

Bosnia And Herzegovina 2024

Criminalization of defamation in Republika Srpska and progressively more restrictive measures countrywide were reflected in a significantly lower ranking in the World Press Freedom Index. Roma and returnees from the Bosnian war continued to face widespread discrimination. Reception conditions for migrants and refugees improved. Genocide denial and glorification of convicted war criminals persisted.

Background

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) remained deeply divided and politically fragile. In May, Republika Srpska (RS) decided to draft an agreement on “peaceful disassociation” from the Federation of BiH and passed entity laws creating parallel legal and institutional frameworks in contravention of the BiH constitution. The UN High Representative in BiH, Christian Schmidt, accused the RS authorities of continuing to “actively subvert” the state.

In March, the EU opened accession negotiations with BiH, a major milestone despite the lack of progress on key reforms. The authorities’ failure to adopt the draft Reform Agenda 2024-2027 left BiH as the only Western Balkan country outside of the EU’s Growth Plan.

Major national parties held most municipal assemblies in the October local elections, but opposition parties had more success in urban centres.

Following an extended heatwave in summer, unprecedented torrential rain in October caused floods and landslides, killing 26 people and causing the destruction of hundreds of homes in several municipalities across the country.

Freedom of expression and association

Journalists were often targets of verbal threats and attacks, including by public officials.

In January, amendments to the RS Criminal Code classifying defamation as a criminal offence entered into force.

A media investigation in June found that recent legal changes and progressively more restrictive measures imposed under the pretext of fighting disinformation had reduced freedom of expression, especially on social media, in both RS and the Federation of BiH.

In April, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association called on the authorities to urgently reverse restrictive laws and practices that threatened civic space, social cohesion and democratic institutions.

Protests in support of Palestine took place throughout the year without restrictions.

In May, the RS government withdrew its controversial Law on Special Registry and Publicity of the Work of NGOs from parliamentary procedure. This would have required non-profit organizations to enrol in a special registry, subjected them to increased legal oversight and potentially classified them as “agents of foreign influence”. RS president Milorad Dodik said the law would be reintroduced after “further harmonization” with European standards.

BiH dropped from 64th to 81st place in the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders.

Discrimination

Discriminatory provisions in the constitution and electoral laws at state level continued to deny adequate political representation to people who did not identify as one of the country's "constituent peoples": Bosniak, Croat or Serb.

There was no progress in implementing previous judgments and recommendations of the European Court of Human Rights, which had found the power-sharing arrangements in the country discriminatory.

Roma continued to face social exclusion and discrimination. Most lived in chronic poverty in inadequate housing and had limited access to formal employment or public services including healthcare and education. The CERD Committee urged authorities to take urgent steps to address systemic racial discrimination against Roma.

In the Federation of BiH, the long-standing "two schools under one roof" system of separate schools in the same building with separate curricula for Bosniak and Croat pupils, persisted, despite multiple court rulings finding the practice to constitute discrimination.

In the lead-up to 11 July, the day chosen to commemorate the events in Srebrenica in 1995, incidents of violence against returnees and internally displaced persons from the Bosnian war of 1992 to 1995 increased. Returnees also continued to face limited access to education, healthcare, social protection and employment.

Violence against women and girls

Gender-based violence remained widespread, with at least 11 women killed by a partner or family member.

In June, the Federation of BiH parliament adopted a Strategy for Prevention and Combating of Domestic Violence 2024-2027. It aimed to strengthen violence prevention measures, improve support for victims and survivors, and set up programmes for work with perpetrators.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

In August, a boat carrying 30 refugees and migrants, mostly from Syria, capsized on the Drina River on the border with Serbia, killing at least 11 people, including a nine-month-old baby.

The authorities considerably improved housing conditions for migrants and refugees in reception centres, but the CERD Committee expressed concern about the continued administrative detention of migrants, including children.

Right to truth, justice and reparation

In May, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution designating 11 July as an International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica.¹ Politicians in the RS continued to publicly deny genocide and war crimes and glorify convicted war criminals. The CERD Committee called on the authorities in BiH to investigate and prosecute all incidents of hate speech.

Courts in RS continued to apply statutes of limitations barring many civil compensation claims filed by the victims of war crimes, especially in cases of sexual violence, and required victims to cover legal fees when their claims were dismissed.

More than 7,500 people remained missing as a result of the Bosnian war.
