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HRW – Human Rights Watch

World Report 2023 - France

President Emmanuel Macron was re-elected in April in elections that saw historic gains for the far right, and campaigns marred by xenophobic and intolerant discourse by some candidates. The government put in place a series of purchasing power measures to mitigate the effects of inflation but its impact on the most vulnerable remained a major concern. Despite significant efforts to help people fleeing Ukraine, asylum seekers from other crises and conflicts faced abuse. Child protection authorities often failed to provide unaccompanied migrant children with appropriate care and services. Racist violence and discrimination remained a concern. A law against “separatism” threatens freedom of association. Reproductive rights have seen significant progress but deaths of women due to domestic violence increased.

Rule of Law

In its July [2022 Rule of Law report](#), the European Commission noted the concerns raised by civil society and independent authorities with respect to the law on “separatism” that entered into force in early 2022, and its potential impact on civic space, particularly on freedoms of association and expression. The law extends the list of grounds for dissolution of associations by executive decree and is widely viewed to risk particularly impacting Muslims.

In March and May, the Council of State [suspended](#) the dissolution by decree of two pro-Palestinian associations and an [anti-fascist group](#).

Reporters Without Borders moved France up from [34th to 26th place](#) in the press freedom index, citing a positive legal and regulatory framework for press freedom and editorial independence, while alerting about media concentration in the hands of a [few owners](#). In its rule of law report, the European Commission recommended that France enhance transparency of media ownership.

The [controller general of places of deprivation of liberty](#) (CGLPL) and the [French National Consultative Commission for Human Rights](#) (CNCDH) continued to denounce the persistence of prison overcrowding, a major cause of violation of the rights of prisoners.

The state of health emergency introduced in [March 2020](#) in response to Covid-19 was lifted on August 1.

Poverty and Inequality

In July, the government put in place a series of purchasing power [protection measures](#) to mitigate the effects of the cost-of-living crisis, but the crisis’ impact on the most vulnerable remained a major concern. A [survey published in September](#) by Secours Populaire and Ipsos found that 65 percent of those surveyed said they know at least one person who is experiencing poverty, up from 55 percent in 2021. Of those surveyed, 45 percent said they have difficulty paying for their transportation costs, an increase of 15 points compared to 2021, and 41 percent struggle to pay their energy bills.

According to [the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies](#) (INSEE), extreme poverty in France disproportionately affects residents in the overseas departments, particularly single-parent households, people who are unemployed, and pensioners, and results in deprivation of fundamental needs such as food and clothing.

Discrimination and Intolerance

[According to official data](#) released in March, reported racially motivated crimes and offenses increased in 2021 by 7.3 percent compared to 2019. Anti-Muslim acts increased by 38 percent and antisemitic acts decreased by 14 percent. Hate speech, including antisemitic and racist conspiracy speech, increased on social networks. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) raised concerns in its [6th periodic report](#) on France about hate speech becoming more widespread, especially in politics, the media, and social networks. ECRI also noted that Roma people experienced discrimination in all aspects of life.

In June, the Council of State [suspended](#) city regulations in Grenoble that allowed burkinis—full-body swimsuits

worn largely by Muslim women, in many cases to uphold their faith—in public swimming pools.

A [survey](#) published by the International Labour Organization and the Defender of Rights in December 2021 found that more than 1 out of 3 young workers (18 to 24 years old) report having experienced discrimination or discriminatory harassment in their job search or career, particularly because of their origin, ethnicity or nationality, physical appearance, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

In May, SOS Homophobia, a nongovernmental organization, [reporting on events from 2021](#), said that discrimination against LGBT people in the workplace increased, and attacks in schools against LGBT children were more frequent and violent.

In its annual report, the CGLPL [denounced the serious violations](#) of the rights of incarcerated transgender people. It noted that transgender people are most often placed in isolation solely because of their gender identity or assigned to quarters that do not correspond to the gender felt and expressed.

A [law prohibiting “conversion therapies”](#) aimed at changing a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity was enacted in January.

Parliament [adopted](#) in February a bill enabling the Harkis—Muslim Algerians who fought alongside colonial France during the Algerian war of independence—and their families to receive compensation for France’s abandonment and for the inhuman and degrading living conditions many of them endured in camps in France after the war ended in 1962.

Counterterrorism

In June, a Paris [court sentenced the sole surviving perpetrator](#) of the November 2015 Paris attacks to life in prison after a months-long trial that included groundbreaking participation by hundreds of victim-survivors and families of the dead. The court also convicted 19 other men for their involvement in the attacks, which killed 137 people and were claimed by the Islamic State.

The [trial](#) of eight suspects for links to the July 2016 Nice attack, which killed 86 people and injured 458, took place from September to December. The suspects were convicted and given prison sentences ranging [from two to eighteen years](#).

Migrants and Asylum Seekers

According to the United Nations refugee agency, by the end of August [101,369 people fleeing Ukraine had registered for temporary protection in France](#), with access to employment, housing, health, and education. More than 18,000 Ukrainian children have attended school in France, [according to official data](#).

French authorities have continued their policy of [systematically dismantling informal encampments in Northern France](#), confiscating tents and tarps and often personal belongings, according to humanitarian and human rights organizations. The latter [have denounced](#) the difference in treatment between Ukrainians and people fleeing other crisis or conflict zones.

Between January and November, the number of irregular crossings of the English Channel [exceeded 40,000, according to the British Ministry of Defence](#). French civil society groups blamed [hostile](#) policies, including lack of adequate reception conditions for asylum seekers, that encourage people to try dangerous routes to England.

Although France has provided significant support to Afghan evacuees fleeing the August 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, evacuees [face trauma and psychological distress](#) upon arrival in France aggravated by a significant gap in urgent and adequate psychosocial support.

In April, the CGLPL [denounced the undignified and inhumane conditions](#) that persist in some migrant waiting zones and administrative detention centers.

Children’s Rights

Unaccompanied migrant children, especially those whose underage status was rejected by the authorities, are often denied the protection to which they are entitled and live in [extremely precarious conditions](#).

In March, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) [condemned](#) France for inhuman and degrading treatment of a Georgian child locked in an administrative detention center for 14 days.

In February, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child [found](#) that France’s refusal to repatriate French children detained in camps in northeast Syria violates their right to life and their right not to be subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment. In September, the ECtHR [ruled](#) that France violated the rights of five French women and children detained in those camps by refusing to repatriate them without any formal review or official decision. France [repatriated](#) 77 children and 32 women from northeast Syria between July and October, but around 150 children, 60 women, and an estimated 60 French men remain arbitrarily detained in the region.

Following [reports](#) that the government had built and offered two online learning products for children in English and German during the Covid-19 pandemic that were transmitting children’s data to advertising technology companies, the Education Ministry removed all data surveillance from its products.

In July, the [Defender of Rights expressed](#) concern about lack of access to education for children in overseas territories, aggravated, as elsewhere in France, by the health crisis and noted that children with disabilities continue to face barriers to education.

Women’s Rights

A [law](#) enacted in March increased the legal timeframe for an abortion from 12 to 14 weeks. A February [decree](#) prolonged the legal timeframe for and increased access to medication abortion, a safe alternative to invasive surgical procedures.

[According](#) to the High Council for Equality between Women and Men, wage gaps continue to widen, and women are disproportionately represented in low-wage, less secure jobs, exposing them to in-work poverty. Telecommuting and part-time work, often linked to childcare responsibilities, reinforce women’s “invisibility” in the workplace and underrepresentation in senior positions, and has a disproportionately negative impact on women’s health. Nearly half of French women surveyed (46 percent) have been victims of sexist acts or comments at work. France has not yet ratified the International Labour Organization convention on violence and harassment in employment.

[According](#) to the Interior Ministry, the number of deaths of women due to domestic violence increased by 20 percent between 2020 and 2021. In [a survey](#) by the feminist group NousToutes, which advocates for action on violence against women, 66 percent of respondents reported poor police response when reporting sexual violence between 2019 and 2021, including dismissive attitudes, victim-blaming, and refusal to take complaints. This increased to 81 percent of non-binary respondents. While the government [announced new measures](#) to fight against such violence and protect survivors, including the creation of 11,000 emergency accommodation places in 2023, associations [criticized insufficient](#) government efforts.

Disability Rights

In July, [Parliament voted](#) to remove consideration of a spouse’s income for the purposes of calculating disability benefits.

After a [journalistic investigation](#) in January exposed neglect and abuse in nursing homes for older people run by the company Orpea, an [administrative investigation](#) and a [Senate commission of inquiry](#) found shortcomings in the control of these establishments and insufficient resources allocated to them. A [criminal investigation](#) was ongoing at time of writing.

International Justice

In response to a November 2021 [Court of Cassation](#) decision to quash the indictment of a Syrian accused of crimes against humanity, civil society organizations highlighted the limitations of France’s universal jurisdiction law. The Public Prosecutor’s office [called](#) for a legislative change, and in June, a [French member of parliament](#), with the support of [a Syrian victims group](#), filed a bill proposing the removal of limitations in the law.

In July, the Paris Assize Court [sentenced](#) a former Rwandan prefect to 20 years in prison for complicity in genocide. On November 2, the Court of Assizes in Paris [sentenced](#) a former Liberian rebel commander to life imprisonment for wartime atrocities in Liberia.

Climate Change Policy and Impacts

As one of the [EU’s biggest greenhouse gas emitters](#), France is contributing to the climate crisis taking a growing toll on human rights around the globe. In a June [report](#), the [High Council for the Climate](#) said that, while progress has been made, the government’s efforts remain too slow to achieve the current 2030 target to reduce emissions by 40 percent. Following the release of the report the [government has pledged to make the target more ambitious](#). France has already warmed by [1.7 degrees](#) and severe climate impacts such as heat waves and [forest fires](#) continue to become more frequent and intense.

Some measures of the purchasing power package put in place to fight inflation have been [strongly criticized](#) by deputies and environmental groups because they would harm the environment by promoting the development of fossil fuels.

Foreign Policy

During its six-month European Union Council presidency, France organized hearings on the rule of law situation in Hungary and Poland. But France failed to use its Presidency to take meaningful steps to address serious abuses against migrants and asylum seekers at the EU’s external borders.

France contributed to the international response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and in the fight against impunity for serious violations committed in Ukraine. France has notably [supported](#) the [opening](#) of an International Criminal Court investigation into crimes committed in Ukraine and supported the UN General Assembly resolution suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). France and Mexico drafted a General Assembly resolution adopted in April that demanded Russia allow humanitarian aid access across Ukraine. It also supported other UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions and initiatives condemning Russia’s invasion and atrocities.

At the September session of the HRC, France supported a resolution establishing a Special Rapporteur on Russia to monitor and report on the human rights crisis in the country.

But France’s proclaimed commitment to the universal values of human rights and the fight against impunity has been missing in other situations of serious violations of human rights crises. France’s unconditional support and arms sales to Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia continued despite their deplorable human rights records. With a total order intake of €4.5 billion in 2021, Egypt is France’s [largest](#) arms customer. In December 2021, a reportedly historic €17 billion [contract](#) for the sale of 80 Rafale fighter aircrafts was signed between France and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia is reportedly among the top five largest [buyers](#) of French arms, despite the war crimes committed by the Saudi-UAE military coalition in Yemen. On July 19, President Macron [awarded](#) the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, France’s highest honor, to UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan during a state visit to Paris. On July 28, the French president [welcomed](#) Saudi Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman to the Elysee Palace, contributing to the latter’s rehabilitation on the international scene despite the escalation of domestic [repression](#) and the crown prince’s approving the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, according to a United States intelligence [report](#).

Despite President Macron’s promises to the Lebanese people in the aftermath of the catastrophic Beirut port explosion in August 2020, France [failed](#) to take action at the UN Human Rights Council to establish an international investigation mechanism into the blast.

France has deepened its political and economic ties with India while failing to raise public concerns about the escalating crackdown on civil society and discriminatory policies against religious minorities, particularly Muslims, under India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In August, France completed [the withdrawal](#) of its Barkhane counterterrorism forces from Mali, prompted by deteriorating relations with Malian authorities and the presence of forces from the private Russian military security company Wagner. The pullout took place amid rising violence against civilians by Islamist armed groups and Malian security forces and their auxiliaries. The French journalist Olivier Dubois, [kidnapped](#) in Gao region on April 8, 2021, is still held hostage by Al-Qaeda affiliated Jamaa Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

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