



## Contribution by Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to the 2026 Rule of Law Report - European Commission

### Rule of law and 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."*

### Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

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.

OHCHR 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's contribution

The current submission consists of a compilation of findings and recommendations contained in reports of UN human rights monitoring mechanisms including treaty-based mechanism (international human rights treaties), and Charter-based mechanism (special procedures and the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council). It further draws on statements and reports by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the High Commissioner's office (see diagram on the next page).

In line with the scope of the European Commission's Rule of Law Report, this contribution covers 27 Member States of the European Union and four candidate States, namely, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

# UN human rights monitoring mechanisms

The below human rights bodies review the following nine core United Nations human rights treaties:

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

## Treaty-based mechanism

### Treaty monitoring bodies

- Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)
- Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESRC)
- Human Rights Committee (CCPR)
- Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
- Committee Against Torture (CAT)
- Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
- Committee on Migrant Workers (CMW)
- Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (SPT)
- Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)
- Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED)

## UN Charter-based mechanism

### UN Human Rights Council

A subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly and the main intergovernmental body in the UN responsible for human rights.

#### Special Procedures

Independent human rights experts with mandates to report and advise on human rights from a thematic or country-specific perspective.

#### Universal Periodic Review

State-led mechanism that conducts a peer review of the human rights situation of each UN Member State

#### Human Rights Council-mandated Investigative Bodies

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) provides expertise and support to all of the different human rights bodies.

# Human rights and rule of law (4 pillars of Rule of Law Report)

## Pillar 1: 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](#)

## Pillar 3: 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 \(CCPR/C/GC/34\)](#)

## Pillar 2: 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](#)

## Pillar 4: 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](#)



## Belgium: Inside the contribution

- **Period of contribution: January – December 2025**
- **Contents of contribution and additional information:**
  - The UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances adopted its concluding observations on Belgium ([CED/C/BEL/OAI/1](#)) on 3 April 2025 at its 537th session and the report was published on 29 April 2025.
  - The UN International Independent Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement visited Belgium from 2 to 11 June 2025. The Expert Mechanism issued a [press release](#) at the end of the visit and subsequently, presented the report of the visit ([A/HRC/60/75/Add.1](#)) at the 60th session of the Human Rights Council (8 September – 3 October 2025).
  - The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women adopted a [follow-up assessment letter](#) on 10 March 2025 in response to the follow-up report ([CEDAW/C/BEL/FCO/8](#)) submitted by Belgium on 10 December 2024 under the CEDAW follow-up procedure.
- **Summary of information which could be of particular relevance to the Rule of Law report:**
  - Under pillar 1 on justice system, relevant findings and recommendations (efficiency of justice system and quality of justice) were issued by UN human rights mechanisms.
  - Under pillar 4 on checks and balances, relevant findings and recommendations (independent authorities - NHRIs) were issued by UN human rights mechanisms.
- **Forthcoming relevant information (January – May 2026):**
  - The Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review will review Belgium at its 4th cycle, [52nd session](#) (4 – 15 May 2026).
  - The UN Committee against Torture will consider the State Party report from Belgium ([CAT/C/BEL/5](#)) in a future session ([date to be confirmed](#)).
- **Resources:**
  - Rule of Law in Europe [OHCHR](#)
  - Country Page [Belgium](#)
  - [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.

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### Quality of justice - accessibility of courts

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women notes information provided by the State party about the provision of interpretation services in the language of the proceedings, in both criminal and civil cases, at public expense, for persons wishing to express themselves in a language other than the language of the proceedings, including those with hearing and speech impairments. It takes note of the State party's indication that eligibility to receive legal aid depends on a person's real income rather than on residential status. It further notes that undocumented women who are victims of trafficking in persons are granted a residence permit for the duration of the legal proceedings (subject to certain conditions). (CEDAW [follow-up letter](#) to Belgium)

It regrets, however, the lack of information on whether undocumented women victims of other types of gender-based violence are granted a residence permit for the duration of their judicial proceedings. The Committee further regrets the lack of information as to the provision of age-appropriate accommodation for women victims of gender-based violence. Nor is there any information on procedural accommodations for women with disabilities. The Committee considers that the State party has not taken any specific action to implement the recommendation. (CEDAW [follow-up letter](#) to Belgium)

The Committee recommends that, in relation to paragraph 14 (b) of the concluding observations, the State party provides, in its next periodic report, information on further actions taken to:

Eliminate the serious obstacles to access to justice faced by all women, including undocumented women and women with disabilities, by ensuring the provision of procedural and age-appropriate accommodation, as well as interpretation services, and by granting a residence permit during the entire judicial proceedings for undocumented victims. (CEDAW [follow-up letter](#) to Belgium)

## **Efficiency of the justice system - Developments related to efforts to improve the efficiency of the justice system**

The UN International Independent Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement has noted a troubling crisis of confidence in the Belgian justice system on the part of Africans and people of African descent. Lengthy judicial proceedings, often ending with a dismissal of charges in cases involving racial discrimination or bias, exacerbate this loss of public trust, as well as the perception of a “two-speed” justice system that is biased against them. ([A/HRC/60/75/Add.1](#), para. 81)

The Mechanism addresses the following recommendations to the competent Belgian authorities:

(a) Ensure that all criminal justice actors, including prosecutors, lawyers, judges, magistrates and penitentiary staff, are regularly trained on fighting racial discrimination and racial bias [...]

## **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.

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## **Independent authorities - national human rights institutions (NHRIs)**

The UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances acknowledges the sectoral institutional framework of equality bodies and human rights institutions in the State Party, including the Federal Institute for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Unia (the Inter-federal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Combating Racism and Discrimination), both of which have been accredited with category B status by the Subcommittee on Accreditation of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions. It notes that the act establishing the Federal Institute provides a legal basis for its potential evolution into an inter-federal body and, eventually, a national human rights institution with category A status. ([CED/C/BEL/OAI/1](#), para. 8)

However, the Committee is concerned that the mandate of the Federal Institute does not extend to matters under the jurisdiction of the communities and regions. Moreover, it remains unclear how the sectoral equality bodies and human rights institutions will coordinate with the Federal Institute – an essential factor for the effective implementation of its mandate across all human rights areas within the State Party, including in relation to the issue of enforced disappearance. ([CED/C/BEL/OAI/1](#), para. 8)

The Committee encourages the State Party to continue its efforts to implement the recommendations made by the Subcommittee on Accreditation of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions in 2023, in order to ensure that the Federal Institute for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Unia comply in full with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles). ([CED/C/BEL/OAI/1](#), para. 9)