

# Contribution to European Commission's Rule of Law report

2025



UNITED NATIONS  
**HUMAN RIGHTS**  
Regional Office Europe

## RULE OF LAW & HUMAN RIGHTS

The 'rule of law' is a concept at the heart of the United Nations' mission. It refers to a principle of governance which is consistent with international human rights standards ([S/2004/616](#)). There is no rule of law within societies if human rights are not protected and human rights cannot be protected in societies without a strong rule of law. This interlinkage is reiterated by the UN Secretary-General in his [New Vision for the Rule of Law](#): *"Human rights and the rule of law are mutually reinforcing – the advancement of the rule of law is essential for the protection of all human rights, and human rights are central to the rule of law."*

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), also known as UN Human Rights Office, is mandated by the UN General Assembly to promote and protect the enjoyment and full realization, by all people, of all human rights. As part of its mandate, OHCHR works to mainstream human rights to strengthen the rule of law ([Management Plan 2024 - 2027](#)).

Established in 2009, OHCHR Regional Office for Europe (ROE) aims to advance the protection and promotion of human rights in the European Union and its member States. ROE works to mainstream international human rights standards to strengthen the rule of law in the EU by engaging in and contributing to the European Commission's Rule of Law Report. ROE furthermore promotes the UN human rights mechanisms and processes by giving their work visibility at the regional level.

## OHCHR ROE'S CONTRIBUTION

The contribution by OHCHR Regional Office for Europe (ROE) is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and nine international human rights treaties:

- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CAT)
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CERD)
- International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW)
- International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CPED)

The current submission consists of a compilation of findings and recommendations contained in reports of UN international human rights mechanisms including human rights treaty bodies, special procedures and the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council. It also includes statements and reports by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and his Office.

# UN HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISM

Each of the nine international human rights treaties creates a **human rights treaty body or committee of independent experts** to monitor the implementation of the provisions of the treaty. With the support from OHCHR, the treaty bodies:

- consider reports submitted by State parties detailing how they are implementing the treaty;
- adopt general comments interpreting the treaty provisions, and organize discussions on themes related to the treaties; and
- consider complaints (communications) from individuals alleging that their rights have been violated by a State party, provided that the State has accepted the complaints procedure.

The **UN Human Rights Council (HRC)** is a subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly and the main intergovernmental body within the UN responsible for human rights. It meets at the UN Office at Geneva in three regular sessions each year, and may convene special sessions to respond to urgent human rights situations. The HRC benefits from substantive, technical, and secretariat support from OHCHR.

The **special procedures of the UN Human Rights Council** are independent human rights experts with mandates to report and advise on human rights from a thematic or country-specific perspective. As of November 2024, there are 46 thematic and 14 country mandates. With the support of OHCHR, special procedures undertake country visits, act on individual cases of alleged violations and concerns of a broader nature by sending communications (letters of allegation) to States and other entities; contribute to the development of international human rights standards; and engage in advocacy.

The **Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council** is a State-led mechanism that conducts a peer review of the human rights situation of each UN Member State once every 4.5 years. It is carried out by the UPR Working Group of the Human Rights Council. In each review, the State under review reports on the actions it has taken to improve its human rights situation and overcome challenges to the enjoyment of human rights. It also receives recommendations from UN Member States for improvement. In addition to the national reports of States under review, the UPR is informed by compilations of stakeholder information and UN system reports.

In recent years, States have established **National Mechanisms for Implementation, Reporting and Follow-up (NMIRF)**, some of whom with the technical assistance of UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). This mechanism, which is often based within the ministry of foreign affairs, has a mandate which includes following-up on all treaty body obligations, UPR recommendations, as well as recommendations from other international and regional human rights mechanisms, and generally works closely with government ministries, national human rights institutions and civil society organizations. (See: [National Mechanisms for Reporting and Follow-up: A Study of State engagement with International Human Rights Mechanisms](#); [A Practical Guide to Effective State Engagement with International Human Rights Mechanisms](#))

The **Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)** also known as **UN Human Rights Office** is the main human rights entity of the UN to protect and promote all human rights for everyone everywhere. The High Commissioner for Human Rights leads OHCHR. He is the principal human rights official of the United Nations.

# INSIDE THE CONTRIBUTION BULGARIA

- Period of contribution: January - December 2024
- Contents of contribution:
  - The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) adopted its concluding observation on Bulgaria ([CRC/C/BGR/CO/6-7](#)) on 2 February 2024 and the report was published on 15 March 2024.
- Forthcoming relevant information (January - May 2025): N/A
- Resources:
  - [Rule of Law in Europe | OHCHR](#)
  - OHCHR country page - [Bulgaria](#)
  - [Universal Human Rights Index \(UHRI\)](#) allows you to explore over 230.000 observations and recommendations made by the international human rights protection system (treaty bodies, special procedures and the Universal Periodic Review)

## Pillar I: JUSTICE SYSTEM

There is no true respect for the rule of law without a judicial power guaranteeing compliance therewith. Judges guarantee compliance with laws and with it the reality of democratic coexistence. The duty to promote equality among all persons, especially to ensure that everyone has the right to access justice on an equal basis with others, rests with the judiciary. Guaranteeing access to justice is indispensable to democratic governance and the rule of law, as well as to combating inequality and exclusion.

Respecting the rule of law through fostering the separation of powers and the independence of justice ensures protection of human rights. The judiciary is the ultimate guarantors of human rights. However, at the same time, judges, prosecutors and lawyers are subject to attacks and violations of their rights, including threats, intimidation, external interference in conducting their professional activities, arbitrary detention, prosecution, and killings. These attacks threaten the impartiality and independence of the judiciary and the legal profession and in turn, deter their role as guarantors of human rights and the rule of law.

For more info:

- [Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary](#)
- [Human rights in the administration of justice: a manual on human rights for judges, prosecutors and lawyers](#)
- [International principles and guidelines on access to justice for persons with disabilities](#)
- [General Recommendation No. 33 on women's access to justice \(CEDAW/C/GC/33\)](#)
- [Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers](#)

### **Quality of justice – accessibility of courts (legal aid)**

- The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that the State party:

- (a) Ensure that all children have access to: (i) confidential, child-friendly and independent complaint mechanisms in schools, foster care systems, alternative care settings and detention for reporting all forms of violence, abuse, discrimination and other violations of their rights; and (ii) legal support and age-appropriate information on access to counselling and remedies, including compensation and rehabilitation;
- (b) Raise awareness among children of their right to file a complaint under existing mechanisms;
- (c) Ensure capacity-building for judges, prosecutors, police officers and other professionals working with children in the justice system on child-friendly justice procedures, children's rights and the Convention. ([CRC/C/BGR/CO/6-7, para. 11](#))

## Pillar II: ANTI-CORRUPTION

Corruption has a destructive effect on State institutions and it undermines the functioning and legitimacy of institutions and processes, the rule of law and ultimately the State itself. In particular, corruption effects on the capacity of States to respect, protect and fulfil human rights particularly of those persons and groups in situation of vulnerability and marginalization.

Corruption pose a major challenge to many societies as they divert public revenues and cripple public budgets that should provide healthcare, housing, education, and other essential services, they undermine States' ability to meet their minimum core obligations and their pre-existing legal obligations to maximize all available resources to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.

For more info:

- [Corruption and human rights | OHCHR](#)
- [OHCHR Key messages on the negative impact of corruption in the enjoyment of human rights](#)

There is no relevant information under this pillar for the coverage period.

## Pillar III: MEDIA FREEDOM

Free, independent, plural and diverse media are a core component of the right to freedom of expression, a cornerstone of democratic societies and plays an essential role in strengthening the rule of law. Journalists and the media are crucial to ensure transparency and accountability for public and governmental authorities.

For more info:

- [OHCHR and the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity](#)
- [Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression](#)
- [General comment No.34 on Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression \(CCPR/C/GC/34\)](#)

There is no relevant information under this pillar for the coverage period.

## Pillar IV: CHECKS AND BALANCES

Civic space is the environment that enables civil society to play a role in the political, economic and social life of our societies. In particular, civic space allows individuals and groups to contribute to policy-making that affects their lives, including by: (1) accessing information; (2) engaging in dialogue; (3) expressing dissent or disagreement, and (4) joining together to express their views. An open and pluralistic civic space that guarantees freedom of expression and opinion as well as freedom of assembly and association, is a prerequisite for making development and peace sustainable.

For more info:

- [OHCHR and protecting and expanding civic space](#)
- [Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders](#)
- [The Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms](#)

### ***Independent authorities – Office of the Ombudsman***

- The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that the State party significantly increase its resources allocated to the child rights directorate of the Office of the Ombudsman, with a view to ensuring that it has adequate and sustainable human, technical and financial resources to allow it to effectively carry out its mandate in full compliance with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles). ([CRC/C/BGR/CO/6-7, para. 12](#))

### ***The enabling framework for civil society***

- Noting with concern the anti-human rights rhetoric among decision-makers and increased opposition to civil society engagement in children’s rights matters, the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that the State party strengthen the participation of civil society organizations, children’s organizations and child human rights defenders in children’s rights matters and in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, programmes and legislation related to children’s rights. ([CRC/C/BGR/CO/6-7, para. 14](#))

## SPECIAL THEME - Child justice system

In his [New Vision for the Rule of Law](#), the UN Secretary-General noted that we need to move urgently and collectively towards more transparent, inclusive and responsive justice systems and that children should have access to specialized and efficient justice institutions and be recognized as fully-fledged and distinct rights holders. The best interests of the child shall always be the primary consideration. Referred to as “child justice system”, it includes the legislation, norms and standards, procedures, mechanisms and provisions specifically applicable to, and institutions and bodies set up to deal with, children considered as offenders. Children differ from adults in their physical and psychological development. Such differences constitute the basis for the recognition of lesser culpability, and for a separate system with a differentiated, individualized

approach. Exposure to the criminal justice system has been demonstrated to cause harm to children, limiting their chances of becoming responsible adults.

For more info:

- [General comment No. 24 \(2019\) on children's rights in the child justice system \(CRC/C/GC/24\)](#)

- The Committee is deeply concerned about:
  - (a) The complete lack of progress in implementing its previous recommendations from 2016 and 2008 regarding child justice;
  - (b) The unacceptably large number of children who continue to be: (i) affected by the Law on Combating the Antisocial Behaviour of Minors and the Underaged; (ii) deprived of their liberty, without appropriate legal representation or the possibility of judicial review; (iii) staying in correctional and educational facilities with inadequate living conditions; and (iv) placed in correctional boarding schools under the Law on Combating the Antisocial Behaviour of Minors and the Underaged. ([CRC/C/BGR/CO/6-7, para. 45](#))
- Recalling its general comment No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system, the Committee urges the State party to implement the Committee's previous recommendations to bring its child justice system fully into line with the Convention and other relevant standards, and in particular:
  - (a) To expedite the reform of the child justice system by adopting the bill on diversion from criminal proceedings and ensuring that it actively promotes non-judicial measures, such as diversion, mediation and psychosocial support, for children alleged as, accused of or recognized as having infringed the penal law and, wherever possible, the use of non-custodial measures for children, such as probation or community service;
  - (b) To urgently take measures to abolish the Law on Combating the Antisocial Behaviour of Minors and the Underaged and to ensure that children under the minimum age of criminal responsibility are not subject to punitive measures, including placement in correctional boarding schools;
  - (c) To ensure the effective provision, at an early stage of the procedure and throughout the legal proceedings, of qualified and independent legal aid to children accused of or recognized as having infringed the criminal law;
  - (d) To phase out the use of correctional boarding schools and, in the interim period, ensure that children in such facilities have access to protection measures under the Child Protection Act and that their placement is reviewed on a regular basis with a view to its withdrawal;
  - (e) To ensure that detention is used as a last resort and for the shortest possible period of time, and that detention conditions comply with international standards, including with regard to monitoring and access to education, health-care services and a child-friendly mechanism for complaints ([CRC/C/BGR/CO/6-7, para. 46](#))