

women entrepreneurs under the EU-funded project ‘Improving the Competitiveness of Women in the Private Sector of the Labour Market’, which included a legislative review and a survey; an awareness campaign under the ‘Stop Human Trafficking’ project. In October 2024, EU Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen met with women entrepreneurs in Ashgabat.

Turkmenistan participated in the EEAS ‘Inspire Inclusion Portrait Gallery’; on the eve of the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris, an exhibition ‘Les Elles des Jeux’ opened at the French Institute in Turkmenistan. Participants from Turkmenistan benefited from regional programmes and projects, including the EBRD’s ‘Advice for Small Businesses project’, the Regional Conference on Gender and Energy, organised by SECCA; and the Young Women 4 Peace Initiative.

**3. EU bilateral political engagement:** The EU voiced its concerns about a number of individual cases through accessible diplomatic means, including verbal notes and démarches. Human rights were raised during bilateral engagements, including in the framework of the annual Joint Committee meeting and the Human Rights Dialogue. For the latter, the EUSR for Human Rights travelled to Ashgabat, and the level of the chair on the Turkmen side was raised to Deputy Foreign Minister.

**4. EU financial engagement:** The protection and promotion of human rights, with particular emphasis on the 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.

The EU-funded project ‘Stop Human Trafficking’, implemented by the Turkmen CSO Ynam is a pertinent example of an initiative with a ground-breaking effort to raise public awareness about the risks and challenges of migration, the rules of staying in foreign countries, and address irregular migration and human trafficking. By addressing vulnerabilities at the root, the project strengthened Turkmenistan’s ability to counter human trafficking and protect its citizens abroad. The ‘Stop Human Trafficking’ project exemplified the positive impact of EU-supported initiatives in addressing global challenges at the local level. Its success sets a benchmark for similar initiatives across Central Asia.

**5. Multilateral context:** Turkmenistan maintained a low level of engagement with multilateral human rights institutions. Turkmenistan has never been a member of the HRC and is not substantially active as an observer. No UN Special Procedures visited the country since 2008 despite standing invitation extended in 2018. Turkmenistan participated in the OSCE ODIHR HDIM in September 2024. Human rights concerns were raised by the European Parliament, the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, as well as within the OSCE and UN frameworks. The EU continued encouraging Turkmenistan to seek 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.

## Republic of Uzbekistan

**1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation:** The general picture for human rights and democracy in Uzbekistan in 2024 was mixed. There were some steps forward, notably the strengthening of protection measures from domestic violence and the ratification of several ILO Conventions. However, the space for political participation remained limited and legislative and local elections, held on 27 October 2024 and observed by an OSCE mission,

lacked political pluralism. The elections did result however in a significant increase of women representatives in both houses. Pressure on independent journalists and bloggers increased and further restrictions on the freedom of association could be observed. Other key concerns remain the criminalisation of consensual homosexual relationships, torture in pre-trial detention, forced evictions, restrictive registration requirements for NGOs and the lack of independence of the judiciary. Full transparency and accountability following the violent unrest in Nukus in July 2022 continued to be lacking. While the Investigative Commission presented its report to the Oliy Majlis, only the summary was published so far. It follows the official narrative and does not address the allegations of torture of protesters in pre-trial detention.

**2. EU action - key focus areas:** During 2024, 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 2020-2027.

The EU Delegation in Tashkent kept in constant touch with human rights defenders, civil activists and registered NGOs. The EU 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 local and legislative elections. Staff from the EU Delegation also attended and observed key trials in cases involving human rights defenders.

A prison visit (together with the embassies of the UK and the US) was organised on 13 June 2024. While the visit was largely symbolic in nature, it represented a major first step towards further engagement on this issue.

On 11 December 2024, to mark International Human Rights Day, the EU Delegation (jointly with the US, UK and Swiss Embassies) hosted a round table on 'Registration, Functioning and Financing of the Civil Society Organisations in Uzbekistan'.

**3. EU bilateral political engagement:** As part of the EU's structured dialogue with Uzbekistan, the Human Rights Dialogue and Justice and Home Affairs Subcommittee were held in Tashkent in June 2024. The EU used this opportunity to engage in a detailed discussion with the government of Uzbekistan on a broad range of human rights and democracy-related issues, including concerns over the freedom of expression, pressure on civil society activists, perceptions that the space for civic engagement in Uzbekistan is shrinking and on forced evictions.

The GSP+ monitoring cycle 2024/2025 provided a further opportunity to engage with Uzbekistan on human rights.

The (then) EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Ambassador Terhi Hakala, visited Uzbekistan three times in 2024. In her meetings with President Mirziyoyev and other members of his government human rights issues were regularly raised. The EUSR also engaged with civil society and media representatives during her visits.

**4. EU financial engagement:** The projects under the EU's Human Rights and Democracy Instruments mentioned in last year's report are ongoing. As a result of the call for proposals in 2024, five new initiatives were selected for funding for a total amount of EUR 2 million. These new initiatives, implemented by CSOs, are focused on issues such as women empowerment, gender-based violence, youth engagement, enhancing civic participation, media skills and others.

Following the 2023 call for proposals under the CSO Thematic Programme, seven EU-funded projects with a total value of EUR 2.9 million started their activities. Projects are focussing on enhancing the capacities of civil society organizations for inclusive development, advocating for gender equality, advancing the Green Agenda, and on enhancing gender-responsiveness. They are expected to be implemented between 2024 and 2026. In addition, a series of capacity-building trainings for nearly 60 CSOs was successfully concluded in October 2024.

**5. Multilateral context:** In the UN General Assembly, Uzbekistan abstained on all country-specific resolutions, with the exception of those relating to Gaza. The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, Balakrishnan Rajagopal visited Uzbekistan from 18 to 30 August 2024. The final outcome report of the fourth Universal Periodical Review (UPR) of Uzbekistan was adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in its 55<sup>th</sup> session in June 2024. Uzbekistan has, however, not yet presented a roadmap for the implementation of the 2023 UPR recommendations.

## 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 the socio-economic situation suffering because of years of economic recession, concomitant worsening of health and quality-of-life indicators, and the first local elections postponed *sine die*. The country has made progress with the implementation of the Angolan National Strategy for Human Rights, adopted in 2020. Efforts to finance, staff and operationalise the network of Local Human Rights Committees are ongoing. So far, 124 out of 164 municipal committees are operational, as are the provincial committees in 18 provinces<sup>16</sup>.

Throughout 2024, concerns have been raised regarding the reduced space for civil society with the consequent limitation of freedom of expression, assembly and association. This might be a consequence of a number of laws approved or under discussion, which also bring further potential restrictions to freedom of expression, association and assembly. These include the Law on National Security and the Law on Crimes of Vandalism of Public Goods and Services already adopted and in effect; the Draft Law on the Statute of NGOs, which has been ‘frozen’ for more than a year in the National Assembly. Presidential Decree No. 214/24, approved on 18 October, creates the Institute for the Supervision of Community Activities, which has the mandate and powers of ‘monitoring, supervision and evaluation of programmes and projects implemented by Non-Profit Organizations that operate in Angola and their financial flows’.

Pluralism and inclusiveness in the information environment in Angola are limited. Nevertheless, in 2024, Angola’s position in the annual World Press Index improved, moving from 125th out of 180 in 2023 to 104th in 2024. Despite considerable female representation in politics, gender inequalities remain. As for child rights, the situation is dire, with about 30% of new-borns not registered and education and health rights not universally guaranteed. The

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The number of provinces raised to 21 from January 2025.