

*Liberties' Rule of Law Report 2025***Democratic Decline Deepens, EU Tools Toothless: Report**

- **Checks and balances weakened by emergency, fast-track legislative procedures**
- **Justice systems under growing political pressure through smears, underfunding**
- **Climate, pro-Palestine protests widely restricted, intimidated by excessive police force**

Europe's democratic recession deepened in 2024, the *Liberties Rule of Law Report* has found. Countries regarded as democratic strongholds are sliding towards authoritarian tendencies and the European Union's minimal use of its rule of law toolbox barely made a dent. In its sixth edition since 2019, the 1000-page *Report* identifies the most striking infringements of justice, corruption, media freedom, checks and balances, civic space and human rights in the European Union in 2024. The comprehensive analysis, a collaboration of 43 human rights organisations from 21 EU countries coordinated by the Civil Liberties Union For Europe (Liberties), is the most in-depth 'shadow reporting' exercise on the rule of law to date by an independent civil liberties network. The report findings feed into the rule of law monitoring cycle of the European Commission, and contributing organisations present their local insights during annual country visits.

Key Country-cohort Insights (find links to country reports below)

- **'The Weakest Link':** In Hungary, already the worst performer for years, significant regression was detected across the board, including renewed campaigns by the 'hybrid regime' against judicial independence, civil society organisations, public participation and media freedom.
- **'Dismantlers':** Governments of Italy, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Slovakia systematically, intentionally undermine the rule of law in nearly all aspects.
- **'Sliders':** Role-model democracies like Belgium, France, Germany, or Sweden demonstrated isolated but still troubling decline in a few dimensions, creating risk that lower standards will become a trend.
- **'Stagnators':** Greece, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, and Spain stagnate or only made minimal progress in their rule of law indicators.
- **'Hard Workers':** Estonia and the Czech Republic show signs of genuine and systemic efforts of improvement, highlighting civil society's successful role in achieving positive change.
- **'The Cautionary Tale':** Poland, where the new government has attempted to restore judicial independence and media pluralism without major progress, illustrates that addressing the compromised independence of institutions is an extremely challenging and fragile endeavor.

Key Insights on Dimensions (find more details below)

- The **justice system** still suffers from political manipulation, insufficient resources, and barriers to legal aid, which undermines its independence, quality and efficiency.
- In the realm of **anti-corruption**, there is a persistent lack of transparency, weak law enforcement, and inadequate protection of whistleblowers, leading to eroded trust in governmental integrity.
- **Media freedom** remains under threat, as political influence compromises the independence of regulatory bodies and concentrated ownership stifles pluralism, with journalists facing increasing harassment and legal challenges.
- **Checks and balances** are further weakened by the overuse of fast-track legislative processes, political interference in independent authorities, and compromised integrity of the electoral system, which erode the democratic and legal control over the government.
- **Civic space** continues to shrink, with widespread smear campaigns emboldening governments to adopt restrictive laws, particularly curtailing the right to peaceful protest and freedom of association.
- **Human rights** are under increasing pressure, with stricter migration policies, inadequate protections for vulnerable groups, and rising discrimination and hate speech impacting minorities across the region. **END.**

+++ Quote, editorial notes follow +++

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Balazs Denes, Executive Director of the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties), said:

“As far-right populism rises and democracy backslides in the U.S., Europe's rule of law crisis deepens. Growing far-right influence threatens EU unity, while Russia's war in Ukraine and rapidly transforming transatlantic ties test the bloc's resilience. To safeguard the EU, and the rules-based world, the European Commission must strengthen the rule of law enforcement—linking it directly to Article 7, budgetary conditionality, and infringement proceedings.”

[Liberties Rule of Law Report 2025 is available here](https://www.liberties.eu/f/vdxw3e)

Permalink to be inserted in online publications: <https://www.liberties.eu/f/vdxw3e>

About Liberties

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) is a Berlin-based civil liberties group with 22 member organisations across the EU campaigning on human and digital rights issues including the rule of law, media freedom, SLAPPs, privacy, targeted political advertising, AI, and mass surveillance. Liberties' next EU-wide report on media freedom is due to be released in April 2025.

About the Report

The Liberties Rule of Law Report 2025 highlights key developments in justice, corruption, media freedom, checks and balances, civic space, and systemic human rights issues in 2024. Compiled by 43 rights groups from 21 EU countries, it is the most comprehensive 'shadow report' by an independent civil liberties network. The sixth edition since 2019, the report consolidates country reports, provides an overview of trends, and offers recommendations for EU institutions to address identified shortcomings. The report also emphasises areas for improvement in the European Commission's monitoring cycle and enforcement tools.

The Country Reports (to download via the hyperlinks below) are authored by the following local rights groups from across the EU:

Belgian League of Human Rights ([Belgium](#)), Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, *Anti-Corruption Fund*, *Alexey Lazarov* ([Bulgaria](#)), Centre for Peace Studies ([Croatia](#)), the League of Human Rights ([Czech Republic](#)), Estonian Human Rights Center ([Estonia](#)), VoxPublic ([France](#)), the Society for Civil Rights (GFF), *FragDenStaat*, *LobbyControl* ([Germany](#)), *Inter Alia* ([Greece](#)), the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union ([Hungary](#)), the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, *Inclusion Ireland*, *Community Law and Mediation*, *Justice for Shane*, *Mercy Law Resource Centre*, *Irish Penal Reform Trust*, *Irish Congress of Trade Unions*, *Outhouse*, *Irish Traveller Movement*, *Index on Censorship* ([Ireland](#)), Associazione Antigone, Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (CILD), *A Buon Diritto Onlus*, *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa*, *StraLi* ([Italy](#)), Latvian Center for Human Rights ([Latvia](#)), Human Rights Monitoring Institute ([Lithuania](#)), the Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation ([Malta](#)), Nederlands Juristen Comité voor de Mensenrechten (NJCM), PILP, *Netherlands Helsinki Committee*, *Free Press Unlimited*, *Transparency International Netherlands*, *Lawyers 4 Lawyers* ([Netherlands](#)), the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights ([Poland](#)), Cristinel Buzatu ([Romania](#)), VIA IURIS ([Slovakia](#)), the Peace Institute ([Slovenia](#)), Xnet ([Spain](#)), Civil Rights Defenders, *International Commission of Jurists*, *Reporters Without Borders* ([Sweden](#)). (Non-member organizations are highlighted in italics.)

Liberties' previous annual rule of law reports are available here: [2020](#), [2021](#), [2022](#), [2023](#), [2024](#).

+++ More editorial notes follow +++

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More Insights on Dimensions of the Report

Justice System: Politicization and Systemic Weaknesses

- Several EU member states grapple with political manipulation in the judicial appointment and removal processes and the operation of judicial self-governing bodies, including in Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovakia, and Spain.
- Political attacks against judges, most notably in France, Italy, Malta, Romania and Slovakia, and the non-execution of court judgements in Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania and Spain continue to be a deeply concerning trend.
- The financial resources allocated to the justice system are insufficient in an alarmingly large number of countries across the EU, leading to systemic problems such as overwhelming caseloads, inadequate salaries, and limited access to legal aid.

Anti-Corruption: Stagnation and Weak Enforcement

- Many countries, like Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Malta, the Netherlands and Spain struggle with regulating conflicts of interest and lobby transparency, resulting in inadequate oversight.
- Whistleblower protections vary significantly across the EU, with several nations lacking effective compliance with the EU Whistleblower Directive, such as Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Spain.
- The criminalisation, investigation, and prosecution of corruption is a general concern in several Member States. However, serious problems tackling high-level corruption due to institutional weaknesses and a lack of accountability were reported from Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Malta and the Netherlands.

Media Freedom: Rising Attacks & Government Control

- Continued threats to the independence and functioning of public service media were reported from Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden.
- Media ownership remains opaque, levels of market pluralism are low in many countries, and Member States where these problems are significant have not taken serious action to address the situation. This is especially true in Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Malta, and Romania.
- Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden all witnessed verbal attacks, threats, targeted smear campaigns and abusive lawsuits against journalists over the last year.

Checks and balances: Fast-track legislation, politicised authorities and compromised electoral system

- We can observe in almost all examined EU Member States an overuse of fast-track legislative procedures, a lack of adequate public consultation, and the normalisation of governance by executive decrees.
- The Czech Republic and Italy still lack National Human Rights Institutions, while independent authorities struggle with political interference, resource shortages, and limited influence on government actions in many other countries, like Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden.
- The electoral framework remains problematic because of the exclusion of people from the franchise based on their nationality or limited mental capacity in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Malta and

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Slovakia, and the manipulation of political advertising is reported in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia and Spain.

Civic Space: Shrinking Freedoms for Activists and NGOs

- Layers of reinforcing attacks ensured a continued closing of vibrant civic spaces and an increasing number of direct attacks against human rights defenders and civil society organisations. In 2024, all countries reported one or more restrictions to civic freedoms with a noticeable deterioration in multiple Member States.
- Smear campaigns and verbal harassment helped sew mistrust, which emboldened governments to embed restrictions in laws and funding policies. Several countries introduced laws that focus on 'foreign agents', 'foreign interest representation services' and lobbying restrictions, including in Bulgaria, Hungary, France, Slovakia and the Netherlands. Hungary's notorious 'Sovereignty Law' led to several investigations into NGOs and investigative journalists.
- The right to peaceful protest has been under increasingly threat, particularly for climate activists and pro-Palestinian demonstrators. Protests were banned, locations restricted, and heavy penalties imposed.
- Many countries, including France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Romania and the Netherlands, cited increased and disproportionate use of force by the police and several countries sought to cement restrictions through changes in the laws on the right to protest.
- Online and media harassment also quite rapidly translated into funding restrictions and in several cases physical attacks.

Human Rights: Systemic violation of the rights of vulnerable groups

- The governments of Croatia, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Sweden have adopted stricter migration policies, threatening the rights of migrants and asylum seekers.
- In Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden, children's rights remain an area with wide legislative gaps and insufficient protection, especially for unaccompanied minors, children belonging to minorities, and juveniles in the justice system.
- Civil Society Organisations across Europe have reported a rise in discrimination and hate speech toward ethnic and sexual minorities, especially in Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia.
- Prison overcrowding and poor detention conditions raise concerns in Ireland, France, Slovenia and Latvia.

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