

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.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ advisory opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence.