are handed down for drug-related offences that do not qualify as "the most serious crimes".

"Kuwaitization" – the replacement of migrant workers with Kuwaiti nationals in the workforce – continued through the year, intensifying concerns among foreign workers in Kuwait. In 2023, the Government also proceeded with measures targeting migrant workers; including the termination of some contracts in the public sector, suspension or withdrawal of driving licenses, ongoing suspension of family residence visas for most categories of migrant workers, as well as administrative deportations for minor administrative offences – without the right to challenge deportations in the courts.

The "Kafala" sponsorship system, which binds foreign nationals to an employer as a sponsor in the country, has not been abolished in Kuwait, thus continuing to raise concerns on exploitation and abuse. The UN Human Rights Committee welcomed several measures adopted by Kuwait to reduce the control of employers over workers (and therefore limiting the use of the "Kafala"), such as the requirement on employers to transfer wages to employee's bank accounts, the decision to allow workers to change jobs without the employer's consent under certain conditions, and the setting of a minimum wage.

Stateless persons ("Bidoons") continue to face discrimination. The UN Human Rights Committee noted that "Bidoon" persons ("illegal residents" by Kuwait's definition) do not have access to nationality and identity documents, or face difficulties renewing them or accessing basic services. In addition, they do not have the right to participate in public protests. The stateless "Bidoon" children continue being discriminated in their access to essential social services, such as education or healthcare.

Kuwait's media landscape is relatively free compared to other countries in the region. However,freedom of expression or opinion is subjected to the control of Kuwaiti state

[22] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/kuwait-statement-spokesperson-todays-executions_en

authorities, particularly as regards social media. As a positive development, Emiri Amnesty pardoned a number of political dissidents and opposition members. “Offensive” content – suchas LGBTI characters in movies and symbols – remains censored or banned. Freedom of assembly and association is guaranteed only to Kuwaiti citizens. The negative trend on LGBTI rights continued, following the unprecedented campaign againstLGBTI persons launched in 2022. LGBTI persons, particularly non-Kuwaitis keep facing major legal and social challenges, including arrests and deportations of migrant workers and tourists.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU engaged on a regular basis with Kuwaiti institutions dealing with human rights, mainlyin the context of the EU-Kuwait Human Rights Dialogue and worked closely with likeminded countries and international organizations to encourage further advancement of human rights inthe country. In terms of activities, the EUDEL Kuwait organized a variety of events, such as the workshop on the nexus between translation and human rights, aimed to equip students to prepare awareness campaigns on migrant workers’ rights. Another activity was the seminar on “Supporting a Just Transition in Kuwait: Decent Jobs for a Sustainable Future” organized in partnership with the ILO and the Supreme Council for Planning and Development in September. The EUDEL Kuwait used social media to mark all human rights’ related events and internationaldays with social media posts. “Kuwait Society for Human Rights”, a Kuwaiti NGO, won the 2023 Chaillot Prize for the Promotion of Human Rights in the GCC region.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU expanded its engagement with Kuwait on human rights. On 5 December, the EEAS and Kuwait conducted the fourth informal Human Rights Dialogue in Brussels, with representation of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other governmental institutions and agencies. The meeting took place in a constructive and friendly atmosphere with Kuwait showing willingness to openly engage with the EU, and both sides raising issues of concern.[23]

4. EU financial engagement: The EU Delegation does not have a dedicated budget for supporting local civil society and human rights organisations. The Foreign Policy Instrument sponsored facility “EU Outreach Facility for the Gulf” is used to conduct human rights projects.

5. Multilateral context: The fourth EU-Kuwait Human Rights Dialogue provided an opportunity to exchange views on human rights in international fora. Kuwait was elected the member of the Human Rights Council for 2024-2026.

Sultanate of Oman

[23] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/kuwait-fourth-human-rights-dialogue-european-union-held-brussels_en

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: 2023 was a year of continuity and stability in Oman's human rights situation in line with the trend seen since Sultan Haitham took office in January 2020. The Omani authorities have exerted efforts to maintain a delicate balance between the more conservative and the more progressive elements of Omani society. The authorities show respect for individual as well as social rights and courts are generally impartial, however, freedom of expression remains limited. Political parties are not permitted, and the authorities do not tolerate other forms of organized political opposition. Overall, socio-economic rights are generally respected in the Sultanate, especially for Omani nationals, even though a conservative view on women's role prevails in the Omani society.

In October, Majlis Shura elections took place. Oman is the first Gulf country having allowed electronic voting with biometric IDs. Out of the 843 candidates running for the elections, none of the 32 women succeeded in being elected. In contrast, Sultan Haitham appointed 18 women, among the 86 members, to the State Council in November 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: *Protecting and empowering individuals:* Although significant progress has been achieved in protecting and empowering women, discrimination in legislation on specific issues (e.g. in case of inheritance, divorce, child custody) needs to be addressed. In April 2023, as a positive development, a royal decree was issued, authorizing marriages of the Omani nationals with foreigners, both for women and men, without prior approval by state. No change has been announced regarding conferring Omani nationality to children of mixed marriages, in case the mother is Omani.

Labour rights: In July 2023, a new Social Protection Law and a new Labour Law were approved. Developed with the support of the International Labour Organization, the legislation radically reshapes the social protection system in Oman. This includes the establishment of a unified pension system for Omani workers across all economic sectors, the enhancement of social insurance benefits during working life, the reduction of weekly working hours from 45 to 40, and the establishment of life-cycle guarantees for the most vulnerable segments of society. The law also requires a pension fund for expatriate workers to be established instead of end of service payments, and extends maternity and sick leave for Omani nationals to expatriate workers. However, it is unclear whether the new legislation covers domestic and agriculture workers, and it does not establish a minimum salary for expatriate workers.

Abolition of death penalty: The death penalty remains in place for murder and a number of other offences, such as drug trafficking, piracy and treason. Death sentences require unanimity from all the members of the court and they need the final approval of the Sultan to be executed. A limited number of executions were publicly reported in 2023, and others were carried out in previous years without publicity, complicating the collection of information on this subject.

Delivering by working together: Throughout 2023, the EU monitored the human rights situation in the country including freedom of expression, women's rights, labour rights and trafficking in human beings. The EU Delegation accredited to Oman was in regular contact with resident EU Heads of Mission, coordinating EU positions on human rights matters and liaising with the authorities in Muscat.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Oman is an important EU partner and there is an on-going political dialogue at many levels where domestic reforms feature on the discussions. Following the signature of the Cooperation Arrangement between the EEAS and Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in September 2018, senior officials meetings have taken place encompassing an enhanced political dialogue component and sectoral policy cooperation discussions. The positive momentum in the EU-Oman bilateral relations was underlined through a series of EU visits to Oman in 2023. The latter included the participation of HRVP Borrell and Commissioner Lenarčič in the 27th EU-GCC Joint Council in October, the attendance of Commissioner Simson at the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman in December as well as the visit by the Delegation for relations with the Arab Peninsula from the European Parliament in May.

4. EU financial engagement: Under the FPI funded "Enhanced EU-GCC Political Dialogue, Cooperation and Outreach", youth empowerment has been one of the priorities identified for projects, especially through education programmes, in an inclusive and gender balanced manner.

5. Multilateral context: Coordination at the multilateral fora could be improved. Oman normally tends to align itself with its GCC partners on human rights issues. Oman is seen reluctant to support human rights resolutions that are considered to be either contentious or politically charged.

State of Qatar

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Over one year since the end of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the human rights situation in the country, although on a good track, has shown modest improvement. Throughout 2023, there have been no signs of Qatar backtracking from its reform agenda. The implementation of recently introduced reforms remains challenging, also as the driving forces behind important changes – the Supreme Committee and the Ministry of Labour – have been restructured.

There has been progress on labour rights following the adoption of relevant reforms even though ILO reports remaining practical challenges for migrant workers for instances related to their ability to change jobs. On women's rights, there have been some concrete advances, as Qatar seeks to ensure women participate in the economic and political sphere. Qatar has not yet granted full citizenship to the children of Qatari mothers and non-Qatari fathers, but several children have in the past year received non-expiring Qatari residency ID's. In June 2023, the elections for the Central Municipal Council, were held as scheduled

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU Delegation in Doha engages with the local civil society and with the authorities on human rights in Qatar in ways that remain most constructive within the local context, sometimes hosting or participating in events, which mainstream human rights through the perspective of other fields, namely sports, culture and public diplomacy events.

Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies: The EU Delegation and the EU member states have been active on promoting a resilient, diverse and inclusive society through a series of activities engaging the local community. This included an event in March 2023, in the context of the International Women's Day, "Women Champions: Creating a Path to the Top", with a short film screening followed by a panel discussion. The discussion included prominent female Qatari and young female European athletes, showcasing inter-generational, inclusivity, youth, multicultural and societal elements.

The EU Delegation was also represented in panel discussions on "Advancing Women in Sport – Globally, Regionally and Locally" at the 4th World Association Sports Management Conference, and in the margin of the fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5) where it advocated for the rights of equal treatment and youth empowerment. In May, the European Commission (Joint Research Center) participated at the international conference on Occupational Heat Stress organised in Doha by the ILO and the Qatari Ministry of Labour

Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy: The EU Delegation and EU Member States have actively and consistently engaged with Qatari authorities to promote EU priorities at relevant UN fora, especially at the Human Rights Council in which Qatar is a member.

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: The EU has initiated exchanges with the National Cyber Security Agency on areas of collaboration, including on the protection of human rights, including data protection, while seeking security online.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In the first full year since its establishment, the EU Delegation consistently engaged with Qatari interlocutors on the topic of human rights.

On September 7, the fifth EU-Qatar Human Rights Dialogue took place, with constructive discussions on specific topics including labour rights; women's rights; vulnerable groups; fundamental freedoms; rule of law, including the death penalty; digital rights; freedom of religion or belief; human trafficking; and refugee policy. The meeting took place in a constructive and friendly atmosphere with Qatar showing willingness to openly engage with the EU, and both sides raising issues of concern.[24]

4. EU financial engagement: The EU Delegation does not have a dedicated budget for supporting local civil society and human rights organisations. The Foreign Policy Instrument sponsored facility "EU Outreach Facility for the Gulf" is used to conduct human rights projects.

5. Multilateral context: Qatar is an elected member of the Human Rights Council, for the period 2022-2024. Qatar did not ratify any of the international human rights instruments in 2023 to which the country is not yet a party. Qatari officials informed of the readiness of the

[24] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/qatar-5th-human-rights-dialogue-eu-held-doha_en

country to agree on the establishment of a permanent ILO office in Doha. Currently, there is only an ILO Project Office based in Qatar.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The overall picture of human rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in 2023 was marked by punctual improvements and the continuation of several challenges. On one hand, KSA made progress by the enactment of the Civil Transactions Law ("Civil Code") in June 2023. Moreover, the Kingdom is working on its first ever criminal code. Reforms empowering women and labour workers were also further implemented as the number of women in the workforce keeps growing, reaching 35.3% in 2023 i.e. already above the 30% target set for 2030. The *Kafala* (sponsorship) continues to be progressively dismantled and, in October 2023, KSA has issued new regulations aimed at safeguarding the rights of workers, while improving the overall labour market in the kingdom.

On the other hand, political freedoms and freedom of expression remain challenged with reported arrests and detentions of religious figures, journalists, academics, writers and human rights activists throughout 2023, including for public criticism on social media platforms. The death penalty still applies, and 171 executions were carried out in 2023, including two for drug-related offenses. KSA is not a party to the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 (Refugee Convention) or its 1967 Protocol. As a result, it is not legally bound to provide protection to refugees. However, KSA has a long history of hosting refugees, including from Yemen, Syria and recently Sudan under 'visit visas'. Reports have also emerged about alleged human rights violations targeting Ethiopian migrants at the Yemeni-Saudi border.

2. EU action - key focus areas: *Protecting and empowering individuals:* Despite repeated requests, EU diplomats have still been denied the right to observe trials, especially at the Specialised Criminal Court.

Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies: The EU has welcomed the adoption of new laws, notably on Civil Transactions in June 2023, Personal Status Law, the Civil Transactions Law, the Law of Evidence and ongoing work on a new Penal Code for Discretionary Sentences and has conveyed its readiness to provide technical assistance on specific aspects of the judicial reforms.

Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy: The EU has been urging KSA to ratify the pending UN Human Rights main Conventions (CCPR, CESCR, CAT-OP, CCPR-OP2-DP, CED, CMW). KSA is still not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention but the country has stepped up efforts in welcoming (under "visit visas") Sudanese refugees since the outbreak of the Sudanese conflict in April 2023. The risk of extradition and / or deportation of individuals who face imminent risks in their home countries is a source of concern. The EU has raised the issue with local authorities, at the most appropriate level.

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: The EU continued to promote freedom of expression, while rejecting hate speech, and discussed this extensively during the third Human Rights Dialogue held in Brussels in November 2023.

Delivering by working together: During the EU-KSA Human Rights Dialogue, the EU and the Saudi Human Rights Commission agreed to step up their cooperation on migrants and labour rights, together with the International Labour Organisation.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: On 28 November 2023, the EU and KSA held their third Human Rights Dialogue in Brussels[25]. It was co-chaired by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights and the President of KSA's Human Rights Commission (HRC). Locally, the EU Delegation and EU Member States' ambassadors have been regularly raising human rights issues with Saudi interlocutors. The EU Delegation issued the annual Chaillot Prize, for protecting and promoting Human Rights in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and continued work with previous Saudi award winners.

4. EU financial engagement: Under the FPI financial programme "Enhanced EU-GCC Political Dialogue, Cooperation and Outreach", women empowerment and human rights remains one of the priorities. In line with the spirit of Team Europe initiatives, EU Member States contributed to events promoting EU human rights priorities locally.

5. Multilateral context: The EU-KSA Human Rights Dialogue provided an opportunity to exchange views on international human rights law and cooperation on multilateral fora. Greater coordination in multilateral fora will allow for a convergence of positions on specific initiatives. In 2023, KSA prepared for the Universal Periodic Review (held in January 2024). The EU has been urging KSA to ratify the UN Human Rights main Conventions (CCPR, CESCR, CAT-OP, CCPR-OP2-DP, CED, CMW). Saudi authorities have been cooperating with the UN Office in Riyadh, as well as UN agencies based abroad to deal with issues related to combatting human trafficking and allegations of human rights violation at the border with Yemen.

United Arab Emirates

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The UAE continued to balance its human rights record and international reputation, especially socio-economic rights; largely according to relevant to recommendations from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2018 and 2023. Civil and political rights, in particular, and political pluralism continue to be restricted. Progress has been observed in case of individual and minority rights and freedoms, and protection against discrimination. Federal National Council elections took place in October 2023.

[25] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/saudi-arabia-third-eu-ksa-human-rights-dialogue-held-brussels_en

Besides the HR Council's UPR (4th cycle) in May 2023, the global climate conference COP28 in Dubai (December 2023) attracted global attention, also in terms of human rights and fundamental freedoms. There were no major incidents nor imprisonments reported in relation to freedom of expression of the foreign NGOs and activists. Moderate expressions of activism, especially against fossil fuels and the war in Gaza took place.

Given the country's unique multicultural concept of tolerance and coexistence, religious and expatriate minorities can live freely and practice their various religions. The UAE has been an active promoter of interfaith dialogue, e.g. the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi (an interfaith centre opened in March), and a new Hindu temple in Jebel Ali / Dubai end of 2023.

The country sustained progress and ambition on human rights with respect to the elimination of discrimination, especially in case of women and disabled people. Recent laws strengthened protection of women (including sexual harassment), codified equal pay and conditions in the workplace. Since October, women in the UAE no longer require their husband's consent to undergo emergency abortions, in case of mother (or child) medical risks.

On the basis of the family law reforms adopted gradually in 2020 and 2021, the UAE decriminalised consensual relationships outside of marriage and strengthened protection of children born out-of-wedlock. Since 2022 a new federal law regulating the *personal status* matters of non-Muslims offers to non-Muslims the option to apply their home country's civil laws, and hence equal male/female rights on matters such as testimony, estate, marriage, divorce and joint custody.

On migrant workers' rights, the government made some progress regarding labour standards, especially ahead of the Expo 2020 Dubai (2021-2022) and during the covid-19 pandemic. However, the sponsorship (*kefala*) system remains broadly in place with partially easing terms for employees e.g. a longer work-permit transition period, or the new (involuntary) loss of employment insurance scheme (since 2023). The new Labour Law (2022) consolidated workers' rights with respect to discrimination, wages and unlimited contracts. Since 2008, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue serves as a forum for dialogue between countries of labour origin in Asia and destination in the Gulf.

Building on covid-19 restrictive measures, the UAE ramped up its surveillance capacity and AI technologies and nearly all public and on-line spaces remain closely monitored. While the UAE issued its first federal personal data protection decree law (No. 45/2021), inspired – allegedly - by the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, deficiencies in data protection remain.

Although the UAE constitution formally guarantees free speech, fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression, remain curbed. Authorities can censor local or foreign media if they criticise the UAE or their policies. Political dissidents and human right activists continue to face severe obstacles to exert their civil and political rights.[26] The death penalty remains a punishment for certain grave crimes.

To address some human rights deficiencies as recommended by the UPR in 2018, the UAE embarked on a human rights relevant legislation review and announced the preparation of its National HR Action Plan (by National Human Rights Committee), which remains overdue since early 2022. In 2021/2022, a formally an independent body - National Human Rights Institution - was established according to the Paris Principles, which after its initial public appearances

[26] For instance, on 16/09/2021, the European Parliament adopted Resolution 2021/2873(RSP) on the case of human rights defender Ahmed Mansour in the UAE.

and engagements remained rather invisible throughout 2023. The UAE did not sign any (major) international covenants in 2023, such as the ICCPR and ICESCR.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU's human rights work focuses on fundamental freedoms, individuals and groups vulnerable to discrimination (incl. prisoners), women's and girls' rights and gender equality, the rule of law and administration of justice, UAE's National HR Action Plan, including business and human rights, and finally digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI).

The EU has been supporting the UAE's efforts to promote women empowerment, including in the context of their UNSC and Human Rights Council memberships. EU's cooperation with the UAE on gender equality is in line with the Country Level Implementation Plan (CLIP).

The EU analysed the new labour law, domestic labour law, and federal personal status law (2022) and monitors their implementation; also in cooperation with ILO's efforts. Several HR promotion and public awareness campaigns were coordinated with EUMSs in social media.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU and UAE held the informal Human Rights dialogue in January 2024. Discussions centred on labour rights, freedom of expression, digital technologies and AI, rule of law and women's rights. The EU stressed the importance of ratifying major international HR instruments. Progress has been commended in case of women empowerment, remaining challenges discussed in the field of migrant labour protection; while renewed concerns were raised as regards conditions of vulnerable individuals and minorities' rights, in particular LGBTI.[27]

4. EU financial engagement: Under the FPI funded *Enhanced EU-GCC Political Dialogue, Cooperation and Outreach* project, the EU organised events in cooperation with the UAE's 'civil society' and academia.

5. Multilateral context: The UAE has taken up its seat in the Human Rights Council (2022-2024), as well as a non-permanent member in the UNSC (2022-2023). This created opportunities for engagement and consultation on multilateral human rights issues. Building upon its previous support for the UAE's National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the EU continued engaging in advocacy for women's participation in peacekeeping and post-conflict efforts. The EU carried out several demarches vis-a-vis the UAE, including the EU's thematic, country and regional priorities at the HRC and UNGA.

Republic of Yemen

[27] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/uae-12th-human-rights-dialogue-held-brussels_en

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023 the human rights' situation remained very poor in Yemen, with continuing reports of violations, especially in the Houthi-controlled areas. The operating space for civil society, press, international and domestic NGOs is dramatically curtailed across the country. Yemeni journalists faced significant threats in 2023, with numerous violations reported.

Reports of killings of (mainly Ethiopian) migrants at the Yemeni-Saudi border are of strong concern. The situation of women, gradually erased from public life in Houthi-controlled areas through restrictions on mobility, is also worrying. Minority communities in Yemen continue facing challenges and their rights are curtailed and violated. The Muhamasheen community (estimated to make up around 10 % of the Yemeni population), faces discrimination and is excluded from almost all services, including income opportunities.

After 8 years of conflict in Yemen, the UN-led peace process entered a positive phase after the announcement on 23 December of an agreement among the parties (including the Presidential Leadership Council and the Houthis). However, the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have had a negative impact on peace efforts in Yemen and are delaying the promise of a UN peace roadmap in early 2024. In 2023, a positive development has been the launch, by civil society organizations, of the "Yemen Declaration for Justice and Reconciliation", highlighting the need to address grievances and achieve reconciliation in the country.

The operating environment for humanitarian actors in Yemen remains extremely challenging because of widespread access constraints, restrictions of movements, and deterioration of the security situation in the government-controlled areas where attacks and violence against humanitarian workers have become frequent over the past months. As unfortunate example of this, on 5 January 2024, a staff member of the NGO ADRA was killed in Ad Dhale' Governorate, the third killing of a humanitarian worker in 6 months. Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have deteriorated further the operating environment, causing a rise in food prices and difficulties for shipping aid, thus affecting negatively the access to basic needs and the fulfilment of the most fundamental rights of millions of Yemeni citizens.

2. EU action - key focus areas:

- Priority 1) Promotion and protection of women's rights and empowerment of women.
- Priority 2) Promotion and protection of children's rights with a focus on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC).
- Priority 3) Closing the accountability gap and fighting impunity as well as promoting compliance with International Humanitarian law.
- Priority 4) Promoting an independent civil society, enabling civic space, support and protect human rights defenders.
- Priority 5) Freedom of expression and promotion of independent media.
- Priority 6) Combating discrimination and exclusion in all forms.

In 2023, the EUD to Yemen financed 2 actions oriented to support women's and children's rights in Yemen (see below under EU financial assistance).

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Given the conflict in Yemen, the EU does not have a formal bilateral human rights dialogue. In the Delegation's regular interactions with Yemeni

political authorities (Presidential Leadership Council, GoY, Houthis/Ansar Allah), human rights issues were regularly addressed. In May 2023, EU Ambassadors met released journalists, advocating for press freedom, while engaging with human rights defenders, signalling solidarity and support for their vital work. In June 2023, the HoD held discussions with Houthi officials regarding the plight of the Baha'i minority, demonstrating engagement on religious freedom issues. In December 2023, EU parliamentarians visited Yemen, engaging with OHCHR to address the human rights situation, highlighting the EU's ongoing commitment to promoting human rights in Yemen. Throughout 2023, EU Ambassadors met on several occasion in Aden civil society representatives acknowledging civil society's role in advancing human rights.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EUD to Yemen launched a call for proposals within the thematic programme on Human Rights and Democracy. EUR 1,790,000 were available for the financing of project proposals. Two actions were selected: 1) Empowering Women Rights Organisations/CSOs to support women's rights for more inclusion in society in Yemen, implemented by Oxfam and co-financed by the EUD with 837,000 EUR. 2) Yemen has a bright future: Enabling women and youth to gain their rightful place in Ibb and Dhamar governorates, implemented by ZOA and co-financed by the EUD with 805,000 EUR.

5. Multilateral context: There is no international mechanism for accountability or for monitoring, reporting or investigating human rights violations and abuses since the Group of Eminent Experts (GEE) was disbanded in 2020 following lobbying by Saudi Arabia and others. The EU continues emphasising, notably in Geneva, the need for independent and impartial human rights monitoring and documentation of serious violations and supports the broadening of the mandate of the UN in Yemen for that purpose.

On January 17, 2023, a joint (EU/CAAC Group of Friends) meeting emphasized the imperative need to safeguard children amid conflict, underlining the EU's commitment to protecting vulnerable populations.

On October 11, the Human Rights Council (HRC) passed a resolution on technical assistance and capacity-building for Yemen without a vote. A statement from Belgium, representing EU member states, conveyed "profound disappointment," as proposals for increased technical assistance and an evaluation of OHCHR technical support were rejected by the Core Group of Arab States without adequate explanation. The statement questioned the resolution's effectiveness in aiding Yemen's government and criticized the Core Group for neglecting to address human rights issues. The US, in a separate statement, expressed regret over the Core Group's rejection of its proposal for an Independent Expert to assess, monitor, and report on the human rights situation in Yemen.

On 14 November 2023, OHCHR issued a statement urgently calling for the immediate release of UNESCO and OHCHR staff who were arbitrarily detained in Yemen in 2021 and 2023 by the de facto Houthi authorities. The statement highlighted the lack of information about the staff members' status, deeming it a profoundly alarming situation and a clear violation of the rule of law.

Asia

Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The year 2023 in Afghanistan was another challenging year in terms of Human Rights and Democracy, with a worsening environment on protection and fulfilment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, social welfare, cultural rights, rights of persons belonging to minorities, as well as on inclusive and representative governance. The edicts issued by the Taliban religious leadership continued to institutionalise the systematic violations of the rights of women and girls, Afghanistan thus ranking worst of 177 countries in terms of the status of women, according to the 2023 Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index.

A parallel political and judicial system prevailed, outside of the still suspended constitution. The constitutional and legal vacuum added to the overall sentiment of unpredictability also regarding the role of key public institutions. Taliban *de-facto* authorities failed to demonstrate their willingness to uphold many of the international norms and standards, as set out in international conventions and instruments to which Afghanistan is a State Party, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Afghanistan is also a party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Persons belonging to ethnic and religious minority groups in Afghanistan continued to be prevented from fully enjoying their rights, and the UN reported credible evidence of torture, and inhuman and degrading treatment of detainees, as well as enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings. The Taliban *de facto* authorities continued to implement the death penalty, with a second known case of public execution reported in 2023, after the first one in 2021. Judicial corporal punishment, implemented based on court orders and sometimes carried out in public, also continued. There are credible reports about arbitrary arrests and detentions of human rights defenders, media workers or members of minority groups. In 2023, Afghanistan ranked at 152 in Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, which compares the level of press freedom enjoyed by journalists and media in 180 countries and territories, with a number of journalists, including some working for international outlets, facing intimidation, threats, arrests and prosecution. Reports indicate that a number of media outlets have also been arbitrarily shut down or prevented from operating if accused of not following Taliban regulations. Many journalists report that a sentiment of self-censorship prevails.

The Taliban *de facto* authorities introduced a series of bans curbing social, political and economic rights of Afghan girls and women and limiting sources of livelihood in 2023. Afghan women were precluded from working for NGOs and UN agencies, making it even harder to deliver humanitarian and basic needs assistance, and beauty parlours were ordered to close in the middle of the year. Non faith-based secondary and higher education for girls remained banned as the Taliban *de-facto* authorities stated they needed more time to adapt the education programmes to Islamic traditions and Afghan culture.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, the EU continued to implement actions in line with the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions adopted in September 2021 and reconfirmed in March 2023, outlining five benchmarks, including human rights. The overall human rights situation, in particular for women and girls, remains a key concern for Afghans, as well as for the EU and for the international community. The EU continued to support Afghan civil society, human rights defenders (HRDs), and media and focused its safe passage operations on Afghans particularly at risk. To date, the EU's Safe Passage Task Force brought to safety hundreds of persons at risk, including dependents.

In 2023, the EU also adopted EU Global Human Rights sanctions against five representatives of the Taliban *de facto* government.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The lack of domestic legitimacy and the subsequent actions by the Taliban made it impossible for the international community, including the EU, to recognise the Taliban *de facto* authorities. The EU Delegation in Kabul ensures the sole representation of the European Union and its Member States in Afghanistan. It allows a channel of communication with the Taliban *de facto* authorities in discussing issues of concern, raising individual cases, including cases of human rights defenders. The Delegation also provides a channel for dialogue with other Afghans, including the business community and civil society representatives. The EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan visits Afghanistan regularly and continues the EU's engagement with Afghan CSOs in and outside of the country.

4. EU financial engagement: Since August 2021, the EU has allocated an overall assistance package of over EUR 1.2 billion in support to the people of Afghanistan including basic needs assistance, humanitarian aid and crisis response funds. In line with EU's policy towards Afghanistan, EU funding is not channelled through the Taliban *de facto* authorities. The EU has spearheaded the formulation of a set of guiding principles adopted by the donor community for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and basic needs and livelihoods support. The principled approach ensures that support is delivered with women at the centre of design and delivery ("by women for women and girls" and in a "do no harm" approach), ensuring also that no resources are channelled through Taliban-controlled entities.

More specifically, EUR 8.9 million were allocated in the area of human rights for the period 2021-2024. In 2023, the EU continued to fund support to Afghan human rights defenders. Continued support was provided for the "Threatened Afghan Students and Scholars Scholarship Programme" for the academic years 2022-2024.

5. Multilateral context: The EU continued to coordinate with the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, and supported the renewal of his mandate with adequate resources. In addition, the EU actively engaged with the UN Special Coordinator for the Independent Assessment on Afghanistan (UNSCR 2679-2023) and announced its readiness to participate in the discussions on the follow-up to his report published in November 2023. The International Criminal Court (ICC) authorised the Prosecution to resume the investigation into the Afghanistan situation in October 2022, which the EU continues to support as a key mechanism for increased accountability in Afghanistan.

In 2023, the EU included Afghanistan in the Council Conclusions on EU priorities in UN Human Rights in 2023, in a number of statements in the 52nd, 53rd and 54th Human Rights Council sessions, and in the UNGA Third Committee

The EU has condemned the multiple Taliban edicts such as the one banning female staff from working for national and international NGOs. The EU has raised concerns regarding the human rights situation of persons belonging to minorities, children, LGBTI persons, human rights defenders, former personnel of the republic, journalists and media workers and others who suffer human rights violations and abuses, as well as the perceived persecution on the grounds of gender, which is a crime against humanity defined in the Rome Statute, to which Afghanistan is a party. The EU has also condemned the reintroduction of corporal and capital punishments.

People's Republic of Bangladesh

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Bangladesh experienced a volatile period ahead of parliamentary elections on 7 January 2024. The period was marked by increasing restrictions to fundamental freedoms, political violence and mass arrests. The Secretary General of the main opposition party (Bangladesh Nationalist Party, BNP) was one of thousands of opposition leaders and activists detained following a large rally in October. At the end of the year, many were still detained, waiting for sentencing or release. Large-scale demonstrations of garment workers demanding a higher minimum wage also took place in 2023. Several workers lost their lives during the protests.

Civil society continued to struggle with a shrinking civic space. Non-governmental organisations were closely regulated by the NGO Affairs Bureau that is charged with the registration of NGOS. After the bureau refused to renew the legal registration of prominent human rights organisation Odhikar in June 2022, two of its leaders were sentenced to prison in September 2023 for publishing an allegedly inaccurate report on extra-judicial killings by security forces a decade earlier. Other human rights defenders were also subjected to surveillance, intimidation and harassment.

The media landscape is diverse and growing, but self-censorship, intimidation and arbitrary arrests remained a reality for many journalists. The Digital Security Act (DSA) and other legislation was used to stifle criticism of the authorities. The Cyber Security Act (CSA) replaced the DSA in September 2023. More lenient prison sentences were introduced for some offences, but the new law still falls short of international human rights standards. A new Data Protection Act, which the EU has commented on, has yet to be adopted.

The draft anti-discrimination law has remained under consideration of the Parliament since April 2022, with little progress achieved in 2023.

Extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances have decreased in past years, but new cases continue to be reported and Bangladesh has yet to create an impartial, independent and transparent mechanism to investigate both old as well as new allegations.

Bangladesh retains the death penalty and has extended capital punishment to offences such as rape and non-violent drug-related offences. Although there are around 2 000 individuals on death row, only four executions were carried out in 2022 (reliable figures for 2023 not yet available).

There remains a need for progress to implement the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, 25 years after its adoption, and to ensure that the rights of indigenous communities are fully recognised.

The Rohingya refugee crisis has passed its 6th anniversary. The humanitarian and security situation in the Rohingya refugee camps deteriorated further in 2023. Insecurity, trafficking and criminal networks became more prominent. Several community leaders were targeted and killed in the camps and the number of daytime violent incidents increased. The World Food Programme was temporarily forced to cut the value of its food vouchers from USD 12 to 8 per person per month. The situation has led an increasing number of Rohingyas to embark on dangerous sea journeys in the Bay of Bengal.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU and its Member States continued to engage on a wide range of human rights issues with government, civil society, academia and business interlocutors. EU Heads of Mission issued joint statements and social media postings on human rights priorities - sometimes together with likeminded ambassadors. There were also a number of social media postings linked to EU high level visits. The spokesperson on 15 September 2023 issued a statement on the sentencing of the secretary and director of the NGO Odhikar. The human rights situation ahead of the parliamentary election (7 January 2024) also gave rise to public messaging, locally as well as from the EU headquarters, notably High Representative Borrell tweeted on the pre-electoral situation. The EU followed up with the authorities on the recommendations of the 2018 Election Expert Mission in view of the parliamentary election. An EU Election Expert Mission arrived in November 2023.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human rights concerns were raised throughout the year by the EU and EU Member States with all relevant stakeholders, including the Government of Bangladesh, National Human Rights Commission, Election Commission, civil society and human rights defenders. Several high-level visits to Bangladesh in 2023 also provided an opportunity to train a spotlight on human rights issues, including visits by: (1) EEAS Deputy Secretary General (DSG) for Economic and Global Issues, Helena König; (2) EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore; (3) DG ECHO Director-General, Maciej Popowski; (4) the EU Election Exploratory Mission (ExM) & Election Expert Mission (EEM); (5) the EU Everything But Arms (EBA) monitoring mission.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU's development and humanitarian partnership with Bangladesh supports the fulfilment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The EU extends substantial support to civil society including in the human rights and democracy domain and engaged regularly with human rights defenders. Projects supported by the EU and Member States also in 2023 concerned gender equality, women's rights and gender based violence; rights of the child; Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society Organisations; freedom of expression, independent media, access to information and fight against disinformation political parties and the integrity of electoral processes; business and human rights; rights of refugees and minorities; the right to a healthy environment and climate induced internally displaced persons.

5. Multilateral context: Bangladesh began its three-year membership of the Human Rights Council in 2023 and had its fourth Universal Periodic Review on 13 November in Geneva. Bangladesh permitted visits by several UN special rapporteurs during 2023, including the UN Special Rapporteur (UN SR) on the human rights of migrants, the UN SR on the elimination of

discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members, and the UN SR on extreme poverty and human rights. Bangladesh continued to engage on the resolutions on Myanmar, including Rohingya issues, in the UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council.

Kingdom of Bhutan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Bhutan's commitment to human rights is well reflected in its Constitution, and the country's laws are largely in line with international standards. Bhutan has ratified and is implementing only two out of the nine international human rights conventions, notably the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) along with two of its optional protocols.

Bhutan continues to make important progress in reducing maternal and infant mortality, and expanding education. Increasing focus is given to domestic and gender-based violence, as well as to mental health, with the relatively new Pema Secretariat being at the forefront.

Concerning civil society space, a number of unfavourable developments were noted in 2023. The Civil Society Authority (CSOA) instructed the Bhutan Civil Society Network (BSCN), an informal and voluntary network of all CSOs in Bhutan, to cease all activities. Further, as of July 2023, all CSOs have been asked to seek approval from the CSOA prior to implementing activities at the Local Government level, including planned advocacy initiatives. The CSO Act defined in 2023 the amounts to be blocked as 'endowment fund' by all registered CSOs (currently 54.) This fund of EUR 23 000 to EUR 45 000 would be used in case of payment default by the CSO. These measures have been perceived by the CSO fraternity as unconducive of a vibrant civic space.

Following an important leap on the World Press Freedom Index in 2022, Bhutan registered a huge drop in 2023, **from the 33rd** to the 90th ranking. Among the reasons, the frequent changes in rules and protocols applicable for media conduct, and the growing reluctance among the bureaucrats and civil servants to share even basic information, were mentioned.

Lack of legal clarity for "inducement" to religious conversion; the practice of minority religions; and the situation of people from Bhutan representing the Lhotsampa community, and stranded in camps in eastern Nepal, remain sensitive issues.

2. EU action - key focus areas: *Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies*: A very successful project with a funding of EUR 1.4 million continued in 2023, in support of democratic governance bringing together Bhutanese civil society organisations (CSOs) with the Parliament and Government agencies.

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: In 2023, a new EU programme on 'Support to Good Governance and Digitalisation in Education in Bhutan' was approved, with a commitment of EUR 9.3 million.

Delivering by working together: The Netherlands is implementing a project in cooperation with a local civil society organisation on empowering rural communities. The Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) continued to support the implementation of the Justice Sector Programme which has a strong human rights dimension. The ADC office ceased its operations in Bhutan on 31 December 2023 as previously announced.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The 2023 edition of the Bhutan-EU Annual Consultations took place in May 2023 in Thimphu, and included on its extensive agenda issues of human rights and democracy. In the margins of the Annual Consultations, meetings with Ministers of the Royal Government of Bhutan, with civil society and UN agencies were also held, and provided opportunities to discuss civil society space and human rights. The EU Delegation and EU Member States Embassies based in New Delhi carried out three EU missions to the country in 2023, including the visit of EU Heads of Mission in April 2023, comprising the EU Ambassador and 15 Ambassadors or Deputies of EU Member States.

4. EU financial engagement: In addition to the above mentioned programmes, the country allocations of the CSO and EIDHR (Democracy and Human Rights) instruments are EUR 3.5 million and EUR 1 million, respectively. The grants through these allocations aim to improve the environment and operational capacity for civil society engagement in sustainable development and good governance, and address human rights issues in Bhutan.

Bhutanese CSOs continue to benefit from regional funds through the SWITCH Asia grants facility. There are two ongoing projects (EUR 3.3 million) in support of sustainable and inclusive tourism/hospitality development in Bhutan, targeting rural and vulnerable communities including women.

5. Multilateral context: Bhutan presented its 10th periodic report to the Committee on the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in October 2023. While good progress has been made for women and girls over the years, notably in education, decrease in maternal mortality, and increase in women's participation in society and work, Bhutan remains among the bottom-ranking countries on gender equality, 103rd out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2023. Bhutan's next Universal Periodic Review will take place in 2024.

Brunei Darussalam

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Since the entry into force of the Sharia Penal Code in 2019, Brunei has a dual criminal law system based on common law and sharia law. The SPC foresees capital punishment (death by stoning) or corporal punishment (amputation of limbs, whipping) for crimes such as adultery, extramarital sex or LGBTI relations. Whereas women can be sentenced to corporal punishment under the Sharia Penal Code, the common law allows for extenuating circumstances (no whipping for women, men over 50, ill people and persons sentenced to death). In practice, no amputations are carried out but whipping of men is enforced on a regular basis. While the Sharia Penal Code also contains death penalty provisions, including for blasphemy, the Sultan explicitly declared in 2019 that the country would continue to observe its moratorium on the death penalty also

for crimes under the Sharia Penal Code, thereby extending the *de facto* moratorium on the death penalty applied for common law offences. No executions have taken place since 1996.

Freedom of religion or belief remains limited, with Shafi'i Islam as the official religion (80% of the population), and restrictions on the practice of other religions (mainly Buddhism, 7%, and Christianity, 7%), or other Islamic theologies. Whereas proselytising to Islam is strongly encouraged and supported, it is forbidden to convert to non-Islamic faiths (apostasy), which is punishable by death under sharia law. New places of worship, if not Islamic, are not registered; the renovation of existing ones face nearly insurmountable hurdles. Non-Muslims suffer discrimination as regards social benefits and access to the military or public jobs.

Other human rights issues relate to civil and political rights, most notably the absence of democratic elections since 1965. Elections are only held at the village level, where only men are elected. The Legislative Council comprises solely appointed or ex-officio members with a consultative role, since legislative powers were transferred in full to the Sultan in 1984. The latter serves as the head of state, the prime minister, and the minister of foreign affairs, finance and defence. The country of 440 715 inhabitants, according to the 2021 census, has been under a state of emergency since 1962, which restricts freedoms of assembly and expression, while granting the Sultan the right to pass legislation without review. Brunei has no political opposition and almost no independent civil society. While no evidence has been found of the existence of political prisoners, 'administrative detention' without trial occurs.

Brunei is ranked 142nd out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2023 (up from 144 in 2022). National legislation restricts press freedom and silences criticism of the Sultan and the government. The largest media are state-run. While authorities monitor online speech, Brunei has an active online community. There are important restrictions to freedom of association and freedom of assembly. For example, the activities of non-governmental organisations can be suspended at any time, for any reason, and strikes are illegal. According to the Freedom in the World Index 2023, Brunei scored 28 out of 100 (repeating its 2022 score) – i.e. 'not free'. Brunei has several laws in place to fight trafficking in human beings, such as the Women and Girls Protection Act, the 2019 Prevention of People Smuggling Order and the 2019 Anti-Trafficking in Persons Order. It ratified the ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons in January 2020, adopted a National Action Plan and created an inter-agency anti-trafficking committee. However, the enforcement of regulations continues to be a challenge. In 2023, the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report upgraded Brunei from its Tier 3 to Tier 2 watch list.

According to the ASEAN Gender Outlook (2021), Brunei has the highest number of women executives in the region, but the lowest representation of women in politics (10% at the Legislative Council). The appointment of the first woman minister in 2022, as Minister of Education, was a welcome development. In March 2023, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports announced the launch of the country's first-ever National Plan of Action on Women. Brunei's Islamic law tends to disadvantage women in areas such as divorce and child custody. The Sharia Penal Code criminalises 'indecent behaviour' and makes abortion a capital offence. Brunei's legislation denies women the right to confer their nationality on their children. Citizenship is derived through descent, and that is the father's prerogative only. There are an estimated 20 863 stateless persons, categorised into stateless permanent residents and stateless persons without legal status, with varying degrees of rights and benefits. In 2023, the

new Minister of Home Affairs granted citizenship to around 2 000 applicants, including stateless and non-Muslim individuals.

2. EU action - key focus areas: There is no structured dialogue on human rights with Brunei but human rights concerns are regularly raised by the local EU representation (France and Germany) and during the visits of the non-resident EU Head of Delegation. In March 2023, the EU Delegation commemorated International Women's Day by holding a policy seminar, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, on women's rights and gender equality in Bandar Seri Begawan.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Bilateral relations are limited given that the negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement remain on hold. The EU Delegation, located in Jakarta, continues to follow developments on the ground, in liaison with the two EU Member States who have in-country missions (France and Germany). In 2023, the EU-Brunei Partnership Facility was launched.

4. EU financial engagement: There is no direct funding from EU programmes to human rights projects in Brunei.

5. Multilateral context: Brunei has ratified a number of key human rights conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Even though in 2019 the Sultan had publicly committed to ratifying the Convention Against Torture (UNCAT), Brunei had not yet done so at the end of 2023. In 2023, Brunei ratified the ILO Forced Labour Convention. For the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Brunei submitted five 'Human Rights 75 Pledges.'

Kingdom of Cambodia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The government continued to use of the judiciary to limit space for political opponents. On 3 March 2023 the leader of the dissolved Cambodian National Rescue Party, Kem Sokha, was sentenced to 27 years' imprisonment after a three-year trial, on charges related to his political activity. The mass trials of opposition politicians and activists continued, with the fundamentals of due process and right to defence not respected. The general election of 13 July 2023 was conducted in a restricted political and civic space. The opposition was excluded from the electoral process, due to criminal convictions of political leaders as well as the disqualification of the Candlelight Party, which was not allowed to register to take part in the vote on procedural grounds. Freedom of expression remained constrained with instances of authorities targeting social media users and activists criticising the government. Media freedom has been constrained, including through disproportionate use of provisions criminalising defamation and incitement. In February one of the last independent media outlets, Voice of Democracy (VOD), had its licence revoked after publishing an article about Hun Manet, son of the then prime minister. Cambodia ranked 147th out of 180 countries in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters without Borders, falling from 142nd position in 2022. As far as freedom of association is concerned, the restrictive Law on Associations and Non-Governmental

Organisations has not been amended and NGOs are subjected to cumbersome registration and reporting procedures. In 2023, the situation seems to have become more restrictive, and NGOs have reported increased surveillance and requests to disclose information on funding and activities. Instances of human trafficking and forced labour via online scams continued to be increasingly reported. Cambodia improved its position in the 2023 Global Gender Gap report; gender mainstreaming is increasingly addressed in key national policies and strategies. Gender-based violence continued to be a challenge. The Ministry of Women's Affairs launched a 16-day campaign to end violence against women, under the theme "UNITE! Invest to prevent violence against women and girls" aligned with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, observed 25 November until 10 December.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2020 the European Commission temporarily and partially withdrew the tariff preferences granted to Cambodia under the EU's "Everything But Arms" trade scheme due to serious and systematic violations of human rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This decision remained in place in 2023. Addressing the existing human rights and labour rights concerns is an essential requirement for the full reinstatement of the EBA preferences, as set out in the EEAS/Commission report on enhanced engagement with Cambodia published in November 2023. In line with the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-24, EU activities focused on the protection and empowerment of individuals, notably in the context of political and civil rights. The EU Delegation and EU Member States monitored a significant number of court hearings of human rights defenders, politicians and activists. They maintained continuous engagement with diverse civil society actors. The EU-Cambodia Joint Committee Sub-group on Institution Building, Administrative Reform, Legal and Judicial Reform, Governance and Human Rights was postponed to 2024.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: 2023 saw fewer high-level political contacts between Cambodia and the EU after the many meetings that took place in 2022, with visits to Phnom Penh linked to Cambodia's chairmanship of ASEAN, and to Brussels for the EU-ASEAN Commemorative Summit. Human rights and democracy related issues were also topics of bilateral contacts in the country, including with representatives of the new government of Prime Minister Hun Manet, and were included in the policy dialogues with high-level representatives of relevant authorities within EU cooperation programmes. The EU Delegation maintained contacts with a wide spectrum of stakeholders, including political parties, NGOs, CSOs, the business sector and trade unions. The EU published several statements throughout 2023 including: on the verdict against the opposition leader Kem Sokha, on the closing down of the independent news portal VOD, on the disqualification of the opposition Candlelight Party from the parliamentary elections, and on the conduct of the National Assembly elections themselves.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU continued to support human rights and democracy in Cambodia through its cooperation instruments by applying a rights-based approach and mainstreaming human rights through all priority areas of intervention. The EU managed ten grants addressing a broad range of human rights issues including freedom of expression, protection of land ownership, combatting gender-based violence and support to human rights defenders. The EU also continued to provide support to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to ensure that national and international actors in Cambodia can integrate more human rights information and analysis in development

responses, strengthen the rule of law and enhance implementation of outcomes from the international human rights mechanisms. In 2023, the EU also started seven new projects in support of labour rights and decent work, protection of land ownership and the traditional rights of forest and fishing communities, and in support of farmers' organisations and networks of CSOs.

5. Multilateral context: During 2023, the EU continued to underline its key concerns at the UN Human Rights Council including through EU statements and participation in the Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia. The Special Rapporteur, whose mandate was extended for another two years at the 54th Human Rights Council regular session, noted in his annual report the efforts by the Government of Cambodia to protect the life of people and maintain peace, stability, public order and improve the quality of life of the population. However, he also expressed serious concern about the reported deterioration of the civil and political environment due to the perceived chilling effects of judicial prosecutions, arrests, alleged surveillance, harassment and violence against members of political parties, trade unions and civil society.

People's Republic of China

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: in 2023, as corroborated through numerous reports by UN special rapporteurs, civil society organisations and academia, the human rights situation in China remained very serious. China's existing obligations under international and national laws (including its own Constitution) to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms for all were not respected. The application of the *non-refoulement principle* in China was questioned by UN experts, further to the publication of reports about the forced, mass repatriation of escapees from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The government's crackdown continued on civil society organisations, including LGBTI activists, human rights defenders, journalists, academics and on Chinese citizens at large - including Uyghurs,[28] Tibetans[29], and persons belonging to ethnic, religious[30] and linguistic minorities across China.

Regarding freedom of religion and belief, the Government only recognises five religion associations (Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Protestant and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association) and closely monitors their houses of worship, clergy appointments and funding. New "*Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues*" came into force on 1 September with the declared goal of strengthening the regulation and management of religious venues[31].

[28] The sentencing of renowned Uyghur professor Rahile Dawut to life in prison for "endangering state security by promoting separatism" received a lot of international attention and demonstrated the continuation of the repression of Uyghurs and the human rights crisis at large in Xinjiang .

[29] The European Parliament organised an urgency debate on the abduction of Tibetan children and forced assimilation practices through Chinese boarding schools in Tibet (13 December 2023).

[30] In September 2023, the Chinese authorities took the unprecedented step of barring over a hundred thousand Tibetan Buddhist believers from attending the Kalachakra, a significant religious event, citing security concerns.

[31] They are required to "support the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), support the socialist system and thoroughly implement Xi Jinping's new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics".

In terms of freedom of expression, China's ranking in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index further worsened: the country was ranked as the world's least free country after the DPRK and was labelled by Reporters Without Borders as "the world's largest prison for journalists" and "one of the biggest exporters of propaganda".

Despite China's ratification of the two ILO conventions on forced labour[32] in 2022, there remained extensive, evidence-based reports (including by UN experts and academia) referring to the use of large-scale forced labour and so called *'vocational training'* schemes in China. While the exact number of persons coerced into such schemes is unknown, human rights groups estimate that altogether more than one million Uyghurs in Xinjiang were in detention camps for forced labour since the creation of the introduction of the scheme.

On women's rights, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) found that in Mainland China there have been no women at the highest executive level since October 2022. CEDAW recommended that China adopt temporary special measures. CEDAW was also concerned about the excessive restrictions on the registration of non-governmental organisations, about reports of intimidation and harassment against women human rights defenders, including sexual and gender-based violence by the police and other officials, and that these defenders might face reprisal for their participation in the review.

Amendments to China's Counter Espionage Law were adopted by the National People's Congress' Standing Committee on 26 April, allowing for a further crack down on perceived threats and cast a wider net in its protection of sensitive information.

2. EU action - key focus areas: the European Council conclusions on China (30 June) confirmed that the EU remains firmly committed to the promotion of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The European Council welcomed the resumption of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue (17 February 2023) and reiterated its concerns regarding forced labour, the treatment of human rights defenders and persons belonging to minorities, the situation in Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as the honouring of China's previous commitments related to Hong Kong. In 2023, most of the EU's actions regarding the human rights situation in China remained primarily aimed at protecting and empowering individuals.

The EU, also through its Delegation in Beijing, continued to regularly address, both bilaterally with the Chinese authorities and through public communications, individual cases involving human rights defenders and journalists. Through EEAS spokesperson's tweets, the EU continued to pay particular attention to the sentencing of human rights defenders who were merely exercising their fundamental freedoms and called for their unconditional release. EU diplomats also tried to attend human rights defenders' trials, but were not allowed in the courtroom even if they were public hearings.

The listing of four individuals and one entity from China for their involvement in serious human rights violations and abuses in Xinjiang, as part of a wider package of listings under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime has been extended for another year on 4 December.

The EU Delegation in China and EU Member States organised and supported a number of public diplomacy activities, such as panel discussions, film screenings and social media

[32] Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)

campaigns, to mark the most significant human rights anniversaries, including the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia. The EU Delegation organised periodical events on gender equality, rights of LGBTI persons, media freedom, death penalty and protection of human rights defenders. On Human Rights Day in December 2023, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the EU Delegation issued a comprehensive statement reiterating all its concerns on the human rights situation in China.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The 38th session of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue was held in Brussels on 17 February 2023, after a four year-long hiatus. At the 24th EU-China Summit (7 December 2023), the EU reiterated its deep concerns about the human rights situation in China, notably systemic human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet, forced labour, the treatment of human rights defenders and persons belonging to minorities, as well as the continued erosion of fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong. During the Summit, EU Leaders also welcomed the resumption of the Human Rights Dialogue and underlined the EU's expectation for the next dialogue to take place in 2024, in China. EU interlocutors continued to systematically raise the EU's human rights concerns in China throughout the year.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU continued to implement several projects to support and promote human rights in China. These projects take shape through official government cooperation, with local partners and with grassroots support. The projects continued to focus on a wide array of social topics, including death penalty, the rights of women, child victim of sexual abuse and migrant workers, to enhancing access to justice for persons with disabilities and victims of domestic violence, and supporting the rule of law.

5. Multilateral context: for the first time in the Human Rights Council, a China-led resolution on the promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development was adopted by consensus (12 October). In the UN General Assembly's Third Committee, 51 UN members (including 23 EU MS) issued a cross-regional statement condemning the Chinese government's crimes against humanity committed against Uyghurs and other Turkic communities (18 October).

The EU, through its Item 4 and Item 2 statements at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC 52 and 54 and 53 respectively) and its omnibus statement at the UN General Assembly's Third Committee continued to urge China to abide by its obligations under national and international law to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, including Uyghurs, Tibetans and persons belonging to ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities across China. Furthermore, the EU continued to promote and defend the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness of all human rights. In this spirit, the EU continued to exercise the utmost vigilance as regards attempts by China to introduce non-consensual language, inconsistent with international human rights law, in initiatives and resolutions negotiated in the Human Rights Council and the UNGA Third Committee.

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Since the imposition of the National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020, the political and human rights situation in Hong Kong has deteriorated drastically. Extensive changes to the electoral laws have significantly curtailed the ability of pro-democracy groups to contest elections. Most independent media outlets closed and many civil society organisations disbanded. UP to 29 December 2023, the police made 290 arrests under the NSL and other national security legislation, including the colonial era sedition law, targeting politicians, journalists and activists. These developments have severely undermined Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong, which were supposed to be guaranteed until at least 2047.

This trend continued in 2023: The trial of the 'Hong Kong 47' (a group of pro-democracy legislators, activists and journalists that held unofficial primary elections in July 2020) started in February. The police arrested several people who were peacefully commemorating the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown on 4 June. In July, Hong Kong police issued arrest warrants for eight overseas-based activists accusing them of national security offences including foreign collusion and incitement to secession. In December, the police added five more activists living outside Hong Kong to this list. In July, Hong Kong's Legislative Council adopted changes to the electoral system of the District Councils, drastically reducing the number of directly elected seats and introducing a strict vetting mechanism for candidates. Not a single opposition candidate was able to stand in the District Council election on 10 December.

The police arrested and issued arrest warrants for seven people calling for casting blank votes or boycotting the election. On 18 December, the NSL trial against media entrepreneur Jimmy Lai started. Mr Lai has been in prison almost continuously since December 2020. He has been convicted for 'organisation of and participation in an unauthorised assembly' in four cases (total sentence of 20 months) and fraud (5 years and 9 months) and now faces charges of 'collusion with foreign forces' under the NSL.

There were positive developments in the area of equal treatment of same-sex couples. In September, the Court of Final Appeal ruled that the government must provide a legal framework for the protection of same-sex relationships to be recognised. In October, the Court of Appeal upheld an earlier ruling that same-sex couples should enjoy equal rights under the inheritance laws, however triggering an appeal by the Government.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU Office continued its work on supporting non-discrimination and equal rights in Hong Kong. To mark International Women's Day, the EU Office co-organised a film screening and collaborated with an independent reporter to produce a video series featuring foreign domestic workers, diplomats and legal professionals. In the context of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the EU Office again participated in an event raising awareness about the difficulties faced by migrant women. Unlike 2022, the annual EU-HK workshop on human trafficking could not take place due to hesitation from the Hong Kong Bureau of Security. The EU Office also organised a panel discussion marking World Press Freedom Day.

To express the EU's support for LGBTI rights, the EU Office organised a film screening and a panel discussion on the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia and participated in the annual Pride Month Bazar. As Hong Kong hosted the first Gay Games

in Asia in November 2023, the EU Office organised a panel discussion on LGBTI rights in Hong Kong, bringing together civil society and the consular corps.

In 2023, the EU office also organised art events related to human rights. The annual EU Film Festival opened with a Ukrainian film, drawing attention to the plight of the Ukrainian people under Russian aggression. The EU Office also continued to co-organise the 'EU-Asia Docs film festival' to shed light on social issues including the struggles of the LGBTI community. In December 2023, the EU Office organised the annual Hong Kong Human Rights Art Prize, whose name was changed to 'Colours of Humanity Arts Prize'.

The EU Office has maintained regular contacts with civil society groups working on a range of topics, including prisoners' rights and asylum.

Mandated by the 2020 Council conclusions on Hong Kong, the EU Office and the EU Member States in Hong Kong conducted more than 120 trial observations throughout 2023. In August, the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy published the 25th annual report on the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, covering developments in 2022[33].

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU Office holds regular meetings with the Hong Kong authorities, including the Chief Executive, during which it conveys concerns about the evolution of democracy and human rights in Hong Kong and the implementation of the NSL. The EU Office is also in contact with the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China (OCMFA).

4. EU financial engagement: The EU is exploring pragmatic ways to enhance its engagement and support for civil society, in line with Council Conclusions and taking into account practical limitations on the ground.

5. Multilateral context: The EU regularly expresses its concerns about the erosion of democracy and fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong in Item 4 statements on situations that require the Human Rights Council's attention. During the UN General Assembly the EU underlined it concerns about developments in Hong Kong in the Omnibus statement read at the Third Committee.

Macao Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Macao is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, a status that implies a high degree of autonomy under the principle of "one country, two systems". However, a push for 'patriotism' and a focus on national security risks eroding democracy and fundamental freedoms.

In past years, the Human Rights Committee had already expressed concerns about the lack of protection regarding migrants' rights, the banning of peaceful assemblies, and the eligibility criteria for the Legislative Assembly. This trend continued in 2023: the amended National

[33] JOIN(2023) 30 final

Security Law became effective on 30 May. It expands the scope of existing offences, for instance to include non-violent actions under subversion, and further widens the definition of sedition to include 'acts that incite participation in riots'. It allows authorities to intercept personal communications as a 'precautionary measure' and can be applied extraterritorially.

During the reporting period, the EU office noticed that some stakeholders were reluctant to meet over concerns around the National Security Law which bans 'collusion with foreign forces.' The law also introduces a new vetting mechanism empowering the Committee for Safeguarding National Security to examine candidates. Under the 'Amendment to Law no. 3/2004 – Electoral law for the Chief Executive' passed on 14 December, Macao's National Security Committee will issue legally 'binding' opinions to the Electoral Affairs Commission to determine if candidates standing in Chief Executive and Election Committee elections uphold the Basic Law and pledge allegiance to the Macao Special Administrative Region (SAR). The decision is not subject to any judicial appeals. Candidates are required to sign pledges to uphold Macao's Basic Law and bear allegiance to the People's Republic of China. In December, the Assembly also approved the outline of a bill to amend the Legislative Assembly Election Law, which will introduce similar criteria to assess whether candidates are upholding the Basic Law and demonstrating sufficient loyalty to the Macao SAR. Both laws are expected to effectively exclude opposition figures from standing in elections.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued monitoring signs of closing civic space and democratic backsliding, in close contact with the Consulate General of Portugal, based in Macao. In April, the EU Office organised a field trip for Member State Consulates-General to reconnect with political and civil society stakeholders in Macao (after a long period when visits had not been possible due to COVID-related restrictions). The EU Office also invited stakeholders for an exchange with the EU Cultural and Public Diplomacy Working Group.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Following the end of Covid-19 restrictions in February 2023, resuming regular dialogue with the Macao Government has proven challenging. The EU Office and Member State Consuls-General in 2023 did not receive invitations to annual events such as the handover anniversary celebrations.

The Head of Office met the Chief Executive shortly after the lifting of the travel ban in February 2023.A joint event by the EU Office and the European Chamber of Commerce in Macao on sustainable development in November allowed for a short exchange with high-ranking government officials.

4. EU financial engagement: There is no EU financial engagement in Macao.

5. Multilateral context: Macao is a party to international treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) but generally plays a very limited role in multilateral fora.

Taiwan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Taiwan is a vibrant democracy with a system of governance based on the rule of law and the respect of fundamental

freedoms. The human rights situation is one of the most advanced in Asia. On LGBTI rights, Taiwan is considered a pioneer in the region, being the first to legalise same-sex marriage in Asia (2019). Protections for civil liberties are generally robust. Elections and referenda are held in a fair and transparent manner. The most recent presidential and legislative elections were held on 13 January 2024.

However, some issues of concern remain, such as the slow progress towards the abolition of the death penalty and the lack of a transparent legal framework for refugees. Further efforts are also needed to improve the protection of migrant workers' and fishers' rights and to ensure proper working conditions. The administration is working on adopting more international human rights treaties, as outlined in Taiwan's first National Action Plan on Human Rights 2022-2024, released in May 2022. A draft bill to integrate the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) and Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) into domestic law was approved by the Executive Yuan but not yet passed by the Parliament. Preparations to align domestic law with ILO Work in Fishing Convention No. 188 (ILO C188) also remains ongoing.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU and Member States present in Taipei identified the following priorities: promoting Taiwan's compliance with international human rights law, including by developing its human rights institutional framework and domestic legislation to protect refugees; improving the human rights situation and working conditions of migrant workers; promoting the abolition of death penalty in Taiwan, including working towards a moratorium on executions and towards sensitising public opinion and judicial practitioners; supporting independent and pluralistic media and the fight against disinformation; and supporting and protecting human rights defenders in the region, including by contributing to the safety and protection of journalist and media workers. The EU continued its consultations with Taiwan with a focus on migrant workers' rights and working conditions, the death penalty, and non-discrimination against persons in the most vulnerable situations. The EU remained in contact with several agencies in charge of human rights related issues.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The sixth EU-Taiwan Human Rights Consultations were held in Brussels on 9 June 2023. Discussion focused on the abolition of death penalty, business and human rights, gender equality and rights of LGBTI persons, human rights education and human rights in the digital sphere. Meetings with CSOs were held before the consultations to gather ideas and exchange information. The EU and Taiwan also discussed human rights in the EU-Taiwan annual consultations held in November 2023. The EU remained engaged on the working and living conditions of migrant workers, and on the abolition of the death penalty.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the European Economic and Trade Office (EETO) organised, promoted or supported a number of events and initiatives on the identified human rights priorities. These activities resulted in increased public awareness and enhanced exchanges between the EU and Taiwan, both with NGOs and with the Taiwanese authorities. Activities on human rights and democracy are being organised. Besides marking Human Rights Day, activities covered the following areas: alignment with the Convention Against Torture (CAT); promote the abolition of the death penalty; promote rights of migrant workers; support to regional human rights defenders; promote LGBTI rights; press freedom; media literacy and countering disinformation; gender equality, jointly organising the 2023 EU-Taiwan Gender Equality Forum together with the Taiwan authorities.

5. Multilateral context: Although Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations, it has voluntarily adopted five human rights treaties by incorporating them into domestic law. These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The authorities regularly publish implementation reports, followed by parallel reports prepared by civil society organisations, and invites a panel of international experts to conduct reviews and give recommendations. The third review of the implementation of ICCPR and ICESCR involving international experts and CSOs was completed in May 2022. Taiwan also reviewed its implementation of the CEDAW, CRC and CRPD following the same procedures. In 2022, the Executive Yuan released the first implementation report of the ICERD, followed by independent review reports released by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and CSOs.

Republic of India

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The year 2023 was marked by India's G20 Presidency, in which context India showed efforts to focus on women-led development and mainstream gender across all work strands. In terms of gender equality, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023 noted that India – ranked 127th out of 146 countries – slightly improved its position, in particular in education and political empowerment, with gender-based violence and low female labour force participation remaining issues of concern. In 2023, the Indian parliament passed the Women's Reservation Bill, mandating that one third of seats in the lower house and state assemblies be reserved for women; entry into force is most realistic by the 2029 general elections.

Online and offline platforms where the right to criticise the government can be freely exercised are available in the country. Artistic and cultural events, as well as universities and student unions continue to be engaged in the political debate. However, several UN bodies and independent reports noted a continued shrinking of civil society and media space in India. India dropped to the 161st ranking in 2023 from the 150th position in 2022 in the World Press Freedom Index. In its World Report 2023, Human Rights Watch highlighted the government's "intensified efforts to silence civil society activists and independent journalists by using politically motivated criminal charges, including terrorism." There were 30 major internet shutdowns in India in 2023, the longest blackout being from May to December in Manipur, and two high-profile cases of law enforcement action against media organisations that drew criticism from civil society: one involving the UK's BBC and the other one involving India's NewsClick.

In December 2023, the Supreme Court upheld the Government's decision in 2019 to revoke Kashmir's special status. The ruling required furthermore the restoration of the statehood in Kashmir, and holding local elections by 30 September 2024.

The broader civil society movement in India continued to be significantly affected by the 2020 amendments to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Act (FCRA). In 2023, several other well-reputed CSOs, some of which were working or had worked with the EU and EU Member States in the past, had their FCRA license suspended or cancelled.

Independent reports noted that the trend of deteriorating freedom of religion or belief, with a high number of attacks against religious minorities including by law enforcement authorities, continued. Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Castes (OBC) members remained among the most disadvantaged groups in India. Over the year, the National Crime Bureau counted more than 57 000 cases of crimes committed by non-SC members against SC members.

Concerning LGBTI rights, in October 2023 the Supreme Court refused to legalise same-sex marriage, while acknowledging the discrimination of LGBTI couples, and left the matter for the Parliament to decide.

2. EU action - key focus areas: *Protecting and empowering individuals*: Through the previous (EIDHR) and current (NDICI) Human Rights instruments, seven projects, amounting to EUR 6.8 million, were implemented, addressing caste based discrimination, forced labour and slavery, torture and death penalty, as well as promoting the rights of children, women, indigenous peoples and minorities, freedom of expression, religion or belief, and strengthening Human Right Defenders' protection and access to justice.

Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies: The EU funded eight projects for a total of EUR 7.24 million focused on promoting the economic, social and political empowerment of women and girls, in particular, increasing their participation in the climate change agenda and digitalisation.

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: In 2023, the EU Delegation awarded a direct grant of EUR 230 000 to three Indian CSOs working on disinformation. The project aims to contribute to the protection and promotion of fundamental freedoms online in India, by deepening understanding of and developing strategies to counter misinformation and disinformation online.

Delivering by working together: The EU Member States financed over fifty human rights projects in India. The majority of these focused on gender rights and were implemented in partnerships with Indian CSOs.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The local EU-India Human Rights Dialogue did not take place in 2023 despite outreach attempts by the EU Delegation to hold it before the end of the year. However, the EU Delegation continued to raise human rights issues on a regular basis during bilateral contacts with the Ministry of External Affairs. Concerning individual cases of human rights defenders/journalists, the EU asked the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to look into allegations of human rights abuses.

During their visits to Delhi, five EU senior officials had interactions with human rights activists and defenders. In 2023, the EU Delegation organised, together with EU Member State, more than 15 meetings with civil society representatives covering all different spheres of human rights.

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation in Manipur in July 2023.

4. EU financial engagement: In addition to the programmes and projects mentioned above, six projects received support under the Partnership Instrument (PI) and the DCI thematic programmes [Civil society organisations (CSO), Global Public Goods and Challenges (GPGC)], for a total of EUR 13.57 million, some of them multi-country interventions including India. These projects focused on addressing economic inequalities, labour standards and workers' rights in sectoral supply chains.

5. Multilateral context: In 2023, UN Special Rapporteurs issued three statements on India, two of them related to Human Rights Defenders, and one concerning the situation in Manipur.

In March 2023, the EU27 co-sponsored a Joint Statement on "Resonance of thoughts and values of Mahatma Gandhi in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights", initiated by India and delivered at the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council. India has expressed an interest to engage further with EU Missions in Geneva and New York.

Republic of Indonesia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Indonesia is the third largest democracy in the world, with free and fair elections, a pluralistic media landscape and a vibrant civil society. Basic human rights are guaranteed by the Constitution and a strong institutional human rights framework. A major human rights development with long-term consequences was the adoption of a new Criminal Code in December 2022, which will enter into force in early 2026. The Code contains provisions that criminalise extra-marital sex and cohabitation (de facto outlawing LGBTI relations), while expanding the punishable scope of libel, slander, insults to the president and vice-president, and blasphemy. It potentially undermines a number of political and civil rights, such as the freedoms of speech, of assembly, of religion and belief, or privacy. In a similar vein, the adoption of the revised Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law) in December 2023 retained contentious articles on hate speech, defamation and fake news. These concerns notwithstanding, the year 2023 ended with the acquittal of two prominent human rights defenders who had been charged with defamation by a high-ranking government official. Indonesia ranked 108th out of 180 countries in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters without Borders, rising from 117th position in 2022.

The new Criminal Code also opens the door to the recognition of discriminatory customary laws, known as bylaws or "living law." It is estimated that 64 sharia-inspired local bylaws currently discriminate against religious minorities, with particular consequences for non-Muslim women and girls who have reported cases of 'hijab bullying.' On the other hand the Code offers a legal definition of rape and marital rape, while expanding the definition of violence to include harassment. Whereas abortion remains a criminal offence, the Code exempts survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence (such as forced prostitution, sexual exploitation and slavery), and increases the time limit for abortion in these cases from 40 days to 14 weeks. These provisions followed in the wake of the landmark adoption of the Law on the Elimination of Sexual Violence in 2022, which created a legal framework for the

prosecution of sexually violent crimes with a survivor-centred approach. Another notable improvement is that the Criminal Code allows for the death penalty to be commuted to life in prison.

Those serving a life sentence can have their sentences commuted to 20 years after 15 years of imprisonment. No executions were carried out in 2023 and the *de facto* moratorium on the death penalty was upheld, with the last executions dating back to 2016. Meanwhile, at least 38 persons were sentenced to death (a marked decrease compared to 118 in 2022), mostly involving drug offences and murder cases. According to the most recent data available, 479 persons (including 10 EU nationals) were on death row at the end of 2023. The situation in the Indonesian Papuan provinces showed little improvement. The ongoing low-intensity localised armed conflict resulted in civilian casualties, including killings committed by separatist fighters, and up to 100 000 internally displaced people, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. A peace initiative by the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) has faltered.

LGBTI persons continue to constitute a particularly vulnerable group in Indonesia, having to grapple with 48 discriminatory bylaws. At a time when support for legalising same-sex marriage is on the rise across Asia, a Pew survey from December 2023 found that 92 percent of Indonesians are against it. The plight of LGBTI persons hit a low-point in July 2023, with the cancellation of Southeast Asia's largest LGBTI event, the 'ASEAN Queer Advocacy Week,' due to security threats.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU Delegation and EU Member States' missions engaged together with the government, parliamentarians and civil society on the freedoms of expression, of religion and belief, discrimination against minorities (including LGBTI persons), human rights defenders, as well as women's empowerment and gender equality. They attended trials of human rights defenders. Initiatives included the EU4Wartawan journalistic writing competition on the climate crisis and its impact on human rights; the '*100% Manusia*' (human rights) film festival; a drawing contest on electoral processes and democracy; a Wikipedia writing competition with the aim of increasing local language content, focused on the Ukraine crisis; and the EU-UNESCO Senior Editors' Forum on preserving press freedom and countering disinformation. The EU-Indonesia Human Rights dialogue was not held in 2023.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Against the backdrop of Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship, there was scope for the EU and Member States to raise human rights issues at all levels. Throughout the year, the EU and Member States engaged with Indonesia on thematic human rights issues as well as matters relating to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the conflict in Gaza, women's access to education in Afghanistan, and the conflict in Myanmar. The 7th EU-Indonesia Joint Committee was held in September; this explored the possibility of convening the next Human Rights Dialogue before the end of 2023, with a view to strengthening cooperation in the promotion and protection of human rights, although the meeting was not scheduled during the year. The EU urged all regional governments to allow disembarkation by sea-borne Rohingya refugees and ensure their access to humanitarian assistance, welcoming Indonesia's actions in this regard.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU continued to work closely with civil society organisations (CSOs) and local authorities through seven projects supported with over EUR 8 million. These covered the protection and promotion of women's rights (including combatting sexual and

gender-based violence), the protection of human rights defenders, the prevention of torture and other ill-treatment, sustainable and rights-based development, and the strengthening of CSOs. Through regional and multi-country projects, the EU also supported projects to protect the rights of Indonesian migrant workers, particularly women and those working in fisheries. In 2023, six new projects were awarded with EU funding of EUR 9 million. These projects, starting in 2024, will cover human rights aspects of the digital transformation and the environment, as well as access to justice.

5. Multilateral context: In October 2023, Indonesia was elected as a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the 2024-2026 period, securing the highest number of votes. Following the 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) that took place in November 2022, the Government of Indonesia supported 205 out of 269 UPR recommendations (74%).

Islamic Republic of Iran

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The situation of human rights in Iran remained of serious concern in 2023. Fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, both online and offline, freedom of assembly and other civic rights have been increasingly curtailed. The discrimination against women and girls continued in public and private life. The pace of executions increased considerably in 2023 to more than 750. A major source of concern continued to be the use of death penalty also for juvenile offenders, protestors and dissidents. In a very grim context, it will have to be seen whether the directive from the Head of the Judiciary on 24 October 2023 promoting "a reduction" in death sentences against juvenile offenders will have some effect on the number of executions. Many accused individuals were deprived of their rights for a fair trial. The arbitrary detention and conviction of foreign and dual nationals and the situation of human rights activists remained matters of serious concern. At the same time, it is commendable that Iran continued to host a great number of Afghan refugees (which has even increased since the recent crisis in Afghanistan), and to provide them with access to basic services, in particular health care and education for children.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In the Council Conclusions of December 2022, the EU reaffirmed its commitment to a comprehensive policy approach: critical where necessary, and ready to engage, on the basis of mutual respect, where interests align. As part of its comprehensive policy approach, the EU followed the situation of human rights in Iran very closely, including the aftermath of the protests started in September 2022, in particular the trials against protesters, and called on the Iranian authorities to end the practice of imposing and carrying out death sentences against protesters. As a result, it continued to address all relevant issues using a mixture of public and private diplomacy as well as bilateral and multilateral tools. This included *inter alia*: the use of death penalty in particular for juvenile offenders, protesters and dissidents; Iran's disregard for its international human rights obligations, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to both of which Iran is a party; freedom of expression and assembly; detention standard and conditions; restrictions on communications, including Internet shutdowns.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human rights continued to be an integral part of the EU's policy vis-à-vis Iran. As a result, the EU used its direct channels with Iran to call on the authorities to uphold their international obligations under international law, demand respect for the fundamental rights of Iranian men and women, raise human rights issues and individual cases and refrain from imposing and carrying out death sentence, in particular in the case of juvenile offenders, protesters and dissidents, and pursue a consistent policy towards the abolition of capital punishment. In his statement on behalf of the EU, one year after the death of Mahsa Amini, the High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) reconfirmed the full support of the EU and its Member States for the aspiration of Iranian people for a future where their universal human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected, protected and realised. The coordinated actions between the EU and its Member States led to the adoption of further targeted restrictive measures in the context of the Iranian government's response to the 2022-2023 nationwide protests. In addition, the EU expressed concern regarding the situation of political prisoners and that of EU and EU-Iranian dual nationals arbitrarily detained in Iran, urging the Iranian authorities to ensure that all prisoners are kept in safe conditions in compliance with the applicable international law, and that they are granted medical and consular assistance whenever needed. Through this political engagement, the EU continued to urge improvements in the human rights situation in Iran and continued to insist, both privately and publicly, that there must be accountability for abuses whenever they occur.

4. EU financial engagement: In implementing projects in the framework of the Iran Multiannual Indicative Programme for 2021-2027, the EU always takes into account its human rights commitments.

5. Multilateral context: The EU continued to be a strong supporter of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran and encouraged Iran to fully cooperate with the latter's mandate. As in previous years, the EU supported the resolution on the human rights situation in Iran tabled by Canada during the United Nations General Assembly in New York, as a resolution that is fact-based and free of unverified allegations. The EU expressed fully support for the work carried out by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission and urged Iran to totally cooperate with the mandate holders and to facilitate their access to the country. The EU also engaged with the Human Rights Council in Geneva by supporting all measures to ensure accountability for human rights violations in Iran.

Japan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Japan is an active promoter of fundamental values and respect for international human rights obligations. It has an important role in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) Third Committee. Despite this, Japan continues to retain capital punishment. In 2023 there were no executions, but three new death sentences were confirmed. At the national level, some positive developments took place on gender equality, and despite Japan not allowing same-sex marriage and the absence of an "anti-LGBTI discrimination" law, positive developments also took place concerning the rights of sexual minorities, with a landmark ruling by the Supreme Court on the "Gender Identity Disorder

Special Law". Japan also continues to engage concretely in the area of business and human rights.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The priority areas on human rights activities were: (i) Death penalty, criminal justice system and prisoners' rights; (ii) Gender equality and women's empowerment; (iii) LGBTI rights; (iv) Rights of the child; and (v) Business and human rights. All the priority areas were in line with the five strands of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-24. They contributed to 'Protecting and empowering individuals', they also promoted building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies, a global system for human rights and democracy, and were linked to the 'New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges' objective. Activities were subject to a broad stakeholder dialogue and work was implemented involving civil society organisations and Member States in a joined-up approach, each according to their competences, in accordance with the 'delivering by working together' principle.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The last round of the EU-Japan human rights consultations took place on 6 June 2023, with both sides discussing policy developments and current priorities, including in UN multilateral fora.

Death penalty, criminal justice system and prisoners' rights: consistent with the EU's work towards the abolition of the death penalty, the EU Delegation continued to run a project to stimulate civil society-led activities to increase awareness of the criminal justice system in relation to the death penalty in Japan. The EU and several EU Member States cooperated in the context of the 42nd Session of the Universal Periodic Review Working Group, by urging Japan to abolish the death penalty and to improve conditions for prisoners.

Gender equality and women's empowerment: the EU Delegation and EU Member States embassies engaged with the Japanese government, Diet members and relevant stakeholders on the issues of gender equality and women empowerment, in various forms of political and policy dialogues throughout the year, including in the context of Japan's G7 presidency.

LGBTI rights: the EU Delegation and several EU Member States embassies provided support to organisations and events aimed at promoting human rights of LGBTI persons and contributing to a society of tolerance and respect. These events included active participation in and/or support of the Tokyo Rainbow Pride Festival in April 2023 and other regional Rainbow Pride events.

Rights of the child: The EU Delegation and several EU Member States embassies closely followed the developments in Japan on rights of the child and the work of the Japanese Ministry of Justice towards new legislative proposals to introduce a joint custody system in the country.

Business and human rights: The EU Delegation continued working on this topic, including the organisation of a meeting with Japanese businesses and business organisations to discuss due diligence issues.

The EU made active use of social media and undertook with EU Member States joint social media campaigns surrounding international human rights related events. EU Member States made substantial contributions in all areas and in particular on gender equality and LGBTI rights.

4. EU financial engagement: In terms of financial contributions, the EU Delegation allocated funding for the following activities: in the area of the death penalty, criminal justice system and prisoners' rights the two-year project "Veritas- Evidence-based advocacy on the Death Penalty – Japan" (EUR 150 000) in support to CrimeInfo, completed its first year of implementation. On gender equality and women's empowerment, two bilateral actions launched in 2022 and financed under the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Support Facility were completed: (i) EU-Japan Joint Project on Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in and with Japan in the Post-Pandemic Era, with a budget of EUR 240 000 and (ii) Project for Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Japan towards G7 2023, with a budget of EUR 120 000.

In December, the EU Delegation organised a seminar (budget of 25 000 EUR / 100 participants) jointly with the UN Information Centre in Japan to mark the 75th year since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and explore the role that strategic partnerships play for actors like the European Union (EU) and Japan when it comes to promoting principles upheld by the UDHR.

5. Multilateral context: The EU Delegation and Member States embassies cooperated to request support from the Japanese government for human rights related resolutions in the UNGA and the HRC. In the 78th session of the UNGA Third Committee, Japan co-sponsored the EU-led resolution on the DPRK. Japan has been elected in October 2023 to serve a three-year term at the HRC beginning on 1st January 2024.

As part of the of the fourth cycle of the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the human rights record of Japan was reviewed during the 42nd UPR session in Geneva on 31 January 2023. One of the main recommendation was related to the abolishment of the death penalty. Other recommendations focused on the establishment of a national human rights institution (NHRI); combatting discrimination and hate speech based notably on race, sexual orientation, or gender identity; ensuring gender equality; combatting human trafficking; ensuring good working and living conditions for foreign workers and ensuring safe discharge of nuclear waste from the Fukushima plant. States also recommended to Japan to ratify a number of international treaties.

Republic of Korea

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The Republic of Korea (RoK) is a developed constitutional democracy characterised by separation of power, fair and free elections, which guarantees human rights, basic civil and political liberties, and freedom of expression and belief to a high level. Civil society remained robust and vocal in promoting causes from all sides of the political spectrum. While the government's intention to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family has been temporally halted, this idea still provoked debate on the direction of gender equality policy. There are still no follow-up measures in place to provide access to safe abortion after the 2019 Constitutional Court decision, which ruled that making abortion a criminal offense was unconstitutional. Although organisations representing social minorities, including the LGBTI, were able to campaign for full enjoyment of human rights, political leaders did not engage in substantive support for these objectives

and a longstanding bill for an anti-discrimination law did not progress. As one of the fastest aging societies in the world projected to become a 'super-aged 'country in 2025, the number of economically vulnerable elderly population in Korea is also growing at a rapid pace. Longstanding concerns remained regarding aspects of the National Security Law and the continuing existence of the death penalty on the statute-books despite the de-facto moratorium on executions.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU's action in the RoK in 2023 focused on supporting civil societies, combatting all forms of hate and discrimination on any ground, promoting gender equality, and rights of older persons.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU regularly engaged with relevant government interlocutors, including the National Human Rights Commission of Korea and civil society organisations (CSOs). Marking the day against the death penalty, the EUDEL together with the EU Member States published a local EU statement on the delegation website reaffirming the EU's strong opposition to the death penalty, calling for de jure abolition of the death penalty in the RoK. The EU with other like-minded diplomatic missions participated in LGBTI Pride festivals and parades, and co-hosted the ASEM Forum on the Rights of Older persons. The EU Delegation also hosted the EU-Korea Women in Science and Technology Forum to exchange ideas with Korean partners on encouraging more women to choose careers in that area. The EU and Member states interacted with journalists and CSO representatives to exchange about press freedom in the RoK. Finally, the EU Delegation also organised a conference "Live Diversity: Practice inclusivity", celebrating the International Human Rights Day.

4. EU financial engagement: Under the EU Policy and Outreach Partnership (EUPOP) project, the EU aimed at promoting human rights and societal resilience by supporting activities of mutual interest to the RoK and the EU. The project specifically addressed topics under the theme of discriminations, raising awareness about EU and international human rights frameworks, and broadly addressing gender equality across its activities. Through the project, the EU carried out targeted outreach, dialogue and communication actions and explored concrete partnerships with local CSOs.

5. Multilateral context: There is a high degree of convergence between the EU and the RoK as regards the priorities for the promotion of human rights in international institutions. The EU and the Republic of Korea exchanged views on draft resolutions ahead of the 67th Session of the UN Convention on the Status of Women and the UNGA 78 Third Committee. The RoK resumed co-sponsoring resolutions on human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The Universal Periodic Review of the Republic of Korea took place in January 2023. States' recommendations mostly focussed on implementing the alternative service to military objectors, decriminalising same sex relations in the military, taking measures to protect the rights of migrant workers, adopting comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation to combat violence, including online and based on gender identity and sexual orientation. States also recommended the government to abolish the death penalty, including by ratifying the relevant Optional Protocol of the ICCPR (International Covenant on civil and Political Rights), and to ratify a number of international human rights treaties, including the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT), the Optional Protocol to International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Optional Protocol to the Convention on

the Rights of the Child (CRC), the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and others.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023 the human rights and democracy situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) remained dire. There were no indications that the DPRK engaged in constructive action to address the findings of the International Commission of Inquiry's conclusions in 2014 that *"systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, its institutions and officials. In many instances, the violations of human rights found by the commission constitute crimes against humanity".* The DPRK maintains significant border restrictions (implemented since 2020), and most diplomats and international humanitarian staff remains absent from the country.

Nonetheless, the number of defectors has increased three fold compared to the two previous years, though still much lower compared to pre-pandemic levels. The government continued to refuse to engage with the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK and to limit engagement with other UN human rights bodies and mechanisms. Outside observers continued to express concern that tight border restrictions, a clamp-down on market activity and the continued suspension of international humanitarian projects, together with the long-term effects of poor economic policies, resulted in significant problems of food insecurity. The dire human rights situation was aggravated by the fact that the DPRK continues to divert its resources into illegal nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles programmes away from the welfare of its own people.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU addressed all areas of concern through resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly. Frequent communication took place between the EU and the UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) as well as like-minded international partners. This included a side-event in the margins of the UN General Assembly co-organised by the EU and the RoK, involving inter alia the UN Special Rapporteur for DPRK human rights and senior EU, RoK and US officials. The EU Delegation in the Republic of Korea also continued to support the work of civil societies in promoting human rights in the DPRK by participating in and co-hosting local events. The EU renewed sanctions against two senior DPRK officials and the DPRK Central Public Prosecutor's Office under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU maintained limited contact with the DPRK authorities through diplomatic channels in Europe, including on issues related to human rights.

4. EU financial engagement: It was not possible to implement humanitarian assistance and food security projects in the DPRK in the context of the absence of international staff from the country.

5. Multilateral context: For several years, the EU has initiated country-specific resolutions on the human rights situation in the DPRK at the Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly. Both resolutions were adopted by consensus and helped to maintain international attention on the situation and send strong messages of concern. The Human Rights Council Resolution focuses, *inter alia*, on the work of the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights and the Council itself, whereas the United Nations General Assembly Resolution focuses, *inter* alia, on the work of the Security Council.

Human Rights Council Resolution 52/28 stressed the importance of following up on the recommendations contained in the report of the Commission of Inquiry. It expressed deep concern over the systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations and over the exacerbation of the humanitarian situation in the country. Underlining the need for accountability and to ensure that the crimes do not remain unpunished, the resolution welcomed various efforts, such as steps taken by the OHCHR including through its field-based structure in Seoul. It renewed the mandate of the Seoul Office and was intended to strengthen its capacity.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 78/218 expressed deep concern regarding the grave human rights situation in the DPRK, the pervasive culture of impunity, and the lack of accountability for human rights violations and abuses in the DPRK. It condemned in the strongest terms the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross violations of human rights and expressed its very serious concern about numerous human rights violations of both political and civil and social, economic, and cultural rights. It included renewed calls for cooperation with UN mechanisms and included several references to the disproportionate impact of human rights violations on women and girls through gender inequality and gender-based violence as well as violations of their economic, social and cultural rights. It also introduced new language on the link between the human rights situation and broader peace and security. It highlighted the importance of the activities of OHCHR, including through its field-based structure in Seoul with regard to victims and survivors, and with regard to accountability.

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR)

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The situation of human rights and democracy remained largely unchanged in 2023. Some new individual cases of concern were raised with the Lao authorities. Despite a commitment to gradual improvement in human rights, there are continuing deficiencies in implementation of key international human rights norms and instruments. Based on the 2020 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a National Action Plan was adopted in June 2022 and published in January 2023. It includes a commitment to accept the visit of a UN Special Rapporteur before the 2025 UPR. Freedom of expression is controlled, and media and cinema are subject to censorship. Concerns expressed by citizens in social media have led to recent official calls for further restrictions on expression, including on the internet.

Laos ranked 160th out of 180 countries in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters without Borders, compared with its 161st position in 2022. The legislative

framework governing civil society is complex and largely unchanged. Individuals have been detained and arrested for public criticism of the authorities. No substantial new information has been made available on the enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone, missing since 2012. The authorities held a meeting with Mr Sombath's wife in June 2023. During 2023, attacks targeted Lao activists and government critics inside the country and in Thailand. Events included the arbitrary arrest of Savang Phaleuth, living in exile in Thailand, on 20 April 2023, the attempted assassination by persons unknown in Vientiane of Mr Anousa (Jack) Luangsouphom on 29 April 2023, and the assassination of Mr Bounsuan Kittiyano in Thailand on 17 May 2023.

A case of particular importance was the deportation to China of dissident lawyer Lu Siwei on 23 September 2023. Concerning religious freedom, greater efforts are required to ensure correct implementation of state law by local authorities. In a difficult economic context, dispossession of local communities continues due to development activities by foreign and domestic investors in agriculture, mining and electricity production. This is accompanied by limited public consultation or impact assessments, and difficulties in obtaining adequate compensation for affected individuals and communities. Lao PDR supports action against gender-based violence and the abuse of children's rights. It has made efforts to increase capacity to combat child trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced marriages to foreign nationals, and forced labour.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU addressed the situation of human rights defenders and others through consultation and support for civil society, with quarterly Civil Society Working Group meetings of CSOs, government, and development partners. The EU supported capacity building for ministries and the National Assembly on the implementation of human rights conventions. The EU and EU Member States promote women's rights, including through the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence, in 2023 combined with annual CSO fairs, gathering 86 CSOs and international NGOs in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The 12th EU-Laos Human Rights Dialogue took place on 12 June 2023 in Vientiane. Discussion was open and showed agreement on some, but not all, points. The EU raised a number of individual cases of concern with the Lao PDR delegation, including the cases of Sombath Somphone and Anousa (Jack) Luangsouphom. A number of follow-up actions were set out in a joint press statement. Following the arrest of Chinese dissident lawyer Lu Siwei in July 2023, the EU also addressed his case along with other international partners. The Governance Sector Working Group (GSWG), a policy dialogue forum between the government and development partners, was revived in 2023 thanks to EU support, along with two sub-sector working groups. The EU co-chairs the Sub-Sector Working Group on Rule of Law, Access to Justice and Institutional Oversight as a member of the GSWG. The EU and development partners continue to express concern on onerous registration and reporting requirements and procedures applied to international and local NGOs.

4. EU financial engagement: EU financial and operational support for good governance is primarily channelled through the project "Citizen Engagement for Good Governance, Accountability and the Rule of Law (CEGGA)", co-funded by the EU, Germany and Switzerland. Implementation currently focuses on sub-national implementation and innovation. In 2023, CEGGA held a first annual exchange workshop between Lao CSOs and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry on policies and laws in this key sector and on the experiences and

perspectives of civil society. A roadmap for innovative public engagement within the Provincial People's Assemblies of Khammouane and Luang Prabang provinces was agreed. CSOs received support under the 'Human Rights and Democracy' and the Civil Society Organisations-Local Authorities (CSO-LA) thematic programmes. In 2023, projects addressed *inter alia* promotion and protection of the rights of women and children, social protection and labour rights, access to justice, victims of trafficking, green action through media and civil society, measures against corruption and impunity, and access by ethnic groups to participation in policy shaping and public services. Twenty-seven CSOs implemented EU grants during the year.

5. Multilateral context: The government submitted state reports on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Preparation of the initial state report to the Committee Against Torture (CAT) is underway. The EU is supporting preparation of the state report to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD). In July 2023, a UN Special Procedures Joint Allegation Letter was sent to the government in relation to the human rights consequences of the 2018 Attapeu dam collapse. The government replied in November 2023, but issues remain as regards housing reconstruction and compensation for damage. No reply has been received to three UN Special Procedures Joint Allegation Letters sent in 2021 concerning the case of Sombath Somphone, alleged attacks on the Hmong ethnic group in the Phou Bia area, and arbitrary detention and continued imprisonment of human rights defenders. In 2023 the government neither invited nor received a UN Special Procedures country visit. Lao PDR has been an active participant in the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and related regional events, assuming its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2024.

Malaysia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights situation saw a number of positive developments in 2023. The Parliament adopted the Abolition of Mandatory Death Penalty Act in April 2023. This removed the mandatory nature of the death penalty for eleven offences, including murder and terrorism, giving discretion to the courts to decide on an appropriate punishment based on the facts of the case and mitigating factors. The Act came into force on 4 July 2023. In 2023, Malaysia ranked 73rd out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, compared to 113th place in 2022. Under the leadership of Azalina Othman Said, appointed Minister for Law and Institutional Reform in the Prime Minister's Department in December 2022, reforms are being advanced in other areas. Preliminary efforts have been undertaken by the government to improve the welfare of migrants and refugees, for example through the launch of forced labour guidelines and a commitment from the government to adopt policies that will give refugees access to employment, health services and education.

The total number of persons registered with UNHCR in Malaysia stood at 185,300 at the end of 2023, with different ethnic groups from Myanmar accounting for almost 90 percent of these. Significant progress has been made in closing education gaps across the urban-rural,

socio-economic class and gender divides. In March 2023, several provisions of the 2022 Anti-Sexual Harassment Act came into effect, while the remainder of the act's provisions will come into effect in future stages. In March 2023, Malaysia also passed amendments to the Penal Code making stalking, both physically and online, a crime. The new Section 507A of the Penal Code and amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code are positive steps towards improving Malaysia's response to gender-based violence and enabling survivors to find relief and seek protection. However, women continue to be a heavily discriminated group.

LGBTI and gender-diverse people, however, face increasing criminalisation under various laws, state-sponsored conversion practices, and censorship, among other forms of state-sanctioned regulation based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex-characteristics (SOGIESC). Nationality rights remain unequal. A government decision in February approving amendments to the Federal Constitution would enable children born overseas to Malaysian mothers, who are married to foreigners, to automatically become citizens, something currently granted to children of Malaysian fathers. However, the amendments would also create new categories of stateless persons (such as by removing the access of both children of permanent residents or of foundlings to automatic citizenship) and as such have been criticised by the Malaysian Bar, among others. Extensive land development continues to adverse effect indigenous peoples, posing threats to a wide spectrum of human rights.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU's human rights priorities in Malaysia include youth and democracy, labour rights, freedom of expression, support to human rights defenders, ratification of core human rights conventions, and the promotion of gender equality, including LGBTI rights. In terms of protecting individual rights a focus for EU action remains advocacy for the full abolition of the death penalty. Child marriage remains a serious issue and access to education is uneven or non-existent in the case of refugee children.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed by the EU and Malaysia in December 2022 and which will reinforce political dialogue on a range of issues including human rights, had been ratified by ten EU Member States by the end of 2023. It was not possible to hold the 9th EU-Malaysia Senior Officials' Meeting in 2023; it will take place in 2024. The High Representative met Fadillah Haji Yusof; Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, on 30 May 2023 in Brussels. The EU Delegation engages regularly with government agencies, the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM) and the Malaysian Bar Council.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU provides financial support to civil society organisations, think tanks and the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) to address issues related to human rights. These include promoting institutional reforms, gender and democratic governance, and five new actions which began implementation in 2023. Malaysia also benefited from EU-funded regional projects. The project "Safe and Fair: Realising women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the ASEAN region" as part of the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative combats violence against women and girls. Through the "Protecting children affected by migration in Southeast, South and Central Asia" project, the EU and UNICEF worked with the government and other stakeholders to strengthen child protection services. Building on the lessons learned from these two key regional projects, a new regional project was signed in late 2023 with the same implementing partners to continue to protect the rights of women

migrant workers and migrant children in Southeast Asia including in the emerging Malaysia-Thailand migration corridor. Further new projects, signed in 2023, will begin implementation in 2024 in order to support indigenous peoples' rights as well as the rights of youth and children. In 2023, in the context of another EU-supported project, Malaysia hosted a national conference on business and human rights, securing another public announcement from the government that it was committed to drafting a national action plan on business and human rights. Although this was the third such commitment made across the terms of the four most recent governments, the finalisation of the national baseline assessment on business and human rights in October was an important milestone.

5. Multilateral context: Malaysia was elected to the United Nations Human Rights Council for the term 2022-2024. This has created a certain momentum for increased engagement on human rights issues and the potential ratification of international conventions. For example, Malaysia has not ratified the following international treaties, despite supporting several related recommendations in its previous Universal Periodic Review: the Convention Against Torture,the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on Enforced Disappearances, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on Migrant Workers. It has however ratified the three remaining treaties (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) with reservations on provisions with regard to equality and non-discrimination.

Republic of Maldives

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Two rounds of Presidential elections were held in the Maldives in September 2023. The election was followed by a peaceful transition of government from President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih to President Dr Mohamed Muizzu.

An EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) was invited by the Government of the Maldives to observe this fourth presidential election since the introduction of multi-party democracy in 2008. The EOM found that the fundamental freedoms were generally respected and voters were able to cast their ballots in an orderly fashion. At the same time, equity on the playing field needs to be improved, and campaign finance framework need to be better regulated and enforced. Political partisanship of media was prevalent, while there were some indications of information manipulation in social media. There was a plurality of candidates in the first round of elections, but women did not feature among the nominees.

Women representation in decision making numbers were lowered when the new government appointed a cabinet with 3 women out of 22 ministers. Robust measures are needed to promote women's participation in national politics.

Concerns persist with regard to the gender based violence. The Family Protection Authority reported 181 cases of domestic violence in the first three quarters of 2023.

Reporters Without Borders ranked Maldives the 100th in the Press Freedom Index of 2023, which is a drop of 13 positions from 2022. The Evidence Act, ratified in July 2022 and criticised by local and international civil society groups for its restrictive effect on media freedom (it requires journalists to reveal sources on court orders) remained unchanged, despite some amendments proposed by the Government back in 2022. Online and off-line intimidation against journalists and human rights activists remains prevalent, and has a significant impact on civic space and freedom of expression.

In a positive step, the Maldives ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED) in August 2023. At the same time investigations were slow with little results in two landmark cases: the abduction of journalist and human rights defender Ahmed Rilwan in 2014, and the murder case of Yamin Rasheed in 2017. Three arrested with charges brought against them were dismissed by the criminal court in November 2023 citing lack of evidence for trial'.

There are some concerns regarding need for more actions against corruption and impunity, instances of curtailing the freedom of expression, gender equality and the rights of women, and the situation of migrant workers.

The foreign migrant workers comprise considerable part of the population, and their situation remains vulnerable, with a need to ensure equal rights and safety standards. Industrial Relations Bill and the Occupational Health and Safety Bill were ratified in December 2023, aiming at ensuring fair labour practices and the protection of workers.

Adult consensual same-sex relations are criminalised in the Maldives. In 2023 an individual, who allegedly engaged in same-sex relations, was sentenced to prison by the High Court of the Maldives.

While death penalty remains part of the penal code of the Maldives, there has been a de facto moratorium on its use since 1952.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In line with the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, the EU action in the Maldives is focused on support to building resilient, inclusive and democratic society; supporting the rule of law, fair administration of justice, and support to transitional justice; promoting fundamental freedoms, media development and space for civil society and human rights defenders; promoting gender equality and women's rights; promoting human rights, transparency, accountability and environmental justice in business practices; and providing support to strengthening economic, social, cultural and labour rights.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The fourth Senior Officials Meeting took place in Brussels in June 2023, addressing, inter alia, governance, democracy, human rights, rule of law, security, and sectoral cooperation. The EU Delegation and Member States carried out high-level political dialogues throughout the year. The EU and its Member States also continued to work closely with civil society, human rights defenders, and media.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU, through its programmes, provides support to strengthening the rule of law and anti-corruption efforts, strengthening civic space and freedom of expression, as well as security cooperation and environmental protection.

5. Multilateral context: In 2023, the Maldives continued to demonstrate its commitment to multilateralism through engagement with international and regional fora. The country became a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2023, with a seat of the HRC for the term 2023-2025. The Maldives announced its candidature for membership of the UN Economic and Social Council (2027-2029) and UN Security Council (2033-2034).

Mongolia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: During 2023, Mongolia continued to make progress in the human rights area and to develop good cooperation with international partners. Actual implementation of relevant laws has however remained a challenge. In view of the Parliamentary elections scheduled for 28 June 2024, an electoral reform was adopted in 2023, which will imply an increase in the number of MPs from 76 to 126 and a limited introduction of proportional representation.

Work on the judiciary reform (notably improving the independence of the judiciary) and the fight against corruption continued in 2023. In response to the public protests of December 2022 triggered by the so-called „coal mafia scandal“, a package of anti-corruption laws was adopted in 2023. Other relevant legislative acts included: amendments to the Law on Procedures for Demonstrations (which will now also confirm the legality of „spontaneous demonstrations“, which have not been announced to the authorities in advance), the Law on the Establishment of Courts (introduction of a special Court for corruption cases) and the Law on Child Protection. The latter is part of a package of measures to increase the protection of vulnerable children against criminal offenses.

2. EU action - key focus areas: As regards protecting and empowering individuals, EU activities in 2023 focused in particular on gender equality and women's rights (including the fight against domestic violence and sexual harassment), the rights of the child, non-discrimination, rule of law and fair administration of justice. The action took various forms: project work, participation in conferences, communication on social media. The reform of the judiciary was also supported through EU funding.

In terms of promoting a resilient, inclusive and democratic society, the EU supported in 2023 various projects in favour of independent media, access to information and fight against disinformation. During the reporting period, implementation of the EU's Budget Support Programme, continued supporting the creation of effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. The EU also provided technical assistance on aligning Mongolian domestic legislation with international labour standards.

Mongolia launched in 2023 the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights and its implementation is supported by the EU project Business and Human Rights in Asia. The EU also supported several projects in favour of civil society: empowerment of young people, strengthening women's participation in community-level decision-making and in economic activities.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human rights related topics were discussed during the EU and Mongolia in the Human Rights Dialogue that took place on 18 July 2023 by videoconference. The Human Rights Dialogue was followed by the 5th Meeting of the EU-Mongolia Joint Committee in Brussels on 26 July 2023. Human rights issues were also discussed (from a GSP+ perspective) during the Trade Subcommittee held on 23 November 2023 by videoconference.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU continued implementation of its sector budget support programme to boost employment/TVET reforms and improve transparency in public finances in Mongolia. An EU supported technical assistance project with UNDP, FAO and, ILO and UNIDO, continued its implementation with focus on transparency and oversight of the budget; employment creation in the non-mining sectors for youth and for persons with disabilities, as well as compliance with international labour standards. In 2023, the EU continued to support human rights and democracy through several ongoing projects, carried out with Member States or other partners. The focus included: engendering rural economic development, business and human rights, enabling CSOs to advocate for accountability and transparency, digital inclusion through CSO empowerment, as well as effective response to human rights violations.

5. Multilateral context: The final report on the visit of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention was published in July 2023. The Working Group identified positive developments, including the 2020 revision of the Law on the National Human Rights Commission; the designation of the national preventive mechanism; the adoption of the Law of Mongolia on the Legal Status of Human Rights Defenders; the adoption of several amnesty laws, including the 2021 Amnesty Law; the absence of systemic detention in the context of migration in the country; and the approach of voluntary admission to State-run care institutions for persons in need of assisted living. Challenges were identified, however, in the criminal justice system, including shortcomings in the implementation of the revised Criminal Procedure Code and the detention of persons in police custody. The Working Group also expressed concern regarding procedural guarantees and fair trial rights. Concerns were also expressed about the lack of specialised courts for youth and of community-based services for persons with psychosocial disabilities.

The Committee on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW) and the Committee under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) issued reports and concluding observations on Mongolia in 2022, whose implementation was discussed at the Human Rights Dialogue in July 2023.

Myanmar/Burma

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The situation remained dire as the military coup of 1 February 2021 triggered a circle of violence, human rights violations, displacement and humanitarian crisis. The right to life and security of the person continued to be routinely violated. Threats, unwarranted arrests, abusive treatment and violence during arrests and torture were commonplace. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners reported that at year-end at least 19,858 dissidents were still in detention, and at least 550

people were killed after being detained. Prisons suffered from serious overcrowding and prisoners lack access to basic services. The regime has not further applied the death penalty after four executions in 2022 but death sentences continued to be handed out. In 2023, 38 people were sentenced to death, making a total of 162 people on death row. Arbitrary killings of civilians continued on a wide scale.

There was an increase in military airstrikes against civilian targets, often as a reprisal following armed resistance attacks on military positions. The UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Myanmar reported that armed resistance groups equally killed hundreds of civilians, including regime administrators, suspected military informants and villagers linked to pro-junta militia. The rule of law was further crippled with a drastic increase in martial law orders. With closed door hearings, absence of legal representation and lack of the right to appeal, martial courts effectively denied a wide range of rights to the accused and allowed for impunity of military acts. The increased intensity of the conflict had a negative impact on social and economic rights, including the right to health and to adequate food. The number of people forcibly displaced almost doubled to over 2.6 million by the end of 2023. One third of the population (18.6 million people) faced humanitarian needs and lack access to basic services. Aid actors were increasingly prevented from reaching people or were delivering at enormous risk.

New laws and continued detention of political opposition voices further diminished any prospects for the return to a democratic path through elections. The January 2023 “Political Parties Registration Law” paved the road for a one-party system led by a military proxy party. No meaningful opposition parties chose to register. President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi remained in jail following a symbolic partial pardon in August - reducing by a few years their still decades-long sentences. Hundreds of other political opposition members share their fate. Myanmar civic space remained highly restricted. Both arrests and detentions of civil society organisation (CSO) staff and office raids were reported. Travel and movement restrictions continued to be imposed. Thousands of activists are in hiding or fled the country. CSOs are under extensive military surveillance both online and offline.

New rules under the Anti-Terrorism Law gave the military legal authority to investigate NGOs and their assets and finances – and confiscate them. Myanmar ranked as the world’s second worst jailer of journalists, with 43 journalists imprisoned in 2023. 192 media staff have been arrested since the coup, of which 61 were still detained at the end of the year. Freedom of association and assembly continued to be highly restricted. In October the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Commission of Inquiry published a report on Myanmar’s violations of Conventions 89 on Freedom of Association and Assembly and 29 on Forced Labour, documenting among other things, disappearances of prominent trade union leaders, harassment and intimidation of labour activists, and the breaking up of strikes.

Human trafficking has taken on unprecedented dimensions with an estimated 120 000 individuals working in illegal scam centres in eastern Myanmar. Chinese pressure led to the first crackdowns, the alleged deportation of over 40 000 involved individuals and the release of hundreds of victims, but the phenomenon is far from eradicated and still flourishes in many areas along Myanmar’s borders with China, Laos and Thailand.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Human rights and democracy continue to be the cornerstone of the EU’s work in Myanmar, in line with its human rights and democracy strategy. Direct protection of human rights defenders and support to organisations working on the most

pressing human rights issues remained a key area of support. Other areas of work include support to justice-focussed CSOs and legal aid, journalists and independent media outlets, gender-based violence and children's rights, the fight against impunity and transitional justice, business and human rights and responsible business practices, respect for international humanitarian law, and support to laying the groundwork for a renewed culture of peace and dialogue.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The Council further extended its restrictive measures on Myanmar with three additional rounds of sanctions in February, July and December leaving 103 individuals and 21 entities subject to EU sanctions. Other EU restrictive measures remained in place: the embargo on arms and equipment, export restrictions on equipment for monitoring communications that might be used for internal repression, the export ban on dual-use goods for use by the military and border guard police, and the prohibition on military training and cooperation with the military. The EU Delegation continued its dialogue with local and international CSOs to align support and better respond to their challenges. Outside Myanmar, the EU stepped up its engagement with stakeholders in the resistance movement, including the National Unity Government. The EU continued to engage with prominent ethnic armed organisations. The EU Special Envoy for Myanmar engaged regional governments and other stakeholders.

4. EU financial engagement: Following the military coup in February 2021, all support channelled to the government was suspended. In 2023 cooperation remained channelled exclusively through local civil society, international NGOs and UN agencies. Over EUR 40 million of cooperation funds under implementation in 2023 directly contributed to strengthening human rights and a culture of democracy.

5. Multilateral context: In UN fora, the EU and Member States continued to be active in influencing resolutions and making statements at the UN Security Council, General Assembly and Human Rights Council. The EU also collaborated closely with the ILO in view of the Commission of Inquiry on violations to Convention 87 of Freedom of Association in Myanmar. The EU and Member States continued their financial and political support to the International Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar to bolster its investigations into allegations of international crimes and violations of international law.

Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Nepal's overall human rights record kept its positive trajectory, and according to IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), the country remains among the world's top 25% with regard to local democracy and press freedom.

However, in the course of 2023, Nepal experienced a continued parliamentary stalemate, corruption scandals, and even communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in the Terai region. Discriminatory practices to the detriment of Dalits, indigenous people and other marginalised communities, and prevailing patriarchy, continue to undermine equality in Nepal. For civil society organisations (CSOs), the applicable regulatory frameworks and their

various administrative hurdles create a less conducive environment. As a growing phenomenon, issues with mis- and disinformation, as well as cybercrime and cyber threats should be noted, with women journalists being prime targets. The negative impacts of climate change*, i.e.* rapid warming in the Himalayas and the melting of glaciers, pose increasing problems in the areas of health, safe water and sanitation and adequate food and housing, contributing to internal migration. The plight of Bhutanese and Tibetan refugees remains an issue.

On a positive side, the Citizenship Act, having entered into force in June 2023, has opened the possibility of obtaining citizenship for hundreds of thousands of stateless Nepalis. Concerning sexual minorities, an order of the Supreme Court in June paved the way for the first same-sex marriage registration in Nepal in November 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: *Protecting and empowering individuals*: A new EU-funded four-year project on storytelling of survivors and digital documentation of the armed conflict started in January 2023. The project also facilitates the implementation of Phase II of Nepal's National Action Plan on the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

A three-year project working with freed bonded labourers (Haliyas) concluded in 2023. Beneficiaries of the project received livelihood support and ID cards, which will enable them to access socio-economic rehabilitation programmes.

Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies: The implementation of a new four-year bilateral EU-Nepal programme, titled 'Empowered Women, Prosperous Nepal', commenced in early 2023. The programme, implemented through UN agencies, will address the key drivers of gender inequality in Nepal through an integrated gender transformative approach.

The EU Delegation organised a roundtable on 'Business and Human Rights' in the margins of the first ever EU-Nepal Business Forum in May 2023. As follow-up, the EU will support the implementation of Nepal's National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights, adopted in December 2023.

Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy: Following Nepal's Universal Periodic Review in 2021, the Government of Nepal committed to update the National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP), which process is ongoing. Once completed, the EU can assist the promotion of the new NHRAP, including through supporting human rights education.

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: A new project, continuing one of a similar nature, started in early 2023 with the objective of capacity-building and creating a conducive environment for an independent media. The project is implemented with the support of local governments, with their accountability in focus for the protection of independent media and the right to information.

Delivering by working together: The EU, Germany, Finland and France continued to implement programmes in a diverse range of topics. These included gender equality and the socio-economic empowerment of women; education; nutrition; water and sanitation; support to victims of conflict; to Dalits and other marginalized communities; to the implementation of the women, peace and security agenda; training of police officers on combating online crimes against children; and LGBTI awareness and sensitisation. Some of these programmes were

implemented jointly, in a Team Europe approach, by the EU Delegation and EU Member States' Embassies on the ground.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In February 2023, EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, paid an official visit to Nepal, and launched with Germany, Finland and France, a Team Europe Initiative on Green Recovery under Global Gateway aimed at boosting Nepal's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic by assisting Nepal's efforts to create green growth and jobs.

The 14th EU-Nepal Joint Commission in February 2023 discussed political relations, as well as human rights and issues of good governance in an open and constructive manner.

4. EU financial engagement: The above-mentioned Team Europe Initiative on Green Recovery is funded with more than EUR 200 million for 2021-2024, including EUR 142 million from the EU budget and over EUR 60 million from Finland and Germany. The programme supports small farmers and the agro-forestry sector, increased energy access and other vital services for the population such as water supply, sanitation and nutrition services as well as education, while fostering increased participation of women in leadership and the economy.

In addition, the EU's sectoral programmes and projects in the areas of water and sanitation, nutrition, education, local adaptation to climate change, women empowerment, all contributed to the promotion of socio-economic rights. The federalism support programme focused on strengthening the capacities of provincial and local governments.

5. Multilateral context: Nepal was a member of the UN Human Rights Council until the end of 2023, and continues its membership in the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) throughout 2024, and as such, holds a special responsibility to promote gender equality at national and international levels. Nepal remains fully committed to a rules-based international order and the principles of the UN Charter.

Islamic Republic of Pakistan

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: 2023 was a challenging year for democracy in Pakistan, marred by political turmoil and uncertainty. The holding of provincial and general elections were postponed until the beginning of 2024. A persisting political stalemate resulted in violent protests in May 2023, sparked by the arrest of Imran Khan, former Prime Minister and popular leader of the PTI party. The reaction of security forces – arresting PTI leaders and supporters and bringing them in front of civilian, military and anti-terrorism courts – raised concerns about due process and an uneven playing field in the run-up to the general elections.

The human rights situation in Pakistan continued to present a mixed picture. The Constitution provides the necessary legal framework for fundamental rights, provincial autonomy and local governance to be guaranteed. But human rights defenders, civil society activists and experts point to the insufficient implementation of existing provision or the lack of proper safeguards.

Repression and discrimination of ethnic and religious minorities continued throughout the year. Pakistan's harsh blasphemy laws remain in place and are prone to misuse and false accusations. At least two people were lynched to death following accusations of blasphemy. The persecution of the Ahmadi community, whose religious self-identification as Muslims is denied by the Constitution, has intensified with the desecration of Ahmadi mosques and cemeteries. On 16 August 2023, angry mobs attacked a Christian community in Jalawala. Although the incident was broadly condemned by authorities and civil society, none of those arrested was convicted in the reporting period. In the aftermath, the Punjab established Messaq Centres across the province to promote interfaith dialogue with religious minorities. However, the autonomous, statutory National Commission for Minorities has not been re-established after the end of its mandate, since the necessary Bill did not pass through the Senate in August 2023. Moreover, civil society organisations report about cases of forced conversion of representatives of women from religious minorities.

Gender-based violence continues to represent a serious concern. Between January and November 2023, 951 women were murdered, 286 women were victims of honour killing and 17 transgender persons were murdered, according to data of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. While a majority remains unreported, at least 1,119 cases of sexual violence against women were mentioned in the press. The Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Act 2018, a landmark bill to secure transgender rights, remains under threat following attacks by conservative groups.

Pakistan remains one of the "world's deadliest countries for journalists", according to 'Reporters Without Borders'. In February 2023, the government proposed controversial amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code and Code of Criminal Procedure, expanding the scope of the current defamation laws. Internet and social media were temporarily shut down on several occasions. In February 2023, access to the Wikipedia website was cut due to "blasphemous content", while mobile internet and social media (Twitter, Facebook, Youtube) were suspended in May and December amidst the clampdown on PTI.

Enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings continued to be used to target human rights activists, journalists and people voicing criticism of the authorities. There is no progress on legislation criminalising and prosecuting enforced disappearances. According to civil society reports, out of 2316 registered cases of enforced disappearances, 88 cases were subject to extrajudicial killings, mostly in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It has to be noted that a *de facto* moratorium on executions remains in place in Pakistan (no executions since 2019), but 137 defendants were sentenced to death between January and November 2023, according to press reports, compared to 98 in 2022. A growing number of prisoners (6,039 in 2023) are waiting on death row, while Pakistan's procedure for mercy petitions continues to fail to deliver. A reform of the procedure has been announced by the Ministry of Human Rights in 2023 but no reports of it reaching the Pakistani Parliament were made public. In a positive development, the passage of the Control of Narcotics Substances (Amendment) Act 2023 eliminated the death penalty for all narcotics offences, thus lowering the number of offences with the death penalty sentence to 31.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU addressed human rights issues through engagement at various levels, including with government and other key stakeholders, civil society organisations and human rights activists. The discussions referred inter alia to Pakistan's

international obligations and commitments under the GSP+ scheme. The EU also observed trials of Muslim, Ahmadi or Christian prisoners accused of blasphemy at the Lahore High Court and the Supreme Court. In meetings with various authorities, the EU raised the issue of women's rights, in particular domestic violence and child marriage, and continued to promote gender equality and women empowerment initiatives. Moreover, on the International Day to End the Death Penalty, the EU supported an event to raise awareness about torture, arbitrary detention, and death penalty. On the International Human Rights Day, the EU conducted a social media campaign against gender-based violence.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Throughout 2023, the EU continued to engage with Pakistani authorities on various platforms to raise human rights issues. The framework of the EU-Pakistan Joint Commission in June 2023 allowed the discussion of human rights issues, in particular in the subgroup on Human Rights, Democracy and Good Governance. Pakistan and the EU discussed, amongst others, the operating space for civil society organisations, preserving freedom of expression and opinion and the growing problem of disinformation. They also exchanged views on freedom of religion or belief and the rights of persons belonging to minorities and vulnerable groups as well as concerns about anti-Muslim hatred. HRVP Borrell met twice with Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar to discuss bilateral relations as well as the internal political situation, economic issues and the security situation. Deputy Secretary General Mora met with Foreign Secretary Qazi to discuss the deportation of unregistered Afghans from Pakistan.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU continued its financial support to a project which aims to increase compliance with human rights standards enshrined in the Constitution and with Pakistan's international treaty obligations to protect vulnerable prisoners from wrongful executions and unsafe prison conditions. The EU also supported the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan on the formulation and publication of a study on the state of freedom of religion or belief and with a project aimed to enhance human rights protection and redress existing inequalities, particularly discrimination based on gender, faith, occupation or status. The EU continued, under its Rule of Law programme, to support reforms aimed at improving gender parity in criminal justice institutions. At the end of 2023, the EU awarded three grant contracts on strengthening the capacities of civil society organisations and media on freedom of expression.

5. Multilateral context: Pakistan continued to be a member of the Human Rights Council until December 2023. The UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review Working Group examined Pakistan's human rights record for the fourth time in January 2023. As part of the Like-Minded Group, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (for which Pakistan served as chair) within the Geneva fora, voting patterns between EU Member States and Pakistan often diverge. However, Pakistan's approach towards international human rights treaties continues to be positively affected by the requirements of the GSP+ regime.

Republic of the Philippines

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Positive developments were noted in 2023. The current government has demonstrated a willingness to engage with the international community on human rights, having actively participated in multiple mechanisms of the UN Human Rights Council and having invited UN Special Rapporteurs to the country. Former Senator De Lima was granted bail and Maria Ressa was acquitted of all five tax evasion charges against her (while at the end of the year her cyber libel case was pending with the Supreme Court). The government has repeated that it has no intention of reintroducing the death penalty. It has also stated its intention to fight against impunity. There have been some first court convictions for extrajudicial killings and efforts to move forward the investigation of other cases. Regarding freedom of expression, the Philippines ranked 132nd out of 180 countries in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters without Borders, rising from 147th position in 2022.

Notwithstanding the positive developments, the EU continues to advocate more resolute action to address outstanding issues of concern, particularly ensuring accountability for extrajudicial killings and other human rights abuses, notably related to the "war on drugs" campaign, with only a handful of convictions in the face of thousands of potential cases. The EU also calls for combatting the harassment of civil society and violence against journalists. Other concerns include increasing reports of enforced disappearances. Drug-related killings still occur despite the publicly stated changed approach to the anti-drug campaign. Concerns continue to be raised by civil society over counterinsurgency and counterterrorism methods. 'Red tagging' (accusing people of supporting the communist insurgency) continues despite the government's condemnation of the practice, with potentially dangerous consequences for community activists, journalists and human rights defenders.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU's human rights and democracy priorities in the Philippines include promoting accountability and the rule of law including support for an evidence-based approach to the fight against illegal drugs; protecting human rights defenders and trade unions; strengthening the civic and democratic space; support for freedom of expression online and offline, access to information and combating disinformation; promoting the rights of the child, and eliminating inequalities, combating discrimination and empowering women and indigenous people. The EU encourages the Philippines to re-establish its cooperation with the International Criminal Court and to re-join the Rome Statute. To protect and empower individuals, and to build resilient, inclusive and democratic societies, the EU Delegation has publicly advocated in support of human rights defenders and press freedom and supported initiatives to fight disinformation and restrictions of the civic space. The EU Delegation and Member States' embassies have monitored trials to ensure compliance with the rule of law and the right to due process, including the trial of former Senator de Lima, and closely followed developments restricting media workers, as well as the abuse of online libel legislation. In the case of Maria Ressa, the EU raised concerns with the government on multiple occasions calling for respect for freedom of expression and the rule of law. EU advocacy against the reintroduction of the death penalty continued. The EU continues to engage with the Philippines in the context of the country's commitments to core human rights conventions through the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) monitoring process.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Under the EU-Philippines Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the third Joint Committee was convened in June 2023 and the third Sub-Committee on Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights in October 2023, both in

Brussels. Both the EU and the Philippines reaffirmed their commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, while recognising the need for further action on a number of issues. The GSP+ report on the Philippines was published on 21 November 2023 and the GSP+ regulation extended for the period 2024-27. High-level visits included those of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights in February 2023, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights in March 2023, and the President of the European Commission in July/August 2023.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU's financial engagements with the government focused on the areas of justice reform and support to national human rights institutions, in particular to increase their capacity to investigate, resulting in more effective prosecution of serious human rights cases. The EU and some Member States are providing funding to support the first Philippines/UN national joint programme on human rights. The EU is supporting a new project on the protection of journalists (especially those working in conflict-affected areas like the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao) and another addressing the issue of disinformation. The EU has also supported the Mindanao Peace Process and action to prevent violent extremism. Through the Global Europe facility, the EU provided support to civil society organisations, such as three grant contracts that will provide support to labour rights defenders and environmental human rights defenders and four grants that will implement activities to combat the continuing problem of child labour. The EU is also funding a project called "YNFORM: Youth-led Network for the Right to Information," which aims to support and strengthen critical youth engagement in promoting democratic processes.

5. Multilateral context: The Philippines has engaged constructively with the EU and UN human rights bodies since the 2022 change of government. In November 2022, it engaged in the 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and accepted 215 out of 289 recommendations at the adoption of its UPR at the Human Rights Council in March 2023. In 2023, there were visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial summary or arbitrary executions (not in that capacity but in a personal capacity as a forensic expert, with the costs of his visit covered by an EU-funded project) and the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion was invited by the Secretary of Justice to visit the Philippines in 2023, although this was postponed to 2024. In the UN General Assembly the Philippines voted in favour of all Ukraine-related Resolutions in the context of Russia's war. It systematically disassociated from any references to the International Criminal Court in resolutions.

Republic of Singapore

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The application of the death penalty continued in 2023: four men and one woman were executed, in all cases for drug trafficking offences. On freedom of expression, Singapore ranked 129th out of 180 in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters without Borders, rising from 139th position in 2022. Its Foreign Interference Countermeasures Act (FICA) fully entered into force in December 2023, after its partial application since July 2022, with its broad definitions of

indictable offences raising concerns among civil society actors. Under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), in effect since 2019, any Singaporean minister can request false information to be removed from the internet or corrected. Several correction orders were issued in 2023.

Two websites that the government repeatedly found to have published "online falsehoods" were added to the list of Declared Online Locations (DOL). Sex between men was fully decriminalised in late 2022. Concurrently, in 2023, the Constitution was amended to prevent the definition of marriage as a "union between a man and a woman" from being challenged in the courts. The rights of migrant workers continued to be an area of concern. The longstanding debate on dangerous transport practices for construction workers continued. At the same time, the Ministry of Manpower announced plans to raise the standards for worker dormitories by 2030. The government continued to implement measures to improve gender equality and equal opportunities in the workplace, following the publication of the White Paper on Singapore Women's Development in 2022. The right to paid paternity leave was doubled from two to four weeks.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued its advocacy for a moratorium on the death penalty and called for a review of the use of capital punishment. Ahead of executions, joint local statements were issued in 2023 by the European Union and its Member States, Norway and Switzerland. At its annual EU Human Rights Day Seminar on 5 December 2023, the EU Delegation marked the 75th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The event placed a particular focus on global trends regarding the rights of migrant workers. On the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT, 17 May), the rainbow flag was flown at the EU Residence in support of LGBTI rights. In early 2023, local activist Alex Au was awarded the Franco-German Human Rights Prize for his commitment to the rights of the LGBTI and migrant communities. Films addressing diverse human rights themes featured at the 32nd annual EU Film Festival in May 2023. In the domain of human rights in the digital space, the EU Delegation presented the EU's human-centric approach to regulating the digital space at several conferences. The EU Delegation and Member States were active in promoting gender equality and women's rights. For the 2023 campaign '16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence', they were joined by known local sports personalities.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU Delegation together with Member States carried out a number of demarches and political outreaches on human rights-related topics to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, presenting – among others – EU priorities for the UNGA Third Committee, and supporting the Bulgarian and Albanian candidacies for the UN Human Rights Council. The EU Delegation and EU Member States engaged with government stakeholders on human rights-related topics on numerous occasions.

4. EU financial engagement: Financing of civil society organisations by foreign entities remains prohibited in Singapore. The EU Delegation's activities consisted of monitoring and reporting, coordinating closely with Member States and international partners, as well as organising meetings and events with members of local civil society and supporting discussions on human rights in Singapore.

5. Multilateral context: Singapore has taken a strong stand to condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine, based on international law and respect for the UN Charter. It is the only

ASEAN country to have adopted financial sanctions against Russia in response to its aggression. In the regional context, Singapore is an active member of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). More broadly, Singapore remained like-minded in supporting the rules-based international order and multilateralism. However, Singapore also continued to lead in advocating for the retention of the death penalty in the UNGA Third Committee.

Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, Sri Lanka progressed towards gradual recovery from a deep economic, social and political crisis, which has had a severe negative impact on a large part of the population with doubling of poverty figures. The government initiated a number of important fiscal, economic and governance reforms. A new Anti-Corruption legislation was approved by the Parliament in July 2023. Effective implementation of stronger measures against corruption and independence and capacity of anti-corruption institutions are needed and of critical importance for the success of good governance reform.

The Government has prioritised economic recovery and managed to stabilise the economy in the short term, and is doing progress in negotiating debt-restructuring to get out of the default situation. However, claiming economic constraints, local elections were postponed and police continued to use force to dissolve peaceful demonstrations. Legislative proposals presented by the Government over this period (Anti-Terrorism Bill, Online Safety Act) could risk fundamental freedoms and narrow democratic space.

The Prevention of Terrorism Act with its wide-ranging powers has long been one of the key concerns to the EU. The new proposal for an Anti-Terrorism Bill, which is to replace the PTA, is one of the controversial new legislative proposals introduced in 2023. The Bill was published in the Official Gazette in March 2023 and after public criticism withdrawn in April 2023. A revised Bill, gazetted in September 2023, was also met with strong domestic and international concerns, but the same text without changes was tabled in Parliament in early January 2024. The Supreme Court has received 31 petitions, some challenging the constitutionality of the whole draft law and others challenging the constitutionality of some of its provisions, which are still being reviewed by the Supreme Court.

Another new legislation is the Online Safety Bill published in the Official Gazette in September 2023. Despite the Bill's stated objective of making online spaces safe, there are concerns that it does not provide adequate safeguards for the fundamental right of freedom of expression and its implementation could curtail the rights of online users. In November, the Supreme Court held that the Bill could be passed in the Parliament, provided that 31 articles that had been deemed unconstitutional were amended. Despite the opposition protests, an amended act was approved in the Parliament on 24 January 2024. The opposition criticised that the rushed process did not sufficiently include a number of decisions by the Supreme Court and demanded the legislation to be repealed or amended.

The EU continues to encourage the Sri Lankan government to cooperate with the UN Human Rights Council (UN HRC) to address transitional justice. Sri Lanka holds on its rejection of the UN HRC resolutions while engaging with the UPR process. In 2023, the Government took new legislative initiatives for national unity and reconciliation and prepared a proposal for a domestic truth-seeking mechanism, notably a Commission for Truth, Unity and Reconciliation. The recommendations of prior commissions with a similar mandate (the 2011 Lessons Learnt Reconciliation Commission, the 2016 Task Force on Reconciliation) are yet to be implemented.

Same-sex consensual relations remain criminalised under sections 365 and 365A of the Criminal Code. While a private member bill was introduced in the Parliament in August 2022 to amend these provisions, there has been no further progress on this legislation in 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In line with the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, EU action in Sri Lanka focused on support to building a resilient, inclusive and democratic society, protecting and empowering individuals and promoting a global system for human rights and democracy. In particular, through dedicated programmes on justice and reconciliation, the EU continued supporting the rule of law and access to justice; promoting space for civil society, human rights defenders, and media; supporting the rights of persons belonging to minorities for an inclusive and peaceful society; promoting gender equality and women's rights, social and environmental rights in business, as well as labour rights.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU Delegation and Member States carried out dialogues throughout the year with the President, Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and other representatives of government on issues impacting long-term peace, political stability and economic recovery in Sri Lanka. The issues related to upholding human rights, promoting the Rule of Law and fostering reconciliation were discussed in the EU-Sri Lanka Joint Commission in May 2023. The visit to Sri Lanka by the Delegation for South Asia at the European Parliament (29 October-1 November 2023) provided an opportunity to address labour laws, new legislation and the need to respect fundamental freedoms, minority issues and upcoming elections with a wide range of interlocutors. The Joint Staff Working Document on the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) covering 2020-2022 was published in November 2023, highlighting progress made in the implementation of the GSP conventions, as well as remaining challenges.

4. EU financial engagement: A flagship Justice Sector Reform programme (JURE) with EUR 18 million of EU contribution, co-financed by UNDP with EUR 1 million, contributes to improved access to justice, focusing on groups in vulnerable situation. The Strengthening Transformation, Reconciliation and Democratic Engagement (STRIDE) programme, EUR 40 million, seeks to strengthen local governance and the process of decentralisation. The Strengthening Social Cohesion and Peace in Sri Lanka (SCOPE) programme, EUR 11 million total, co-financed by the German Federal Foreign Office with EUR 3 million, promotes social cohesion. A number of programmes funded by the EU and Member States mainstream women's rights and gender equality; the rights of minorities; promote space for civil society, human rights defenders and media.

5. Multilateral context: Sri Lanka cooperates with UPR process and underwent its fourth UPR review in February 2023. The Government supported 173 of the 294 recommendations it received, whilst 115 were noted and 6 rejected. Sri Lanka rejected the recommendations to implement UN HRC resolutions 30/1,46/1 and 51/1. At the 52^{nd,} 53rd and 54th UN HRC sessions

in 2023, the EU reaffirmed its commitment to supporting Sri Lanka in its process of economic recovery, in full respect of the democratic values, encouraged to cooperate fully with the OHCHR and other UN human rights mechanisms, called for reconciliation and accountability and encouraged to conclude the reform of the counter-terror legislation in line with international human rights standards.

Kingdom of Thailand

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Thailand held general elections on 14 May 2023. The opposition Move Forward Party topped the polls with 151 out of 500 seats, but was unable to form a coalition government in the post-electoral process. On 22 August, Srettha Thavisin of the second largest Pheu Thai Party was elected Prime Minister, leading a coalition of 14 parties, including some from the previous government. Thailand launched its candidature for the Human Rights Council for the term 2025-2027.

Some steps were taken towards Thailand's alignment with major international human rights conventions. Four draft acts to amend the Civil and Commercial Code to allow same-sex marriage, supported by different parties, passed their first reading in the House of Representatives. The new civilian head of the government's peace panel met with the Malaysian facilitator to discuss the resumption of the peace process between the Thai authorities and the main separatist group in the southernmost provinces. The Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearances Act entered into force in February. The Second National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights was launched in September.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) expressed criticism over lack of progress made in the investigations of enforced disappearance cases and the continuation of torture and extrajudicial killings, particularly in the southernmost provinces. Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) reportedly continued targeting human rights defenders (HRDs). CSOs regretted that the authorities continued convicting with harsh sentences an increasing number of individual activists and politicians on lèse-majesté grounds. CSOs observed a continued trend of prosecuting minors. Smaller protests occurred sporadically in early 2023 against pre-trial detention and bail revocation of activists, especially those prosecuted under lèse-majesté legislation.

Thailand ranked 106th out of 180 countries in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters without Borders, rising from 115th position in 2022. CSOs expressed concern that the cabinet-approved draft amendment to the Royal Ordinance on Fisheries would conflict with Thailand's obligations under ILO Work in Fishing Convention 188 and exacerbate the reportedly poor living and working conditions on Thai vessels. CSOs reported stalled progress on amending the Labour Relations Act and the State Enterprise Labour Relations Act that would pave the way for the ratification of ILO Conventions 87 and 98. Thailand maintained the death penalty for 60 offences. The number of persons displaced from Myanmar to Thailand continued to increase, with CSOs reporting cases of refoulement.

2. EU action - key focus areas: With a view to protecting and empowering individuals, the EU continued efforts to strengthen the protection of civil and political rights, promote the

business and human rights agenda, and ensure protection of HRDs. The EU continued regular dialogue with interlocutors in government, civil society and the business sector as well as cooperation with UN agencies on implementing EU-funded projects which ensure a human rights-based approach to development. The EU Delegation organised a panel discussion for students on the road towards the abolition of the death penalty. Démarches, public diplomacy campaigns and diplomatic briefings were conducted or attended. The EU Delegation and Embassies coordinated diplomatic trial observation. The EU remained committed to supporting resilient, inclusive and democratic societies by supporting capacity building for and providing assistance to non-Thais, marginalised groups and individuals in vulnerable situations, as well as promoting gender equality and engagement with youth. The EU worked with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and civil society on providing humanitarian assistance and advocacy for Rohingya refugees and Myanmar asylum seekers.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU Delegation and embassies continued to regularly engage with the relevant authorities to discuss the protection and the promotion of human rights. The EU Delegation engaged with the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security to enhance cooperation on gender equality and women's empowerment. It also regularly met the Ministry of Justice to further enhance cooperation on the business and human rights agenda and provide technical assistance on developing human rights due diligence measures in business operations. The EU invited Thailand to proceed with the ratification of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, signed in December 2022, which would provide a solid foundation for further policy dialogue and cooperation on issues of mutual interest and shared values, including the promotion and protection of human rights and democratic principles.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU Delegation continued cooperation with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to train government officials on international human rights standards, and provide technical assistance to government and civil society to support implementation of the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearances Act. The EU launched two projects focusing on labour rights and engagement with the Ministry of Labour, employers and trade unions; and on engagement with youth and media to promote responsible business conduct. Two other new projects focused on migrant workers' rights through strengthening CSOs capacity. In December, a regional project was concluded with the International Organisation for Migration on promoting corporate responsibility and migrant workers' rights in supply chains. A gender-targeted action was signed to enhance CSO participation and the inclusion of women's, youths' and children's voices in socio-economic policy dialogues. In the southernmost provinces, the EU supported projects to protect the rights of marginalised communities and to improve the situation of children and youth, including those with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity. The EU provided EUR 3 million of humanitarian assistance for refugees from Myanmar; new projects were launched to continue supporting nine temporary shelters on the Thai-Myanmar border.

5. Multilateral context: The EU Delegation worked with EU Member States and other embassies and organisations including the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific to raise human rights and democracy issues with government counterparts. The EU Delegation led and joined several outreaches with the Thai authorities on the rules-based international order and the UN General Assembly resolutions on the Russian aggression against Ukraine. A Swedish Embassy and EU Delegation-led activity in February 2023

highlighted the humanitarian consequences of the Russian war of aggression and the need to defend the rules-based international order and protect human rights.

Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Timor-Leste has always been a like-minded country sharing with the EU the values of democracy, fundamental freedoms and human rights. Timor-Leste stands out in the region for its positive record on human rights and democracy. It is party to eight of the nine core human rights treaties of the United Nations. Timor-Leste has established independent institutions to safeguard democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The system of democratic checks and balances has matured and demonstrated resilience over the past two decades through five parliamentary election cycles. By and large, the media operates freely in Timor. The government has maintained an open and enabling environment for civil society. Compared to countries in its region, Timor-Leste consistently scores above-average rankings in leading most international indices measuring governance and rights.

At the same time, resource insufficiency and low administrative capacity result in serious problems in effective delivery of essential public services in healthcare, water and electricity, education, justice. Although Timor-Leste has made many advances in the past two decades, significant challenges remain, the most serious human rights problem in Timor-Leste being gender-based violence.

2023 was an important election year and the EU deployed and Election Expert Mission for the general elections. In a competitive, but peaceful political environment, the electoral process was credible and transparent.

2. EU action - key focus areas: With support from the Spotlight Initiative (EUR 14 million from the EU), Timor-Leste has continued making tangible progress in raising awareness of gender based violence, initiating behavioural change and equipping authorities and communities with policies and practices to accelerate the fight against gender-based violence. In collaboration with implementing partners from the UN and the civil society, the EU's support contributed to the creation of a real movement for the elimination of violence against women, in particular domestic violence, which continues to be one of the most widespread human rights abuses in the country.

The Delegation is supporting several initiatives to protect the rights of, and to empower, vulnerable people including specifically targeting people with disabilities and the LGBTI community. The activities focus on unlocking the full potential of vulnerable people and LGBTI through the provision of decent work opportunities and enhanced access to adequate education and vocational training.

In May 2023, Timor-Leste held its fifth parliamentary elections since independence. The elections were credible and transparent. The EU deployed an Elections Expert Mission.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU's engagement contributed to ensure tangible progress as regards addressing gender based violence, promoting woman's rights and women

empowerment, addressing children's malnutrition, empower vulnerable people, progressing towards decent work.

The EU and its Delegation were actively monitoring the preparation and conduct of the 2023 general elections. The EU was actively engaged in the follow up of the recommendations stemming from the Electoral Expert Mission's final report. The EU's engagement contributed to the creation of a positive momentum for the elimination of domestic violence, which continues to be one of the human rights challenges.

4. EU financial engagement: EU financial engagement is in line with Timor–Leste's strategic priorities to become an upper-middle-income country by 2030 based on sustainable and inclusive growth, enabling it to improve infrastructure, worker skills, education, training and health systems, and combat poverty and malnutrition. Under the joint EU-UN Spotlight Initiative, EU support (14 million euro) contributed to making tangible progress in awareness raising and fight against gender based violence.

The work of the EU Delegation also included continued support to civil society and the press with the aim of enhancing pluralism and holding leaders and institutions accountable. The formulation and adoption of the Regional Integration and Trade programme (EUR 3 million) that will support Timor-Leste's ASEAN and WTO accession efforts will indirectly contribute to the improvement and standardisation of labour conditions, through legislative reform.

5. Multilateral context: Timor-Leste took steps in 2023 to ratify the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In October 2023, a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs represented Timor-Leste observed for the first time, in line with established ASEAN guidelines, the EU-ASEAN Human Rights Dialogue held in Brussels.

Socialist Republic of VietNam

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: While VietNam assumed its seat on the UN Human Rights Council for the period 2023-2025, significant positive developments in the area of human rights were few in 2023. The space for civil society shrank further, demonstrated by harassment, arbitrary arrests and convictions of activists and bloggers. Environmental activists and experts remained a prime target: human rights lawyers defending them were accused of abusing democratic freedoms for which the Penal Code foresees severe sanctions. Several of them fled the country. Ethnic minorities and religious groups continued to be victims of harassment by state authorities.

In terms of press freedom, Viet Nam was ranked 178th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2023 World Press Freedom Index, falling from 174th position in 2022. A cybersecurity decree (53/2022/ND-CP) issued in 2022 continued to further erode freedom of expression through the authorisation to access user data under vaguely defined articles related to national security and public order. In the field of labour rights, the ratification of ILO Convention 87 on freedom of association and the adoption of a decree on workers' representative organisations and collective bargaining is still pending.

Executions continued with no exact figures on total numbers. In 29 cases, death penalties were reduced to life sentences through a decision signed by the President. On the positive side, a new gender transition law facilitating transgender people's access to a legal gender change was proposed to the National Assembly which agreed to include this in the agenda for discussion at the 8th session in October 2024. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development visited in November 2023, the first Special Rapporteur to visit Viet Nam since 2017. He acknowledged Viet Nam's achievements in economic growth and poverty reduction, but stressed the need for greater public participation in the country's development processes, especially by marginalised groups.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU focussed on access to information and freedom of expression; freedom of religion and belief; civil society and participative democracy; equal rights and diversity (gender, people with disabilities, LGBTI); rights of the youth and child; fair administration of justice and the rule of law, including the abolition of the death penalty, compliance with international human rights law and effective implementation of human rights mechanisms. The EU was actively engaged in actions aimed at supporting human rights activists, requesting the possibility to observe trials of human rights defenders and insisting on access to legal aid, medical support and family visits for prisoners. The protection of labour rights, an EU priority and an obligation under the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement, was addressed on several occasions. The EU advocated and provided technical assistance for the revision of the labour code, and the ratification of all core ILO Conventions and their implementation.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human rights were regularly mainstreamed in bilateral discussions with the government. The EU-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in June and the EU-Vietnam Sub-Committee on Good Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights under the Participation and Cooperation Agreement in May addressed Viet Nam's action plan on the accepted recommendations under the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review focussing on issues of concern. The EU gave particular attention to protecting and empowering individuals: the release of all persons detained for exercising their freedom of expression (both online and offline), the situation of human rights defenders, the tightening space and working environment for CSOs and the abolition of the death penalty. The EU together with EU Member States arranged social media campaigns, activities and events to promote human rights, including on the occasion of the World Day against the Death Penalty, International Human Rights Day and International Women's Day. Member States also arranged events on gender equality, LGBTI rights and the situation for civil society, with the aim of helping to build a more resilient and inclusive society. Ahead of two high-profile death penalty cases, local EU statements were issued; a statement by the HRVP Spokesperson was published on the conviction of an environmental activist.

4. EU financial engagement: With the Thematic Programme for Human Rights and Democracy and the CSO budget line, civil society actions were supported through grants in various domains: gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence; ethnic minority rights (including land rights); children's rights; business and human rights; civil society empowerment; environmental rights; promotion of information on human rights issues online; freedom of expression; rights of migrants, returnees and informal workers; response to COVID 19 and cultural rights. Through an EU-funded action implemented by UNDP support was provided to promote fair trials, the implementation of the Convention against Torture

and the abolition of the death penalty. A partnership with the Judicial Academy was established to train lawyers and judges on death penalty abolition, and to raise awareness on the issue among students, academics and non-state actors.

The partnership built between the EU Delegation, Member States, the Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Court in the context of the "EU Justice and Legal Empowerment Programme in Vietnam" (EU JULE) supported the implementation of ICCPR and other treaties such as the Convention against Torture, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. EU JULE also included a component supporting non state-actor initiatives to increase access to justice. The EU Delegation was the main sponsor of the 2023 Hanoi Pride Week (18-24 September) which featured 23 community events, such as art spaces, advocacy efforts and health discussions contributing to enhanced visibility and awareness of LGBTI issues in the media and the public. The EU Delegation also supported the development of a second season of "My Best Gay Friend", a YouTube series aiming to reduce discriminatory attitudes against LGBTI communities.

5. Multilateral context: In terms of cooperation in multilateral fora, the EU maintained a regular dialogue with Viet Nam on international human rights issues in the context of the 78th UN General Assembly. Viet Nam continued to refrain from condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine and abstained from all UN votes on the issue, apart from the vote to suspend Russia's membership of the Human Rights Council where it voted against. In November 2023, Viet Nam presented the first draft of its national report for the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review. According to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Viet Nam implemented 209 recommendations (86.7%) with considerable results, while for 30 recommendations (12.4%) implementation was ongoing. Two recommendations (0.9%) were considered for implementation.

Oceania

Commonwealth of Australia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Australia continued to have an overall positive human rights record. It remained actively engaged in advocating human rights in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. The government's commitment to strengthen the protection of human rights and complementary actions by the judiciary and civil society was evident in several developments. The decision to hold a referendum on whether to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the constitution by creating an advisory body to the parliament put differences in life outcomes between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians at the top of the political agenda. On migration, the government announced a pathway towards permanent visas for 19 000 people living under the uncertainty of possessing Temporary Protection Visas. The first Action Plan to implement objectives under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 began to be implemented. Some State governments took action to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 years of age. A Royal Commission published recommendations on how to ensure the

rights of people with a disability to live free from violence. The Prime Minister participated in Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade as the city hosted World Pride 2023. A National Anti-Corruption Commission was established.

A key challenge remained the disparate life outcomes experienced by many indigenous Australians when compared to their non-indigenous compatriots. The government's defeat in the referendum left uncertainty over future policy directions and the building of social cohesion to address the problem. While the "Closing the Gap" report showed progress in areas including enrolment in pre-school and employment, other indicators such as the number of children in out of home care deteriorated. Amnesty International noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprised 29% of Australia's adult prison population, but just 3% of the national population.

The treatment of people in detention saw concerns related to the absence of independent oversight bodies in some States despite the obligation under the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) to set up independent bodies known as National Preventive Mechanisms (NPM). A decision by the High Court that indefinite immigration detention of non-citizens who had committed offenses but could not be returned to the their country of origin was illegal created political controversy and was followed by new legislation placing controls on some of the people released. The policy of holding people, including children, who arrive illegally in Australia in closed detention for longer than the time it takes to gather basic information was a matter of concern. Under Operation Sovereign Borders, the detention of people who arrive illegally by boat in Australia and processing of their claims in the offshore centre of Nauru was evident in two cases during the year. Violence against women and children remained an issue and the Australian Human Rights Commission reported that sexual harassment continued to be an unacceptably common feature of workplaces.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Based on the five strands of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-24, the EU and EU Member States undertook the following action:

Protecting and empowering individuals: exchanges took place on protecting the human rights of people from indigenous Australian backgrounds, including through the hosting a lecture by Professor Peter Yu, Vice-President First Nations at the Australian National University; interaction with civil society organisations working on the rights of people with disabilities and on suicide prevention and the de-stigmatisation of mental health.

Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies: a campaign to mark International Women's Day was complemented by events to promote greater participation by women in traditionally male dominated professions. Promoting discussion on tackling racism was facilitated through EU sponsorship of the Kep Enderby Memorial Lecture, delivered by the Attorney-General of Australia. The EU sponsored the World Pride Human Rights Conference and the related indigenous Scholarship programme. Commissioner isiting senior EU officials engaged with civil society organisations, including on the intersectionality of LGBTI, indigenous and health issues.

Promoting a global system for human rights and democracy: Regular interaction took place on priorities and objectives at United Nations human rights forums and other multilateral bodies, including interaction with climate focussed civil society organisations in the run up to COP 28.

A seminar was held on the implementation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). The first return of cultural artefacts from continental Europe to Australia's First Nations took place in collaboration with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

New technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges: exchanges were implemented with the eSafety Commissioner and other relevant stakeholders on online regulation and the protection of children online; interaction continued on approaches to the governance of artificial intelligence and the EU Delegation monitored and raised awareness on fake news and information manipulation, as well as on child abuse and cyberbullying through its social media channels.

Delivering by working together: The EU pursued human rights objectives through engagement of Australian stakeholders in coordinated and complementary actions and initiatives by the EU Delegation and Member States. An effective social media network was used to ensure deeper engagement and content sharing.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Regular interaction took place between senior EU and Australian officials throughout the year on human rights issues.

4. EU financial engagement: There was no significant EU financial assistance in Australia.

5. Multilateral context: There remained a high degree of convergence between the EU and Australia on priorities for the promotion of human rights in international institutions. Australia delivered an intervention before the International Court of Justice in support of Ukraine's case against Russia. Together with the EU, Australia was member of the core group on the resolution on the human rights situation in Syria. Australia together with others presented a joint statement on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan joined by 80 UN Member States and the EU. Australia became the 117th country to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration, an intergovernmental pledge to protect education in times of conflict.

Republic of Fiji

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Fiji's coalition government came to power in December 2022 after 16 years of single party rule, and the human rights and democracy situation in the country has been gradually improving. Access to political rights and civil liberties in Fiji is assessed as partly free by Freedom House. The repressive climate that followed the 2006 coup has eased since democratic elections were held in 2014, 2018 and 2022. The relatively smooth transition of power in December 2022 marked a crucial moment in Fiji's democracy.

Fiji has abolished the death penalty and ratified all core human rights instruments (so far as the only Pacific island country). Fiji is actively engaged multilaterally on human rights, but at the same time a number of human rights challenges persist in the country. Issues that impact women's development include the high prevalence rates of violence against them, the low representation of women in formal sector employment, the state of women's health and women's equal representation at all levels of government and civil society. The new

government has declared the fight against gender-based violence as one of its priorities and has launched an ambitious awareness campaign.

Fiji has made continuous progress in terms of fighting corruption since 2010, ranking 52rd in the 2023 Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. The Constitution provides for freedom of expression, freedom of press, as well as the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. However, these freedoms may be restricted by legislation on a wide range of grounds (e.g. to maintain national security, public order, public health, public morality, protect reputation, privacy measures). Some provisions of the Public Order Amendment Act remained of particular concern. In recent months, the new Fiji government has repealed a restrictive media law, a positive step for press freedom. There have been positive signals for freedom of peaceful assembly under the new government.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU action continued to promote access to justice and respect for human rights, including fostering gender equality, and support for civil society organisations (CSOs) in various areas of activity.

Fiji also benefits from several initiatives promoting human rights, gender equality and addressing gender-based violence, supporting economic rights, climate change adaptation and mitigation and improving the management of natural resources.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continues to promote access to justice and respect for human rights. Our partnership dialogue encourages the government to progress towards making Fiji's legislation fully compliant with international human rights standards. The EU Delegation will continue carrying out outreach activities to promote EU values and priorities.

4. EU financial engagement: The multi-country Pacific Digital Democracy Initiative is now worth EUR 1.4 million and contributes to promote participatory digitalisation processes in four target countries – Fiji, FSM, Solomon Islands and Tonga – in order to harness Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for more inclusive, rights-based democracy and development. In the framework of the CSO Thematic programme, the EU Delegation awarded EUR 1.08 million at the end of 2023 for the benefit of civil society organisations working in the areas of building resilience to climate change and promoting good governance and accountability.

Fiji also benefited from the regional programme 'Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and Girls' for which the EU allocated EUR 12.7 million (programme ended in December 2023). Fiji benefited from an initiative aimed at fighting human trafficking, as well as the 'Strengthening Collaboration, Accountability, Law and Empowering Stakeholders (SCALES)' programme addressing issues in sexual reproductive health, gender equality, access to justice and social inclusion (ended in March 2023). The EU also supports the work of CSOs in Fiji.

5. Multilateral context: Fiji completed its 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in November 2019 in which it supported 207 of the 242 recommendations made. Fiji did not support recommendations made on issues such as: equality and non-discrimination (particularly on LGBTI rights); freedom of expression, opinion and the right to information; juvenile justice, and further ratification of international human rights instruments. Issues raised and supported

by Fiji include tackling domestic violence, sexual exploitation of children and human trafficking, as well as reforming of and providing necessary resourcing to the Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission. Fiji announced at the UPR the Cabinet's decision to withdraw Fiji's reservations to the Convention against Torture (CAT). Fiji's next UPR is scheduled for January 2025.

Republic of Kiribati

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Since its independence from the UK in 1979, Kiribati has maintained a stable and democratic government. Kiribati is a constitutional parliamentary democracy with a multi-party political system in place. Elections have been regular, free, peaceful and well-administered and the courts can review disputed results. The country held its last parliamentary and presidential elections in April and June 2020 respectively, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Elections are planned for May 2024.

Overall, the Human Rights situation in Kiribati remained stable in 2023. There is national legislation in place condemning violence against women and children but spousal abuse, child abuse and sexual exploitation of children remain challenges. Sexual and gender-based violence continues to be a challenge in Kiribati.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is incorporated into national legislation through the 'Children, Young Persons and Family Welfare Act 2013', and the 'Education Act' prohibits corporal punishment in schools. However, corporal punishment is still practised and is considered socially acceptable. Violence against children and child malnutrition remain serious concerns.

The Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of race or origin. However, only native i-Kiribati can own land. Gender discrimination is prohibited only when it pertains to employment. The law does not prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or social status. Consensual sex between males is criminalised in Kiribati, but there were no reports of prosecutions. Women's participation in political life remains relatively low. Following the 2020 election, only four of the 46 members of the national legislature are women, one more than in the previous period.

Human rights are being mainstreamed into national legislation. A Human Rights Taskforce and a Human Rights Unit based at the Ministry of Justice provide human rights training and monitoring and coordinate implementation of ratified human rights treaties. The government of Kiribati has not yet established a National Human Rights' Institution (NHRI) in compliance with the Paris Principles.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Regional programmes implemented in Kiribati focus also on the eradication of domestic and gender-based violence. Other key areas aim at upholding and promoting citizens' protections as well as of building inclusive and democratic societies.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human rights and gender equality are promoted through policy dialogue and financial instruments. The EU is committed to supporting government and non-state actors' efforts to reduce gender-based violence. During 2023, the

EU Delegation to the Pacific reached out numerous times to the Kiribati government via demarches, in order to support the EU's human rights priorities and initiatives at the UN and other international fora.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, Kiribati benefited from two EU-funded regional initiatives promoting gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence: the 'Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and Girls' (VAWG) and the 'Spotlight Initiative'. Kiribati is one of the target countries from the regional component of the Spotlight Initiative. Both programme ended in December 2023, and Kiribati benefits from the 'Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and girls (PPEVAWG) Phase II' since January 2024.

The Ministry of Education in Kiribati revised curricula that incorporate social citizenship education (SCE) in mainstream subjects. An SCE Policy Handbook for Schools has been developed for Kiribati and other Pacific Islands.

The Pacific Partnership also facilitated access to services for survivors of violence against women in Kiribati to continue through adaptation of national reporting and referral pathways.

5. Multilateral context: Kiribati's 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) took place in January 2020. Of the 129 recommendations received, Kiribati accepted 88 and noted 41. Kiribati is party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Kiribati has been a key ally in international fora in condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Kiribati co-sponsored the vetoed UNSC resolution of 25 February 2022 and voted in support of all five Ukraine-related UNGA resolutions. Kiribati is also a key ally together with other Pacific Islands Countries in the fight against climate change.

Republic of the Marshall Islands

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Regular democratic elections, combined with an independent judiciary and media ensure that basic human rights are respected in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). Marshall Islands voted in a general election on 20 November 2023 to elect members of the *Nitijela* (parliament) as well as for referenda on 8 proposed constitutional amendments — including establishing an Office of the Ombudsman to investigate high-level corruption and fraud.

The Marshall Islands are viewed as a promoter of and leader on human rights in the Pacific region, especially regarding climate change (to which they are very susceptible), and anti-nuclear testing.

Current human rights and democracy concerns in the Marshall Islands include gender-based and domestic violence, corruption, child abuse, cases of human trafficking, and the rights of prisoners and detainees. Awareness of children's rights issues remains low in the Marshall Islands, with cases of neglect and abuse still pervading. Corporal punishment is illegal in schools, but is still permitted at home.

The Marshall Islands is one of the most active countries among the Pacific islands in terms of participation in core international human rights treaties. The Marshall Islands is a particularly active and vocal participant in climate change negotiations, being a strong partner for the EU in climate action in international fora. The Marshall Islands also remain a strong defender of international rule of law, condemning Russia's illegal, unjustified and unprovoked war in Ukraine.

Recent reports of foreign interference in the Marshall Islands' domestic political decision-making, as well as investigations into and sanctions over high-level corruption are concerning, and highlight the need for more stringent transparency and oversight measures for all levels of government.

Food security issues in Kili island as a result of public funds mismanagement illustrate the real threats to human rights that can stem from a lack of robust measures supporting democracy and the rule of law.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU actions focus *inter alia* on elimination and prevention of violence against women and girls and supporting civil society organisations' (CSOs) engagement with the government on policy dialogue and governance.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: During 2023 the EU Delegation for the Pacific continued working closely with the Marshall Islands in promoting and upholding human rights. The EU Delegation carried out demarches and outreach activities with the Marshall Islands to support EU human rights initiatives and priorities at the UN level. With climate change and human rights inextricably linked in the Pacific region, the EU Delegation for the Pacific will continue to actively promote climate change awareness through its interactions with the Marshall Islands.

4. EU financial engagement: Through different financial instruments, the EU promoted human rights, gender equality and the increased participation of women in decision making. The Marshall Islands benefits from two EU-funded regional initiatives promoting gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence: the Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and Girls, and the Spotlight Initiative. Under the Pacific Partnership, formal education on human rights, gender equality and ending gender-based violence was deepened through mentoring and technical assistance in the implementation of the Social Citizenship Education in the Marshall Islands. The Marshall Islands "Secondary Teachers Guides" for grades 9-12 and "Primary Teachers Guides" for grades 5-8 were finalised, trialled with teachers, revised as needed in 2022, and in 2023 they were in the final stages of design for printing. In total about 139 teachers improved their skills, knowledge and ability to deliver this education in the classroom integrating relevant concepts and materials into their pedagogy and classroom management.

Through the Spotlight Initiative, work in the Marshall Islands has focused on sexual and reproductive health for girls and young people, increasing access to menstrual products for women and stimulating entrepreneurship for locally made products via women-led businesses.

The EU remains committed to supporting and raising awareness for civil society and non-state actors in the Marshall Islands as a key component in implementing of the regional roadmap

for CSOs in the Pacific. The EU works closely with government and civil society actors, as well as other regional organisations and donor partners in the Marshall Islands to this end.

5. Multilateral context: The Marshall Islands underwent their 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in November 2020. The Marshall Islands received 171 recommendations, of which it supported 161 and noted 10, mostly relating to ratification of international instruments and LGBTI rights. Recommendations pointed to challenges such as addressing gender discrimination, gender-based violence and women's rights, as well as human trafficking.

The Marshall Islands have ratified 7 of the 9 core international human rights instruments, as well as one Optional Protocol. They have not acceded to the 2 000 UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol.

The Marshall Islands has also been a key ally in international fora in condemning Russia's war in Ukraine, having supported all 8 Ukraine-related resolutions in the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council, and been a co-sponsor in all but one.

Federated States of Micronesia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Regular democratic elections, combined with an independent judiciary and media ensure that basic human rights are respected in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). FSM's latest election on 7 March 2023 to elect all 14 members of the unicameral national Congress saw a smooth and peaceful transition of power to the Simina administration. At the election, citizens also voted in referenda on 9 proposed constitutional amendments — including establishing an Office of the Independent Prosecutor for corruption, and enshrining a Constitutional right to a healthy environment. FSM's judiciaries are independent, and civil liberties are generally respected.

Recent reports of foreign interference in FSM's domestic political decision-making processes are concerning, and highlight the need for more stringent transparency and oversight measures for all levels of government.

The legislative framework assures women equal rights in FSM, including with regard to property ownership and employment. FSM's National Constitution, as well as the four State constitutions, all prohibit sexual discrimination. Despite this, socio-economic discrimination and violence against women continue to be the most prevalent human rights problems facing the country, with no national legislation criminalising spousal rape.

FSM remains a source country for human trafficking, including forced labour and sex trafficking. As a country with many low-lying atolls, FSM is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, notably sea-level rise, changing weather patterns and increased frequency and intensity of storms and disasters.

An independent National Human Rights Institution in line with the Paris Principles has not yet been established, although a scoping study was completed in 2019.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Human rights concerns in FSM regarding domestic violence, sex discrimination and human trafficking (as well as exploitation of migrant workers) continue to demand attention. EU actions focus inter alia on supporting the ratification of or accession to the remaining core human rights instruments, promoting gender equality and women rights, and supporting the engagement of civil society organisations (CSOs) in FSM society. Upholding and promoting citizens' protections and rights in these areas is in line with the EU's objective of protecting and empowering individuals as well as of building inclusive and democratic societies.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Through policy dialogues and a number of different financial instruments, the EU continues to promote human rights, gender equality and the increased participation of women in decision making. The EU remains committed to supporting and raising awareness of civil society and non-state actors in FSM as an essential element of implementing the regional roadmap for CSOs in the Pacific. The EU works closely with government and civil society actors, as well as other regional organisations and donor partners to this end. Implementation, enforcement, and integration of these principles into domestic laws and policies are equally important.

In 2023, the EU Delegation for the Pacific carried out demarches and outreach activities inviting the Pacific island countries, including FSM, to support EU human rights initiatives and priorities at the UN level.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU is providing a EUR 1 million grant to support increasing the participation of women and CSOs in the energy sector. The EU also supports civil society to enhance participation of Non State Actors in policy dialogue, monitoring national programmes, economic reforms and public finance management with a particular emphasis on climate change, sustainable energy and environmental conservation.

FSM ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and completed consultations and reporting for the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) with support received through EU-funded projects. FSM is currently working on its new Disability Policy after the previous policy expired in 2018.

FSM benefits from the EU-funded regional Spotlight Initiative promoting gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence.

5. Multilateral context: The Federated States of Micronesia underwent their 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in January 2021. FSM received 154 recommendations, of which it supported 141 and noted 13, mostly relating to ratification of international instruments and LGBTI rights. Recommendations pointed to challenges such as human trafficking, addressing gender discrimination, gender-based violence and women's rights, establishing a National Human Rights Institution, as well as the rights of children, including their access to health and education.

FSM has also been a key ally in international fora in condemning Russia's war in Ukraine, having supported all 6 Ukraine-related resolutions in the UN General Assembly, and been a co-sponsor in all resolutions but one at the UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council and Security Council.

FSM is party to only three of the nine core international human rights instruments, as well as two optional protocols. FSM is not party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, but is party to the 2 000 UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol.

Republic of Nauru

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Nauru, the world's smallest republic (population of about 12,500), gained its independence in 1968. It has a long history of political instability, with nearly 20 different governments ruling the country over the last decade. Nauru does not have formal political parties. Independent members of parliament will typically form a majority government through alliances, based on individual and family interests.

While Nauru citizens generally enjoy political rights and civil liberties, previous Presidential reigns were associated with an increasingly authoritarian rule.

The government's capacity to ratify and implement international human rights treaties remains constrained by financial and administrative capacity considerations, as well as the reporting burden. Nauru has not yet established a National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) in line with the Paris Principles.

Nauru has been hosting the Nauru Regional Processing Centre, an Australian offshore immigration facility, which was scaled down and then paused the hosting of refugees.

Nauru is one of the few nations worldwide who recognise the two break-away regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia of Georgia.

Domestic violence, poverty and limited women representation in Parliament, remain the most serious impediments for the progress in the area of women's rights in Nauru. Eliminating domestic violence is a national priority. The 'Nauru National Women's Policy' assists in reflecting the gender performance indicators in the 'National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDS) 2005-2025' and provides direction for all levels of society regarding Nauru's gender priorities. The government has a Directorate of Women's Affairs (DWA) within the Department of Home Affairs that is responsible for monitoring and improving the status of women and the quality of their lives. Nauru has a National Action Plan for Women focusing on issues such as women's health, violence against women, education and training for women, women in decision-making, and women's participation in the economy.

As regards freedom of press and media, the criminalisation of criticism towards the government remains an important concern. In accordance with the 'Crimes Act 2016', criminal charges can be evoked for defamation, punishable with up to three years in prison. Several newspapers ceased activities in the past decade, and currently there are only government-operated media and information outlets.

Climate change has become an important human rights issue in Nauru. As the climate crisis in the Pacific further escalates, Nauru citizens may soon start experiencing reduced access to water, food and other basic services. This may lead to an increase in migration pressure.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Presently, there is no key focus area in Nauru as the EU is not providing any bilateral support to Nauru under the new programming given its status as a high income country.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: During 2023, the EU Delegation for the Pacific reached out numerous times to the Nauru government via demarches in order to foster support for the EU's human rights priorities and initiatives at the UN and other international fora.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU is no longer providing bilateral support to Nauru under the new programming cycle. However, Nauru remains eligible to participate in regional programmes, such as a new Public Finance Management (PFM), Oversight and Accountability programme, Pacific – European Union Waste Management Programme (PacWaste Plus), Biodiversity and Protected Area Management (BIOPAMA II), SWITCH-Asia, Pacific EU Marine Partnership (PEUMP) programme, BSRP II – Building Safety and Resilience in the Pacific, Climate Services and Related Applications Programme (ClimSA) and activities of the Regional Pacific NDC (Nationally Determined Contribution) Hub.

5. Multilateral context: Nauru completed its 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in February 2021.

Nauru has voted in favour of all six resolutions at the UN fora on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, but has not co-sponsored any of the resolutions. It is also a key ally together with other Pacific Islands Countries in the fight against Climate Change.

Nauru is party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

It is party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.

New Zealand

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2023, New Zealand continued to rank highly in annual international assessments on human rights and democracy. New Zealand also continued its active involvement in the promotion of human rights and democracy at multilateral level. The new Government in office since 27 November 2023 has yet to define its priorities on human rights and democracy. However, there are opportunities for improvement in various areas. Child poverty reduction remained a political priority for the Government. New Zealand has made recent progress in child poverty reduction, but still has relatively high rates, in particular among Māori and Pasifika children. Concerning gender-based and domestic violence, in April 2023, the government launched "Better Outcomes for Victims", an initiative designed to build a more victim-focused criminal justice system.

Regarding social inclusion and anti-discrimination, in February 2023 the Government decided to postpone the reform of hate speech laws (which currently cover race but not gender, sexuality, or religion) and refer the matter to the Law Commission. The new Government in office since November 2023 has ruled out new legislation on hate speech. In July 2023, the UN Committee against Torture (CAT) released its findings on New Zealand, highlighting concerns about the high representation of Māori, particularly women and young people, in New

Zealand's prison system, noting that they constitute about half of the prisoner population while making up only 17% of the total population. The Committee emphasised the need for New Zealand to intensify efforts to reduce Māori imprisonment, understand the causes of their disproportionate re-offending rates, and ensure the availability of culturally sensitive legal services. New Zealand continued to face challenges related to disinformation. New Zealand's National Security Strategy 2023-2028 released in August includes disinformation as a key area of focus.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Considering New Zealand's overall very high level of human rights protection and democracy, the EU's main focus is on cooperating with New Zealand to uphold and protect human rights and democracy on a global scale *(see point 5 below)*.

Regarding activities in New Zealand, the EU focused on sharing best practices, awareness raising and engaging in policy dialogue. The EU Delegation presented EU policies on tackling disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference in a panel discussion organised by the University of Auckland. The EU Delegation and a number of Embassies marked the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT). Several Embassies participated in the global 'Orange the World' campaign condemning violence against women and girls. The Embassy of Poland organised several events on gender equality, including on International Women's Day.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The human rights priorities were discussed during the EU-New Zealand Joint Committee meeting in February 2023.

4. EU financial engagement: There is no EU financial engagement in New Zealand.

5. Multilateral context: The EU and New Zealand exchanged views ahead of the UNGA 78 Third Committee, which confirmed close alignment between EU and New Zealand positions in their priorities for advancing human rights.

New Zealand continued to engage actively in international human rights forums. New Zealand's International Human Rights Strategy ran from 2019 to 2023. During 2023 stakeholder consultations were held on the successor Strategy. Following the October 2023 elections, it will be for the new Government to define priorities for 2024 onwards. In view of New Zealand's 4th Universal Periodic Review in 2024, New Zealand released the draft national report for public consultation in July.

In 2023, New Zealand continued its role as a co-leader, alongside Mexico, in advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities.

In February New Zealand co-sponsored an UN General Assembly Resolution calling for a just and lasting peace in Ukraine. In June, then Foreign Affairs Minister Nanaia Mahuta announced the extension of travel bans on Iranian officials responsible for the violent response to protests in Iran. In July, New Zealand provided an additional NZ$11 million to the UN to address Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, while reaffirming its commitment to supporting the Afghan people and standing with international partners in addressing the humanitarian and human rights situation, especially for women and girls.

Republic of Palau

1. Overall human rights and democracy situation: Basic human rights are generally respected in Palau, with regular democratic elections, combined with an independent judiciary and media, and no substantial reports of irregularities. There are, however, human rights concerns that still demand attention, such as addressing gender-based violence, corruption and tackling human trafficking, including due care of trafficked persons, migrants and asylum seekers.

Although Palauan society is matriarchal and matrilineal, women have continued to be under-represented at higher levels of public life and the civil service. Women have close to equal status in public and private sector employment, education as well as in public participation. Sexual harassment and rape, including spousal rape, is illegal in Palau and punishable by fine, imprisonment or both. Domestic violence is a criminal offence, but there is still a level of reluctance for victims to involve law enforcement due to cultural and societal pressures. There are no laws addressing sexual orientation and gender identity. Same-sex sexual activity was decriminalised in 2014.

Palau's Penal Code includes trafficking offences as well as child exploitation offences. The Ministry of Justice's Anti-Human Trafficking Office is active in investigating human trafficking offences, but both investigations and convictions have stagnated in recent years, although in 2022 the Courts made their first human trafficking conviction since 2018.

Palau's national legislation does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status and there is no formally established system for providing protection to refugees in Palau.

Climate change continues to stand as a major human rights issue in Palau. While the Office of the Ombudsman reviews complaints and reports to the Parliament, and a Reporting Committee on UN Conventions on Human Rights was set up, the establishment of a National Human Rights Institution in line with the Paris Principles, as recommended during Palau's previous UPR cycles, is still in progress.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Persisting human rights and democracy concerns in Palau include gender inequality and gender-based violence. EU actions focus *inter alia* on supporting the ratification of or accession to the remaining core human rights instruments, promoting gender equality and women's rights, and supporting CSOs' engagement with the Government of Palau on policy dialogue and governance.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human rights were discussed during formal meetings in 2021 and on the side-lines of the Pacific Islands Forum in July 2022 and November 2023. Through these dialogues and through a number of financial instruments, the EU continues to promote human rights, gender equality and the increased participation of women in decision making.

Gender equality and human rights are shared values and common challenges between the EU and Palau in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals dialogue. The EU Delegation for the Pacific will continue to actively promote climate change awareness and environmental protection, for which Palau is a vocal advocate.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU remains committed to supporting and raising awareness of civil society and non-state actors in Palau as a key component in implementing of the regional roadmap for CSOs in the Pacific. The EU works closely with government and civil society actors, as well as other regional organisations and donor partners in Palau to this end. In the National Indicative Programme for Palau designed under the 11th EDF, a EUR 0.2 million financial allocation was set aside to support civil society organisations in Palau.

Palau benefits from the EU-funded Spotlight Initiative promoting gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence. Through this project, the Pacific Sexual and Gender Diversity Network (PSGDN) formed a consortium with Living All Inclusive in Belau (LAIIB), Palau's first LGBTI advocacy organisation and resource to promote equality and develop partnerships within the private and public sectors.

5. Multilateral context: Palau underwent its 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in May 2021. Palau received 142 recommendations, of which it supported 67 and noted 75. Recommendations pointed to challenges such as participation in international human rights treaties, human trafficking, addressing gender discrimination, gender-based violence and women's rights, establishing a National Human Rights Institution, the human rights implications of climate change as well as the rights of children, including their access to health and education.

Palau has only acceded to two of the nine core human rights instruments, despite having signed (but not ratified) all seven others in 2011. Palau is Party to the 2 000 UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol.

Independent State of Papua New Guinea

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a lower-middle income country with a constitutional parliamentary democracy and an estimated population of 11 million people. Tribal conflicts, deeply rooted gender inequality, violence against women and children, sorcery related violence, weak law and order structures continue to affect the human rights parameters of the county.

Nevertheless, a number of positive developments could be noted in the last few years, such as abolishment of the death penalty, the reinforcement of anticorruption institutional structures with the operationalisation of the Independent Commission against Corruption (ICAC) and the establishment of the Parliamentary Committee for Gender Equality, along with a reinforcement of the anti-gender based violence capacities across the country thanks to the successful implementation of the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative. Renewed efforts towards the establishment of a Human Rights Commission could also be witnessed in 2023.

At the same time, major challenges remain as regards gender equality, children's rights, improving law and order, good governance and assuring basic services (education, health, sanitation) and environmental rights. Sorcery accusation related violence continue to be widespread and witness a resurgence in 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: All EU supported actions in PNG integrate commitments on gender equality and women's empowerment. EU-UN Spotlight Initiative launched in March 2020 has been successfully completed in 2023. With the support of the Spotlight Initiative, a Special Gender Based Violence Parliamentary Committee was formed and has successfully delivered recommendations to the Parliament and has made notable legislative advances.

A new EU Gender-Based Violence Referral Pathways Programme has been prepared to be deployed in 2024, aiming at improving gender-based violence survivors' access to justice.

Effective protection and support to HRDs materialised in projects that target strengthening HRDs protection, capacities and prevention work, supporting and defending the rights of disadvantaged and vulnerable people, as well as defending the rights of women and girls.

On 20 January 2022 the Parliament decided in unanimity to replace capital punishment with live imprisonment. However at the multilateral level PNG remained hesitant in actively supporting the universal abolitionist movement. Furthermore, following a resurgence in violent incidents in 2023, there were calls on the floor of the Parliament for the re-introduction of the death penalty.

In 2023 the EU-financed Forestry Climate Change Biodiversity (FCCB) Nexus, "Our Forest, Our Future" programme for PNG has been launched.

The EU continued to support rule of law, anti-corruption, peace and stability throughout 2023, through actions to improve transparent and accountable governance, including the full operationalisation of ICAC. In 2023 the EU continued to support the establishment of the PNG Human Rights Commission.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In the context of the 5th PNG-EU High level Political Dialogue (26 February 2023, Port-Moresby), human rights, democracy and good governance featured in the Joint Conclusions as mutual commitments. EU and PNG agreed to work together to promote effective multilateralism, improve PNG's capacity to meet its reporting requirements to UN Treaty Bodies at the Human Rights Council, strengthen cooperation on good governance, fight against corruption, address violence against women, and work for the establishment of a National Human Rights Commission. Furthermore, throughout 2023 numerous political demarches were conducted targeting the PNG positions in multilateral organisations.

The EU continued to encourage PNG to ratify the remaining international conventions (Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers, Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance, Convention against Torture), the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (abolition of the death penalty).

Concerning the Bougainville Peace Process, including the post 2019-Referendum Consultation Process, the EU maintained its commitment to support a credible process leading towards a negotiated solution.

4. EU financial engagement: EU programmes continued to play an important role in improving the human rights and democracy parameters of PNG. As regards gender-based violence, the support under the Spotlight Initiative has been complemented by the implementation of the

2023 NDICI CSO Programme, the 2023 NDICI HR Programme and the remaining projects under EDF 11 (STREIT and WaSH).

The "EU-PNG Partnership for Good Governance" programme continued throughout 2023. In 2023 the Forestry Climate Change Biodiversity (FCCB) Nexus, “Our Forest, Our Future” programme for PNG, financed under NDICI, has been launched as Team Europe Initiative, together with France. Other EU Member State also expressed an interest to join.

Support to HRDs in Papua New Guinea has received an allocation of EUR 3.2 million, complemented by an allocation of EUR 4 million through the NDICI CSO Programme for 2021-2024. At the end of 2023, a technical assistance contract (EUR 981 000) was signed specifically to support the establishment of the PNG Human Rights Commission and the work will start in 2024.

5. Multilateral context: During the 5th PNG-EU High level Political Dialogue, the EU and PNG agreed to work together to improve PNG’s capacity to meet its reporting requirements to UN Treaty Bodies at the Human Rights Council.

PNG environment and biodiversity continues to be affected by various economic activities, in particular logging and extractive projects. Nevertheless, some progress has been observed, as regards the political determination to protect the forest and biodiversity. At COP 28 PNG reiterated its pledge to end deforestation by 2030.

Independent State of Samoa

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The overall human rights situation in the Independent State of Samoa is stable and there are no systematic abuses. Samoa’s government generally respects and enforces human rights provisions of the country’s Constitution and legislative framework and is committed to continue improving the human rights standards. However, there are some persisting human rights concerns that need to be addressed.

A traditional system of governance co-exists with democratic processes in Samoa, affecting the participation of women in politics and public decision-making. There is a quota for 10% of women in the parliament.

Physical and sexual violence against women and girls, discrimination, and gender inequalities remain the most significant human rights abuses in Samoa. However, there is political will in the country to advance national action to end domestic violence. Consenting relationship between adults of the same sex is still criminalised in Samoa, although there are no reports of the law being enforced.

Samoa is the only Pacific Island State having an “A Status” National Human Rights Institution (Samoa’s Office of the Ombudsman) under the Paris Principles.

Climate change has also become a serious human rights issue in Samoa, as it threatens the effective enjoyment of a range of human rights. Challenges with Samoa to implement its

human rights obligations include lack of resources, limited data and statistics, as well as insufficient capacity.

2. EU Action - key focus areas: Through dialogue with the Government and the non-state actors / CSOs in conjunction with various financial instruments, the EU has been promoting and advocating on human rights, gender equality and prevention of violence against women and girls, as well as strengthening the capacity of the civil society organisations.

Samoa benefits from several initiatives promoting gender equality and addressing gender-based violence, supporting economic rights, climate change adaptation and mitigation and improving the management of natural resources.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Issues related to human rights and democracy have been addressed during the Political Dialogues and latest during the Partnership Dialogue between the EU and Samoa which was held in Brussels in January 2024, where the EU and Samoa discussed, inter alia, priorities and developments in the area of human rights, and policies related to addressing gender equality and gender-based violence, and accession to international human rights instruments.

Climate change and human rights are inextricably linked in the Pacific region, the EU Delegation for the Pacific will therefore continue to actively promote climate change awareness and action through its interactions with Samoa.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU supported an enabling environment for an independent and vibrant civil society and created spaces and opportunities for engagement, dialogue and strengthening capacity in strategic planning, implementation, and oversight between the Civil Society and the Government of Samoa under the 11th EDF from 2019-2023. Seven Projects aimed at supporting the capacity building and development of the civil society which is participating actively in the public debate on democracy, human rights, gender equality, social inclusion and the rule of law, and has the capacity to influence policy and decision making processes.

At the end of 2023, through the CSO Thematic programme, the EUDEL set aside EUR 1.135 million for the benefit of Samoan civil society organisations working in the areas of gender equality and social inclusion, democratic governance and waste management and recycling.

Samoa was a focus country under the regional “Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and Girls” programme, funded primarily by the EU which ended in December 2023.

In addition to this, protection of women’s rights and prevention of violence is also addressed through the Spotlight initiative, which was launched with Samoa’s Prime Minister in March 2020 and which also ended in December 2023. Spotlight took a comprehensive approach, going from prevention and awareness raising to shifting stereotypes, providing protection, access to services, legislation, support to women’s organisations and ensuring reliable data collection.

5. Multilateral context: Samoa is a party to six of the nine core international human rights instruments:

- Convention against Torture and other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR)
- Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

Samoa underwent its 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in November 2021. The next UPR for Samoa is scheduled for May 2026.

Solomon Islands

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Solomon Islands is a constitutional monarchy with Kind Charles III as Head of State and a unicameral Parliament. Since the end of the ethnic and tribal violence of the period 1999-2003, recent elections have been regular, free, peaceful and well-administered, allowing the participation of international observers, with transparent and credible voting and counting.

A number of international observers were invited to the elections in 2024, including the EU, which was invited to send an election expert mission to the elections.

The overall human rights situation in Solomon Islands is stable and there are no systematic abuses. Gender based violence remains however a concern. Enforcement mechanisms for international human rights instruments are often missing and implementation is therefore hampered – especially at outer lying islands. The limited technical, human and economic capacity within public institutions also contributes to this.

Corruption is a serious concern. While the law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials it is implemented inconsistently. The constitution provides for an independent Office of the Ombudsman with power to subpoena and investigate complaints of official abuse, mistreatment, or unfair treatment, but the Office lacks resources and its effectiveness is limited.

Climate change has become an important human rights issue: as the climate crisis in the Pacific further escalates.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU actions focus *inter alia* on supporting the ratification of, or accession to the remaining core human rights instruments, promoting gender equality and women rights, and supporting CSOs engagement with government on policy dialogue and governance

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Via annual enhanced Political Dialogues, the EU and Solomon Islands discuss issues of mutual interest, such as human rights, rule of law, fight against climate change and biodiversity loss and protection of the seas.

During 2023, the EU Delegation for the Pacific outreached numerous times to the government, via demarches, in order to support the EU's human rights priorities and initiatives at the UN and other international fora.

The EU is committed to supporting government and non-state actor efforts to reduce gender-based violence. Regarding the fight against corruption, the EU Delegation for the Pacific manages an on-going Budget Support programme involving vigilant monitoring of government spending, in particular the Constituency Development Funds (CDFs).

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the "*Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and Girls Programme*", has strengthened the ability of Non-State Actors (NSAs) to advocate for gender equality and as well as increase their ability to engage in monitoring gender equality. At the end of December 2023 "Pacific Partnership" ended its activities. However, a new program, building on the lessons learned from previous interventions, started in January 2024, thus ensuring continuity to the work done by the EU to fight gender-based violence in the Pacific.

The recently signed two-year (2023-2025)*'Strengthening the Electoral Cycle in the Solomon Islands (SECSIP) Phase III'* project (EU contribution: EUR 5.5 million) focuses on enhancing inclusive, informed and transparent electoral processes, including through accountable and effective electoral institutions.

The following actions are about to start in 2024: *Youth Economic and Climate Action*, implemented by Plan Ireland (EUR 0.6 million, 30 months). It aims to strengthen and empower local CSOs to engage as actors of governance and development by meaningfully supporting youth's economic empowerment and driving local climate action in the Solomon Islands.

The project on *Building Voices For Accountability (Bva)* plans to empower CSOs in Solomon Islands to engage as actors of governance and development by advancing human rights issues, influencing policy and decision-making processes and holding the Government accountable for its performance towards citizens and society at large.

The three-year (2022-2025) '*Protecting and Promoting of Civil, Social, Economic and Human Rights for People with Disabilities in Solomon Islands*' project, implemented with the Disabled Peoples Association of Solomon Islands (DPASI), aims to advance the implementation of the Solomon Islands' National Disability Policy.

The two-year (2022-2024) '*Strengthening the Capacity of Civil Society Organisations in Solomon Islands to Prevent Trafficking in Persons (TIP) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and to Protect Survivors*' project been raising awareness and advocating to combat human trafficking at the community level and enhancing first responder support to victims and survivors of human trafficking and gender-based violence.

The EU also supports the multi-country Pacific Digital Democracy Initiative: this action – now worth EUR 1.5 million – contributes to progress participatory digitalisation processes in four target countries – Fiji, FSM, Solomon Islands and Tonga – in order to harness Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for more inclusive, rights-based democracy and development.

5. Multilateral context: Solomon Islands completed its 3rd UPR in May 2021. Following up on the recommendations of the UN Country Team, Solomon Islands ratified two out of three Optional Protocols to the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', i.e. the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (August 2022) and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the involvement of children in armed conflict (20 January 2023). The country's 4th UPR is scheduled to take place in May 2026.

Kingdom of Tonga

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Tonga is a Kingdom with a highly stratified patriarchal system. The King retains important powers, including the authority to veto legislation, dissolve the parliament, and appoint judicial officials. The Privy Council facilitates a continuing political role for the monarch.

Tonga's Constitution provides for the protection of certain fundamental rights and freedoms. The Constitution and its revisions do not specifically guarantee women equal rights to men. While there is no discriminatory legislation concerning participation of women in politics, traditional system and cultural factors limit participation of women in political processes and local government. Women also face challenges with regards to the full enjoyment of economic rights, particularly inheritance and land rights. While the education level of women in Tonga is very high, this is not translated into the workforce and the way families view the roles of women.

The level of domestic violence remains a critical human rights issue in Tonga and has been identified by the Government as a major impediment to gender equality. There is a political will in the country to address the problem.

The Constitution guarantees freedom of press and there are independent media outlets in Tonga. There is however a record of lawsuits by politicians against media outlets, exposing them to the risk of heavy damages.

The legal status of same-sex relationships is not recognised in Tonga and consenting same-sex relationships between adults remain criminalised by the law, although there are no reports of the law being enforced. There is a *de facto* moratorium on the application of the death penalty since 1982. Tonga does not have a National Human Rights Institution. The Ombudsman's office is empowered to investigate any decision, act or omission by government services or relevant organisations.

The 2020 World Risk Index ranks Tonga as the world's second most vulnerable country to natural disasters (cyclones, earthquakes and tsunamis), after Vanuatu. Climate change has also become a serious human rights issue in Tonga, as it threatens the effective enjoyment of a range of human rights including those to life, water and sanitation, food, health, housing, self-determination, culture and development.

2. EU action - key focus areas: With climate change and human rights inextricably linked in the Pacific region, the EU Delegation for the Pacific will continue to actively promoting climate

change awareness and action through its interactions with Tonga during missions and other occasions such as international meetings.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU bilateral engagement followed up on issues discussed in the '1st Enhanced High Level Political Dialogue' under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement in Nuku'alofa in April 2017. In the area of human rights, the EU urges Tonga to formally abolish the death penalty, accede to the Rome Statute and core Human Rights Conventions, and to decriminalise same sex relations.

4. EU financial engagement: Tonga benefits from the new regional programme, Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and Girls II, which tackles root causes of gender inequality and violence against women in the Pacific. In Tonga this programme, inter alia, provides support to the Women's Affairs and Gender Equality Division to develop a national referral pathway and standard operating procedures to guide multisector service provision to women and girls who experienced violence, and offers technical and financial support to national crisis centres and hotlines.

Tonga also benefits from thematic programmes such as the Pacific Digital Democracy project, which seeks to establish a strong commitment to digital rights by, strengthen the government and civil society participants to enhance safety online, battle disinformation and hate speech and promote e-government.

5. Multilateral context: Overall, the level of ratification of key Human Rights conventions remains very low. Tonga is a party to the 'International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)' and 'Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)'.

Tonga signed the 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)' in 2007, but has not yet ratified it. In February 2020, Tonga acceded to the 'UN Convention against Corruption'.

In August 2020, Tonga formally deposited the ratification instruments for the ILO 'Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour'. As a result, this Convention achieved universal ratification, having become the first International Labour Convention ratified by all member states.

Tonga's last Universal Periodic Review (UPR) was completed in May 2023. The Tongan government received a total of 173 recommendations. Tonga accepted 110 as a whole. Tonga reported that 53 recommendations concern the ratification of the international human rights instruments, emphasizing that many core human rights values are reflected in the national law and the country is committed to ratification of those conventions. Tonga is not a party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Tuvalu

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Human rights are widely respected in Tuvalu, the rule of law is sound, and the principles of good governance are generally adhered to. The 'National Human Rights Institution Act 2017' created an

independent rights body by giving the Ombudsman power to receive complaints and initiate inquiries into human rights issues, as well as undertake activities to promote awareness of fundamental human rights. Tuvalu has become the first Pacific country to launch a National Action Plan on Human Rights, developed with the support of the EU, Australia and the Pacific Community. Tuvalu's Association of NGO (TANGO) is an umbrella organisation for its 48 members, which play active role in developmental and human rights issues.

Tuvalu undertook constitutional amendments in Tuvalu in September 2023, which include provisions on statehood, as well as balancing international human rights with cultural norms of Tuvalu.

There have been no reports of systematic violation of human rights in Tuvalu in 2023. However, a few areas of concern remain, in particular increased gender based violence due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Tuvalu's legislation does not prohibit discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation, consensual same-sex relations between men remain criminalised under the Penal Code (although there are no reports of law enforcement).

Gender-based violence is rooted in traditional behavioural norms and often remains unreported. Tuvalu has a normative framework in place against violence against women and a 'Domestic Violence Unit' has been established within the police. However, women's rights and gender equality continue to be areas which need further improvement, including, inter alia, employment discrimination, land inheritance aspects or local governance arrangements.

While there were no government restrictions on press and media freedom and the law provides for freedom of expression, there is lack of media ownership diversity.

In 2017, the National Human Rights Institution Act was adopted by the Parliament to provide a mechanism to ensure protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Tuvalu is one of the most environmentally fragile countries in the Pacific. An adverse impact of climate change is affecting human rights such as the rights to life, development, food, health, housing, water and sanitation.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continues assisting Tuvalu to tackle root causes of violence against women and girls, providing support to civil society, encouraging Tuvalu to accede to the key international Human Rights instruments and help addressing the adverse impact of climate change.

Gender equality and women's and girl's empowerment is a significant objective under a coconut sector specific bilateral support. The action is also aligned with fundamental values of human rights, democracy and rule of law.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: During 2023, the EU carried out demarches and outreach activities inviting Tuvalu to support human rights initiatives, to support Ukraine and other priorities at the UN level.

Areas for political engagement have been further discussed in bilateral meetings at various levels, including in the margins of the Pacific Island Forum summits.

With climate change and human rights inextricably linked in the Pacific region, the EU Delegation for the Pacific will continue to actively promote climate change awareness and action through its interactions with Tuvalu.

4. EU financial engagement: Awareness-raising and support to civil society and non-state actors were essential elements for the implementation of the regional roadmap for CSOs in the Pacific.

Tuvalu became a focus country under the regional programme 'Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and Girls', which ended in December 2023. It brought together governments, CSO, communities and other partners to promote gender equality, prevent violence against women and girls and increase access to quality response services for survivors. In addition to this, the protection of women's rights and prevention of violence was also addressed through the Spotlight initiative regional programme.

5. Multilateral context: Tuvalu is a party to three core international human rights instruments:

- 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)'
- 'Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)'
- 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)'.

Tuvalu underwent its 4th Universal Periodic Review in November 2023. Recommendations focused largely on increasing the accession to core human rights treaties, a prohibition against discrimination based on gender, disability and sexual orientation, implementing policies aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change, taking into consideration a focus on human rights, decriminalisation of homosexuality and improving access to health care. Tuvalu's government received a total of 167 recommendations.

There is limited administrative capacity due to the low population (approximately 11 000 citizens), and this creates particular constraints with regard to reporting requirements under UN instruments. Tuvalu's report to the CEDAW Committee is due since March 2019.

Republic of Vanuatu

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Since its independence in 1980, Vanuatu has been politically volatile, with frequent motions of no confidence filed against the government. Following the dissolution of the Parliament on 19 August 2022, a snap election took place on 13 October 2022. The elections were carried out without any major security incidence and no observer, political party agent or candidate reported issues with access to the process.

No women were elected between 2008 and 2022, which made Vanuatu one of only few countries in the world without a single female Member of Parliament until a women was elected in 2022.

Climate change has become a serious human rights issue in Vanuatu. In 2022, Vanuatu initiated a proposal for a UN Resolution requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on states' legal obligation for climate action.

Otherwise, societal discrimination and violence against women remained the most significant human rights concern in Vanuatu. Although no laws limit participation of women and/or members of minorities in the political process, traditional attitudes regarding male dominance and customary familial roles have hampered women's participation in political life, and affect access to employment.

Implementation of the human rights instruments to which the country is a party is hampered by lack of adequate enforcement mechanisms and limited technical, human and economic capacity within public institutions – especially on outer lying remote islands.

Corruption remains an endemic problem, given the close ties between politicians and the business community. In that situation, the independent judiciary constitutes a balancing element.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Through the bilateral Budget Support and Technical Assistance programme on value chains, the EU promotes fundamental values of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, progress towards Sustainable Development Goals and encourages an accountable and effective public administration. In addition, the support to CSOs is expected to have a positive impact on food security and gender equality.

EU actions in Vanuatu focused on preventing gender-based violence, promoting climate actions and better management of natural resources.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: With regard to the EU, Vanuatu is an important partner in the Pacific (particularly on climate change, disaster risk reduction and ocean governance) and the third largest aid recipient in the region. Vanuatu actively participated in post-Cotonou regional consultations leading up to the Samoa Agreement. The challenge for the future is to develop enhanced political and trade relations (including accession to iEPA) beyond development cooperation.

During 2023, the EU Delegation to the Pacific outreached numerous times to the Vanuatu government, via demarches, to foster support for the EU's human rights priorities and initiatives at the UN and other international fora.

Vanuatu is taking a global leadership role in the fight against climate change, leading the process for the UNGA Resolution calling for an Advisory Opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the obligations of States in respect of climate change. Vanuatu has also announced plans to develop a global Fossil Fuels Non-proliferation Treaty.

4. EU financial engagement: Cooperation with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) is laid down by the June 2020 Financing Agreement 'The Vanuatu Civil Society Organisations Support & Technical Cooperation Facility (CSOTCF) Programme' (which allocates EUR 4.5 million for the support of CSOs). The initiative aims to enhance the institutional capacity of CSOs and support their initiatives towards food security and economic empowerment of women, projects with World Vision, Live and Learn, and Care have been implementing the initiative in 2023.

In 2023, Vanuatu has also benefited from two regional initiatives promoting gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence (GBV): a) 'Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and girls (PPEVAWG)', a regional programme of EUR 12.7 million implemented by UN Women in collaboration with the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat (PIFS); b) 'Spotlight Initiative', an unprecedented effort in the global fight to end violence against women and girls through its level of funding (EUR 50 million) for the Pacific region), its holistic approach and its support for multi-stakeholder partnerships. Under this joint EU-UN initiative, a specific country programme of EUR 2.2 million has been defined for Vanuatu. Both programmes have been completed in December 2023, however Vanuatu will benefit from the 'Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and girls (PPEVAWG) Phase II' as from January 2024.

5. Multilateral context: The country successfully completed its 3rd Universal Periodic Review in January 2019. Vanuatu supported recommendations regarding the establishment of a National Human Rights Institution compliant with the Paris Principles and the prevention of discrimination and violence against women and girls. Vanuatu is a party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

The Americas

Antigua and Barbuda

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Antigua and Barbuda is a stable, multi-party parliamentary democracy. Antigua and Barbuda continues to face human rights challenges, namely domestic violence, discrimination against LGBTI people, child abuse, and bad prison conditions including overcrowding. The death penalty is still in place, although it has not been recently applied. As in much of the Eastern Caribbean, the significant judicial backlog of cases remains a concern. The EU-funded PACE Justice Programme, launched in 2023, aims at helping to tackle this challenge.

2. EU action – key focus areas: The EU action in Antigua and Barbuda continues to follow the EU Action Plan. The EU Delegation participated in the international "16 Days of Activism" campaign against gender-based violence through a campaign on social media platforms. A survey on human rights priorities in the Caribbean was also launched on the Delegation social media platforms in January 2024, in view of the launching of the human rights and democracy regional call for proposals scheduled for early 2024**.**

LGBTI persons continue to face widespread discrimination in Antigua and Barbuda. The constitutionality of long-standing anti-buggery laws was successfully challenged in 2022 thanks to local and regional civil society efforts. Incidents of gender-based violence, domestic violence and violence against LGBTIQ+ persons remain a concern in Antigua and Barbuda. There is thought to be significant underreporting of such offences, attributed to social stigma and community pressure, victim blaming, lack of confidentiality or fear of reprisal.

Child abuse remains a challenge in Antigua and Barbuda. It ranges from neglect/abandonment, verbal abuse, and physical abuse, to sexual abuse. Corporal punishment as a disciplinary tool in schools remains legal in Antigua and Barbuda, although not commonly enforced.

On rule of law, Antigua and Barbuda's criminality score for 2023 is 2.98, ranking as 177th of 193 countries and 11th of 13 countries in the Caribbean. The country's only prison still suffers from substantial overcrowding, and does not meet the UN standards.

Antigua and Barbuda retains the death penalty, although no executions have been carried out since 1991. The 2023 Amnesty International report lists Antigua and Barbuda among the "Retentionist" countries, i.e. countries that retain death penalty for ordinary crimes.

3. EU Bilateral political engagement: Human rights are regularly discussed in bilateral meetings with national authorities and civil society organisations. Currently there is no resident EU Member State in Antigua and Barbuda. France has an Embassy based in St. Lucia. Germany, The Netherlands and Spain cover the Eastern Caribbean from Trinidad and Tobago.

4. EU Financial Engagement: The European Union is financing the Caribbean LGBTI Initiative for Promoting Solidarity Outcomes – CALIPSO project – for the strengthening of LGBTI communities across OECS countries. The project inception meeting took place on 26 January 2023 at the EU Delegation in Barbados, with the two implementing partners – ECADE and Synergia. The Partnership of the Caribbean and the European Union on Justice (PACE Justice) Regional Programme aims at assisting efforts towards reducing the high number of criminal case backlogs. PACE Justice was launched in Barbados on 17 October 2023. The program will be implemented by UNDP over the next 48 months, with EU funding of EUR 9.75 million. The Spotlight Regional Caribbean – a global multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls – is the EU main programme supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. Concluded in 2023, it facilitated several initiatives in the Caribbean in the past 12 months.

5. Multilateral Context

N/A

Argentine Republic

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Argentina's human rights situation remained stable in 2023, reflecting an overall positive trend. In 2023, Argentina celebrated 40 years of uninterrupted democracy. There is a strong consensus and commitment within the broad political spectrum and civil society with democracy. Despite all the controversies of the campaign, the general elections in 2023, both on the provincial and national (federal) level were free, fair and transparent; no fraud and no violent incidents were reported. For the fourth time since the return of democracy, the presidency was handed over to an opposition political force within the constitutional procedure.

In January, Argentina went through the Universal Periodical Review. All main human rights legislation is in place and in some cases such as the anti-discrimination laws (including of LGBTI people) legislation remains very progressive. Political rights, as well as freedom of expression and association, are guaranteed and generally respected. The press is generally free, although it is somewhat concentrated within major media groups and exhibits a high degree of polarization. Civil society and human rights organisations are active and vocal in expressing their concerns.

Despite the general positive situation, there are a number of significant obstacles to the full enjoyment of human rights in Argentina, among which: 1) the population living in poverty in Argentina was 40.1% in the first half of 2023. This represents an increase of 3.6 percentage points compared to the same period in 2022 (36.5%); 2) There is an implementation gap of laws, regulations and norms; the partisan approach of human rights issues within the political polarization has not been helpful; 3) Femicides in 2023 increased even more than the previous year; 4) The number of incarcerated people nationwide has increased, but the urgent reform of the situation of prisons and correctional institutions nationwide was absent in the political agenda and public discussions; 5) The situation of the indigenous people did not improve in 2023; episodes of clashes with security forces and repression, as well as public protests were registered.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU priorities continued to focus on the following areas: (i) democratic governance and institutional strengthening; (ii) gender issues: the fight against violence and for equality; (iii) children's rights and protection; (iv) building a more equal society free of any type of discrimination against minorities or vulnerable groups; (v) environmental rights and the right to live in a healthy and sustainable environment; and (vi) new technologies / digitalization, including media freedom.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued its broad political contacts, meetings and initiatives with both State and non-state actors engaged with human rights issues. No local human rights dialogue has been organised with the government since the last one in June 2022, as 2023 was an electoral year. Plans are underway to organize one in 2024 with the new administration.

4. EU financial engagement: In total, the EU Delegation´s portfolio of ongoing EIDHR (and CSO projects where human rights are also addressed), amounts to EUR 19.9 million. At the end of 2022, the EU Delegation in Argentina launched a Call for Proposals in relation to the two thematic budget lines CSOs and EIDHR, the latter with a focus on digital rights. The objective of the Call was to identify projects aimed at reducing the digital divide and ensuring a just and anthropocentric digital transition. The issue of digitalisation has been one of the focuses of the work under Team Europe. Preparatory activities were carried out fostering an EU-Argentina Road Map that will guide dialogue and cross-fertilisation on issues such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, functioning of the digital market, rules for Tech giants, protection of data and protection of children rights.

The new projects related to the Call will be implemented from 2024 and will complement the on-going EU-funded human rights actions as follows: The implementation of the project "Alianza Universitaria Argentina Europea para la Transformación digital" has now established a network among nine Universities (five Argentinian and four European). This initiative aims to exchange best practices in promoting digitalization between the public and private sectors and academia, as well as to enhance digitalization in university courses. The second phase of the project "Sociedad Civil en Red II" coordinated by the "Confederación de la Sociedad Civil", aims to enhance civil society's participation in public decision-making through dialogue between authorities and civil society organisations.

Four projects supporting indigenous peoples rights are underway. Other human rights projects encompassing a range of initiatives aimed at addressing diverse issues. These include: "Sociedad civil y los recursos naturales: modelos innovadores para el desarrollo sustentable"; "RED CREER - Modelo de Impacto Colectivo para la Inclusión Socio-económica de Personas Privadas de la Libertad, Liberados y Liberadas"; and "Bien Restituido: para el desmantelamiento patrimonial del crimen organizado y el fortalecimiento de la sociedad civil". In 2023, the finalisation of the Spotlight initiative marked a significant achievement in Argentina's efforts to promote gender equality and combat femicide. Additionally, significant work was made to promote responsibility in the mining sector, with ongoing engagement with the private sector at all levels to support a sustainable investment agenda in the country.

5. Multilateral context: Argentina considers itself a leading country in the promotion of human rights in multilateral forums. At the regional level, Argentina supports the Inter-American Human Rights System, which was incorporated into the National Constitution in 1994. Additionally, the country is active in various Human Rights forums, including the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, UNGA's Third Committee, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Argentina has been a member of the Human Rights Council (HRC) since 2019, with two terms: 2019-2021 and 2022-2024.

On October 11, at Argentina's initiative, the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) unanimously approved the first resolution recognizing the importance of care work ("*cuidados*"), titled "The Centrality of Care and Support from a human rights perspective," within the framework of human rights and from a gender perspective. This resolution marks a significant milestone in international human rights standards, acknowledging the impact of care redistribution on gender equality and the exercise of women's human rights.

Commonwealth of the Bahamas

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The Bahamas has a stable democracy with inclusive and transparent elections. The last general election, which was held 16 September 2021, saw the centre-left Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) record a major win against the centre-right Free National Movement (FNM), obtaining 32 out of 39 seats.

The FNM-administration fulfilled two pledges to improve public administration and good governance before demitting office. The government took a step to improve accountability and transparency in public administration with the passing of the Public Procurement Act in 2021. In May 2023, the Freedom of Information Commissioner announced that a Freedom of Information Unit was being set up to oversee continuous training sessions on the Bahamas' Freedom of Information Act. A National Implementation Plan for freedom of information was presented to the Cabinet and approved.

Crime continues to be a major issue in the country. Statistics from Insight Crime website states that the country has recorded 128 murders for 2022 while data from the Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index ranked The Bahamas as 30 out of 180 countries with a score of 64/100 for 2023. However, with security being a priority area of focus, the government is seeking to tame the problem of crime in the Bahamas by focusing on border security, and reducing the flow of guns into the country and investing in crime prevention.

A resolution for the appointment of a parliamentary committee on human rights was passed in April 2023. The committee, which is the first of its kind in the Bahamas and the third such committee in the Caribbean Community, will consist of five members of Parliament and three Senators and will assess or evaluate all matters related to the protection and enforcement of human rights in The Bahamas.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) preliminary report released in December 2023, pointed to numerous faults relating to the criminal justice system. According to the WGAD, the country is not doing enough to ensure forced confessions to crimes are not impeding people's right to a fair trial.

2. EU action – key focus areas: In line with the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020 – 2024, the EU monitors human rights issues, with focus on undocumented migrants, women's rights and gender equality.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The Bahamas and the European Union held their sixth Political Dialogue in October 2023. Delegates expressed concern over the political and economic developments in a geopolitically challenging landscape characterised by rampant insecurity and a complex multi-layered crisis in Haiti, Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the security and humanitarian situation in the Middle East. The dialogue supported the call

for compliance with international humanitarian law norms and principles in conflict-affected areas. Demarches were also carried out to seek support for EU priorities.

4. EU financial engagement: The Bahamas continues to benefit from a series of regional projects, some of which related to human rights such as access to health and energy following the 2019 Dorian hurricane. The establishment of the Caribbean Consultative Working Group has promoted civil society engagement, and higher education mobility schemes have contributed to faculty expertise and students' employability, thereby advancing human development in The Bahamas.

5. Multilateral context: The most recent Universal Periodic Review within the framework of the UN Human Rights Council was held in May 2023. Among the supported recommendations were those related to the rights of women and girls, domestic violence and violence against women, the rights of the child, the right to education, climate change and the environment, the national human rights institution/ombudsman, and trafficking in persons. Additionally, the review stated that the Government supports the development of Civil Society and continues to engage with them to address social and economic issues. The work of CSOs in the protection of human rights, civil liberties and social justice plays a pivotal role in the fostering accountability, which is particularly important for marginalised groups.

Barbados

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Barbados is a multi-party parliamentary democracy, where human rights are generally respected and guaranteed. It operates under the rule of law with strong democratic institutions. Human rights challenges include LGBTI rights, domestic and gender-based violence, and child abuse. In 2023, Barbados experienced a notable decrease in crime rates. The death penalty is still in place, although it has not been recently applied. As in much of the Eastern Caribbean, the significant judicial backlog of cases remains a concern. The EU-funded PACE Justice Programme, launched in 2023, aims at helping tackle this challenge. In 2023, Barbados continued work on the review of its Constitution. The Constitutional Reform Commission is expected to submit a draft Constitution for Cabinet’s consideration by April 2024.

The EU Delegation took part in the Pride parade in June 2023. Europe Day on 9 May was marked by outreach activities in schools across Barbados: 17 May 2023, the Head of the EU Delegation to Barbados addressed the members of the LGBTI community present at the IDAHOBIT event organised at the UN House in Bridgetown. The EU Delegation participated in the international “16 Days of Activism” campaign against gender-based violence through a campaign on social media platforms. A survey on human rights priorities in the Caribbean was also launched on the Delegation social media platforms in January 2024, in view of the launch of the human rights and democracy regional call for proposals scheduled for early 2024.

2. EU action – key focus areas:

LGBTI persons continue to face widespread discrimination and harassment in Barbados, in various areas, including in the workplace and educational institutions. The constitutionality of long-standing anti-buggery laws was successfully challenged in 2022 thanks to local and regional civil society efforts. Incidents of gender-based violence, domestic violence and violence against LGBTI persons remain a concern in Barbados. There is thought to be significant underreporting of such offences, attributed to social stigma and community pressure, victim blaming, or fear of reprisal. The Child Protection Bill, incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child within the laws, and currently under review by the Barbados House of Assembly, sparked a national debate, with people opposed to it claiming it would infringe on parental rights, and that compliance with UN standards could open the way to promote an LGBTI agenda. Barbados' criminality score[34] for 2023 is 3.07, ranking as 175th of 193 countries and 10th of 13 countries in the Caribbean. A high number of backlog cases continues to set back Barbadian courts, representing the main hurdle in terms of access to justice. Certain steps have been taken, such as the increase of the number of judges. Capital punishment was removed from local legislation as automatic punishment for murder in 2019. According to 2020-1 amendment, which is underway, individuals previously sentenced to death will be resentenced to life imprisonment or a term of years. The last execution in Barbados occurred in 1984. The latest Amnesty International report lists Barbados among the "Retentionist" countries, i.e. countries that retain the death penalty for ordinary crimes

3. EU Bilateral political engagement: Human Rights matters are regularly discussed in bilateral meetings with national authorities and civil society organisations in all countries under the mandate of the Delegation. Currently there is no resident EU Member State in Barbados. France has an Embassy based in St. Lucia. Germany, The Netherlands and Spain cover the Eastern Caribbean from Trinidad and Tobago.

4. EU Financial Engagement: The European Union is financing the Caribbean LGBTI Initiative for Promoting Solidarity Outcomes – CALIPSO project – for the strengthening of LGBTI communities across OECS countries. The project inception meeting took place on 26 January 2023 at the EU Delegation in Barbados, with the two implementing partners – ECADE and Synergia for Initiatives for Human Rights. The Partnership of the Caribbean and the European Union on Justice (PACE Justice) Regional Programme aims at assisting efforts towards reducing the high number of criminal case backlogs. PACE Justice was launched in Barbados on 17 October 2023. The programme will be implemented by UNDP over the next 48 months, with EU funding of EUR 9.75 million. The Spotlight Regional Caribbean – a global multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls – is the EU main programme supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. Concluded in 2023, it facilitated several initiatives in the Caribbean in the past 12 months.

5. Multilateral Context: Barbados underwent its fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in May 2023. As a result, 224 recommendations were officially addressed to the country in June 2023. The Government of Barbados accepted 129 recommendations and took note of

[34] According to the Global organised crime index: https://ocindex.net/.

some further 86, while 3 were declared as fully implemented and 9 were supported and noted. Barbadian representatives pointed out in their statement at the adoption of the Barbados UPR in October 2023 that recommendations revolving around administration of justice, child protection and the rights of LGBTI persons will continue to be on their radar "in due course".

Belize

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Belize is a democracy that has experienced regular, peaceful rotations of power through competitive general elections. General elections were last held in 2020 with the People's United Party (PUP) taking the majority of seats. The next elections are due in 2025. Belize is currently conducting a review of the country's Constitution, including countrywide consultations to make recommendations for constitutional reform. In a further boost to democracy and citizen's participation, the government enacted in November, the Referendum (Amendment) Bill 2023, compelling the government to hold a mandatory referendum before oil exploration can take place in Belizean waters.

Tensions remain around the territorial disputes with Guatemala and Honduras but the case is inching towards a resolution. On 7 June 2023, Belize delivered its Rejoinder in the case to the Registrar of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This marked the end of the stage of written submissions in the border dispute case with Guatemala. The next step is for the court to set a date for the oral hearings. In another case, Belize has submitted a Memorial to the ICJ in the ongoing dispute with Honduras regarding the sovereignty of the Sapodilla Cayes. The Memorial is requesting the Court to invalidate Honduras' claim and declare Belize's sovereignty.

The Government has taken steps to comply with the Caribbean Court of Justice's Consent Order of 2015, with a plan of agreed actions to recognise and protect the rights arising from the Maya customary land tenure system. However, the government has not yet passed any customary land tenure policy or legislation requiring prior consultation with indigenous peoples on matters affecting them. Consultations around the draft policy have been met with concern by civil society and indigenous communities. Belize has not ratified the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169).

The Belize Refugee (Amendment) Act of 2019 offers a legal framework for the provision of protection and assistance to refugees. From August 2022 to February 2023, the government ran an amnesty programme to allow undocumented immigrants to gain residency under certain conditions. Approximately 13,000 amnesty requests were lodged, a much lower number of the estimated 40-60,000 eligible migrants in Belize, presumably due to the costs associated with meeting the requirements of the procedure. The programme helped to reduce trafficking vulnerability for many migrants.

2. EU action – key focus areas: In line with the EU Action Plan on Human Rights 2020- 2024, the Delegation continued its focus on: (i) the rights of indigenous populations; (ii) women's rights and gender equality; and (iii) the abolition of the death penalty. The annual EU-Belize Political Dialogue, as well as financial assistance are the main routes of engagement.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Belize and the European Union held their 8th political dialogue on 22 May 2023. Good governance, human rights, the condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its impact on food and energy security, the deterioration of the security situation in Haiti, the EU support for confidence building measures in the Adjacency Zone between Belize and Guatemala ahead of the International Court of Justice ruling, as well as the preparation of the new Global Financial Pact were among the issues discussed. With respect to the issue of climate change, both sides shared their views on adaptation and mitigation measures, loss and damage reparations, and more ambitious climate financing. The EU Delegation is in regular dialogue with local stakeholders on human rights related issues. Likewise, member states raise human rights issues with their high-level government partners during their meetings. The Delegation also carried out demarches to seek support for EU priorities.

4. EU Financial Engagement: Several EU-funded projects for human rights were implemented in 2023, promoting economic, social, cultural and environmental rights with emphasis on protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, including the poor, indigenous people, women and girls. Additionally, under the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative, significant support was provided to the government and civil society organisations to boost efforts to end gender-based violence and promote gender equality. For the first time, the EU provided support to the umbrella network of NGOs in Belize, the Belize Network of NGOs (BNN) in an effort to strengthen local civil society organisations' capacities for developing, advocating for, and monitoring good governance, public accountability, transparency and national constitutional reforms. Support was also provided to the local non-governmental organisation Sarstoon Semash Institute for Indigenous Management (SATIIM), to promote and protect the economic, social, and cultural rights of Maya women in Belize. The EU continued to provide financial support towards the implementation of the special international mandate of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in the Adjacency Zone between Belize and Guatemala.

5. Multilateral Context: The Human Rights record of Belize was examined by the United Nation's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group on 29th January 2024. Belize received 166 recommendations. Among them are that Belize should: (i) Sign and ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming at the abolition of the death penalty; (ii) Adopt and ratify the Inter-American Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination and Intolerance; and (iii) Ratify the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) of the International Labour Organisation.

Plurinational State of Bolivia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Persistent levels of polarisation have resulted in political gridlock, which hampers governability in Bolivia. As a result, the judicial elections that were to take place in 2023 have been postponed, while the mandates

of the current magistrates have been extended by the Constitutional Court. However, some magistrates have resigned, as this situation is constitutionally questionable. Concerns regarding the legitimacy and independence of the judiciary coincide with the courts deciding on issues with political implications, affecting internal disputes in the ruling party as well as legal cases against members of the opposition. Violence against women, children and LGBTI people, child labour, constraints on press freedom, the excessive use of pre-trial detention and prison overcrowding, as well as impunity for human rights violations, continue to be central issues. In this context the uncertain legal status of the OHCHR limits its ability to operate and hire staff, while the EU and its Member States play a crucial role in defending human rights through political engagement and cooperation projects, with an increasing focus on the nexus between environmental and human rights.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued its commitment to promoting the rule of law and access to justice, supporting and protecting human rights defenders, advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples and LGBTI groups, as well as empowering women and working towards the elimination of gender-based violence.

To prevent further polarisation of civil society and to facilitate the integration of emergent civil society in 2023, the EU Delegation has launched a 3 year NDICI human rights programme with a well-known local organisation “Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado” (CIPCA), aiming to support civil society organisations, to be involved in shaping a national vision.
In collaboration with UN Women, in 2023, the Delegation launched an innovative action to address gender-based violence in over 80 municipalities. With this initiative, the EU has become a key actor in this thematic area. The Delegation has also supported the first multifactorial investigation on the situation of the LGBTI community in Bolivia. This document is an important step in the Delegation’s strategy of action to promote inclusion and defend the human rights of LGBTI people.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Human rights and democracy issues were addressed in regular dialogues with the Bolivian authorities, and civil society, as well as through public diplomacy. In addition, in the framework of the GSP+ monitoring, the EU was in constant exchange with Bolivian authorities regarding human rights and democratic values. The GSP Joint Staff Working Document, published in November 2023, was received by the government in a constructive manner.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU is supporting Human Rights and Democracy through a number of projects, through the new MIP (2021-2024) and global funds like EIDHR and CSOs. Access to justice, support to human rights activists, trafficking in human beings, elections, and the fight against discrimination of vulnerable people and against gender-based violence are tackled with stand-alone projects.
Regarding the fight against gender-based violence, the EU Delegation in Bolivia has continued to implement a contribution agreement with AECID/Spain that includes support to the Vice-Ministry for Equal Opportunities (EUR 600,000 incl. co-financing by Spain) and launched in 2023 a EUR 3,440,000 G2 action with UN Women aiming to eradicate gender-based violence. The Delegation supported two projects implemented by a consortium of NGOs and universities led by OXFAM to promote women's participation in political parties, combat political violence and promote intercultural democracy (first phase EUR 1 million ended in

2022, second phase EUR 1 million began in 2023). The project has already supported the adaptation of the statutes of important political parties and trained more than 200 political leaders.

To foster societal cohesion and counter the diminishing space for civil society, the EU initiated a 3-year NDICI HR action (EUR 1.3 million) in 2023. The primary goal is to encourage a more integrated civil society and facilitate the inclusion of emerging organisational forms. In 2022, the EU supported the closing phase of a regional project aiming to promote the rights of LGBTI peoples in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia (EUR 1.99 million). In 2023, an output of this project was the publication of the first ever survey of the LGBTI community in Bolivia, which can be used to inform policymaking. The EU also continued the support to the implementation of a project aiming to extend the right to comprehensive health for indigenous peoples, implemented by two local NGOs (EUR 610,000).

To strengthen the nexus "environmental rights and human rights" the EU continued to support a regional project implemented in Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador by a consortium of NGOs (EUR 1.5 million) that aims to promote human rights and environmental protection in the mining sector. In 2023, the consortium overseeing implementation utilised the scientific investigation conducted in 2022, which demonstrated mercury accumulation in the hair of indigenous people residing in an isolated community near gold mines. This information was leveraged to amplify their advocacy efforts at the local, national, and international levels. Notably, the campaign included visits to the EU institutions in Brussels and the United Nations in Switzerland.

5. Multilateral context: In 2023 Bolivia held the Vice Presidency of the UN Human Rights Council. During this time, the EU Delegation held constructive discussions with the Foreign Ministry, reaching common ground on thematic resolutions, notably regarding gender issues and the death penalty. Among its priorities are resolutions on the rights of peasants and workers in rural areas. During the 54th session, Bolivia aligned with the EU in over half of the votes.

The EU Delegation also provides support to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). The IACHR and the Bolivian government signed an agreement in 2019 to create an Inter-disciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI) to investigate the violent events that occurred in Bolivia in late 2019. A regional EU-funded project (EUR 300,000) supports the IACHR in the follow-up of the GIEI recommendations. In December 2023, IACHR Commissioner José Luis Caballero visited Bolivia to assess compliance with the recommendations, including discussions with EUD regarding remaining challenges.

Furthermore, the EU supports the work of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to monitor the respect for human rights, to enhance the rule of law and to support civil society organisations. Continuous efforts are made to build synergies between the work of IACHR, OHCHR, and CSOs to strengthen the respect for human rights in Bolivia.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in December 2023 expressed its concern about persistent structural issues within Bolivia's justice system, and

recommended that Bolivia expedite its judiciary reforms to ensure autonomy and impartiality and guarantee comprehensive coverage, amongst other things.

Federative Republic of Brazil

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The return to power of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as of 1 January 2023 represented a positive development for the protection and promotion of human rights and democracy in Brazil. In addition to the Ministry for Human Rights and Citizenship, President Lula created the first Brazilian Ministry for Indigenous Peoples, led by female indigenous leader Sônia Guajajara, as well as a Ministry for Women and a Ministry for Racial Equality. The government re-introduced a number of social and human rights programmes, re-opened civil society spaces, paid its debts with international organisations and generally adopted a more respectful attitude towards human rights activists. According to the National Federation of Journalists, the number of violent incidents against journalists decreased by 50% during President Lula's first year in government, compared with the previous year. A new law on 'equal pay for equal work' was passed and President Lula signed a Racial Equality Package with initiatives aimed at affirmative action, fighting racism and creating social and cultural programmes. The riots of 8 January 2023 against the executive, legislative and judiciary powers were the most significant attacks against democracy since the end of the country's military dictatorship.

Shortcomings remained in some areas. According to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, police was responsible for 6,296 homicides in 2023. As of June 2023, over 649,000 persons were in prison, exceeding the capacity of Brazilian facilities by 34%. The National Mechanism for the Prevention and Combat of Torture denounced overcrowding, unhealthy conditions, collective punishment, and ill-treatment of adults and children in detention. Discrimination against people of African descent and the LGBTI communities persisted and killings of women went up by 2.6% (to 1,902) in the first half of 2023. Police registered more than one third of them as femicides. Threatened human rights defenders remained at risk in the absence of an effective national protection programme. Environmental crimes persisted in the Amazon region, deteriorating the habitat of indigenous peoples and putting their lives in jeopardy. Brazil scored 36 points out of 100 (placing it on rank 104 out of 180 countries) on the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2023, democracy and human rights remained a political priority for the EU and Member States in Brazil. Based on the 2007 Strategic Partnership, the EU and Brazil have continued regular exchanges on human rights, both at bilateral and multilateral levels. Following the adoption of the 2020 EU Gender Action Plan III, the EU prepared a Brazil-level action plan, whose implementation started in 2022. Key priorities include combatting all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, and promoting social, political economic and cultural rights of women and girls.

The EU continued to implement the EU Roadmap for the engagement with Civil Society in Brazil, adopted in August 2020. The main priority areas include overcoming social and economic inequalities, promoting an enabling environment for civil society, promoting their human rights protection, strengthening rights related to the environment and climate, as well

as the development of a sustainable economy. The EU remained in constant contact with Brazilian civil society actors, representatives of indigenous peoples and of minority groups, drawing on their knowledge and expertise to build an informed opinion about the human rights situation in the country. This work with civil society has shown to be essential to preserve their space but also to be well positioned with these social movements, which are today part of the new Government.

Together with other Latin American countries, Brazil was a beneficiary of regional programmes such as EUROFRONT (integrated border management, trafficking of human beings and migrant smuggling and COPOLAD III (drug policies).

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU initiated a cooperation with the Superior Tribunal of Justice, with the aim of broadening the dialogue with the European judicial system, notably the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The NGO *Transparência Eleitoral* won the 2023 EU Human Rights Prize on the topic of 'Together for Gender Equality'. The EU continued its dialogue with the Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship on business and human rights and organised workshops with business, academia, NGOs and other organisations in São Paulo and Brasilia to exchange best practices on the implementation of Human Rights Due Diligence policies and legal frameworks.

4. EU financial engagement: Under the EU-Brazil Dialogue Facility, the EU continued the joint work with the Superior Electoral Tribunal on fight against disinformation. The EU also supported local civil society organisations and media actors in the fight against disinformation and hate speech through the Getulio Vargas Foundation. The second phase of the EU's regional El PAcCTO programme will both continue its work with security authorities, assisting *inter alia* their further professionalisation, and start a new work strand on the protection of indigenous communities. The EU is funding twelve projects fostering good governance via civil society organisations in the areas of urban development and mobility, socio-economic development, basic sanitation, transparency, public governance and social participation. Five more projects focus on female Human Rights Defenders at risk (indigenous, Afro-descendants, LGBTI, migrants, Roma), fostering the economic inclusion of women, promoting the participation of indigenous women in decision-making processes and strengthening a network of women's organisations. Lastly, six EU projects focusing on policy dialogue on the digital agenda, digital inclusion, digital territorial protection, access to internet, digital government, digital rights and the use of information and communication technologies as well as the fight against disinformation in the professional field, are being implemented.

5. Multilateral context: In October 2023, Brazil was re-elected for its sixth mandate as a member of the UN Human Rights Council. Brazil was last reviewed under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in November 2022, when it received 306 recommendations. While the previous government deferred its position on them, the government of President Lula accepted most of them, including on sexual and reproductive health and land rights for indigenous communities. Brazil has ratified all of the core human rights instruments with the exception of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW).

In 2023, the Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship paid USD 37 million in compensation for sentences emitted by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, for human rights violations committed by the Brazilian state going back as far as 1982. The Brazilian lawyer Rodrigo Mudrovitsch was nominated new Vice President of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Canada

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights situation in Canada is positive overall and Canada has a steady global reputation as a defender of human rights and democracy. In 2023, one of the most significant steps forward in advancing human rights in Canada was the release of the federal government's action plan for implementing the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (**UNDRIP). The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal also approved a settlement of CAD 23.4 billion to compensate victims of the First Nations child welfare system. Despite these efforts, several longstanding issues remain, including systemic discrimination and violence against Indigenous people, poor consultation processes on the extraction of natural resources on Indigenous land, chronic under-funding of Indigenous resources and the over-representation of Indigenous peoples amongst prison inmates. According to civil society organisations such as Amnesty International, Canada also crucially lacks a strong monitoring system to ensure systematic respect of human rights across the federal and provincial borders, and levels of government.

Civil society organisations and academics have also pointed to the detention of certain immigrants, including some who are seeking refugee protection in Canada, and to the breaches of environmental human rights, in particular when federal and provincial climate policies impact First Nations, as areas of concern. The direction taken by certain provinces on LGBTI rights, especially towards youth, under the guise of parental rights, is also a source of concern. The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, urged Canadian authorities to: i) amend Canada's temporary foreign worker programmes, described as "a breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery", and end the closed work permit system and ii) bring forward legislation requiring Canadian companies to implement mandatory human rights due diligence and expand the independence, powers and mandate of the CORE."

On the international stage, Canada has continued to stand up for human rights and democracy and has announced it will be seeking a seat on the UN Human Rights Council for the 2028-2030 term. In 2023 it notably imposed additional sanctions on representatives of the Iranian and Myanmar regimes for gross and systematic violations of human rights. Nevertheless, concerns remain over the poor oversight of Canadian mining companies operating abroad and activists continue to call on the government to expand the powers and mandate of the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise (CORE).

2. EU action - key focus areas: Gender equality and the empowerment of women is a shared priority for the EU and Canada and was covered in a number of activities. The subject is also

mainstreamed into regular bilateral dialogues. The EU Head of Delegation hosted a panel discussion on gender equality with the International Women's Forum. The EU Delegation and EU Member States also relayed on their online platforms their support to international campaigns such as International Women's Day and the "Orange the World" campaign. The EU Delegation and a number of EU Member States showed their support to the LGBTI community through participation in Pride Parades (Ottawa/Montreal), and a number of EU Member States signed up to the Joint Statement issued by the "Diplomats for Equality" network. A number of European experts travelled to Canada this year. The French Ambassador for LGBTI rights travelled to Canada and held a number of meetings at provincial and federal levels, and The Netherlands coordinated the visit of the Amsterdam Rainbow Dress to Vancouver. Several EU Member States organised events with local organisations (YMCA, College La Cité) in support of people in need, disabled people, or celebrating noteworthy human rights activists and authors. EU Member States, additionally, engaged in Canada's Universal Periodic Review process with a number of recommendations.

The leaders' statement of the 2023 Canada-EU Summit underscored the importance of defending the international rules based order and that efforts to promote our shared values of human rights, democracy and rule of law are more important than ever. Together, the EU Delegation, EU Member States and Canada continued to show their support for Ukraine, notably through regular participation in the Group of Friends of Ukraine. The importance of feminist foreign policies in tackling current global problems, but also ways to continue improving these feminist policies, were addressed by certain EU Member States in panel discussions in Ottawa and other events that include Canadian participation outside of Canada. A number of EU Member States also organised or participated in a number of events addressing mis-/disinformation, as well as challenges faced by journalists in the current polarized context. The EU Delegation notably cooperated with World Press Freedom Canada to mark World Press Freedom Day. The EU also expressed strong support at multilateral events in 2023 for Canada's international efforts to fight arbitrary detention, such as the high-level dialogue on the initiative against arbitrary detention in state-to-state relations on the margins of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York. To this end, the EEAS financed a joint EEAS-Canada study on the legal context and instruments to tackle State-sponsored arbitrary detention in State-to-State relations at the international and European level.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The Human Rights dialogue under the EU-Canada Strategic Partnership Agreement took place in June 2023. Discussions focused on cooperation at the UN Third Committee and Human Rights Council. They also touched upon Indigenous issues, arbitrary detention, and the need to build sustainable partnerships with the Global South. The exchange allowed for the identification of several fields of engagement, including the Global Digital Compact and the Canada-Netherlands joint initiative on a global declaration for informational integrity online. EU Member States representatives also raised human rights issues in their respective high-level meetings with their Canadian counterparts.

4. EU financial engagement: As in previous years, the Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) continues to be instrumental in supporting the EU Delegation's actions in the area of human rights, especially engagement on LGBTI issues.

5. Multilateral context: The EU Delegation delivered a demarche in support of EU priorities at the UNGA 3rd Committee to Global Affairs Canada. The exchange confirmed the strongly likeminded approach by Canada and the EU on the agenda of the Third Committee, including on resolutions on Ukraine, Myanmar, DPRK, Iran and religious freedom.

Republic of Chile

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights situation in Chile remained positive in 2023. However, the social unrest in October 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant human rights challenges that remained prominent on the agenda in 2023. These challenges include the implementation of recommendations from national and international bodies regarding human rights violations reported during the police response to the social protests.

On the constitutional process, in December 2023, Chileans voted a second time to reject a new constitutional proposal, marking the end of the country's four-year-long process. The process was initially launched in 2019 in response to the October social uprising. Although human rights groups were generally relieved by the second proposal's rejection, they were disappointed about the lost opportunity to expand rights protections, particularly for indigenous peoples, women and LGBTI people. There is now a consensus that the constitutional debate should end and the government has turned its attention to expanding access to human rights through legislative and administrative reforms, particularly of the tax, pension, education and health systems.

Chile actively supports the defence of the universality of human rights and of a rules-based international order. President Boric has been a vocal supporter of Ukraine and encouraged other countries in the region to be clearer in their condemnation of Russia's aggression. The Boric administration has also been consistent in condemning human rights violations in the region, such as in Venezuela or Nicaragua. With respect to the Middle East, Chile (which is home to the largest Palestinian community outside of the Middle East) has been critical of Israel's response to the October 7 attack by Hamas and has expressed support for South Africa's case before the International Court of Justice. Moreover, along with Mexico, Chile referred the situation to the International Criminal Court.

In the region, Chile is a strong ally on gender equality and LGBTI rights. In fact, in 2023, Chile became the first South American country to implement a Feminist Foreign Policy. The government is also emphasising its response to public security and migration, two issues with human rights implications that have become major priorities of the public. On other security issues, Chile's Minister of Defense was the only Minister from Latin America to participate in the Schuman Security and Defense Partnership Forum in March 2023.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In alignment with the Human Rights & Democracy Country Strategy 2021-2024 the key focus areas for EU action encompass: (i) strengthening institutional framework of human rights, rule of law and accountability; (ii) supporting the rights of groups in vulnerable situations, including Women and girls, Children and adolescents, Indigenous peoples, LGBTI, Migrants, and Human Rights Defenders; (iii) Economic, social,

cultural rights; (iv) human rights and business; and (v) strengthening access to information and fight against disinformation and corruption.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The signing of the EU-Chile Advanced Framework Agreement in December 2023 marked a new step in the strengthening of the EU's partnership with Chile and reflects the mutual interest in deepening a relationship defined by common values, such as rule of law, democratic principles and human rights, gender equality and promoting sustainable and inclusive economic growth. The EU-Chile relationship saw significant reinforcement through a series of high-level visits, which underscored shared values concerning democracy and human rights while advancing projects aimed at delivering tangible benefits. In 2023, the EU Delegation in Chile sustained its ongoing dialogue on human rights matters, holding the XII EU-Chile Human Rights Dialogue on 28 November and launching the EU-Chile Dialogue on Climate Change and the Environment on 12 October.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU is supporting Human Rights and Democracy in Chile through a number of projects, through funds like the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights budget line (EIDHR) and the Civil Society Organisations budget line (CSOs). Under the CSOs thematic line, the EU Delegation oversaw the remaining active projects in 2022, with a total combined budget of EUR 3,790,000 (EU contribution). This included supporting a civil society initiative with *Fundación Colunga* to enhance collaboration in developing innovative social policies for vulnerable children. In 2023, this initiative resulted in the establishment of the first *Observatory for Children* and the formation of the "*Pacto Niñez*", a network comprising over 100 organisations dedicated to advancing children's rights.
The EU Delegation in Chile supported civil society projects on indigenous rights with *Observatorio Ciudadano* and *Fundación Ciudadanía Inteligente*, aiming to advance indigenous people's rights in democratic processes. Additionally, the goal was to encourage the use of dialogue to prevent conflicts and promote peaceful forms of inter-ethnic and intercultural coexistence. Furthermore, the projects sought to ensure a better impact of indigenous peoples' participation within the framework of Chile's Commission for Peace and Understanding.

In the context of Chile's Pro-Tempore Presidency of the Quito Process, on 10-11 October, the EU Delegation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Chile co-organized two workshops on "Integrated Border Management" and "New Narratives on Migration".

Concerning the situation of Human Rights Defenders, the EU Delegation supported a project aimed at developing public policies and regulations that integrate environmental justice, human rights and climate change considerations. This initiative aimed to tackle environmental threats stemming from industrial pollution in the Valparaiso region.

5. Multilateral context: Chile is a close partner of the European Union in the field of human rights, maintaining similar positions in multilateral fora at both bilateral and multilateral levels. The country has systematically condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine, voting with the EU on UNGA resolutions, inviting President Zelensky to address the Congress, and pushing regional partners to take a stronger stance in the EU-CELAC Summit in July. On Israel, Chile has been vocal in its condemnation of what it sees as Israel's disproportionate response, its concerns about civilian casualties in Gaza and its interest in seeing the

international community take a more robust line on the conflict. As a member of the Human Rights Council from 2023 to 2025, Chile has emerged as a significant partner for the EU in defending the multilateral system of human rights protections.

Republic of Colombia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The first government from the left in Colombian history placed a new focus on human rights, incorporating human rights provisions into sectoral policies, appointing well-known human rights defenders (HRDs) to key positions in government ministries and departments, and establishing a Ministry of Equality spearheaded by Vice-President Francia Márquez, the first Afro-Colombian to hold the position, and a Vice-Ministry of Diversity. The Petro Administration made concerted efforts to address violence against social leaders and HRDs, adopting an Emergency Plan and resurrecting the campaign Lidera la Vida to raise awareness of the situation of social leaders and HRDs. In addition, in December, a presidential decree recognised the important role social leaders and HRDs play in strengthening democracy, and reaffirmed the Government's commitment to support them.

In accordance with the Government's policy of "Total Peace", several ceasefires with armed groups were concluded in 2023, which also contributed to reducing levels of violence, especially clashes with the military. Despite government's efforts, important human rights concerns persisted, particularly killings, violent attacks and threats against HRDs, social leaders or former FARC combatants, as well as forced displacement, perpetrated by different illegal armed groups. In 2023, the number of mine victims decreased from 82 to 55, with most casualties in Nariño (39). The number of reported child recruitments by armed groups decreased from 178 to 86, with the highest number from Cauca (32). In total, 44 former FARC combatants were killed (compared to 50 in 2022), the majority of which in Cauca (7), Meta (6) and Huila (5). Finally, the number of victims from forced displacement dropped from 298 783 to 167 540, with most cases in Nariño (35 024) and Valle del Cauca (25 731). These are positive tendencies, but the number of assassinations of human rights defenders is still very high (188). The migration/humanitarian situation at the border with Panama raised alarm bells. Many migrants fall victim to financial extortion, human trafficking, kidnapping or sexual and physical violence.

The local and regional elections, held on 29 October, saw an increase in violence against candidates, including 28 reports of lethal violence according to the Misión de Observación Electoral, a civil society platform promoting civil and political rights. Illegal armed groups exerted heavy influence over the choice of candidates and their ability to campaign.

2. EU action – key focus areas: EU action on human rights and democracy in Colombia focused on seven priority areas: (i) prevention and protection from violence against social leaders, environmental leaders, human rights defenders and unionists; (ii) gender equality: participation and empowerment of women; (iii) guaranteeing the rights of the LGBTI

community; (iv) guaranteeing the rights of indigenous and afro-descendant people and other vulnerable populations; (v) guaranteeing the rights of the migrant population; (vi) human rights in the context of peacebuilding and conflict prevention; and (vii) democratic and human rights empowerment for sustainable development.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: There are a number of sectoral bilateral dialogues between the EU and Colombia on topics such as human rights, security and defence, drugs, the environment and climate. The 14th edition of the EU-Colombia Human Rights Dialogue covered a wide range of topics, including the security of social, political and environmental leaders, HRDs and ex-combatants; peacebuilding and conflict prevention; migration; business and human rights; and cooperation on human rights in multilateral fora.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU supports human rights in Colombia with a wide range of instruments and projects, both regional and bilateral. Under the bilateral Multi-annual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2021-2027, peace projects aim to address the root causes of armed violence and poverty in Colombia, focusing on reintegration of former combatants, socio-economic integration of migrants, combating gender based violence and continuing support to the Special Jurisdictions for Peace. These priorities were allocated EUR 38 million of the total funding available for 2021-2024 (50.6%). Environmental projects, in areas such as climate change, biodiversity, deforestation, boosting green rural development and sustainable development, were allocated EUR 23 million (30.6%).
Through Human Rights and Democracy and Civil Society Organisations thematic programmes, the EU has provided vital support to the guarantee and protection of human rights in particular of social leaders and persons qualified as HRDs. Projects amounting to an overall EUR 8.2 million in 2023, aimed at monitoring the situation of violence in the regions, building HRDs' protection and self-protection capacities, at individual and collective level, providing access to justice, and supporting the adoption of an efficient and effective public policy guaranteeing the individual and collective rights of HRDs and social leaders. Together with the OHCHR's country office, the EU has continued strengthening institutional support to the Ombudsman's Office, particularly its ability to follow up on its early warnings. The project also developed assessments and important recommendations related to the situation of civil servants carrying out human rights work, and the state of play on judicial sentences in cases of violence against HRDs. It also provided recommendations to state institutions in the reform of the public policy on protection and security guarantees, currently under revision. Through EU emergency grants and national mechanisms, the EU Delegation and Member States have ensured the provision of individual and collective emergency support to several HRDs and organisations facing imminent threats. Public diplomacy, including visible presence and support to HRDs and communities in their territories of origin, has also proven a very effective tool, including through the #DefendamosLaVida campaign that brings together the EU Delegation and all EUMS Embassies as well as Norway and Switzerland.
EU provided judicial and psychosocial accompaniment to women victims of the armed conflict to access the Special Jurisdiction for Peace and promoted participation of women and their organisations in the development of a National Action Plan under the Resolution 1325. In the lead up to the local and regional elections in October 2023, the EU Delegation implemented a series of activities to promote political participation of women, and to dispel stereotypes against participation of women in politics and violence against women candidates.

In the run-up to the local and regional elections in October 2023, the EU supported local citizen electoral observation efforts, in alliance with Misión de Observación Electoral, the largest Colombian CSO platform engaged in election observation in the country.

5. Multilateral context: The EU works very closely with the UN in Colombia in the promotion and protection of human rights, particularly the OHCHR. The EU also has a lot of interaction with the Mission to Support the Peace Process of the Organisation of American States (MAPP/OEA), given its central role in the peace process, particularly in the negotiations with FARC-dissident group Estado Mayor Central.

Colombia's voting patterns in multilateral fora generally align with the EU, particularly in the area of human rights.

Republic of Costa Rica

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Costa Rica has a long democratic tradition and has long represented an example in Central America in terms of political stability and a strong human rights record. However, challenges continue to persist despite an improved economic situation illustrated by deflation, lowest unemployment in 10 years (7,7%) and a slightly decreased poverty rate (21,8%).

Press freedom and hate speech, migration, gender violence as well as rights of indigenous people and of the LGBTI community were the main challenges in 2023. Costa Rica fell 15 places in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Frontiers (RSF) losing its position as the best country on the American continent on press freedom. Online hate speech increased by 110% over the previous year.

The number of migrants increased by 133% in 2023 with 530.000 migrants entering Costa Rica. This triggered the Government to declare state of emergency on migration issues in September 2023 and announce deportations of migrants if law and order are not respected. The migrant population continues to represent 11% of the total population and Costa Rica is the third country in the world as regards the number of refugee seekers – 300 000 until now (85% of them Nicaraguans), increasing from 2022. Together with Panama, Costa Rica established orderly migration flows to alleviate pressures from record numbers crossing the Darien Gap and to curb human trafficking.

Gender discrimination remains an issue and 2023 was the year with most female homicides (over 800). In the area of environment, the Escazú Agreement was archived without ratification in February 2023. The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment reiterated his disappointment about Costa Rica's shift away from ecological leadership. Against this background, insecurity has in the meantime come to the forefront as a main concern Costa Rica, compounded by the lowest social expenditure in the last five years with implications also on health and education.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU action in Costa Rica continues to focus on the protection of the international human rights system and the upholding of the rights of vulnerable groups

(such as indigenous people and afro-communities, human rights defenders, migrants and refugees). The EU is a major donor working with UN agencies on inclusion of migrants and refugees in the country, including providing humanitarian response through protection and relief assistance.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In 2023, the EU Delegation continued its political and diplomatic work to enhance the dialogue and cooperation with Costa Rica in the field of human rights and democracy. Regular communication with exiled Nicaraguans in the country has also been maintained. In the field of gender equality, the EU has an implementation strategy for Costa Rica based on the Gender Action Plan III – 2021-2025. In 2023, the EU Delegation gave its annual Gender Equality Award to *Fundación Mujer* for their work on empowering women and providing them with the tools they need to become financially independent through social and economic development.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU continued to implement several cooperation projects with a strong human rights component, focusing on Protecting and Empowering Individuals, the first strand of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-24.

The EU Delegation published a joint call for proposals for the human rights and democracy, and civil society organisations instruments, resulting in five contracts which aim to (i) protect and empower populations in Costa Rica that have historically seen their rights violated, with a special focus on indigenous peoples and afro-communities; (ii) contribute to the social and economic integration of the forcibly displaced people and to simultaneously promote business and human rights, and finally to (iii) counter the abuse and misuse of digital technologies.

Furthermore, an EU-funded migration project implemented by AECID (EUR 2.5 million) has provided access to social security, employment and regularisation to thousands of beneficiaries. Project "*Arcoíris de Esperanza*" (EUR 2 million) has continued to support the socioeconomic inclusion of the population affected by displacement, additionally focusing on the resilience of host communities, including climate adaptation.

The EU Delegation has supported the protection and temporary relocation of Central American human rights defenders through the project "Shelter City Costa Rica", ensuring a safe recovery space and (if possible) their return to their countries of origin.

5. Multilateral context: Costa Rica formalised its seat in the Human Rights Council for the period 2023-2025 in February 2023. It is the second time that Costa Rica holds a seat in the Human Rights Council since its creation in 2006. As a country that abolished the army 73 years ago, it has continued to reiterate the necessity to halt all armed conflicts. Within different UN bodies, it has strongly advocated resolutions *inter alia* on nuclear disarmament and fight against statelessness. In ECOSOC, where it is also a member for the period 2023-2025, notably the co-chair of the Commission for Social Development, Costa Rica has been *inter alia* calling for the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights, European Court of Human Rights and African Court on Human and People's Rights held an International Forum in San Jose in May 2023.

Costa Rica hosted a Week of Democracy on the occasion of the Summit for Democracy 2023 with Commissioner Urpilainen delivering on 30 March a video message during the main event on promoting the role of youth in politics and democracy.

Costa Rica hosted RightsCon, 'the world´s largest event on human rights in the digital age', in June 2023 in San José.

At various occasions, Costa Rica joined statements with other founders of the Alliance for Development of Democracy (ADD) (Panama and the Dominican Republic) on different topics, such as requesting respect of democratic institutions in Ecuador in May or in Guatemala in December 2023.

Republic of Cuba

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Despite some advances, the situation of human rights in Cuba remained a matter of serious concern in 2023 given the persisting limitations on the effective exercise of some fundamental rights and freedoms - in particular, civil and political rights, including freedoms of expression, association, assembly, movement and information. The deep economic crisis has also impacted economic and social rights, and continues to fuel massive migration outflows. The US embargo and the maintenance of Cuba in the list of States Sponsors of Terrorism continued having a considerable impact, including on the standards of living of the population and on the much-needed modernization, comprising the emergent private sector. Restrictions to activities of local HRDs, journalists, academics, artists and critical voices constrain pluralism. Disproportionate prison sentences to peaceful protesters and pro-democracy activists (notably those involved in July 2021 events, still under detention), poor conditions in detention centres, reports of alleged harassment, arbitrary arrests, and travel-restrictions, remain challenges the authorities should address. Cuba is a one-party State and organised political opposition is not legal. Even though it has not been applied since 2003, the Cuban Criminal Code still retains the death penalty. Despite introducing some advances, this Code could be potentially used to further prevent citizens from expressing their dissent and to criminalise international funding of artists, journalists and activists, in particular those using social media.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Throughout 2023, the EU remained engaged in monitoring the situation and maintaining a constant critical but constructive dialogue with authorities on human rights defenders, under the umbrella of the key legal instrument at our disposal - the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA). In particular, HRDs were discussed at the highest political level in the context of the EU HRVP mission to Havana for the Joint Council. The parties publically agreed to pursue cooperation in concrete actions in a number of areas pertaining to HR.

A special focus was given to supporting the implementation of international law and the promotion of good governance, civil, political, economic, social, cultural rights, and the *de iure*

abolition of death penalty; fostering pluralism and dynamism of civil society; protecting and empowering local societal actors, human-rights defenders (HRDs), women and youth, intellectuals, journalists and private entrepreneurs and monitoring cases of alleged violations; and promoting equal opportunities and inclusiveness through public, cultural and economic diplomacy. The EU remained consistently engaged with human rights defenders and societal actors, including international NGOs, local CSOs under ACNU, and a wide range of additional independent actors, activists, analysts, journalists and private entrepreneurs inside Cuba. Exchanges included many families of protesters detained. All inputs have nurtured the constant dialogues with the authorities developed under the PDCA. The 4th dialogue on HR was a unique occasion to engage with Cuba on progress made and remaining challenges. Capacity-building activities also focused on digitalisation and other projects with the Justice Ministry. EUDEL also organised a wide-range of public diplomacy activities and public events on HR and fundamental freedoms, including rights of the children, rights of people with disabilities, women's rights and fight against gender-violence, LGBTI rights, cultural and artistic freedoms.

The EU is contributing to resilience and inclusiveness promoting HRD and fundamental freedoms of all Cubans. A special focus was given to good governance, the modernisation of the administration and decentralisation of decision-making, the achievement of the UN SDGs and women empowerment, non-discrimination and participation of vulnerable groups in public affairs. Economic modernisation remains a key objective and the EU is promoting the participation of MSMEs and new economic actors, especially the private sector, in modernisation processes. Socio-economic rights and support to the private sector and MSMEs, including town-hall discussions on the important role of MSMEs, entrepreneurs' fairs or round-tables in FIHAV. The EU has also been promoting biotechnologies, scientific research and advances by supporting ecological and energy transition, sustainability and disaster-preparedness. Creative industries and cultural and artistic freedom and heritage were also supported, in particular throughout the Month of Europe.

Improved access to the internet since 2018 has been a very positive development, fostering citizens' access to information and plurality stimulating debates on social media and access to international media content. A special focus was given to freedom of information online and offline. With increased use of digital services, there is also a risk of digital divide and data-privacy concerns. Polarisation and hate speech in social media are another worrying trend. EUDEL is supporting projects related to modernisation of the administration, capacity building on data privacy and simplification of the administrative burden for citizens´ services, trade and investment. The EU is supporting the further development and regulatory compliance of Cuba's bio-tech sector.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: HRD continued to be an integral part of the EU's policy towards Cuba based on 'constructive but critical engagement' under the PDCA. The EU continued to monitor closely the situation and gather input from a wide range of stakeholders (local and international, governmental and non-governmental). Reported violations and specific concerns were discussed with authorities. The EP adopted a resolution on 12 July 2023 in which it urged the Cuban authorities to put an end to the policy of repression. MEPs called for the immediate and unconditional release of all those detained solely for the exercise of their human rights, the withdrawal of abusive criminal charges and for exiles to be allowed to

return. The EU HRVP mission to Havana for the Joint Council and that of the EU SR for HR for the fourth Human Rights Dialogue represented extremely important opportunities for holding frank discussions.

4. EU financial engagement: EU financial engagement has continued to contribute, directly or indirectly, to human rights and democracy in Cuba. Specifically, in 2023, the EU and Cuba signed a EUR 67 million package to support a substantive modernisation process through legal and institutional adjustments aiming at facilitating transparency, efficiency of public services, decentralisation and macroeconomic stability, including a gradual opening-up of the economy to private participation. A targeted portfolio of EUR 3.8 million intends to promote gender equality through support to the implementation of the Cuban gender policy framework with focus on the reduction of all forms of gender-based violence.

5. Multilateral context: Cuba was re-elected to the HRC for the sixth time and it also underwent its 4th Universal Periodic Review. Cuba's Presidency of the G-77+China and the III EU-CELAC Summit provided additional opportunities for high-level engagement. The UNGA adopted on 2 November the Resolution against the US embargo with the unanimous support of all EU Member States (187 countries in total) calling for an end to the economic, commercial and financial embargo and against the inclusion of the Cuba in the list of States Sponsors of Terrorism for its impact on Cuban's livelihood.

Commonwealth of Dominica

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Dominica is a multiparty parliamentary democracy upholding civil liberties and fundamental freedoms. It operates under the rule of law with strong democratic institutions. In September 2023, Sylvanie Burton was elected President of Dominica. She is the first female and the first President of an indigenous community in the history of the country. The death penalty remains in place in Dominica, although it has not been recently applied. As in much of the Eastern Caribbean, the significant judicial backlog of cases remains a concern.

2. EU action – key focus areas: The EU key focus in Dominica follow the EU Action Plan on human rights. On LGBTI rights "buggery" and "indecency" provisions remain part of the criminal code of Dominica through the Sexual Offences Act 1998. Sentences range from 5 to 10 years' imprisonment. Child abuse remains a concern in Dominica. Incidents range from neglect and physical abuse to sexual abuse. As a common trend in the region, the procedures of reporting to the authorities are often too complicated and not victim-centric.
Concerning the rule of law,

Dominica's criminality score for 2023 is 2.63, ranking as 184th of 193 countries and 13th of 13 countries in the Caribbean. Courts are under-resourced and understaffed. The government is also working towards a new Juvenile Justice System reform. Dominica is home to the Kalinago, the largest indigenous population in the Eastern Caribbean, with a community of approximately 3500 persons. The government recognises their special status and assigns

management authority of the Kalinago territory to the local council, which has veto power over new infrastructure projects in the territory.

The death penalty continues to be legal in Dominica. Although the last execution took place in 1986, there has not been any political discussion or initiative towards abolishing death penalty in 2023. The latest Amnesty International report lists Dominica among the "Retentionist" countries, i.e. countries that retain the death penalty for ordinary crimes. The EU-funded PACE Justice Programme, launched in 2023, aims at helping tackle this challenge. Other crosscutting human rights challenges pertain mainly but not exclusively to LGBTI rights, domestic and gender-based violence, and child abuse.

The EU Delegation participated in the international "16 Days of Activism" campaign against gender-based Violence through a campaign on social media platforms. A survey on human rights priorities in the Caribbean was also launched on the Delegation social media platforms in January 2024, in view of the launch of the human rights and democracy regional call for proposals scheduled for early 2024.

3. EU Bilateral political engagement: Human Rights matters are regularly discussed in bilateral meetings with national authorities and civil society organisations. Currently there is no resident EU Member State in Dominica. France has an Embassy based in St. Lucia. Germany, The Netherlands and Spain cover the Eastern Caribbean from Trinidad and Tobago.

4. EU Financial Engagement: The European Union is financing the Caribbean LGBTI Initiative for Promoting Solidarity Outcomes – CALIPSO project – for the strengthening of LGBTI communities across OECS countries. The project inception meeting took place on 26 January 2023 at the EU Delegation in Barbados, with the two implementing partners – ECADE and Synergia for Initiatives for Human Rights. The Partnership of the Caribbean and the European Union on Justice (PACE Justice) Regional Programme aims at assisting efforts towards reducing the high number of criminal case backlogs. PACE Justice was launched in Barbados on 17 October 2023. The program will be implemented by UNDP over the next 48 months, with EU funding of EUR 9.75 million. The Spotlight Regional Caribbean – a global multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls – is the EU main programme supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. Concluded in 2023, it facilitated several initiatives in the Caribbean in the past 12 months.

5. Multilateral Context

N/A

Dominican Republic

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The Dominican Republic (DR) is a stable democracy and a pole of stability in the region. In its 2023 "Global State of Democracy Report", IDEA international highlighted significant improvements over the last 5 years, including in terms of citizen participation and rule of law. In its second electoral observation report, published end-2023, *Participación Ciudadana*, the local chapter of Transparency International, highlighted the political stability over the last three decades. Elections are held in line with the established period and benefit from ample participation of citizens and political parties. However, *Participación Ciudadana* also raised concerns on the length and costs of the pre-campaign period.

The Abinader administration is committed to making continuous progress in the area of human rights. The main policy framework is the National Human Rights Plan 2018-2024, which focuses on civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights (including environmental rights), vulnerable groups and the implementation of international standards. The country enjoys freedom of speech and journalists are able to operate freely, as reflected by the Dominican Republic's highest position in the Chapultepec Index on press freedom. Significant progress has been made in tackling corruption. This was also reflected in the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International, where the Dominican Republic is the only country in the region that has made significant progress since 2021. The Government also continued the implementation of the police reform, focusing among other on better training, raising salaries and benefits (including better health insurance) and regular evaluation of police staff. Curbing gender-based violence has been another government priority alongside with women's empowerment, both economically and politically. In 2023, femicides decreased by 12% compared to 2022, although remaining among the highest in the region (CEPAL). Efforts are also undertaken to improve prison conditions**,** which suffer from overcrowded facilities, high numbers of preventive prisoners, non-separation of men and women, and limited access to healthcare.

The Dominican Republic is heavily affected by the multidimensional crisis in neighbouring Haiti. With its 400 km land border, it is struggling to control irregular migration. Amid increased illegal migration, forced repatriations of Haitians have increased[35], with reports of arbitrary arrests, mistreatment of migrants in detention, and vulnerable Haitians being deported. At the same time, the Dominican Republic has worked towards the regularization of migrants, although this is a slow and complex process, particularly for the many who remain without documentation. The authorities announced a "National Pact", a comprehensive strategy that, among other, aims to improve border control, regulate migration and promote cross-border economic development.

2. EU action – key focus areas: In the area of human rights, the EU focused its actions mainly on the rights of specific vulnerable groups. The EU promotes women´s rights, including elimination of child marriage and gender-based violence. Furthermore, the EU contributes to

[35] According to the IOM, in 2023 over 200,000 people were forcibly deported: https://dtm.iom.int/node/23491 (to be noted that figures include multi-entries).

the elimination of all forms of discrimination, including against the LGBTI community, migrants and people with disabilities. Other actions focus on the protection of the rights of migrants, including safeguarding rights of deportees. Actions also target the rights of detainees and their re-insertion into society. As a crosscutting priority, the EU aims to strengthen civil society organisations and support human rights defenders. Finally, the EU will also support national observers during the 2024 elections.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued to monitor, promote and support human rights through dialogue and public diplomacy events. This includes the political dialogue in March that was opened by HRVP Borrell and the bilateral meetings with national and local authorities at the margins of the Euro-Latin Parliamentary Assembly in October. The European Parliament's Delegation for relations with the countries of Central America visit in May 2023 has also been an opportunity to visit the border with Haiti and exchange with local authorities and relevant actors in the field. The event "EU and Dominican Republic-natural partners", held at the Presidential Palace and in which more than 200 government officials, embassies, international organisations and civil society organisations participated, was also a prime occasion to highlight the shared values, including on human rights and democracy.

The EU also maintains an active engagement and dialogue with civil society organisations, including through the annual dialogue on the civil society roadmap. Close coordination and dialogue with UN agencies is also ensured.

The EU also sought to leverage the Economic Partnership Agreement to promote gender equality and decent working conditions. The annual EPA awards include, among others, two specific categories respectively for women entrepreneurs and fair trade.

4. EU financial engagement: All projects under the EIDHR and CSO-LA instruments, which amount to approximately EUR 12 million, incorporate the Human Rights-Based Approach and gender mainstreaming in all phases of the project cycle. Actions include capacity building of CSOs and Human Rights Defenders, the promotion of women's rights and fighting gender-based violence and improving youth rights, labour rights and environmental rights. The EU also funded a project on migration and social cohesion between the DR and Haiti. DG ECHO also provides EUR 0.5 million humanitarian assistance to people on the move on the Dominican border with Haiti, especially unaccompanied or separated children and their families, refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons (implemented by UNHCR and UNICEF).

5. Multilateral action: The EU and the Dominican Republic are like-minded partners in the area of human rights and democracy. Regular coordination is ensured in multilateral fora, including e.g. at the occasion of the UNGA Third Committee. The Dominican Republic was also elected as member of the UN Human Rights Council for the period 2024-2026, underscoring its commitment to strengthen multilateralism and the global rules-based framework.

Republic of Ecuador

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In mid-2023, Ecuador experienced heightened political turmoil stemming from the government's setbacks in a February referendum and local elections. Former president Lasso responded to the threat of a political trial by dissolving the National Assembly and calling for early general elections in August. The campaign period was marked by the assassination of a presidential candidate. Daniel Noboa won the October 15 run-off election with a campaign focussed on security and job creation.

In 2023, the human rights situation in Ecuador deteriorated mainly due to the sharp increase of violence linked to organized crime. The declaration of a "state of emergency" by the government to combat criminal organisations highlights the pressing need to address this issue. Ecuador also faces significant human rights challenges such as gender-based violence and development disparities. Additionally, safeguarding environmental defenders and journalists remains crucial.

Ecuador has consistently expressed its willingness and commitment to protecting and promoting human rights. In fact, in 2021, Ecuador made history by becoming the first and only country in the world to ratify all 27 UN human rights treaties.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU priorities are focused on (i) protecting and empowering individuals; (ii) building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies; (iii) promoting a global system for human rights and democracy; (iv) new technologies: harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges; and (v) delivering by working together.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The third Human Rights Dialogue with Ecuador took place on 25 January, 2023. The EU supported the dialogue between the Government and the indigenous organisations, mediated by the Episcopal Conference. In the context of the widespread increase of violence, the EU has been supporting Ecuador to address its security challenges, through regional programmes aimed at combating transnational organised crime (ELPacCTO, Copolad, Eurofront, Seacop, etc.), as well as bilateral cooperation activities, such as the emergency support for prisons security in Ecuador.

4. EU financial engagement: In September 2022, the EU launched a new Penitentiary Reform Project, making a EUR 2.5 million contribution. With a duration of 18 months, the project will focus on working on three specific detention centres, seeking to restore order in the prison facilities and provide training to prison guards to improve the quality of prison management. In all activities proposed by the project, respect for human rights is a central pillar. It views the provision of humane conditions as a primary guarantor for peace and stability while also serving as a preventive measure against unrest and crisis.

The EU is also permanently supporting dialogue between indigenous groups and the government through two specific projects. One EIDHR project, with a budget of EUR 1 million, is to be implemented by the GIZ. The second project, financed by FPI with a budget of EUR 1.5 million, aims to enhance the dialogue capacity of indigenous groups on extractive issues.

5. Multilateral context: President Noboa played a key role in facilitating Ecuador's active participation in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) discussion on transnational crime held on December 7, 2023. Additional engagement during Ecuador's UNSC presidency in December 2023, along with regular communication between delegations, streamlined the timely exchange of information.

Ecuador successfully completed its fourth Universal Periodic Review at the Human Rights Council (HRC) in November 2022 (the outcome document was published in March 2023). While acknowledging positive achievements in education and indigenous community protection, the review also raised concerns about gender-based violence, transnational crime, infant malnutrition, and the rights of individuals in custody. Moreover, as a UN Human Rights Council observer state, Ecuador expressed concerns about human rights violations in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Ukraine, and Afghanistan, aligning with EU positions.

In 2022, Ecuador committed to a "Framework of Cooperation for Sustainable Development" with the UN, focusing on human rights, rule of law, gender equality, and environmental sustainability projects for 2022-2026.

Republic of El Salvador

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: While security dramatically improved in El Salvador, the continuation of the State of Exception, mass detentions and lack of due process place undue pressures on the rule of law and human rights. 2023 saw a continued drop in homicide numbers (-64% compared to 2022) reaching a rate of 3 assassinations per 100,000 citizens. Official figures report that disappearances and femicides also fell dramatically (respectively from 6.8 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2021 to 2 in 2023, and from 1.7 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019 to 0.4 in 2023) as well as extortion and other criminal activities by street gangs.

At the same time, 2023 was marked by the further extension of the State of Exception for 21 consecutive months. However, some of its legal dispositions such as the suspension of freedom of association and assembly were only in vigour for a few months in 2022. Human rights organisations witness a climate of intimidation and of restriction of civic space supported by discourses of stigmatisation dismissing the promotion of human rights as the defence of criminals. The national press association shares this analysis and points to surveillance of journalists, harassment - mostly online - often encouraged by high-level officials and a general lack of access to official information. The repeal at end 2023 of dispositions of a security law (so called “gag Law”), that generated fear for possible use to silence reporting on gang issues, was a welcome signal but the climate of tension within CSOs and the press remained throughout the year leading to the 2024 election.

Under the State of Exception, more than 74,000 persons were detained for their membership or supposed connections with gangs. Use of anonymous denunciation, and quotas and premiums for arrests have been reported. These practices, the possibility to detain without a judge’s warrant as granted by the State of Exception and the backlog in the judiciary’s

proceedings resulted in important lack of due process, human rights abuses and prolonged provisional detention exceeding legal norms. Official figures state that over 7,000 persons have been incarcerated, some pending judgment. Human rights organisations have documented cases of ill treatment and torture by security forces and lack of medical attention. Violence against women, minors and LGBTI persons were also denounced during arrest and in detention. Families of detained persons remain without information. Over 200 persons died while in detention. Reforms of the law on organised crime increased penalties for gang leaders and authorised the temporary holding of trials of up to 900 defendants within the same criminal structure. These mass trials have been criticised for infringing individual's presumption of innocence. A mega jail with the capacity to receive 40,000 inmates was inaugurated on 31 January 2023.

El Salvador continues to suffer from high socioeconomic and gender inequity. As regards social and economic indicators, according to the World Bank, poverty rates have returned to pre-pandemic figures and - according to the World Food Programme - El Salvador has made improvements as regards food security and nutrition in recent years. However, challenges persist. As regards violence against women, the high number of femicides saw a steep reduction in official numbers from 113 femicides in 2019 to 63 in 2022 and 27 in 2023. El Salvador criminalises all forms of abortion, even in the case of rape or medical emergencies. While some have been released or granted alternative measures, cases of women in detention following obstetric emergencies remain of concern. The number of adolescent births, while it has decreased in recent years, remains high (50 per 1000 girls aged 15-19, UNFPA).

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU supports the policies and programmes of the justice and security sectors that are focused on respect for human rights through human rights and democracy programme projects. This enabled for instance the EU Delegation to contribute to addressing humanitarian issues in juvenile detention centres and work on violence prevention with the ministry of education. In regards to building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies, the EU Delegation launched campaigns, awareness-raising and independent opinion-forming initiatives. A series of consultations were organised with civil society organisations as part of the EU roadmap for engagement with civil society. In the focus area of promoting a global system for human rights and democracy**:** the EU supported projects in the fields of freedom of expression and transparency. The EU designed a programme to promote inclusive, independent and transparent electoral processes, and to combat misinformation and hate speech in traditional and social media.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The Delegation engages with relevant authorities on human rights and democracy via public and traditional diplomatic engagement to underline the importance of due process and rule of law to ensure the sustainability of security for all. The Delegation maintains an effective political dialogue with the international donor community and organised civil society, as part of its efforts to contribute to democracy and strengthen the rule of law and respect for human rights. The aim is to promote civil society governance for the prevention, restitution of rights and prohibition of torture and ill-treatment of women, young people and the LGBTI population. The first EU/El Salvador bilateral dialogue based on the Memorandum of Understanding signed in margin of the 2023 EU-CELAC summit was held in October 2023.

4. EU financial engagement: Various projects have been financed and promoted by the EU, seeking to promote peace (such as the EUR 0.5 million "Building Peace" project), democracy, security and good governance (with the EUR 0. 5 million project "Citizens pushing for good governance of security policies in the change of government"), or the fight against gender-based violence (through the EUR 0.5 million project "Strategy of citizen oversight and institutional strengthening for a gender-based security policy that reduces social vulnerability to violence").

5. Multilateral context: In 2018, El Salvador was selected as one of five Latin American countries in which the Spotlight initiative would be implemented to combat femicide. Implementation by UN agencies (UNFPA, UNWomen, UNICEF and UNDP) on the ground began in 2019. The country programme has been allocated USD 10 million. The second phase of the Spotlight initiative was implemented from December 2021 to March 2023.

At the 111th International Labour Conference and Committee on the Application of Standards, the EU generally commended El Salvador for taking steps to comply with Convention N°144, on Higher Labour Council (CST) for 2021-2023. At the same time, the ILO has expressed concerns on the lack of interest of the Ministry of Labour to promote the social dialogue and to renew union credentials of some organisations and asked the government to take action

El Salvador was condemned by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2021 for a criminalising a case of obstetric emergency. The hearing for Beatriz and other vs. El Salvador case took place in March and April 2023. The case concerns the absolute prohibition of abortion in the Americas and the need to strengthen the protection of women's sexual and reproductive rights. The ruling will most likely determine reparation measures for Beatriz's family and structural measures sexual and reproductive health.

Grenada

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Grenada is a multiparty parliamentary democracy upholding civil liberties and fundamental freedoms. It operates under the rule of law with strong democratic institutions. The death penalty remains in place in Grenada, although it has not been recently applied. As in much of the Eastern Caribbean, the significant judicial backlog of cases remains a concern. Other crosscutting human rights challenges pertain mainly but not exclusively to LGBTI rights, domestic and gender-based violence and child abuse.

2. EU action – key focus areas: In Grenada are illegal and punishable by 5 to 10 years in prison according to outdated “buggery” laws in the Criminal Code of 1987. The existence of such laws, even if not enforced, creates an environment conducive to discrimination. In 2019, the civil society group ECADE launched a litigation challenging the constitutionality of “buggery” laws in Grenada. To date, no judgment has been rendered.

Incidents of gender-based violence, domestic violence and violence against LGBTI persons remain a concern in Grenada. There is thought to be significant underreporting of such offences, attributed to social stigma and community pressure, victim blaming, or fear of

reprisal. According to the latest data by the World Bank, on average 1 in 3 women is subject to gender-based violence in Grenada. Child abuse remains a challenge in Grenada. Incidents range from neglect and physical abuse to sexual abuse. As a common trend in the region, the procedures of reporting to the authorities are often too complicated and not victim-centric. According to the Spotlight Initiative's data, 1 in 5 Grenadian women have been sexually abused during childhood.

Grenada's criminality score is 2.93, ranking as 179th of 193 countries and 12th of 13 countries in the Caribbean. Its judicial system is slow, leading to significant case backlogs. Suspected offenders are usually bailed for several years pending trials. Most prisons are overcrowded and have a high rate of pre-trial detention.

The death penalty is still legal in Grenada. Although the last execution took place in 1978, there has not been any political discussion or initiative towards abolishing death penalty in 2023. The 2023 report by Amnesty International on the death penalty lists Grenada among the countries that are "Abolitionists in Practice", i.e. they have not executed anyone in the past 10 years and are believed to have a policy or established practice of not carrying out executions.

3. EU Bilateral political engagement: Human Rights matters are regularly discussed in bilateral meetings with national authorities and civil society organisations. Currently there is no resident EU Member State in Grenada. France has an Embassy based in St. Lucia. Germany, The Netherlands and Spain cover the Eastern Caribbean from Trinidad and Tobago.

4. EU Financial Engagement: The European Union is financing the Caribbean LGBTI Initiative for Promoting Solidarity Outcomes – CALIPSO project – for the strengthening of LGBTI communities across OECS countries. The project inception meeting took place on 26 January 2023 at the EU Delegation in Barbados, with the two implementing partners – ECADE and Synergia for Initiatives for Human Rights.

The Spotlight Regional Caribbean – a global multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls – is the EU main programme supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. Concluded in 2023, it facilitated several initiatives in the Caribbean in the past 12 months.

5. Multilateral Context

N/A

Republic of Guatemala

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Guatemala continued to face serious systemic and structural challenges to the effective implementation of its human rights commitments. 2023 was marked by the electoral process, observed by an EU Election Observation Mission [36] at the invitation of the Guatemalan authorities, and a tense period of transition. As reported by the EU EOM, the 2023 general elections in Guatemala took place in a politically tense environment, with citizens showing a remarkable resilience and commitment to defend democracy despite a limited separation of powers, severe restrictions on the freedoms of expression and of the press, misuse of politically captured institutions for electoral purposes and constant attacks on the rule of law. The period following the elections was marred with abuse of judicial procedures intending to overturn the election results and attempts to obstruct the transition of power. Thousands of Guatemalans participated in nationwide demonstrations calling for respect of the election results as well as the resignation of the Attorney General. Notably indigenous authorities, representatives and organisations have been prominent actors in support of the integrity of the electoral process, publicly representing the historically marginalised population.

There are serious concerns about the rule of law and judicial independence. During the reporting period, at least 20 justice operators, including judges, prosecutors, and lawyers, were forced to leave the country following intimidation and criminal accusations.
Structural challenges as regards social and economic rights persist, in particular for vulnerable groups. The World Bank estimated that in 2023, 55.2% of the Guatemalan population lived in poverty. According to UNDP, Guatemala's loss in the human Development Index due to inequality is 26.6%.[37] Chronic malnutrition rates are highly concerning. Almost half of the children under five are affected by chronic malnutrition. Almost 60% of chronically malnourished children are children of women who are or were teenage mothers.

Violence against women and girls, including femicide, remains an alarming issue. In terms of political participation and representation, like the indigenous population, women remain heavily underrepresented. In the 2023 general elections, 33 women were elected as members of Congress, out of 160 seats. At municipal level, 12 women were elected as mayors, out of 340 municipalities (3.5%). LGBTI persons continue to face stigma, discrimination and threats. There is currently no legal nor regulatory framework in place for the protection of LGBTI rights. Human rights defenders continued to face aggressions including criminal persecution, harassment, intimidation, threats and violence. 2023 was particularly violent year for journalists. According to the Association of Guatemalan Journalists, there were ca. 180 attacks including three murders. More than 25 journalists or social communicators have left the country following criminalisation and intimidation. Investigative newspaper El Periódico, ceased operations in May 2023 after suffering continued attacks. Its President José Rubén Zamora remains in detention since 2022.

[36] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EU%20EOM%20GT%202023%20FINAL%20REPORT%20ENGLISH_0.pdf.
[37] https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/GTM.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Key focus areas of EU action include (i) fostering a comprehensive agenda to promote inclusive Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; (ii) supporting the Rule of Law, access to justice, inclusive and effective administration of justice; (iii) enhancing the protection mechanisms for human rights defenders; (iv) strengthening the implementation of legal frameworks to prevent and sanction all forms of violence against women and gender based violence; (v) strengthening the mechanisms of child protection against all forms of violence; and (vi) promoting full implementation of international conventions and ratification of pending conventions to reinforce the equity and development of vulnerable groups.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: As regards the electoral process and EU support to democracy, the High Representative decided to deploy an EU Election Observation Mission to assess the entire electoral process and issue recommendations. In close coordination with the EOM, the EU Delegation maintained a regular dialogue with all the key stakeholders in the electoral process. Following persistent attempts to undermine the election outcome, the EU initiated the process for the adoption of a dedicated framework for restrictive measures, adopted on 12 January 2024.[38] The EU Delegation maintains regular dialogue and meetings with civil society organisations, human rights defenders and indigenous authorities. The EU hosts the EU Filter group, a mechanism to implement the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders with the Members States and international partners, with the support of the OHCHR office in Guatemala. Moreover, the EU supports implementation of local measures for the protection of human rights defenders and has continued assistance to the relevant Guatemalan authorities to this end.

4. EU financial engagement: The overarching goal of the bilateral Multi-annual Indicative Programme for Guatemala (MIP) 2021-2027 (EUR 141 million) is to reduce inequalities by improving living standards of the rural population, with a focus on youth, women and indigenous peoples. It specifically seeks to address the main problems affecting rural areas: lack of economic opportunities, environmental degradation and exploitation of natural resources and low access to basic public services. The thematic Human Rights and Democracy Programme (EUR 1.5 million) has focused on the protection of human rights defenders, freedom of expression and of association, the fight against impunity, and access to justice for the most vulnerable groups. The thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) addresses strategic needs of local civil society and supports the implementation of the EU Roadmap for engagement with CSOs (EUR 3.9 million).

5. Multilateral context: Guatemala underwent a 4th Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in the UN Human Rights Council in January 2023. The government rejected 40% of the 207 recommendations received, notably related to judicial independence and attacks against justice officials, the protection of human rights defenders, civic space, LGBTI rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights and the decriminalisation of abortion, and Indigenous Peoples' rights to land and to free, prior and informed consent. Guatemala does not have a clear

[38] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/01/12/guatemala-council-establishes-dedicated-framework-of-restrictive-measures-in-support-of-democracy/.

procedure and structure to follow up on the implementation of UPR or other human rights bodies' recommendations.

Cooperative Republic of Guyana

1. Overview of the human rights and democratic situation: Guyana is a parliamentary democracy. The democratic process and rule of law suffered a major crisis in 2020, following the general elections, which were marked by attempts of electoral fraud and a protracted legal battle. With strong support from a. o. the EU, the process was completed five months later, and credible election results were ultimately announced, leading to a democratic and largely peaceful transition of power.

Guyana's overall human rights track record is broadly positive. Persistent human rights challenges in 2023 continued to include women's rights, gender-based and domestic violence (including femicide), child abuse and corporal punishment, homophobia and trafficking in human beings. Conservative religious lobby groups remain successful in denying rights to LGBTI persons. Several aspects of the country's legal framework continue to stymie human rights, such as the Death Penalty Law and the Criminal Offences Act, prohibiting adult same-sex relations between men. Harsh prison conditions, lengthy pre-trial detention, judicial backlog and police violence against detainees also form part of the pervasive institutional weaknesses. However, there is recognition by the authorities that these weaknesses have to be addressed, and action is being taken.

While the death penalty remains in the penal code, there is a de facto moratorium since 1997. No death sentences were handed down since then, but there are still prisoners on death row. Guyana has ratified most, but not all of the main international human rights treaties. The exceptions are the Optional protocol of the Convention against Torture, the Convention against Enforced Disappearances, and the Protocol on the Death Penalty.

Guyana is a pioneer in indigenous peoples' rights, for example with land rights. However, some allege that legal loopholes place indigenous peoples at a disadvantage when it comes to land rights and mining encumbrances. The Government has allocated additional financial resources to address economic poverty and the struggling village economies, which negatively affect indigenous people's livelihoods.

2. EU action – key focus areas: The EU prioritises its action in the areas of women's rights and the rights of the child, including domestic violence; the fight against homophobia; good governance; electoral reform; the livelihood of people living in and off the forest; death penalty; and the strengthening of the role of the civil society.

3. EU bilateral political engagement*:* The EU continued to engage in human rights and democracy discussions with Guyana in various settings and many important initiatives took place in 2023. The EU human rights priorities were discussed with Guyanese authorities during the visit of the European External Action Service's Deputy Director General, H. König, in March 2023 and the visit of Commission Executive Vice President, F. Timmermans in June 2023, as well as during the EU Election Follow-up Mission (EFM) deployed to Guyana in May 2023,

following the Election Observation Mission (EOM) that was deployed to Guyana for the 2020 general elections.

The EFM was deployed to Guyana from 7 May to 1 June 2023, to assess the progress made in electoral reform and the implementation status of the 2020 EU EOM's 26 recommendations. The EFM met a wide range of Guyanese electoral stakeholders, including members of the Government, the Guyana Elections Commission, National Assembly members, and representatives of political parties and civil society. The roundtable with 28 electoral stakeholders, gave an opportunity to discuss the current status of electoral reform and the implementation of recommendations proposed by the EU EOM in 2020. It was assessed by the mission that two of eight priority recommendations had been implemented in full and two other priority recommendations were underway. Unfortunately, nineteen recommendations remain without any significant progress.

The EU Delegation launched a Human Rights Prize in 2017. The prize is awarded to people in Guyana who make an exceptional contribution to the promotion of human rights. The awarding ceremony also provides for an excellent opportunity for the Delegation to speak about Human Rights issues. In 2023, the award was given to *Women across Differences* for their stellar work in empowering teenage mothers.

4. EU financial engagement*:* Under the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative, Guyana benefited from a EUR 4.5 million envelope for a 3-years period, with a focus on violence against women and girls. In 2023, the EU Delegation actively participated in several field missions, co-organised and participated in numerous events, and acted to raise visibility of the Spotlight Initiative, in both traditional media and social networks. The Initiative has produced significant results, namely a dedicated national 24 hours gender-based violence (GBV) hotline service; and a specialised GBV course "Resilience against and Disruption of Gender-Based Violence" led by the University of Guyana, which targeted an initial 60+ students (free of cost). This course was created to build institutional capacity and establish specialized training. Moreover, the new Family Violence Bill was drafted in 2022 and discussed at Cabinet level in 2023. It will be presented to Parliament in 2024. The draft Harassment Bill is under review and will be issued for consultations in 2024.
Children's rights are central to EU thematic funding. There were two ongoing grant contracts addressing children's rights issues, implemented by ChildLink in 2023. The One Thousand Boys Project focused on the protection of boys from child sexual abuse. Another project seeks to strengthen policy, practices and procedures to improve services for 3000 children in conflict with the law. The Diversion and Integration Policy was drafted within the project, which currently is at the level of the Minister of Home Affairs for approval**.** The organisation has proven to be a driving force behind policy reform and implementation in Guyana.

5. Multilateral context: Guyana is a like-minded country that shares with the EU a strong belief in upholding the multilateral system and voting for UN resolutions that are important for the EU. Guyana was elected as a non-permanent member to the UN Security Council as of January 2024. In its Universal Periodic Review statement at the UN Human Rights Council Working Group on 5 October 2020, Guyana reiterated its commitment to implement another round of constitutional reform and to strengthen legislation to enhance protection for all human rights,

as well as electoral reform. The national consultative constitutional reform process was supposed to commence in 2021 and examine all areas of the Constitution including human rights, but has not yet started. The electoral reform process was launched in 2021 and some reforms have taken place since then.

Republic of Haiti

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: During 2023, the human rights situation in Haiti continued to deteriorate. In particular, the right to life and to physical integrity, socio-economic rights, the rule of law and democracy in general, significantly worsened, primarily due to kidnappings, assassinations, and sexual violence committed by armed gangs as well as to the state's incapacity to address the security problem.

During 2023, BINUH documented over 8,400 direct victims of gang violence, including people killed, injured and kidnapped, an increase of 122 per cent as compared to 2022. Port-au-Prince accounted for over 80 per cent of killings and injuries, violence by criminal groups continued to spread in the metropolitan area of the capital as well as in the Artibonite department, and in communes located at the southern entrance to the capital. Criminal groups continued to use sexual violence in attacks on people living in rival neighbourhoods.

The recruitment of children by gangs remains another major concern. The *phenomenon Bwa Kale*, a community-based, self-defence groups against the gangs, contributed to exacerbate the situation with numerous lynching and extrajudicial executions.

The conditions of prisoners in Haiti do not comply with minimal human dignity requirements; 130 prisoners died during 2023 due to malnutrition and corresponding diseases. 83% of prisoners have not received a trial. The Project with *IMED* (*Mobile Institute for democratic education*) was able to free around 300 of these prisoners in 2023, which can be considered a considerable success, after years of inconclusive attempts from others projects and organisations.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU key focus areas in 2023 were in line with the five strands of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-24. In relation to the policy area of protecting and empowering individuals, the EU engaged in a project in cooperation with the organisation *Mobile Institute for Democratic Education*. This initiative contributed to the release of several detainees held in prolonged pre-trial detention in 2023 and their social reintegration. Moreover, projects to support the fight against gender-based violence were initiated in different parts of the country, but mainly in Port-au-Prince. The EU signed a contribution agreement with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human rights. This action established "judicial hubs" for the legal pursuit of serious financial crimes. It includes an "incubation and support" component for new human rights defenders in the provinces and addresses topics such as land conflicts and non-judicial conflict resolution mechanisms. The EU delegation has launched two projects on the electoral cycle that will focus on forming a non-partisan societal alliance in view of elections and exploring innovative technical solutions to enhance credibility and inclusivity of elections with the policy goals of furthering resilient, inclusive and democratic societies. In order to promote a global system for human rights and democracy, the

The Delegation is implementing the “Project to support the integration of young people and the reduction of community violence” (EUR 4 million), in the metropolitan area, and is launching a “Pilot program for emerging civil society initiatives” (EUR 6.2 million) in rural areas, both aimed at supporting small-scale civil society initiatives with a focus on economic and social activities.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The political instability continued in 2023 and did not allow for a political dialogue with the Haitian government, including on human rights. Nevertheless, the Delegation maintained and fostered contacts with various sectors of the Haitian civil society, including organising discussions with a broad spectrum of actors from the civil society on the security situation and the upcoming deployment of a Multinational Security Support mission to Haiti, discussions on human rights, possible options to end the crisis and discussion on how to reduce insecurity. Formal sectoral dialogues did not take place in 2023 due to a temporal evacuation of the Delegation as well as the deteriorating security situation. The Delegation conducted however regular bilateral formal and informal dialogues with representatives of the LGBTI community, women, and farmer associations.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU contributed EUR 0.4 million for a targeted project aimed at the release of detainees in prolonged pre-trial detention and supporting their social reintegration (*Mobile Institute for Democratic Education*). Financial support for OHCHR's habeas corpus logistic activities was provided, which deliver humanitarian aid in prisons and financially support the social reintegration activities of the *IMED* project. The EU financed projects to combat sexual violence against women in the capital (*Association volontaire pour le service international*, EUR 0.4 million), contributed to the Spotlight Initiative for a multi-sectorial response to gender-based violence (EUR 14 million), and to other projects against gender based violence (*Christian Aid*, EUR 0.66 million). The EU provided financial support to a project aimed at reinforcing women’s organisations networks in the Northeast for victims of violence rights and protection (EUR 0.38 million), and to an initiative with the goal of improving autonomy of young women and girls by changing norms at community level and to reinforce their economic capacity (*Beyond Borders*, EUR 0.6 million). EUR 4 million were allocated to a project to support the integration of youth and reduce community violence, aiming to support socio-economic rights through income generation and other forms of empowerment for disadvantaged urban youth in Port-au-Prince, thus reducing community violence (*Goupe de recherche et d’échange technologique*).

A contribution agreement for the OHCHR project "Support to judicial hubs, non-formal judicial mechanisms, and incubation and support for human rights defenders" was signed (EUR 2.3 million) as well as for the "Basket Fund for support to the National police," implemented by UNDP and UNODC (EUR 3 million). Moreover, the EU contributed to two projects to support civil society organisations in the preparation of elections through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, namely the "Project of Civil Society Organisations in Haiti to Support Elections – Pwojè OSC Ayiti pou Kore Eleksyon” (*Volontariat pour le development d’Haiti*), and the "Program to Support Transparency, Efficiency, and Credibility of Electoral Processes in Haiti: Konbit pou bon jan Demokrasi" (*Medialternatif/Progetto Mondo/Fondation Je Klere*).

5. Multilateral context: On 2 October 2023, the UNSC authorized the deployment of a Multinational Security Support mission to Haiti. There are different opinions on the mission within Haitian society. Respect for and compliance with human rights will be a key element for the mission to observe - human rights violations must be avoided. The EU might consider supporting the independent monitoring mechanisms that should be established for accountability purposes. Haiti currently does not dispose of a mechanism that specifically protects human rights defenders related to violations incurred by an international mission.

Republic of Honduras

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Honduras continues to face many deeply rooted and structural challenges related to civil, political, social and economic rights. The situation of vulnerable groups including women and girls, LGBTI persons, indigenous peoples, journalists, and human rights defenders remains of serious concern, and has deteriorated in some aspects.

The OHCHR reported at least 15 murders of human rights defenders, two journalists, 15 cisgender men and two transgender women in 2023. *Cattrachas* on the other hand, a leading Honduran LGBTI organisation, registered 40 homophobic or transphobic killings from January through October 2023. According to United Nations data, the impunity rate in Honduras continues to exceed 90%, and more than 97% of crimes against human rights defenders go unpunished. According to the *Centro de derechos de Mujeres*, a leading women´s civil society organisation in Honduras, at least 402 women were killed in 2023 and in the two first weeks of January 2024, making Honduras the most dangerous country for women in Latin America

Criticism towards the Government has been mounting, as - despite electoral commitments to uphold human rights - no sound public policies have been tabled yet**,** notably in defence of gender equality and to strengthen the national HRD protection mechanism. 95% of the mechanism´s budget has been used for the protection of only seven individuals, thereby underlying stark underfunding and mismanagement leading to the failure of the mechanism. Such criticism is ill-tolerated, with dissenting voices defamed as pertaining to lobbies emanating from the previous government. Faced with a continuously shrinking civic space, a great number of civil society organisations prefer to remain silent due to fear of reprisals, complacency, or some cases – co-optation. The declared state of emergency, established as a measure against violence and extortion, has yet to bear significant results while the impact on human rights is an additional cause for concern in this respect. The *Escazú agreement*, designed to protect biodiversity and environmental defenders in Latin America and the Caribbean, has yet to be ratified despite of the political commitment expressed by the Government.

A three+ months-long political crisis at Congress impeded the passing of new laws while the Human Rights Ministry has been marred with both internal and external conflicts with other stakeholders, allegations of harassment and abuse of power, thereby bringing some to discredit to the Institution. The setting up of an International Commission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (CICIH), one of the flagship electoral promises in the Government Plan to refund Honduras, remains pending.

2. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU has taken a prominent role in advocating for reforms, including electoral reforms, aimed to address corruption. EU priorities include strengthening civil society, enhancing rule of law and fight against impunity and corruption, and protection of HRDs, gender equality, LGBTI persons and other vulnerable groups. The European Union and the Member States present in the country (France, Germany and Spain) continue their efforts to support human rights defenders by maintaining open channels of communication with civil society, in a structured manner and in close collaboration with the United Nations broadly and the OHCHR in particular.

On social media, the EU Delegation and Member States regularly react on the human rights situation in Honduras and on cases of particular concern. At the occasion of the International Day of Human Rights, the European Union and its Member States (DE, ES & FR) awarded the "EUROPA Award for Human Rights 2023" to *Centro de Derechos de las Mujeres,* in recognition of its 30 plus years of action and defence of women's rights. Other projects also brought significant results in the field of elections and civic participation with a view to strengthen the electoral institutions in line with the 2021 EU Electoral Observation Mission's (EOM) recommendations.

During 2023, Honduras received one high-level visit from the European Union regarding the Electoral Follow-up Mission to the EOM that took place in 2021. They held meetings with members of the government, political parties, electoral institutions and civil society organisations (CSO). Only 2 of the 23 recommendations made have been considered partially implemented; 10 recommendations showed no progress.

3. EU action - key focus areas / EU financial engagement: In 2023, the European Union in Honduras implemented 20 programmes and projects for an amount of approximately EUR 42 million in line with the current Strategy on Human Rights and Democracy of the EU, of which 9 projects have finalised and 5 new projects have started in the course of 2023. The EU's main programme on human rights *ProDerechos*, supports the consolidation of a human rights system. The programme provides assistance for capacity building of human rights institutions and business associations and to improve civil society's technical capacities to establish space for dialogue with the State and the private sector. In 2023, the programme supported in particular the Human Rights Ministry in the preparation of a new Human Rights Strategy, the former 2012-2022 strategy expired with a worrying 96% rate of non-implementation.

Other projects concluded in 2023 included capacity building of political parties to become more transparent, inclusive and respectful of democratic values; strengthening of the electoral institutions in line with the EOM recommendations; increasing inclusion of under-represented groups in the electoral process; and ensuring CSO participation in the fight against corruption to improve transparency and freedom of expression with the aim of fostering independent media. A new large-scale programme to support the implementation of the EOM recommendations is scheduled to start in the first semester of 2024.

Additionally, 5 new projects from the CSO and Human Rights thematic programmes, started in 2023. These aim to strengthen and create adequate conditions for organised Honduran civil society, as essential actors in promoting sustainable and inclusive socioeconomic development, following a human rights-based approach and with emphasis on vulnerable

groups. The global joint EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to combat violence against women and girls focusing on legislative and policy frameworks, strengthening key institutions and preventing violence through changes in norms and behaviours finalised its work in June 2023. Honduran stakeholders expressed their commitment to continue coordination spaces created by the Spotlight Initiative in the fight against gender-based violence.

4. Multilateral context: Honduras is one of the 47 members of the Human Rights Council, serving a three-year term as of January 2022. Honduras has proven to be aligned with the EU on many issues such as the death penalty. Disagreement may arise when resolutions concern China, Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba. Honduras tabled a resolution regarding technical assistance in the management of penitentiary centres. Another resolution regarding the setting up of the CICIH was adopted before the United Nations General Assembly. This resolution fails to address the institutional and legislative changes requested by the United Nations (UN). In the meantime, Honduras and the UN agreed to extend the deadline for the completion of necessary requirements until June 2024.

Jamaica

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Jamaica is a stable democracy with constitutional protection of fundamental rights, but it continues to struggle with a major crime problem. The country is currently ranking 10th in the list of countries with the highest crime rates in the world. The 2023 successful conviction of a notorious gang leader and fourteen of his co-accused gang members under the recently amended anti-gang legislation and a 10.7% reduction in crime statistics in 2023 (compared to 2022) are hopeful signs that inroads are being made. The country has legislation in place –The Integrity Act to promote standards of ethical conduct for parliamentarians and other government officials, and an Integrity Commission (IC), with a mandate to investigate and prosecute acts of corruption. Jamaica ranks 69th out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) and has had an average score of 44 over the last six years. There is regular rotation of power through competitive elections, with the next general election scheduled to take place in 2025. After being postponed several times, local government elections, which are constitutionally due every four years, will now be held on 26 February 2026. The last time these elections were held was in 2016.

Jamaica was the best-ranked Caribbean island and was among three countries with the highest parity scores in the Latin America and Caribbean region, ranking 24 out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap. This is an improvement over the previous year when the country ranked 42nd. The Global Gender Gap Report also lists Jamaica as one of the countries with relatively even access for men and women to economic participation and opportunity, with a score of 89.4%. Other advancements in the area of gender include introduction of paternity leave with pay, for biological fathers of new-borns, and newly adoptive parents, effective in the public sector as of 1 January 2023. Gender-based violence remains prevalent despite several laws and strategies put in place to stop it. Among them are The Domestic Violence Act, Offences against the Person Act, Sexual Offences Act, Trafficking in Persons Act and most recently, The Sexual Harassment (Protection and Prevention) Act, which came into effect on 3 July 2023. According to the World Bank, an estimated 39% of Jamaican women experience some form of intimate partner violence.

2. EU action – key focus areas: Support was provided to government and civil society organisations and in line with the EU Action Plan on Human Rights, several activities were undertaken during the year. The Delegation focuses on (i) protecting and empowering individuals; (ii) building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies; (iii) promoting a global system for human rights and democracy; (iv) new technologies: harnessing opportunities and challenges and (v) delivering by working together.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Jamaica and the European Union (EU) held their 7th Political Dialogue on 9 October 2023 in Kingston, Jamaica. The Political Dialogue focused on several critical issues of interest to Jamaica and the EU, in their respective jurisdictions, such as the rampant insecurity and multi-layered crisis in Haiti, the continued Russian aggression against Ukraine, as well as the recent escalation of violence in the Middle East. The EU Delegation is in constant dialogue with local stakeholders on human rights related issues. Likewise, member states consistently raise human rights issues with their high-level government partners during their meetings.

4. EU Financial Engagement: Several EU projects were implemented in 2023, promoting economic, social, cultural and environmental rights with emphasis on protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, including members of the LGBTI community, youth, people in violence prone communities and rural areas. Support was provided to the government's Digital Transitioning Programme (DIGITAL JAMAICA), under the Global Gateway Initiative. This is designed to address Jamaica's pressing digitalization challenges relating to access and capacity, over the next four years. Funding was also provided to support civil society organisations (CSOs) to engage as actors of governance and development at the country level. The action aimed to contribute to an inclusive, participatory, empowered, and independent civil society, which is pivotal for promoting a democratic space.
Jamaica is receiving technical assistance under the Citizen Security Budget Support Programme. This is helping the government Ministries and Agencies to reach out to the individuals most at-risk to be involved in, or become victims of, crime and violence, especially the youth. It is also supporting an integrated inter-ministerial approach to contribute to prevention of violence and crime through the provision of enhanced psychosocial and case management services and the delivery of targeted education interventions, which provide supporting services to the students, parents, and wider communities of the selected schools in five Zones of Special Operations (ZOSOs). The EU continues to be a strong partner in support of environmental protection with a heavy focus on forestry and rural communities. Support was also provided to the government for its Health Systems Strengthening Programme, and also to end gender-based violence.
The EU-funded and UN-implemented Spotlight Initiative aimed at contributing to the elimination of all forms of family violence ended in 2023. Among the outputs of the programme were the establishment of three shelters for victims of domestic violence, establishment of six additional Domestic Violence Intervention Centres by the Jamaica Constabulary Force, bringing the complement to 10. These centres are managed by police officers who were trained to intervene through a variety of methods, including home visits, referrals and counselling. A Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Helpline and Sexual Harassment Investigation Units have also been established to support victims, survivors and witnesses.

5. Multilateral Context*:* Jamaica supports multilateralism, territorial integrity and sovereignty and the rules-based international order. The government of Jamaica was among the many countries that condemned Russia's attack on Ukraine both individually and as part of the CARICOM group. Jamaica is among the countries that have signed the Samoa Agreement signalling its commitment to the partnership with OACPS countries and the EU. Although the death penalty remains on the law books, Jamaica has had a long-standing de facto moratorium on its application. The Delegation continues to dialogue with the government for its abolition.

United Mexican States

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Mexico is a consolidated democracy with a presidential system that holds elections every six years. Presidents cannot be re-elected for another term according to the Constitution. The Judiciary is independent and the Parliament is composed of two chambers: the Chamber of Deputies and that of Senators. The checks and balance system is reinforced by its federal territorial system, in which 31 States and Mexico City have executive and legislative competences. Autonomous bodies as well as the Judiciary have been under political pressure during the last few years, particularly the National Electoral Institute, illustrating the political polarisation of the country and the centrality of the President in the Mexican political system.

Mexico faces serious challenges in the protection of human rights, particularly due to the power of organised crime and challenges of the justice system, but the Government shows a willingness to build positive cooperation with international partners including the EU. In the last few years, the Mexican Government has established and strengthened the existing institutions for the defence of human rights. The Ministry of Interior (*Secretaría de Gobernación* – SEGOB), is very active in the promotion of human rights and the development of protection policies. In particular, several commissions and mechanisms of truth and protection of human rights, as well as the registry of enforced disappearances, play a key role in addressing the human rights crisis in the country. Mexico's civil society space remains vibrant although organisations sometimes face hostility for their criticism of the government. In 2023, the registered number of victims of enforced disappearances exceeded 110,000 with sustained high levels of serious crimes (homicides, femicides, kidnappings and extortions), although in December 2023 the Government published revised figures. At least 4 journalists and 13 human rights defenders were assassinated in 2023 (according to UN figures). HRDs and environmental activists suffer regular attacks and threats. Organised crime organisations are a major threat to human rights in Mexico, with levels of impunity that exceed 95%. While investigations of assassinations of journalists resulted in some sentences and a more consistent implementation of the strategy to identify missing persons can be observed, the scale of the security problem nation-wide would require a more comprehensive strategy.
Mexico is an origin, transit and destination country of migrants. Migration and internal displacement of persons remain big challenges, influenced by US migration policy and persisting root causes in Central America such as poverty, insecurity and natural disasters. In March 2023, 40 migrants were killed following a fire in a migrant detention centre in Ciudad Juárez. In 2023, up to November, 136,934 people requested asylum in Mexico.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EUDEL supported the UN OHCHR in the celebrations, and co-funded the production of the video clip of a pop song by several Latin American artists. In a few weeks the song "Liberté" by Aterciopelados, Susana Baca, Dr. Shenka and E. Bunbury,

got one million views on Youtube. Furthermore, as part of the same campaign, the EUDEL contributed with several videos to promote the Universal Declaration that were shown in 70 Mexico City metro stations with a daily reach of 3.4 million people. The EUDEL also contributed to the song "Quién cuida al pueblo" ("Who is taking care of the people"), by Vivir Quintana, La Marisoul and Mujeres del Viento Florido as a homage to HRD and journalists.

The EUDEL kept supporting human rights defenders along with EUMS Embassies (plus Norway and Switzerland) through the initiative #ProtejamosSusVoces ("Let us protect their voices"). In June 2023, EUDEL and MS Embassies organised an event with the beneficiaries consisting of workshops on social media. The EUDEL also funded a joint initiative with the Mexican Government in the promotion of freedom of speech and the right to defend HR and, protection of HRD and journalist called "De frente a la libertad" ("Facing Freedom").

The EU and its Member States, with Switzerland and Norway, issued four declarations condemning the assassination of HR defenders and journalists.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: On 17 November, the XI EU-Mexico High Level Dialogue on Human Rights took place in Mexico City. The EUSR for Human Rights, Mr Eamon Gilmore, headed the EU delegation, while Mexico was represented by the Vice Minister for Human Rights and Multilateralism of the MFA, Mr Joel Hernández. It was a constructive, open and frank dialogue, reflecting the relations among like-minded partners. It was an opportunity to share best practices and reinforce the political dialogue on human rights. Both parties committed to reinforce their partnership on human rights through bilateral technical cooperation as well as in the multilateral arena. The day before, EU and Mexican CSOs held the IX Civil Society Seminar on Human Rights, also in Mexico City. EU and Mexican authorities and representatives participated throughout the session.

Vice President of the European Commission Margaritis Schinas visited Mexico from 31st October to 2nd November and met with MFA Alicia Bárcena and high-level security authorities (Minister for Public Security and Director of the National Center of Intelligence) with whom he discussed the security response to the security and human rights crisis.

4. EU financial engagement: Human rights protection, governance, social cohesion and fighting inequality are among the priorities under the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework. The EU is currently working on security and justice (*El PAcCTO programme*), human rights, fighting gender violence and migration, with a focus on HRDs and journalists and enforced disappearances in partnership with CSOs and Mexican institutions. The EU also contributes to the social and economic integration of young people in Mexico, supporting them through several programmes implemented by CSOs. Social cohesion is addressed through support to job formalization and decent work, notably for people on the move and other vulnerable categories, as well as support to optimise the management of public finance (tax revenues and spending) and strengthening the Mexico's regulatory system of medicines and vaccines.

5. Multilateral context: Mexico was a member of the Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2023. Mexico had a leading role in the discussion on several thematic issues, being part of the core

groups on issues such as discrimination against women, rights of indigenous peoples, or minorities. Being part of GRULAC, Mexico is an important partner on the EU-GRULAC cooperation. Mexico and the EU share principles and values and have a fruitful cooperation in multilateral human rights bodies. Mexico is the most like-minded GRULAC partner of the EU at the UN Human Rights Council, sharing voting patterns in 85% of times.

Republic of Nicaragua

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights situation has remained very concerning. Repression continued unabated, as did crackdowns against any dissenting voices, with persecution, intimidation and reprisals against civil society, political opponents, media outlets, clergy, independent universities and more. On 9 February 2023, the unexpected release of 222 prisoners (in line with long-standing demands from the international community) was greeted with relief. However, it was immediately followed by their deportation and deprivation of nationality, in a violation of their fundamental rights and a breach of international law. This was followed by the liberation of a further 12 prisoners in October, who were also expelled (but not deprived of nationality). The Government freed and expelled 12 priests in October 2023, releasing later on 2 bishops (including Monseñor Alvarez) along with other 17 clergy on 14 January 2024. All religious persons accused of political crimes have now been released and expelled. Despite the mass releases (and deportation) which took place in 2023, civil society organisations and opposition in exile denounce the continued existence of political prisoners. No agreed figure exists. One human rights organisation estimates that 91 political prisoners remain at the time of writing[39], while others refer to some 150 persons. Following human rights advocacy activities conducted abroad, a number of citizens were denied entry when attempting to return to Nicaragua.

Cancellation of non-profit organisations' legal status continued, thus further restricting civic space and affecting freedom of association. Private university institutions were also closed and their assets confiscated, including the Central American University (UCA) in Managua, thus further weakening academic freedom. Freedom of expression has continued to suffer from intimidation and pressure, resulting in the departure of further journalists from the country. Those journalists who do remain opt for self-censorship. Access to opposition outlets operating from abroad and to international media remains possible for Nicaraguan citizens, including via internet and TV broadcasting.

The Government continues to exercise close control in in the country's Caribbean autonomous regions. Ahead of the March 2024 regional elections, the legal status of Yatama, a prominent political party representing the interests of a part of the local indigenous populations, was cancelled for "undermining national integrity" and two top party leaders were imprisoned in October.

On gender issues, statistically Nicaragua has the lowest gender gap in the region, thanks in part to a supportive equal rights legislation and to awareness-raising campaigns. At the same time, several women's rights organisations promoting gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights, and prevention of violence were closed as part of the general trend of

[39] According to the NGO "Mecanismo para el reconocimiento de personas presas políticas".

shrinking civic space. On LGBTI rights, there is anti-discrimination legislation in force and a special Prosecutor office for diversity.

Nicaragua remains the second poorest country of the Americas, after Haiti. Over recent years, there have been records of improvements in life expectancy, access to health, drinking water, sanitation, electricity and housing services, as well as in overall citizen security (Nicaragua claiming to be the safest in Central America[40]).

2. EU action – key focus areas: In line with the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-24, the EU focused on the following areas: (i) protecting and empowering individuals, human rights defenders; protecting girls and women against violence and promoting gender equality; promoting rights of indigenous peoples and the environment; supporting social and economic rights of the population's most vulnerable groups; (ii) building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies; resisting the rollback of freedom of expression and information.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Notwithstanding the absence of a structured political dialogue, the EU Delegation endeavoured where possible to engage on human rights issues through several initiatives in public and cultural diplomacy. These included the commemoration of the World and EU Day against Death Penalty with a public, well attended film projection; the launch of a human rights competition "I have a dream", commemorating the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 60th anniversary of Martin Luther King´s historic speech; and the "Cuéntame Europa" activity aiming to promote universal values among youth and children.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, the EU continued to actively support human rights, including through the approval of a number of new projects aiming at supporting the protection of human rights defenders, civil society and youth capacity building, fighting against gender-based violence and child labour, supporting media and indigenous people, and upholding LGBTI rights. These actions provide support to different types of partners working in various portfolios addressing human rights, working closely with EU Member States and other stakeholders with a view to reducing and mitigating potential risks. The EU continues to use systematically a rights-based approach, mainstreaming human rights and democracy through its development actions in the country.

5. Multilateral context: The EU Delegation also continues to engage with a view to advocating for rule-based multilateralism. The human rights situation in Nicaragua continues to be closely addressed by the UN Human Rights Council and the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua established through HRC resolution resolutions 49/3 and 52/2. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has undertaken regular reviews to update on most recent developments, the latest in December 2023. The EU continues to contribute to the work of the Office and to voice its concerns on the human rights situation. Thus far, the Government has declined requests to cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms, denying access to international and regional HR organisations as well as to independent verification

[40] According to Homicide Monitor / UNODC statistics.

bodies. Nicaragua's withdrawal from the Organisation of American States and from its organs, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, took effect on 19 November.

Republic of Panama

1. Overview of the Human Rights and democracy situation: Although Panama is committed to the defence of human rights and democracy, a number of internal challenges are slowing down the pace of advancement of the country's human rights agenda. The full and coherent implementation of the existing legislation to combat corruption, reach transparency and avoid impunity would require reinforced Panamanian democratic institutions. With respect to democracy and the rule of Law, Panama ranked globally 74nd across 142 countries in 2023 monitored by WJP[41], thus descending two positions in the Overall Rule of Law Score.

One of the major human rights challenges is the situation of irregular migrants and under the custody of the State, crossing the Darién Gap on their way to reach the United States. 2023 has been a record year with 520,085 irregular migrants entering Panama. Apart from natural hazards and malnutrition, irregular migrants face abuse and robbing, and there is persisting impunity for the criminal groups involved.[42] The situation of women and girls is particularly dire, with 675 cases of sexual violence treated by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) only in 2023.

Between 20 October and 2 December, roadblocks and mass protests against a government contract with a mining company, in part motivated by inadequate public consultation and environmental preoccupations, sparked concerns on Human Rights grounds. In addition to violence among the protesters and against media and journalists, the roadblocks resulted in lack of medical and food supplies as well as gasoline, especially in the provinces but even in the capital city, and in the closure of schools and universities.

Judicial harassment against journalists and media outlets is progressively increasing in Panama, with a clear upward trend in criminal cases strategically aimed at intimidating journalists and the media not aligned with the political and business establishments of the country. This practice affects freedom of expression and the work of journalists in Panama.

In February 2023, the Supreme Court of Justice ruled against same-sex marriage as it "does not pertain to the category of human rights or fundamental rights", breaking the trend in the region and running counter to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) Advisory Opinion 24-17.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In regards to activities surrounding "protecting and empowering individuals", the EU Delegation regularly carried out communications campaigns to raise awareness on Human Rights. Civil society organisations were consulted in the preparation of the EU Roadmap on Commitment to Civil Society 2023-2027. A prominent LGBTI activist was invited to a meeting with EU Member States Heads of Missions. In accordance with the policy area of "building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies", two

[41] https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/Panama.

[42] https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2023/11/americas1123web_1.pdf.

projects were finalised in 2023: one on child rights, in particular those under foster care, and one on the social and economic integration of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Another project aiming to prevent, sanction and eradicate gender-based violence was signed in December 2023. In order to "promote a global system for human rights and democracy", the EU's global SANCUS project implemented a Panama-specific action to improve oversight capacities of the country's National Assembly. At the end of 2023, the contract for INTER PARES Panama on inter-parliamentary cooperation was signed. In relation to the policy area "new technologies - harnessing opportunities and addressing challenges", a project on digital rights was launched in January 2023, with five strands focusing on topics such as gender-based violence online, fight against disinformation or LGBTI vote at the 2024 general elections. The EU Delegation (EUDEL) to Panama has deepened its cooperation with Human Rights defenders, increasing its participation in local events promoting Human Rights and democracy and encounters with key actors.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: EU-Panama relations rely on the shared commitment to promote, protect and respect human rights and fundamental freedoms by generating inclusive spaces for coordination of government actors, non-governmental organisations and civil society. Annual political consultations should provide an opportunity to engage with the Panamanian government on human rights. The EUDEL to Panama has been actively communicating, raising awareness and promoting human rights and democracy not only through its engagements with Panamanian authorities, but also via public diplomacy events and public communications, such as social media actions and public interventions. The EUDEL has maintained a good working relation and active collaboration with the Office of the Ombudsman of Panama and with the newly created Ministry of Woman, seeking to strengthen institutional alliances and establish collaborative approaches.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2023, two projects were financed with close to EUR 700,000 under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). The 2021-2024 envelope for thematic programmes for Human Rights and Democracy (NDICI-HRD) allocates a total maximum of EUR 1.1 million to Panama. In January 2023, the grant contract launched for a project on digital rights and inclusion received EUR 400,000. Two contracts were signed in December 2023: on inter-parliamentary cooperation (EUR 400,000), and on gender-based violence (EUR 300,000). In addition, the EU Delegation and Member States undertook an important number of events and activities during 2023, some of which with a Team Europe approach. In particular, the EU Delegation to Panama allocated more than EUR 15,000 to cultural and public diplomacy in support of human rights and democracy.

5. Multilateral context: Despite sometimes departing in multilateral fora from EU positions, Panama remained a like-minded partner of the EU in promoting human rights. In 2023, Panama was aligned with the EU on UNGA Third Committee resolutions such as those dealing with Ukraine, Syrian Arab Republic, Islamic Republic of Iran or unilateral coercive measures. In April 2023, the UN Human Rights Council issued observations on Panama's fourth periodic report[43], highlighting as areas of attention: discrimination and violence based on sexual

[43] https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G23/060/60/PDF/G2306060.pdf?OpenElement.

orientation and gender identity, as well as reproductive rights; rights of indigenous and African-descent peoples; and situation of prisoners and persons deprived of their liberty.

Republic of Paraguay

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Paraguay generally has a good legal basis for the protection of human rights, but the National Plan for Human Rights that is vital for the necessary institutional strengthening remained unimplemented also in 2023. Violence against women and girls continues to be a widespread issue, and a draft anti-femicide law remains stalled in Congress. Teenage and child pregnancy rates are among the highest in the region. Law enforcement operations continued to confirm close links between some politician, public institutions, judges, the police and organised crime, including the trafficking of illicit drugs and of arms, with Paraguay increasingly becoming a hub for trafficking within its own region and Europe. Other challenges include corruption, pressure on independent journalism, the criminalisation of social protests, as well as lack of protection of vulnerable groups, such as children, indigenous communities, landless farmers, persons with disabilities, and LGBTI persons. The weak functioning of the justice system, including overcrowding and violence in prisons, and the excessive use of pre-trial detention continue to be of concern.

The year was marked by the April 2023 general and presidential elections, in which the long-ruling Colorado party won clear victories. The EU accompanied the ballot through an Election Observation Mission, which, whilst noting that the elections took place in a highly polarised environment, where distrust in state institutions and political structures prevailed, assessed the overall conduct of polling operations as smooth and transparent. The EOM issued recommendations on issues such as voter education, assisted voting, national election observation, and the political participation of women. It will now be important for Paraguay to ensure the proper follow-up to these recommendations.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In line with the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, the EU focussed its efforts in Paraguay on: (i) consolidating democracy, including through improving electoral processes; (ii) transparency and fight against corruption; (iii) promoting and protecting vulnerable groups (children, indigenous people and persons with disabilities), gender equality and prevention of discrimination. Other EU priorities included promoting the institutionalisation of human rights, judicial reform, fighting corruption and organised crime, and further enhancing transparency.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In 2023, the EU continued to maintain contacts with all relevant stakeholders, including the government, human rights institutions and civil society organisations. It used its regular political dialogue with the government to communicate the importance it attaches to human rights and democracy. The EU continued to call for the implementation of the recommendations of the 2018 and 2023 EOMs. The EU also stressed that much remained to be done on the rights of indigenous peoples, women's rights, gender discrimination and violence.

4. EU financial engagement: During 2023, the EU and its Member States continued to devote financial and non-financial means to support the EU human rights and democracy priorities. The project “Consolidation of Paraguayan Democracy” (2019-2023), supported the promotion of democracy, focussing not only on strengthening the National Electoral Administration and the National Congress, but also increasing alliances with other strategic actors in the electoral process (political parties, academia, the media, the Ministry of Women, and civil society organisations), and providing support to the EU Election Observation Mission 2023. Within the framework of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, the project "Right to identity through access to official documentation of indigenous people in Paraguay" contributed to increasing the political participation and access to public policies of the indigenous population, through the recognition of their legal personality and their equality before the law in Paraguay.

Activities related to the priority of “Transparency and fight against corruption in Paraguay” were channelled at regional level through "EL PAcCTO" program. The second phase of “EL PAcCTO 2.0” started its activities in November 2023, providing technical assistance, training and sharing of best practices and mobilising expertise from EU countries for a more effective fight against transnational organised crime. The focus is on cross-border cooperation, penitentiary intelligence, asset recovery, alternatives to detention, cybercrime, money laundering, police and customs cooperation, and fight against corruption..

The EIDHR project “Access to justice and human rights of detainees” started activities in 2023, in a context of overcrowded prisons due to the high percentage of pre-trial detainees. The project provided technical assistance for the reform of the prison management model, by the implementation of a model for the application of alternative measures to prison, with a focus on human rights and the involvement of civil society. Progress has also been made towards the implementation of the Roadmap for Civil Society 2021-2024, including a mechanism to strengthen and train local civil society organisations. A joint call for proposals 2023, under the thematic lines of Human Rights and Support for Civil Society, led to the approval of six new projects, related to disinformation and digital violence, the strengthening of institutions for a better democracy, access to health, a healthy environment, and the participation of young people for the expansion of civic space and the impact on public policies in Paraguay, but also the mobilisation of women and young people in support of gender equality, all of which will start in 2024. Finally, as a part of the Team Europe Gender action plan 2021-2025**,** a joint EU-Spanish programme on prevention of, and attention to, gender-based violence was approved, whose implementation will commence in 2024.

5. Multilateral context: Paraguay has ratified all core international and regional human rights conventions and is a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the period 2022-2024. At the UN, there was a large degree of like-mindedness between Paraguay and the EU on country-specific resolutions, if not always on thematic files. Notably, Paraguay continued to vote consistently in favour of resolutions condemning Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and its impact on the human rights situation in Ukraine. Paraguay will continue to play an important role in the HRC, since it was elected for the vice presidency in 2024.

The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) issued findings on Paraguay in 2023, expressing concern about poor compliance with legislation on accessibility

to the physical environment in schools, as well as access to information and communication, for students with disabilities. In a follow-up report, the UN Human Rights Committee recommended ongoing follow-up dialogue on the issue of the effect of crop fumigation agrochemicals on an indigenous community.

Republic of Peru

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Throughout 2023, Peru faced several challenges concerning human rights and democracy. The violent demonstrations against the government, which started in December 2022, persisted until March 2023. These events resulted in a large number of casualties, including civilians and members of the police force. Judicial investigations into alleged human rights violations committed by the police and army are currently underway, including proceedings within the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the UN Human Rights Office. While the Peruvian Government has cooperated with international inquiries, progress on national investigations has been limited thus far. The system of checks and balances, which includes an independent and impartial judiciary as well as autonomous electoral bodies, is facing challenges.

The security situation of indigenous, environmental and human rights defenders, along with their communities, continue to raise concerns. Despite government efforts to establish mechanisms for protecting these defenders, the underlying causes of violence persist. These causes include the high incidence of organized crime and the lack of state presence in regions like the Amazon where these communities reside. Furthermore, gender-based violence remains a significant issue in Peru, with the measures taken by the state still insufficient to ensure access to justice for victims and to address the underlying causes of violence against women.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU action on human rights and democracy in Peru is focused on five priority areas: (i) Democratic stability; (ii) Human rights defenders (HRDs), particularly environmental defenders; (iii) Prevent gender violence and discrimination (Women and LGBTI); (iv) Economic and social rights (particularly indigenous population and migrants); and (v) Press freedom and new technologies.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU permanently engages in support of national efforts to strengthen democracy. At the initiative of UNDP, an electoral governance working group was established in 2021 with support from the EU. It continues to be an important tool to foster political dialogue on democracy issues.

The implementation of EU cooperation projects aimed at strengthening democratic institutions provided opportunity to engage with electoral bodies, regional governments, Congress, the Ombudsman's Office and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Training seminars and meetings throughout the year were occasions to convey messages on the need to strengthen democratic stability, the independence of the electoral bodies and Ombudsman's office. The importance of guaranteeing the balance of powers and ensuring access to justice for the victims of alleged human rights violations during the protests from December 2021 to March 2022 were among the key message delivered in these dialogue meetings with the

authorities. MESAGEN, the space for gender coordination among 32 embassies and international organisations, remained the main forum for coordination on gender issues and violence against women. It is an efficient forum to amplify the voices of the EU, its member states and likeminded countries on these issues.

4. EU financial engagement: Strengthening democracy and human rights remains a key priority for the EU's financial engagement in Peru. In 2023, the EU launched three projects designed to enhance Peru's democracy. The first initiative was a EUR 2.5 million project implemented by International IDEA titled "Consolidation of Peruvian Democracy," which aimed to strengthen democracy, accountability, and inclusivity in accordance with the EU EEM 2021 recommendations. Additionally, a EUR 1 million project, implemented by UNDP, focused on enhancing the communication and conflict prevention capacities of electoral institutions, subnational authorities, and civil society organisations. Lastly, a regional initiative was launched to strengthen mediation capacities within regional governments.

Regarding the protection of Human Rights Defenders, the EU is implementing a project aimed at enhancing the efforts of the Peruvian Ombudsman in safeguarding HRDs in Amazonian provinces. Additionally, other programs incorporate components specifically designed to protect Human Rights Defenders. Concerning gender-based violence, the EU is implementing a EUR 5 million program with the objective of eradicating gender violence with the support of the AECID (ES) and GIZ (DE). Moreover, a EUR 1 million action implemented by DEMUS-Study for the Defense of Women´s Rights aims at mobilising civil society organisations and women´s networks to promote gender equality and combat gender violence. The EU supports the inclusion and integration of migrants through DG ECHO, FPI, DCI and NDICI programs. Through the GIZ (DE), the EU implements a regional program in Peru, Colombia and Ecuador, providing support to migrant and refugee communities in the border areas of these three states. The EU bilateral indicative program 2021-2027 allocates EUR 15 million for human development, in particular social cohesion and migration.

5. Multilateral context: In January 2023, Peru's human rights record underwent examination within the framework of the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council. Through the session, Peru's government demonstrated constructive engagement with UN mechanisms and reported on its efforts to implement specific recommendations from prior reviews. However, the UN raised concerns about the increasing threats to the independence of Peru's judiciary. Additionally, the government was urged, among other measures, to step up its efforts in preventing sexual and gender-based violence.

In May 2023, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) issued a report on violent demonstrations that occurred between December 2022 and March 2023, as well as the response of the authorities. The IACHR recommended promoting broad, genuine, and inclusive talks with an intercultural and territorial focus to assist victims and assure reparations and judicial investigations. The government accepted the conclusions and recommendations but denied the claims of extrajudicial killings. In October 2023, the UN Human Rights Office issued a report on the conduct of security forces during protests. It inter alia concluded that Peruvian authorities unduly restricted demonstrators' human rights and that security forces used unnecessary and disproportionate force. It recommended

strengthening internal accountability mechanisms, ensuring victim-centred, impartial and effective investigations, and addressing the deep-rooted and systemic problems of racism and discrimination.

Moreover, Peru continue its support for the initiatives undertaken by the European Union to denounce the unlawful invasion conducted by Russia against Ukraine.

Federation of Saint Kitts and Nevis

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The Federation of Saint Kitts and Nevis is a multi-party democracy, with the smaller island Nevis having considerable power of self-governance under the leadership of its own Premier. Human Rights concerns in the country include LGBTI rights, domestic and gender-based violence and child abuse. The country retains the death penalty, although it has not been recently applied. As in much of Eastern Caribbean, the significant judicial backlog of cases remains a concern. The EU-funded PACE Justice Programme, launched in 2023, aims at helping tackle this challenge.

2. EU action – key focus areas: LGBTI persons continue to face widespread discrimination in St. Kitts and Nevis. The constitutionality of long-standing anti-buggery laws was successful challenged in 2022 thanks to local and regional civil society efforts. Incidents of gender-based violence, domestic violence and violence against LGBTI persons remain a concern in St. Kitts and Nevis. There is thought to be significant underreporting of such offences, attributed to social stigma and community pressure, victim blaming, lack of confidentiality or fear of reprisal. Child abuse remains a challenge in St. Kitts and Nevis, ranging from neglect/abandonment, verbal abuse, physical punishment and family dysfunction to sexual abuse. Corporal punishment as a disciplinary tool in schools remains legal in St. Kitts and Nevis, although not commonly enforced. However, its use has been discouraged through the UNICEF Effective Child Friendly Schools framework, which the Ministry of Education adopted. St. Kitts and Nevis' criminality score[44] for 2023 is 3.52, ranking as 167th of 193 countries and 7th of 13 countries in the Caribbean. Challenges to the rule of law are poor prison conditions and the long delays in administration of justice. The country has also been witnessing an alarming increase in criminal incidents. St. Kitts and Nevis retains the death penalty in its legislation, with the most recent execution dating back to 2008. The latest Amnesty International report lists St Kitts and Nevis among the "Retentionist" countries, i.e. countries that retain the death penalty for ordinary crimes.
The EU Delegation participated in the international "16 Days of Activism" campaign against gender-based Violence through a campaign on social media platforms. A survey on human rights priorities in the Caribbean was also launched on the Delegation social media platforms in January 2024, in view of the launch of the human rights and democracy regional call for proposals scheduled for early 2024.

3. EU Bilateral political engagement: Human Rights matters are regularly discussed in bilateral meetings with national authorities and civil society organisations. Currently there is no

[44] According to the Global organised crime index, https://ocindex.net/.

resident EU Member State in St. Kitts and Nevis. France has an Embassy based in St. Lucia. Germany, The Netherlands and Spain cover the Eastern Caribbean from Trinidad and Tobago.

4. EU Financial Engagement: The European Union is financing the Caribbean LGBTI Initiative for Promoting Solidarity Outcomes – CALIPSO project – for the strengthening of LGBTI communities across OECS countries. The project inception meeting took place on 26 January 2023 at the EU Delegation in Barbados, with the two implementing partners – ECADE and Synergia for Initiatives for Human Rights.

The Partnership of the Caribbean and the European Union on Justice (PACE Justice) Regional Programme aims at assisting efforts towards reducing the high number of criminal case backlogs. PACE Justice was launched in Barbados on 17 October 2023. The program will be implemented by UNDP over the next 48 months, with EU funding of EUR 9.75 million.

The Spotlight Regional Caribbean – a global multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls – is the EU main programme supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. Concluded in 2023, it facilitated several initiatives in the Caribbean in the past 12 months.

5. Multilateral Context

N/A

Saint Lucia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: St. Lucia is a multiparty parliamentary democracy upholding civil liberties and fundamental freedoms. It operates under the rule of law with strong democratic institutions. As in much of the Eastern Caribbean, the significant judicial backlog of cases remains a concern. The EU-funded PACE Justice programme, launched in 2023, aims at helping tackle this challenge. The death penalty remains in place in St. Lucia, although it has not been recently applied. Other crosscutting human rights challenges pertain mainly but not exclusively to LGBTI rights, domestic and gender-based violence, child abuse and gang violence.

2. EU action – key focus areas:
According to the Criminal Code of Saint Lucia, same-sex relations are outlawed, with legal provisions for “acts of gross indecency, buggery” corresponding to sentences from 5 to 10 years in prison. The legal challenges to outdated St Lucian buggery laws criminalising same-sex relations, launched by the civil society group ECADE are pending a final resolution to date. Incidents of gender-based violence, domestic violence and violence against LGBTI persons remain a concern in St. Lucia. There is thought to be significant underreporting of such

offences, attributed to social stigma and community pressure, victim blaming, lack of confidentiality or fear of reprisal. Child abuse remains a concern in St. Lucia. Children, especially those of economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking, often encouraged or forced by parents or caretakers. Child marriage remains as high as 24%. St. Lucia's criminality score[45] is 3.53, ranking as 166th of 193 countries and 6th of 13 countries in the Caribbean. The criminal justice system of St. Lucia is slow in delivery, resulting in significant case backlogs and long pre-trial detentions. The death penalty remains legal in St. Lucia. While the last execution took place in 1995, there has not been any political initiative or discussion towards abolishing the death penalty in 2023. The latest Amnesty International report lists Saint Lucia among the "Retentionist", i.e. countries that retain death penalty for ordinary crimes.

The EU Delegation participated in the international "16 Days of Activism" campaign against gender-based violence through a campaign on social media platforms. A survey on human rights priorities in the Caribbean was also launched on the Delegation social media platforms in January 2024, in view of the launch of the human rights and democracy regional call for proposals scheduled for early 2024.

3. EU Bilateral political engagement: Human rights are regularly discussed in bilateral meetings with national authorities and civil society organisations. Currently, France among has an Embassy in St. Lucia; Germany, The Netherlands and Spain cover the Eastern Caribbean from Trinidad and Tobago.

4. EU Financial Engagement: The European Union is financing the Caribbean LGBTI Initiative for Promoting Solidarity Outcomes – CALIPSO project – for the strengthening of LGBTI communities across OECS countries. The project inception meeting took place on 26 January 2023 at the EU Delegation in Barbados, with the two implementing partners – ECADE and Synergia for Initiatives for Human Rights.

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The Spotlight Regional Caribbean – a global multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls – is the EU main programme supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. Concluded in 2023, it facilitated several initiatives in the Caribbean in the past 12 months.

5. Multilateral Context

N/A

[45] According to the Global organised crime index: https://ocindex.net/.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The multi-island state of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a multiparty parliamentary democracy upholding civil liberties and fundamental freedoms. It operates under the rule of law with strong democratic institutions. The justice system of St. Vincent and the Grenadines suffers from an increased backlog of cases. The death penalty remains in place, although it has not been recently applied. Other crosscutting human rights challenges pertain mainly but not exclusively to LGBTI rights, domestic and gender-based violence and child abuse.

2. EU action – key focus areas:

The Criminal Code of St Vincent and the Grenadines outlaws same-sex relations and includes sentences ranging from 5 to 10 years in prison under the outdated "buggery" laws. Although there have been no recent convictions based on these provisions, the laws contribute to the stigmatisation and discrimination of LGBTI persons. A July 2019 lawsuit, challenging the constitutionality of the buggery laws is pending a resolution to date. Incidents of gender-based violence, domestic violence and violence against LGBTI persons – remain a concern in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. There is thought to be significant underreporting of such offences, attributed to social stigma and community pressure, victim blaming, lack of confidentiality or fear of reprisal. Compared to the other Eastern Caribbean states, St. Vincent and the Grenadines generally records the highest number of gender-based violence against women. Child abuse remains a challenge in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Incidents range from neglect and physical abuse to sexual abuse. As a common trend in the region, the procedures of reporting to the authorities are often too complicated and not victim-centric. St. Vincent and the Grenadines criminality score[46] is 3.08, ranking as 174th of 193 countries and 9th of 13 countries in the Caribbean. The judicial system lacks the full capacity to effectively implement the law and counter organised crime. There is a significant case backlog, which leads to prolonged pre-trial detention. In December 2023, Prime Minister Gonsalves stated that his administration is proposing changes as to how the courts handle certain criminal matters and was hoping to soon abolish preliminary inquiries in an attempt to alleviate the backlog. Death penalty is still legal in St. Vincent & the Grenadines. Although the last execution took place in 1995, there has not been any political initiative or discussion towards abolishing the death penalty in 2023. On the contrary, reinforcing his stance as previously publicly expressed on the death penalty, Prime Minster Gonsalves stated in April 2023 that "[…] there are particular offences you need the death penalty for". The latest Amnesty International report lists Saint Vincent and the Grenadines among the "Retentionist" countries, i.e. countries that retain death penalty for ordinary crimes.

The EU Delegation participated in the international "16 Days of Activism" campaign against gender-based violence through a campaign on social media platforms. A survey on human rights priorities in the Caribbean was also launched on the Delegation social media platforms in January 2024, in view of the launch of the human rights and democracy regional call for proposals scheduled for early 2024.

[46] According to the Global organised crime index: https://ocindex.net/.

3. EU Bilateral political engagement: Human rights are regularly discussed in bilateral meetings with national authorities and civil society organisations of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Currently there is no resident EU Member State in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. France has an Embassy based in St. Lucia. Germany, The Netherlands and Spain cover the Eastern Caribbean from Trinidad and Tobago.

4. EU Financial Engagement: The European Union is financing the Caribbean LGBTI Initiative for Promoting Solidarity Outcomes – CALIPSO project – for the strengthening of LGBTI communities across OECS countries. The project inception meeting took place on 26 January 2023 at the EU Delegation in Barbados, with the two implementing partners – ECADE and Synergia for Initiatives for Human Rights.

The Spotlight Regional Caribbean – a global multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls – is the EU main programme supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. Concluded in 2023, it facilitated several initiatives in the Caribbean in the past 12 months.

5. Multilateral Context

N/A

Republic of Suriname

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Suriname is a presidential republic with a relatively favourable human rights situation. Fundamental rights are generally respected, and credible, transparent and inclusive elections were held in 2020. Suriname has abolished the death penalty and is relatively advanced on the protection of the rights of LGBTI persons. There is no legal prohibition of same-sex relations. However, elements of discrimination remain, such as the lack of legal provisions for a same-sex registered partnership. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated certain human rights issues, especially sexual and gender-based violence, which remains a major challenge. Other main problems concern the rights of the child (including widespread abuse, corporal punishment and child labour in the informal sector), trafficking in human beings, prison conditions, stigmatisation of persons with HIV, widespread public sector corruption, and the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, including the implementation of legal recognition of their land and collective rights.

On 5 August 2022, the Constitutional Court had declared that the Electoral Regulations violate provisions in the Constitution as well as provisions in the Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the UN Convention on Human Rights, and the American Convention on Human Rights. After long consultations, on 13 October 2023 Suriname's Parliament reached a rare consensus amongst the main political parties and amended the Electoral Law ahead of the general

elections to be held in 2025. The next elections will be held on the basis of national proportionality instead of a district system, which means that each political party will be presenting only one list of candidates nationally. Under the previous system, candidates in Paramaribo needed more than 7000 votes to be elected as a member of parliament in their constituency, while candidates in the sparsely populated constituencies like Coronie only needed 300 votes. With the new system, small political parties will have a greater chance of getting into the National Assembly.

Initiatives to promote gender equality and women's empowerment and to combat domestic violence generally have remained at the level of policy formulation and the establishment of coordination structures between ministries and agencies, but have failed to be properly implemented. The situation of the indigenous and tribal people remains challenging in Suriname. Suriname has yet to implement legal recognition of land and collective rights of indigenous peoples in the Marowijne region, as it was ordered to do in the Kali'na (Caraib) and Lokono (Arawak) verdict of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights of November 2015. Some work has been undertaken involving a roadmap towards legal recognition of indigenous and tribal peoples' land and other rights, but this has yet to be finalised. The collective land rights of indigenous and Maroons are still not recognised.

On 20 December 2023, the highest court in Suriname issued its final decision in the appeal by former President Desi Bouterse against his conviction for the December 1982 murders of political prisoners. The court upheld a 20-year prison sentence for Bouterse; the other 4 suspects were convicted to 15 years. The EU acknowledged the verdict in the 'December Trials' as a commitment to upholding the rule of law and ensuring that justice is served.

2. EU action – key focus areas: The EU prioritises its action in Suriname in the following areas: (i) women's rights and the rights of the child, including domestic violence; (ii) social and economic rights of indigenous communities; (iii) good governance; (iv) conditions in detentions centres; and (v) strengthening the role of the civil society.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued to engage with authorities, civil society and stakeholders to support human rights and democracy progress. The EU human rights priorities were discussed with the Surinamese side in various settings, including during the visit of the European External Action Service's Deputy Director General, H. König, in March 2023 and the visit of Commission Executive Vice President, F. Timmermans, in June 2023. The EU have been highlighting in particular the issue of gender-based violence, the situation of children, excessive police violence, non-discrimination of LGBTI persons, and equal treatment of tribal and maroon people, and asked about concrete measures taken.

4. EU financial engagement: In order to underpin the EU support to strengthen the rights of the child, the EU signed in 2021 the project "Change Nickerie", implemented by the *Bureau voor de Dienstverlening aan NGO´s* (EUR 155,000). This project addresses an integrated prevention and support system for victims of violence, particularly children and women. The project is in line with government priorities, and was designed in collaboration with the

Bureau of Gender Affairs. To attenuate the negative factors influencing the LGBTI community, the EU launched the project "The Stand with Us", implemented by Projekta (EUR 402,000). The project establishes broad support for the rights of LGBTI persons in Suriname, by creating and strengthening the building blocks for an inclusive society.

In order to empower indigenous and tribal communities, the EU started the project "Local Actors for Change in the Hinterland" (LACH), implemented by Conservation International, (EUR 849,000). The project strengthens local hinterland civil society organisations to mitigate climate change through effective, community-managed forests by developing a sustainable forest and environmental management programme. In February 2023, the EU concluded the implementation of the "Trio and Wayana Indigenous Community Empowerment" project, implemented by Conservation International (EUR 285,000). The main objective of this project was to socially and economically empower the Trio and Wayana indigenous communities.

5. Multilateral context: Suriname is a like-minded country that shares with the EU a strong believe in upholding the multilateral system and voting for UN resolutions that are important for the EU. Suriname is party to most UN and Organisation of American States human rights treaties, without any significant reservations. Suriname accepts the right of individuals within its jurisdiction to present complaints to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, as laid down in the First Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, without reservations. Suriname recognises the original jurisdiction of the Caribbean Court of Justice for the interpretation of the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas and the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court on Human rights. Suriname has ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, but its national legislation has not been brought in line with the Rome Statute yet.

At the 49th regular meeting of the UN Human Rights Council on 23 March 2022, Suriname's report of the Universal Periodic Review Third Cycle was adopted. Of the 147 recommendations made on human rights, Suriname adopted 124 (84%). Suriname confirmed its commitment to ratify the following conventions and protocols: International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances; Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation Convention against Discrimination in Education; Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Trinidad and Tobago has been an example of electoral democracy, convening elections as provided for in its Constitution with the full will of the people being respected. However, improving accountability and transparency, public sector efficiency and the administration of justice remain issues of national concern.

The country's human rights record is considered good in most respects, although there are clear deficiencies regarding death penalty, LGBTI and prisoner rights. Gang-related violence, high levels of gender-based violence and trafficking are exceedingly high. As a result, the Government is implementing initiatives to strengthen prevention through programmes to support at-risk youth and change gender stereotypes, while also improving the criminal justice system and services for survivors of violence against women. In 2018, the High Court of Justice of Trinidad and Tobago decriminalized same-sex relations. The decision was appealed by the State, and a final decision remains outstanding. Although there is general antipathy towards LGBTI people in society, in particular from religious groups of all denominations, their rights are slowly gaining broader acceptance, especially with the younger population. Trinidad and Tobago retains the death penalty, although it has not been applied for some years. Significant numbers of persons are held on remand awaiting trial.

After the record number of murders in 2022 (605), for this past year the total number of murders was lower by about 30 (576). Nonetheless, the further strengthening of criminal activities (e.g. protectionism - especially in the building sector) and the feeling of insecurity of the general population is the dominant problem among the socio-economic issues affecting the country.

The government fails to follow up with the ratifications of several international treaties and conventions, e.g., regarding migrants and refugees and persons with disabilities. The State's management of prosecutions for corruption and human rights abuses suffers from overburdened bureaucratic procedures, inefficiencies and backlogs that riddle the justice system. Since the foundation of Trinidad and Tobago, there has never been a successful conviction for a major fraud. A number of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) cover a wide range of human rights and democracy issues as well. They hold power to account and are able to operate without restriction or fear for their safety. Some of the main issues for CSOs, however, include the lack of financial resources to sustain some of their successful initiatives, and lack of legally established mechanisms to engage in formal dialogues with the government.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU Delegation has continued to focus on its priorities from the "Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategy 2021-2024": the abolition of the death penalty; gender equality and women's rights; rights of the child; LGBTI rights; migrant and refugee rights; prisoners' rights; and the anti-corruption architecture.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The Trinidad and Tobago government stakeholders were engaged through the delivery of demarches encouraging the country to vote on several resolutions that relate to human rights at the 78th UNGA Third Committee. Seven strategic political and operational priorities from the "Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategy 2021-2024" were addressed through public diplomacy activities and information campaigns on the Delegation's communication platforms.

The European Union pays special attention to the position of women and the problem of violence against women in society. Trinidad and Tobago was one of six Caribbean countries where the Spotlight Initiative was implemented until the end of 2023. Certainly, the biggest

result is the approval of the “National Strategic Action Plan on Gender Based and Sexual Violence 2023-2027”. Independently of this EU-funded project (implemented by the UN), the EU uses other fora to warn about this cross-cutting social problem and it is every year active in organizing public events in the framework of the “16 Days of Activism”.

4. EU financial engagement: While no new projects were awarded in 2023, engagement with stakeholders continued in order to discuss the priorities for the allocations received under the Human Rights and Democracy thematic budget for 2023 and 2024. The funds will be pooled and a “Call for Proposals” is expected to be launched early 2024 to award new grant projects.

The final report of the last ongoing EIDHR funded project “Addressing Human Rights Abuses of Remand Prisoners with Special Emphasis on Domestic Violence Murder Cases” indicated substantial progress achieved by raising a landmark constitutional motion in the High Court against the Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago. The core premise and the objectives of the case was to challenge effectively the legal paradigm of the unjust remand system. The trial was completed in November 2023, and a judgement is awaited.

5. Multilateral context: During the UNGA 78th Third Committee, Trinidad and Tobago voted in favour of a number of human rights and democracy related resolutions on: Combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; Enlargement of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination; Promotion of democratic and equitable international order; promotion of equitable geographical distribution in the membership of the human rights treaty bodies; Human rights and cultural diversity; Human Rights and unilateral coercive measures; The right to development; The right of Palestinian people to self-determination; Strengthening the role of the UN in the promotion of democratisation and enhancing periodic and genuine elections; UN Human Rights Training and Documentation Centre for South-West Asia and the Arab Region; Report of the Human Rights Council; A global call for concrete action for the elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance and the comprehensive implementation of and follow-up to the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

The country abstained on certain country-specific resolutions regarding the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran; the situation of human rights in the temporarily occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol; and the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Eastern Republic of Uruguay

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Uruguay is a like-minded partner with strong democratic institutions and values. In 2023, it developed its first National Human Rights Plan (2023-2027) which establishes the bases and programmatic guidelines for the incorporation of the human rights approach to public policies, as well as for regulatory and institutional adaptation in this area. Human rights organisations enjoy good legal and political environment to operate in. Nevertheless, these organisations have been reporting less access to public financing and openness of the government to dialogue with civil society.

The uptrend in homicides and the high rate of domestic violence against women and girls remains a serious concern. In 2023, the UN Experts of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) recognised the country's commitment to implementing the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women: approval of the comprehensive law on gender violence, decriminalisation of the voluntary interruption of pregnancy, the "Trans law", and the law on equal marriage. The laws on trafficking and sexual and workplace harassment were also approved. However, these texts alone did not change the cultural bias, underlining the necessity of allocating appropriate resources and plans for education, implementation and enforcement. Uruguay has one of the largest prison populations per capita globally and the first in South America. High rates of institutional and interpersonal violence persist, as well as homicides and suicides. Social reintegration of prisoners remains a pending issue; the recidivism rate in Uruguay is around 65%. Discrimination against afro-descendants, LGBTI community, immigrants and other minorities continues to be present in the society (particularly in income, education, health and work opportunities) despite legislative and policy initiatives.

2. EU action – key focus areas: The EU priories focused on: (i) combatting all forms of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls, promoting gender equality, combatting discrimination and increasing political participation of women; (ii) promoting the protection of children from all forms of violence, abuse and neglect; (iii) raising awareness about the poor living conditions of people deprived of liberty, to encourage their economic and social reinsertion and to strengthen the civil society organisations (CSOs) on the matter; (iv) promoting the protection, access and use of natural resources, supporting communities affected by environment and climate change and monitoring by NGOs, and to promote citizen's participation and the access to environmental justice.

In 2023, the EUDEL launched the sixth edition of the EU Human Rights Award to give greater visibility to the activities carried out by civil society in Uruguay and to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The award (USD 5,000) was granted to DIANOVA Uruguay, committed to help people suffering mental health problems and addictions.

Three ongoing EU-funded projects under the Human Rights and Democracy Thematic Programme will strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to influence public policies on gender-based violence, to generate knowledge about gender-based violence as a risk factor in the suicides of women, children and adolescents, to promote the respect of

women's rights and to empower female victims of domestic violence through their reintegration in the labour market and to develop their effective access to justice. The EU is also providing technical assistance to the National Women Institute with the cooperation of UN Women. To this end, a contract of EUR 325,000 was signed under the Human Rights and Democracy Thematic Programme.

Concerning the right to access sustainable natural resources and a sound environment, three projects were awarded in 2023 to CSOs, focused on promoting agro-ecology and protecting biodiversity in Uruguay (total budget EUR 1,675,000).

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Uruguay hosted in September 2023 the Second World Summit of the Parliamentary Committees of the Future, dedicated to Artificial Intelligence (AI). The three-day Summit, co-funded by the EU, explored the threats and opportunities posed by the ongoing development of AI, with a focus on the critical role of parliaments and anticipatory parliamentary practice in governance. European Parliament was represented by its Vice-President and (virtually) by the President of the Special Commission on Artificial Intelligence in the Digital Age, MEP Dragoş Tudorache.

As part of its efforts to support the participation of Civil Society Organisations in the preparation of the 4th cycle of Uruguay's Universal Periodic Review in May 2024, the EU Delegation organised a meeting with Member States' Embassies and various NGOs.

4. EU financial engagement: The total value of the EU Delegation´s support to civil society organisations in on-going (2020-2024) projects currently amounts EUR 5,613,213 of which EUR 1,971,000 (35%), specifically promote women's rights and fight against gender violence. Some EU Member States' embassies also provide financing for human right projects.

5. Multilateral context: Uruguay is committed to multilateralism. The country is a UN founding member and is one of the world largest per capita contributors of forces to UN peacekeeping missions. Uruguay ratified the United Nations Convention on International Settlement Agreements Resulting from Mediation, entering into force in September 2023. The EU Delegation and the EU Member States Embassies conducted joint demarches about the Russian invasion to Ukraine and many other issues of multilateral relevance. Those demarches, as well as those related to the UNGA Third Committee, confirmed that Uruguay's positions are in general on the same line as the EU's.

United States of America

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights and democracy situation in the US is positive overall and the US is a leading global promoter of human rights and democracy abroad. The EU nevertheless continues to engage with the US on a number of human rights challenges that persist within the US.

Although the Biden Administration maintained its moratorium on the federal death penalty, the Department of Justice (DOJ) followed up on the Trump Administration's pursuit of a death

sentence for Robert Bowers, the perpetrator of the Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue shooting. In August, Bowers was sentenced to death, making his case the first federal death sentence imposed since President Biden took office. At the state level, 24 people were executed in five states, an increase on the 18 executions carried out in 2022. 27 states still maintain capital punishment as no new states passed repeal legislation and Congress did not pass proposed legislation to abolish the federal death penalty.

Following the US Supreme Court's repeal of the constitutional right to an abortion through its *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation* decision, 14 states had imposed near-total abortion bans by the end of the year. Courts continued to consider legal challenges to the distribution of abortion medication and whether abortion care is covered under the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA), which mandates medical professionals provide life-saving treatment to those in need.

By the end of 2023, 520 anti-LGBTI laws were proposed in state legislatures, most of which focused on restricting access to gender-affirming healthcare and curtailing the discussion of LGBTI issues in schools. Restrictions on trans rights increased as 23 states implemented 84 anti-trans laws in 2023. Congressional Republicans also introduced 37 anti-trans bills, including restrictions on gender-affirming health care, although none of these laws passed.

The Guantánamo Bay detention facility remained open. The Department of Defense resettled five former Guantánamo Bay detainees, but at the end of the year 30 detainees remained at Guantánamo, 16 of whom have been recommended for transfer.

Migration and asylum rights continued to face significant challenges, despite the ending of the enforcement of Title 42, which banned the entry of migrants and asylum seekers into the US on public health grounds. Although the US implemented several new policies to discourage irregular crossings, a historic high of 2.5 million people attempted to enter the US illegally through Mexico over the course of the year.

Throughout 2023, the US continued to promote democracy and human rights abroad, especially regarding accountability for Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine. The US successfully organised the second Summit for Democracy in March, co-hosted by Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Zambia, leading to the publication of the Declaration of the Summit for Democracy.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU and Member States organised a full programme of activities to advance human rights goals, in line with the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024). The EU remains one of the most engaged international actors (alongside like-minded states such as Switzerland) on advancing abolition of the death penalty in the US, with the active support of Member State embassies and consulates across the country. In 2023, the EU submitted written interventions in three individual cases and sent a letter with 26 Member States to the Governor of Louisiana to request that he commute death row sentences following the submission of clemency petitions by nearly every death row prisoner. Counsellors from the EU Delegation to the US, nine Member States, plus Norway and Switzerland also travelled to North Carolina in November to demonstrate EU support for a

grassroots campaign calling on the Governor to commute death row before leaving office in December 2024.

The EU Delegation to the US organised several briefings for Member States with civil society groups and administration officials on capital punishment, Guantánamo Bay detention facility, immigration developments, sentencing reform, arbitrary detention, antisemitism, US support for a tribunal on the crime of aggression against Ukraine, and global democracy developments. The EU Delegation also met with numerous human rights defenders. In addition, the EU Delegation and Member States worked together to promote human rights through a variety of events including on the death penalty, press freedom, religious freedom, and LGBTI rights, among others.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU maintained an open and productive dialogue with the US government on a wide range of human rights issues. This included, amongst others, coordinating closely on, the death penalty, migrant and asylum seekers' rights, further accountability for human rights violations in Ukraine and the promotion of human rights in multilateral fora. In April, the EU and US held their annual consultation on human rights in Brussels, which provided an opportunity to discuss domestic developments, and to explore opportunities for EU-US collaboration and synergies, while also conveying EU concerns on some aspects of US policy such as the continued use of the death penalty. In October, the EU-US Summit reaffirmed the joint commitment to defend the shared values of human rights, democracy and respect for the rule of law.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU Delegation to the US promoted the EU's human rights values by financially supporting a Europe and World Day against the Death Penalty event in conjunction with the French and Spanish Embassies, which featured an art exhibit by an exonerated death row inmate, and a musical performance that included an individual incarcerated on Ohio's death row. The EU Delegation also funded a dinner and panel discussion with the North Carolina Alternatives to the Death Penalty group during the annual death penalty outreach trip to North Carolina. Additionally, the EU Delegation financed an event on the occasion of Pride Month that featured a screening of the Belgian film "Lola by the Sea" and a panel discussion on challenges to LGBTI rights.

5. Multilateral context: The EU and the US strengthened coordination on UN affairs, particularly in response to Russia's illegal and unprovoked military aggression in Ukraine, including through a more systematic monitoring of key resolutions and coordinated efforts to promote and defend the UN Charter. The EU and US worked closely together at the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC), especially in successfully promoting the election of Bulgaria and Albania to represent Eastern Europe, and ensuring Russia was unable to re-join the HRC.

Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: For years, Venezuela has been enduring a deep political and socio-economic crisis, with a serious and worrying impact on the

human rights and humanitarian contexts. This multifaceted crisis has led to the largest migration wave in the history of the continent, with estimated 7.7 million Venezuelans having left the country by November 2023[47]. In terms of civil and political rights, the government-led crackdown on opponents and civil society has quantitatively slowed down in 2023. However, targeted repression on civil society activists and key political figures, such as political disqualifications, arbitrary detentions and harassment continued throughout the year. There were also increasing restrictions to civic space, which limited the work of civil society organisations, as well as to fundamental freedoms, such as the freedom of media (16 radio stations closed in 2013). Moreover, there was a widespread application of Constitutional Law against Hatred, for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance to criminalise and delegitimise the work of human rights defenders and journalists.

The beginning of 2023 was marked by the protests in demand for better salaries and working conditions, whilst the revival of the political agenda with the opposition primary elections of 2023 dominated the domestic agenda in the second half of the year. The landslide victory of Maria Corina Machado (Vente Venezuela) in the primaries of 22 October coincided with an intensification of repression against political opponents in the last quarter of the year. In parallel, the signature of two partial agreements between the government and the opposition on 17 October in Barbados was a milestone setting an electoral road map towards inclusive and competitive elections in 2024.

The climate of violence in border and mining areas continued throughout 2023, often controlled by illegal armed groups (dissident FARC and ELN), local gangs or military groups. NGOs report some 130 disappearances in these regions between January and September 2023. Human Rights Defenders continue denouncing episodes of violent attacks and harassment.

The rights of vulnerable groups are impacted in a differentiated manner by this multifaceted crisis. The NGO CEPAZ recorded 201 femicides between January and September 2023: 9.5% of the victims were girls under 11 years old, and 8.5% of them were between 12 and 17 years old. Independent NGOs denounce the widespread corruption within Venezuelan judicial system, which results in the widespread impunity of the perpetrators. LGBTI persons also face discrimination and a series of legal and social barriers that undermine their rights. However, on a positive note, the Supreme Court issued a decision lifting the ban on gay, lesbian and bisexual people to serve in the military.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Venezuelan civil society has a long tradition of activism, displaying large expertise on documentation and advocacy. Contributing to strengthening of their capacities is one of the key priorities guiding EU human rights action in Venezuela. The EU supports projects that contribute to reinforcing the resilience and capacity of civil society working on human rights such as capacity building for women organisations to participate in public affairs, protection of human rights defenders and human rights education for youth

The EU Delegation has been implementing since 2021 a nexus approach focussing on humanitarian aid, development and peace, by improving basic services, building resilience in the population and promoting dialogue at the community level the actions. The actions remain highly relevant and necessary, supporting the improvement of the living conditions

[47] R4V Platform: https://www.r4v.info/es/home.

and socio-economic rights of the beneficiary population with access and improvement of water and sanitation services and solid waste management.

The EU has continued its work on promoting transparent, inclusive, accountable, participatory, and representative decision-making for example with activities promoting the participation of civil society in the electoral process. The EU has supported fight against disinformation for example through CSO projects combining online fact-checking tools, and various educational resources for different audiences.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU and its MS in Venezuela actively engage in public diplomacy to promote the EU's democratic and human rights values, prioritising the support to independent civil society and relevant stakeholders. On 13 November 2023, the Council decided exceptionally to extend its restrictive measures for six months only instead of one year, until 14 May 2024, in connection with the signature of the Barbados agreements, which were a necessary first step in Venezuela's return to the democratic path. The Venezuelan government and opposition agreed in Barbados to extend an invitation to the EU to observe the presidential elections in 2024. The EU expressed its readiness to consider any formal invitation by the Venezuelan authorities.

4. EU financial engagement: For the third consecutive year, the EU is the main donor to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Venezuela. EU support focuses on the Office's work with civil society and human rights defenders with EUR 3 million for the period 2022-2025 (nearly 60% of their overall funding). The office continues strengthening civil society organisations and working closely with journalists and human rights defenders, including through field missions, trainings and the regular implementation of a mechanism to follow up on cases and situations of concern.

5. Multilateral context: The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which has a field presence in Venezuela since 2019, has published several reports on the human rights situation in Venezuela, the latest in June 2023[48]. The report acknowledges the steady decrease in the number of gross human rights violations documented, including the threats and stigmatisation of civil society activists and other dissenting voices. Yet, these trends remain preoccupying. Other sources of concern for the High Commissioner were the restrictions on public information, as well as on freedoms of opinion and expression. The European Union supports as well all other human rights mechanisms on Venezuela such as the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission and the International Criminal Court (ICC) proceedings. The Venezuelan authorities signed in 2023 a Memorandum of Understanding with the ICC, which comprises the creation of field office of the ICC in Caracas.

In February 2023, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) participated in the government-led Social Dialogue Forum. This initiative is aimed at providing a space for union confederations, employers' organisations and government to discuss ILO Conventions and the criminalisation of union leaders and elections.

[48] See: https://www.civilisac.org/civilis/wp-content/uploads/A_HRC_53_54_unofficial-translation-es.pdf.