

programme assisted with further upgrading the Central Election Commission's Electronic Platform on Financial Monitoring and Reporting in the run-up to the May 2025 parliamentary elections, drafting improvements to the laws on conflict of interest and on establishing an asset recovery office. It also supported the relevant agencies in processing compensations for properties confiscated during the communist regime, and in implementing judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

5. Multilateral context: Albania continued its dialogue and cooperation with European and international human rights organisations and monitoring bodies, notably with the UN, Council of Europe and the OSCE. Albania continued playing an active role in the UN Security Council since October 2023 and took a strategic role in the new geopolitical context marked by the war in Ukraine and in Gaza. 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: In 2024, the functioning of democratic institutions continued to be undermined by persistent discriminatory elements in the constitutional structure, and the *Republika Srpska* entity continues not to implement the decisions of the Constitutional Court. Local elections took place on 6 October 2024 based on the state-level election law.

The general framework for fundamental rights is largely in place but needs to be improved. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to urgently adopt constitutional and electoral reforms to ensure equality and non-discrimination of all citizens, implementing the ECtHR *Sejdić-Finci* case law. Parliamentary oversight over the executives remained weak. The executives continued having little capacity for coordination and policy planning. Independent institutions remained weak. There is no parliamentary monitoring of compliance with their recommendations. Political pressure, intimidation and harassment against journalists continued, including physical and verbal attacks, with no appropriate institutional follow-up. All prosecutors' offices and law enforcement agencies have appointed contact points for journalists. Political influence over public broadcasters persisted, the relevant legislation was not implemented, and their financial sustainability was ever more in danger. In the *Republika Srpska* entity, freedom of assembly remained restricted and civil society organisations continued operating in a constrained environment. While *Republika Srpska* withdrew its draft law on targeting civil society groups as 'foreign agents', the criminal penalties for defamation in the entity continued to have a chilling effect. Six cantons adopted legislation aiming to align with European standards on freedom of assembly, following the example of the Brčko District. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to implement court rulings to end divided education and ensure inclusive and non-discriminatory education for all, eliminating the practice of 'two schools under one roof'. Gender-based violence, including femicides, ill-treatment of detainees and the insufficient protection of minorities, including the Roma, continued to cause concern.

For more information, please refer to the European Commission's: [Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024 Report](#).

2. EU action – key areas: The EU continued to closely monitor the respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights, including the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, the rights of persons in vulnerable situations including persons belonging to minorities, as well as gender equality, as part of the EU integration process. Half of the fourteen key priorities set out in the 2019 Commission Opinion on the EU membership application of Bosnia and Herzegovina 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: In March 2024, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and invited the Commission to prepare the negotiating framework with a view to its adoption by the Council the moment all relevant steps set out in the Commission’s recommendation of October 2022 are taken. In parallel, the Commission was preparing the screening exercise. The Commission regularly held meetings with Bosnia and Herzegovina’s authorities under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU support via the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) continued focusing on the areas of judiciary (EUR 6.4 million) while support to civil society and the media through the Civil Society and Media Facility amounted to EUR 7.8 million 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 a civil society resource centre. The Civil Society Facility also continued to contribute to building the capacities of governments to include civil society into decision-making (EUR 944,750).

EU funding contributed to accounting for missing persons (EUR 3 million) as well as supporting and monitoring the processing of war crime cases (EUR 5 million). EU funds provided support to the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees, including on the monitoring and reporting on the needs of those in vulnerable situations (Human Rights Database) through the EU4Inclusion project (EUR 279,500). The EU also provided support to improve the living conditions women living in vulnerable situations (EUR 500,000). The Regional Housing Programme delivered 2,778 homes to families in very vulnerable situations, benefitting some 9,000 persons.

The NDICI Thematic Programme for Human Rights and Democracy continued to support initiatives addressing women victims of violence, promoting equal enjoyment of human rights by LGBTI persons, the rights of the child, the rights of Roma women and girls, supporting the implementation of the UN Guiding principles on businesses and human rights, supporting independent media and freedom of expression, strengthening access to information and promoting reconciliation and transitional justice (EUR 2.3M).

In parallel, the EU – Council of Europe Horizontal Facility (Phase III) with EUR 4.498 million for Bosnia and Herzegovina financed activities aimed at strengthening human rights, including the treatment of persons in detention, preventing and combatting trafficking in human beings, supporting an equal, inclusive and tolerant society, quality education for all, and freedom of expression and of the media. Among several concrete deliverables, the EU-CoE Horizontal

Facility supported the fifth Pride March in Sarajevo (around 2,000 participants), and the establishment of the first LGBTI shelter.

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 needs to address a significant number of recommendations by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the UN Committee against Torture and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

Republic of North Macedonia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The legal framework on the protection of fundamental rights remained partially aligned with the EU *acquis* and European standards. The country continued to meet its general obligations on fundamental rights, but legislation was not implemented in a systematic manner.

The Macedonian Association of Young Lawyers and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights appointed by the Parliament in 2023 to serve as the civil control mechanism within the Ombudsman's office did not start functioning due to lack of funds. There were no significant improvements in implementing the Ombudsman's Office recommendations by the public authorities, and the Parliament did not complete the long-awaited revision of the Law on the Ombudsman's Office. The services for victims of gender-based violence still required improvement and proper budgeting to meet the standards laid down by the Istanbul Convention. Mechanisms for implementing and monitoring gender equality policy was not effective and still required strengthening. There was no progress in adopting a national action plan for LGBTI persons. Persons with disabilities continued to face discrimination, social exclusion and barriers. No progress was made on the protection of personal data. The overall situation in the penitentiary system remained dire and prisons overcrowded. Some infrastructures were renovated and improved in several prison facilities. However, the lack of adequate healthcare remained an issue of serious concern. The recommendations of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (on the treatment of detained and convicted persons) were not addressed. The government remained committed to the Poznan Declaration priorities, however further efforts are still needed to fully promote the inclusion and protection of Roma and tackle anti-gypsyism.

Media freedom faced challenges despite some progress in legal reforms and institutional oversight. Attacks and threats against journalists persisted, highlighting the need for stronger protective mechanisms. The strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) exposed vulnerabilities in defending press freedom. Challenges persisted regarding the transparency of media ownership and concentration.

The functioning of democratic institutions was mostly satisfactory. The OSCE/ODIHR concluded that the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2024 were competitive, and fundamental freedoms were respected. The election legislation provides a suitable framework for holding democratic elections. However, campaign rules, access to the media and distribution of State funding are not adequately regulated.

For more information, please refer to the European Commission's: [North Macedonia 2024 Report](#)

2. EU action on Human Rights and Democracy - key focus areas: The EU continued to monitor closely human rights in North Macedonia within the framework of the EU accession negotiations. Key focus areas included freedom of assembly and association, freedom of expression and freedom of media, the work of the Ombudsman Office and implementation of its recommendations, non-discrimination, including the rights of LGBTI persons and of persons in vulnerable situations, Roma inclusion, measures undertaken to prevent and ensure accountability for torture and ill-treatment within the prison system, respect, protection and fulfilment of the rights of the child, rights of persons with disabilities, as well as gender equality and combating gender-based violence.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Regular political and economic dialogue between North Macedonia and EU continued mainly in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The 18th meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Subcommittee on Justice, Freedom, and Security 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.

4. EU financial engagement: North Macedonia continued to benefit from funding under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III). Under the IPA III Civil Society Facility and Media Programme, support continued for Civil Society's efforts to bolster participatory democracy, EU integration, empowering women and youth and promoting human rights (EUR 3.3 million). Media associations implemented initiatives on freedom of expression, including enhancing the support for journalists, social and economic rights, and supporting the quality of local journalism. An EU-twinning project supported the media regulator in the implementation of the Media Directive, as well as the public broadcaster to expand audience through improved internet and social media use (EUR 788,000). The EU-funded grant on rule of law continued to support strengthening of human rights capacities and awareness across various sectors (EUR 10 million). Efforts to combat gender-based violence, enhance child rights policies, improve the probation system and non-discrimination marked significant steps.

Under the NDICI Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy, ten new grants (EUR 1 million) were awarded to civil society organisations, aiming to improve the equal enjoyment of human rights by LGBTI persons, gender equality and gender-sensitive education, investigative journalism, conditions for participatory democracy, services for marginalised groups and those in vulnerable situations, the situation of non-majority communities, and inmates in correctional facilities and migrants.

Cooperation with the Council of Europe continued under the Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye – Phase III with EUR 4.765 million for North Macedonia focusing on rule of law, democracy and human rights and fighting organised economic crime.

5. Multilateral context: North Macedonia continued its active cooperation with international organisations, notably the UN, Council of Europe and the OSCE. The country was reviewed during the 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) dialogue at the Human Rights Council and received 205 recommendations, of which it approved 193. Most

recommendations concerned gender-based violence and gender equality, independence of justice, penitentiary conditions, right to education, rights of persons with disabilities and vulnerable groups as well as trafficking in human beings. They also encouraged to strengthen the independent Human Rights Institutions and accede to further International Human Rights instruments. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) published in May 2024 the report of its periodic visit to North Macedonia. North Macedonia has an observer status in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

Georgia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The human rights and democracy situation in Georgia deteriorated significantly in 2024. The adoption of several legislative packages and amendments severely undermined the legal framework for upholding fundamental rights, infringing in particular the rights to freedom of association, expression and privacy, as well as the right to take part in public affairs and the prohibition of discrimination. This included the law on ‘transparency of foreign influence’, the legislative package on ‘family values and protection of minors’, as well as additional legislative amendments to laws on assemblies and demonstrations, on police, on administrative offences and on public service. Peaceful protesters, civil society activists, opposition leaders and media representatives participating in demonstrations faced threats, intimidation, arbitrary detentions and excessive use of force by the authorities, there were several reports of torture. The situation deteriorated following the Parliamentary elections and a statement by the Georgian authorities of their intention not to pursue the opening of accession negotiations until the end of 2028. Reports from civil society organisations, the Public Defender of Georgia and preliminary findings of the United Against Torture consortium indicated recurring, severe and intentional violence by the police, lack of accountability for acts of torture and ill-treatment, and suggested a systematic and coordinated policy of repression.

The conduct of the 2024 parliamentary elections was marked by irregularities, political polarisation and their results were not recognised by the opposition. The OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission report identified several irregularities and procedural inconsistencies and raised concerns about the effects of adopted legislation on the election process, as well as the lack of independence of institutions involved in the elections. The recent amendments reversed some of the previous positive provisions, such as the abolition of gender quotas, other temporary special measures, and amendments to the composition of the Central Election Commission. Further changes were introduced to the Electoral code with a view to favouring the ruling party in the 2025 local elections. A comprehensive electoral reform requested by the EU and recommended by the Venice Commission’s opinion was not initiated.

The key provisions of the Strategy on the Protection of Human Rights and the Action Plan require amending, including on LGBTI persons and the protection of privacy. As a result of legislative activities and the continued prevalence of homophobic hate speech, LGBTI persons were facing an increasingly hostile and stigmatising atmosphere. Tbilisi Pride did not take place due to fear of violence. Backsliding also occurred in judiciary with several negative developments undermining the independence and integrity of the judicial system. In particular, judicial appointment procedures and some newly introduced legal provisions did