

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.