

THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

EU ENLARGEMENT PACKAGE 2025 **INPUT FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS**

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THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has defended women's rights since 1993. For every woman's right to be safe and to be heard.

Today we are one of the world's leading women's rights organisations, working directly in areas affected by war and conflict to strengthen women's influence and power. We work closely together with over 100 local partner organisations across 20 countries to end gender-based violence, reach lasting peace and close the gender gap once and for all.



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INTRODUCTION

Kvinna till Kvinna and its partner organisations are glad to provide their input to the 2025 Enlargement package. For the past seven years, The Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation has been producing a gender analysis of the European Commission Country Reports for the Western Balkans aiming to contribute to the gender mainstreaming of the EU Accession process. Our 2025 [analysis](#) shows that more can be done to increase gender mainstreaming of different chapters and include clear and actionable recommendations. This year, the revised format improved the readability and comparability of reports but often the reduced length has come at the expense of gender mainstreaming. Greater clarity and consistency is needed also for the inclusion and removal of official recommendations pertaining to gender equality issues.

With this collective input, we aim to provide a **shared analysis of political and social developments relevant to the EU accession process of each country and tailored recommendations** especially under Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights), 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), 19 (Employment and Social Policy) but also Chapters 6 (Company Law), 10 (Information Society and Media), 18 (Statistics), 27 (Environment), 28 (Consumer and Health Protection) 31 (Foreign, Security and Defence Policy) and Normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

The input for the 2025 Country Reports is based on the contributions by the following Kvinna till Kvinna partner organisations in the Western Balkans:

Albanian Women's Empowerment Network (Albania)



Aleanca LGBTI (Albania)



Bolja Buducnost (Bosnia and Herzegovina)



Helsinki Citizens Assembly (Bosnia and Herzegovina)



United Women Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina)



Kosovo Women's Network (Kosovo)



Kosovar Gender Studies Center (Kosovo)



Mitrovica Women's Association for Human Rights (Kosovo)



Women's Rights Center (Montenegro)



Coalition Margins (North Macedonia)



ESE (North Macedonia)



REACTOR – Research in Action (North Macedonia)



A 11 - Initiative for Economic and Social Rights (Serbia)



ASTRA Anti-trafficking Action (Serbia)



Autonomous Women's Center (Serbia)



Sandglass (Serbia)



YUCOM (Serbia)



ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CoE	Council of Europe
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EU	European Union
GBV	Gender-based violence
GREVIO	Group of Experts on Action Against Violence Against Women
HRDs	Human Rights Defenders
IPA III	Instrument for Pre-Accession III
Istanbul Convention	Council of Europe Convention on Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence
IVF	In-vitro fertilization
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other sexual identities
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
NPAA	National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
SOGIESC	Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics
UNSCR 1325	United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WCSOs	Women's Civil Society Organisations
WPS	Women, Peace and Security



ALBANIA

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS SINCE JUNE 2024

The EU officially opened accession negotiations with Albania in October 2024, focusing on Cluster 1 and specifically the chapters related to judiciary, fundamental rights, internal security and public administration reform. In December 2024, negotiations started also on Cluster 6 focusing on external relations, foreign and security policies.

While these are positive developments, the country has been witnessing political and social turbulence over the last few months especially due to **several corruption scandals involving both government and opposition figures**. On 21st October 2024, former President and current Freedom Party leader Ilir Meta was arrested on charges of corruption, money laundering, and concealment of wealth. In November 2024, Prime Minister Edi Rama's Socialist Party was accused of corruption and election manipulation by opposition lawmakers and supporters who blocked main streets in Tirana, demanding the government's replacement by a technocratic caretaker cabinet until the 2025 parliamentary elections. The protests led to clashes with riot police, who used water cannons and tear gas to disperse demonstrators. In February 2025, protests flared up again following the arrest of Tirana's mayor Erion Veliaj on corruption charges.

Albania has seen a larger number of corruption investigations recently by the Special Structure Against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), which led to high-profile arrests. **However, convictions remain low due to political interference and operational limitations**. Despite some progress made in judicial reforms through vetting processes, enforcement against powerful figures is inconsistent. The political polarisation further weakens institutional accountability, with ruling and opposition elites engaging in mutual accusations rather than pursuing systemic reforms. It remains to be seen whether the increase in convictions becomes a wider trend in Albania.

Also, in November 2024, Prime Minister Edi Rama announced **plans to grant sovereign state status to the Bektashi Sufi movement's world headquarters in Tirana**. The proposal aims to establish the site as a center of moderation and peaceful coexistence, though it has sparked controversy among various religious groups and political commentators.

In December 2024, the Albanian government announced a one-year ban on TikTok, citing concerns over the platform's role in promoting violence and bullying among children. This decision followed a fatal incident involving a teenager and has been met with both support and criticism, especially by independent media representatives regarding its implications for freedom of speech and political motivations.

Rise of anti-gender movement and initiatives by political parties aimed at restricting rights

In recent months, Albania witnessed a **rise in anti-gender movements, led by influential political figures, religious leaders and prominent public personalities**. These movements target the LGBTQI+ community, particularly transgender women, using inflammatory rhetoric, perpetuating harmful stereotypes, and fostering public animosity. This occurs in a predominantly conservative environment, further exacerbated by the lack of objective information on LGBTQI+ issues.

In late May 2024, two lesbian women, in a 14-year relationship and mothers of twin girls through IVF, organized a symbolic religious ceremony to bless their union. This ceremony, held on the terrace of Tirana City Hall, sparked a disinformation and hate campaign. Representatives of the pro-family and pro-life coalition falsely claimed that the mayor of Tirana was illegally arranging the marriage, alleging an aggressive political agenda by the LGBTQI+ community. Religious leaders, political figures, and public personalities joined the outcry, culminating in public protests against the "homosexual agenda." This narrative was

linked to the recent draft law "On Sexual and Reproductive Health," which introduced surrogacy (only for heterosexual couples), misrepresented by anti-LGBTQI+ movements as a societal destabilization effort. Criminal charges were filed against the main individuals responsible for crafting this harmful hate narrative, but the Prosecution dismissed three out of the five cases.

On January 29, 2025, members of the Albanian Parliament representing the Democratic Party submitted a draft law proposing amendments

to the Law on Civil Registry. **This proposed amendment seeks to explicitly restrict gender recognition by legally affirming only two genders, male and female**, thereby excluding and denying recognition to transgender individuals. Such a provision stands in direct violation of Albania's constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination and contradicts the country's binding obligations under international human rights instruments, including the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

KEY DEVELOPMENTS AT LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY LEVEL SINCE JUNE 2024

- **Electoral Code Amendments** (July 26, 2024): The Albanian Parliament approved changes to the electoral code to enhance electoral processes and representation. Notable amendments include provisions for diaspora voting, adjustments to mandate allocations, and a requirement that one out of every three candidates elected from the open list be a woman, promoting gender equality in line with EU standards.
- **Approval of Reform Agenda** (October 23, 2024): The European Commission approved Albania's Reform Agenda, which outlines commitments to socio- economic and fundamental reforms from 2024 to 2027. This agenda focuses on areas such as the rule of law, governance, digital and green transitions, human capital development, and improving the business environment, aligning with EU priorities.
- **Opening of EU Negotiations on Cluster 6: External Relations (December 17, 2024):** Albania commenced negotiations with the EU on Cluster 6, covering chapters on External Relations and Foreign, Security, and Defense Policy. This step demonstrates Albania's commitment to aligning its foreign policies with EU standards.
- **Draft law proposing amendments to Law No. 10129, dated 11.05.2009 On Civil Registry.** This proposed amendment seeks to explicitly restrict gender recognition by legally affirming only two genders, male and female, thereby excluding and denying recognition to transgender individuals.

DEVELOPMENTS ON GENDER EQUALITY

Albania continues to face significant challenges in effectively implementing its legal and policy frameworks for gender equality, particularly at the local level. While the country made progress in developing legislation, the translation of these frameworks into concrete actions remains inconsistent.

Structural weaknesses, inadequate resources, and entrenched societal norms continue to hinder progress in advancing gender equality and protecting women's rights. Albania's legal framework on GBV still does not fully align with the Istanbul Convention, and there are persistent gaps in enforcement, particularly in ensuring police and judicial responsiveness to reported cases.

Despite Albania's legal commitments under international frameworks such as the Istanbul Convention, there remain persistent gaps in the practical enforcement of protection measures. According to the 2024 GREVIO Thematic Report¹, Albania has made progress through legislative reforms, the nationwide rollout of Coordinated Referral Mechanisms, and the development of protocols and manuals. However, serious challenges persist, including insufficient access to long-term shelter, underuse of emergency protection orders, low reporting and conviction rates for sexual violence, and a lack of standardized care and mental health support services. Structural reforms in the justice and healthcare sectors remain urgently needed.

Gender-based violence remains one of the most critical and visible gender equality challenges in Albania. In 2024 alone, over 4,000 women and girls reported violence to the police. While this increase partly reflects greater awareness, services remain insufficient. Decision No. 327 (2021), which establishes the referral mechanism, is not fully implemented due to a lack of municipal funding. The Femicide Observatory Report, published in December 2024, revealed that 32 women were killed between 2021 and 2023, with 90% of cases

committed by partners or family members, and 60% occurring in the victims' homes.² Municipal services for survivors continue to be under-resourced. CRMs are often not gender-sensitive, shelters are limited in capacity, and reintegration support is lacking.

Albania remains classified as Tier 2 in the 2024 U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report.³ In July, the government approved a new National Action Plan Against Human Trafficking (2024–2025), yet key measures from the previous plan—such as drafting a framework law on human trafficking—remain unfulfilled. Organizations in the National Coalition of Anti-Trafficking Shelters (NCATS) report a rise in trafficking cases involving sexual exploitation, forced labor, and forced criminal activity, increasingly affecting foreign nationals. A significant gap persists in the availability of shelter for male victims, as noted by VATRA, which temporarily adapted services to accommodate such cases.

The migration crisis continued to impact Albanian society in 2024, particularly affecting women's economic empowerment. The emigration of men has increased women's domestic responsibilities, while persistent unemployment and lack of housing and financial support make it difficult for survivors of violence to escape abusive environments. Population decline and brain drain are now coupled with political instability, as the country experienced heightened tensions and polarization throughout the year. Emigration trends were further confirmed by the 2024 census, showing a 15% population decrease since 2011.

Women's political participation remains uneven. While 35.7% of parliamentary seats are held by women, representation at the municipal level remains low. Marginalized groups—including youth, Roma and Egyptian communities, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ individuals—continue to be largely

¹ <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-s-first-thematic-evaluation-report-on-albania/1680b1a0ca>

² <https://albania.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/12/killings-of-women-and-girls-and-femicide-in-albania>

³ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/>

excluded from decision-making. Socio-cultural barriers and lack of political will hinder women's meaningful inclusion in governance processes.

The media landscape plays a critical role in shaping gender narratives but continues to reflect deeply rooted stereotypes. GBV is still sensationalized in the media, often treated as isolated incidents in the “black chronicle” sections rather than as a systemic issue. Survivors' identities are often exposed, leading to revictimization and stigma. Women are commonly portrayed in passive or objectified roles, reinforcing gender norms and undermining women's public image. According to the Albanian Media Institute (2023), women remain significantly underrepresented as experts and spokespersons in political and economic reporting.

Despite some legal progress, Albania's constitutional and legislative framework continues to fall short of fully protecting the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals. While Law No. 10221 on Protection from Discrimination explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics, these grounds are still not reflected in the Albanian Constitution. Article 18, which guarantees equality before the law, does not specifically mention SOGIESC, leaving LGBTQI+ people vulnerable to legal ambiguity and selective interpretation. Attempts in 2017 to amend the Constitution to include SOGI were met with strong political and religious opposition, including hate speech by Members of Parliament. The government ultimately withdrew support for the amendment, and no further constitutional efforts have since been made. Meanwhile, the Criminal Code includes some protections, such as aggravating circumstances for hate-motivated crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Article 50), yet its frequent references to “homosexuality” reinforce stigmatizing language and do not inclusively reflect the broader spectrum of LGBTQI+ identities.

In practice, the implementation of these legal protections remains weak, and the LGBTQI+ community continues to face systemic barriers. Despite legal guarantees, hate speech, discrimination, and violence—particularly against transgender individuals—persist, often with impunity. Aleanca LGBTQI's recent survey data shows that 43% of respondents experienced violence or discrimination, and 73.8% of those incidents were directly linked to their LGBTQI+ status. Alarming, 83% of victims chose not to report incidents to any authority, primarily due to fear of exposure or lack of trust in institutions. Public awareness about the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination is also critically low—over 63% of surveyed LGBTQI+ individuals were unaware of the institution's existence. Similarly, while Albania's Labour Code prohibits workplace discrimination on SOGI grounds, over 40% of LGBTQI+ respondents have never held formal employment, and 32% of those who did reported discrimination at work, with only 2% having filed formal complaints. These figures reflect a legal system that, while inclusive on paper, fails in practice to offer effective remedies or institutional accountability.

Gaps also remain in family rights, housing, and legal gender recognition, which continue to severely affect the daily lives of LGBTQI+ people in Albania. Same-sex couples are still not legally recognized under the Family Code, despite the Constitution's neutral language in Article 53 on the right to marry and have children. This legal void excludes same-sex partners from accessing basic rights such as co-parenting, inheritance, survivor's benefits, or joint healthcare decisions. In housing, although the Law on Social Housing lists LGBTQI+ people as a priority group, implementation remains problematic due to lack of bylaws and the risk of forced outing through municipal application systems. Between 2019–2023, at least 20 transgender women were evicted due to their gender identity.

ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONSULTATIONS

Since June 2024, Albania's civil society sector encountered several notable developments affecting its operational environment, funding, legislative framework, and collaborative dynamics with the government. The **Government Roadmap on an Enabling Environment for Civil Society** (2019–2023) showed little progress in implementation. Civil society, particularly WCSOs and LGBTQI+ organizations, plays an essential role in advocating for gender equality, providing services, and supporting survivors of violence. However, these organizations operate in an increasingly challenging environment, marked by severe financial constraints, shrinking civic space, and difficulties in engaging in meaningful advocacy. The absence of stable financing affects their ability to hire qualified staff, expand outreach efforts, and build long-term strategies for gender equality advocacy.

Over recent months, a **growing anti-gender movement**, bolstered by certain political, religious, and media actors, has been actively working to delegitimize gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, creating a hostile environment for public discourse and advocacy. Women's organizations have been targeted by public disinformation campaigns and attempts to disclose personal information including their salaries.

In addition, the **Implementation of the Electronic Registry for Non-profit Organisations** scheduled to be operational by

December 30, 2023, was further delayed. As of March 2025, this registry remains non-functional, hindering transparency and posing significant obstacles to NGO operations that rely on access to accurate sector data. Furthermore, the introduction of **Instruction No. 27/2023**, establishing a zero percent VAT rate for foreign-funded projects, has inadvertently increased administrative burdens on NGOs. Requirements such as mandatory VAT registration and extensive procedural compliance have complicated project implementation, leading to higher operational costs.

In early 2025, **the U.S. administration announced substantial reductions in foreign aid**, resulting in the termination of numerous USAID programs in Albania. These funding cuts have significantly affected the operational capacity of civil society organizations, particularly those reliant on international support for projects related to infrastructure, energy security, and social inclusion.

With regards to **government-civil society dialogue on EU integration**, only 26 of the 33 required consultation tables have been established. Despite these challenges, civil society organizations continue to engage with government institutions through various working groups and consultation mechanisms. However, the effectiveness of this cooperation is hindered by structural and operational deficiencies within these mechanisms.

Recommendations for the 2025 Country Report:

1. Introduce an official recommendation in Chapter 23 to step up implementation of the Law on Gender Equality and National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021- 2023 and to align legislation on gender-based violence with the Istanbul Convention
2. Add an overview of structural social, cultural and legislative barriers towards gender equality and the active roles women play in society in the fundamental rights section
3. Include an official recommendation on the need to harmonise Albanian legislation with the Work-Life Balance Directive and the implementation of targeted measures to bridge the gender gap in employment
4. Recommend adoption of a law to legally recognize same-sex partnerships, providing couples with rights and protections similar to those afforded to heterosexual couples, including access to joint property ownership, inheritance rights, and spousal benefits.
5. As a minimum, introduce sex-disaggregated data on gender-based violence, including domestic violence (Chapter 23) and trafficking of women and girls (Chapter 24)
6. Recognise the key role of civil society in building democratic societies and acknowledge the crucial role of women's rights organisations in providing specialised services to victims/ survivors of GBV in the absence of adequate state services
7. Include a specific recommendation on preventing and curbing gender-based violence and trafficking of women and girls, identifying victims and ensuring access to justice and services
8. Reintroduce references to the situation of women and girls in different chapters of the report, including Chapter 6, 26, 28
9. Keep the reference to Albania's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 in Chapter 31 and introduce a reference to the role of women in peacebuilding and reconciliation
10. Continue to integrate an intersectional perspective across the report and in particular in relation to access to education, jobs, housing and healthcare services for women and girls belonging to vulnerable groups



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is undergoing a political and constitutional crisis

after Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska (RS), pushed through legislation aimed at blocking state-level Constitutional Court rulings and amending entity-level laws. In late February, Mr Dodik was sentenced in a first-instance verdict to one year in prison and barred from holding political office for six years. Shortly after the verdict, Dodik travelled to Russia, where he met with President Putin - an act that further signalled his political orientation.

The newly adopted laws aim to limit the authority of the state judiciary and the State Investigation and Prosecution Agency (SIPA), establish a separate judicial and prosecutorial council for RS, criminalize state officials who do not comply with entity-level directives, and open the door for the persecution of civil society activists. While the laws have been temporarily put out of force by the Constitutional Court of BiH until it reaches a final decision on their constitutionality, Dodik has maintained that they will be implemented.

At the same time, RS's leadership is pushing for constitutional changes that seek to redefine the

entity as a state of the Serbian people, introduce the right to self-determination, establish its own military, and abolish the RS Council of Peoples - directly contradicting the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. **The NARS's approval of the Draft Constitution represents a significant secessionist move, following the adoption of laws that block the functioning of BiH's judicial institutions within the entity.**

Additionally, creating a special court and prosecutor's office for "protecting constitutional order" further consolidates RS's quest for stronger legal independence.

The increasingly inflammatory rhetoric within RS politics targets dissenting voices, including journalists and civil society activists, fuelling polarization and threatening fundamental freedoms. The adopted **Law on Special Register and Transparency of Work of Non-Profit Organizations** (the so-called Foreign Agents Law), which aims to control foreign-funded organizations, directly contradicts EU recommendations for ensuring a free and independent civil society, further isolating BiH from the European integration process. Lately, new initiatives by Dodik have signalled a move toward establishing RS border police.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS AT LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY LEVEL SINCE JUNE 2024

- **Decision to initiate the adoption of a new Constitution of the Republic of Srpska** ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Srpska", No. 22/2025)
- **Law on the Protection of the Constitutional Order of the Republic of Srpska** (not yet published in the "Official Gazette of the Republic of Srpska")
- **Regulation on the Procedure for Taking Over Employees from the Republic of Srpska Working in the State Investigation and Protection Agency**

("Official Gazette of the Republic of Srpska", No. 20/2025)

- **Law on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of the Republic of Srpska** ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Srpska", No. 19/2025)
- **Law on the Non-Application of Laws and the Prohibition of the Work of Unconstitutional Institutions** ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Srpska", No. 19/2025)

- **Law on the Special Register and Transparency of Work of Non-Profit Organizations** ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Srpska", No. 19/2025)
- **Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Srpska** ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Srpska", No. 19/2025)
- **Law on Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina** ("Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina", No. 19/2025 of: 14.03.2025) – partially aligned with EU Acquis.

DEVELOPMENTS ON GENDER EQUALITY

BiH continues to face significant challenges in implementing its legal framework on gender equality, anti-discrimination, and human rights protection. The high incidence of femicide remains a pressing issue, highlighting systemic failures and widespread gender biases within society.⁴ Despite longstanding advocacy from women human rights defenders, gender-based violence and broader gender inequalities persist, exposing critical gaps in institutional responses and legal enforcement. Specialized services for domestic violence victims provided by women's organizations remain underfunded through public budgets. Public budget support focuses on safe houses/shelters, while support to women survivors outside shelters remains dependant on limited international funds.

Support to victims of sexual violence is largely missing, due to lack of public policies focusing on other forms of GBV, and lack of protection mechanisms/services in place. **Access to justice for women GBV survivors remains weak, and lacking victim-based approach.** In less than 5% of criminal cases in which women appeared at the court as witnesses, they were supported by their attorneys. No cases were observed where the women domestic violence victims were accompanied by a person of trust who could provide them support during proceedings to avoid re-victimisation. Out of total 264 criminal cases observed, in 16 cases (approx. 6%) women

requested compensation, and only one request was awarded by the court during criminal proceedings against perpetrators of violence. While monitoring reveals progress toward **increased recognising aggravated forms of domestic violence**⁵, penalty policy for domestic violence predominantly includes suspended sentences – 48% of all cases. 56% of domestic violence cases end with plea agreement, in which courts impose lighter sanctions. **Judicial proceedings for domestic violence are lengthy**, with average first-instance procedure lasting 166 days⁶, which affects safety of victims due to risk of repeated and even intensified violence.

Authorities of RS continued with the initiatives of removing gender identity from legislation and public policies, and restricting protection from violence and discrimination based on gender and gender identity. In November 2024, RS Constitutional Court reduced definition of a family within the criminal offence of domestic violence to remove *„persons that were or still are in emotional or intimate relationship, regardless if a perpetrator shared/is sharing the same household with a victim”*, thus narrowing protection from violence prescribed with the Law.⁷ The proposed amendments to remove gender identity as protected characteristic from the RS Criminal Code was adopted by RS Parliament in late March, 2025.

⁴ Independent monitoring of media reporting conducted by the Foundation United Women indicates 13 cases of femicide, and 2 cases of attempted femicide during 2024.

⁵ E.g. committed against children or in a presence of a child, for which the sentence of two to ten years of imprisonment is prescribed.

⁶ More in: Access to Justice, Safety and Protection from Violence: Response of Courts to Violence against Women and Children, Foundation United Women Banja Luka (2025).

⁷ Decision of the RS Constitutional Court, 24 November 2024.

The influence of the anti-gender movement has been expanding, shaping public discourse and policy debates. Various political and non-governmental actors have mobilized around populist narratives that oppose gender equality, LGBTQI rights, and broader human rights frameworks. These groups actively disseminate misinformation, fuelling moral panic and targeting WCSOs and LGBTQI movements. While this phenomenon is not new, its growing visibility and influence pose significant challenges to the advancement of anti-discrimination policies and inclusive governance. In the area of sexual and reproductive health, troubling practices continue to restrict women's autonomy over their bodies. Reports indicate that some healthcare institutions arbitrarily interpret or refuse to implement legal provisions on reproductive rights, further limiting access to essential services. Such actions undermine existing legal protections and exacerbate gender disparities in healthcare.⁸

Women remain underrepresented in legislative and executive roles, despite the

40% gender quota in BiH's Law on Gender Equality, which is not being enforced. Political parties rarely promote women to top positions, and few have gender equality policies. Women face unequal treatment in campaigns and are often sidelined in representing their views. In the 2024 Local Elections, only eight women were elected as mayors, showing that BiH is far from gender equality. Women are often placed on candidate lists just to meet the quota, with little chance of winning. Recent research shows many ruling parties are indifferent to increasing female representation or improving women's legal status.

Overall, while the legal framework for gender equality and anti-discrimination exists, its implementation remains weak due to political resistance, institutional inefficiencies, and influence of anti-gender movement. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms, ensuring full legal alignment with international standards, and countering anti-rights narratives are essential to advancing gender equality and human rights protection in BiH.

ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONSULTATIONS

The situation for civil society organizations (CSOs) in BiH is getting worse each year.

HRDs, especially women, are facing increasing attacks, and these incidents are often ignored or not properly condemned. CSOs and HRDs have less space to operate because of restrictive laws that limit basic rights like freedom of speech, access to information, and the right to organize—rights that are crucial for their work.

The National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska adopted under urgent procedure the **Law on the Special Register and Publicity of Work of Non-Profit Organizations**, known as the "law on foreign agents." The adoption of this law is not just an administrative measure but a direct preparation for a crackdown on all critical voices in RS. In the near future, we can expect the selective application of the law and repressive

measures aimed at media, organizations, and individuals who criticize the government.

The law raises serious issues of compatibility with the principle of legality which includes the principle of foreseeability. One of the key criteria in the law for the use of the 'agent of foreign influence' label for organisations, namely 'political activity' is unforeseeable. **The wide discretion left to the RS Ministry of Justice to interpret what 'political activity' entails** may discourage organisations from exercising their freedom of expression such as engaging in advocacy toward public institutions/authorities or debate to influence improvements of legislation and public policies. The Law imposes registration of all CSOs receiving foreign funding, and their regular financial reporting to RS Ministry of Justice, but also exceptional

⁸ Orange report on the situation of women's human rights in BiH: (2025)

inspection controls, which creates hostile environment for CSOs engagement and fosters self-censorship to avoid persecution and sanctions.

During 2024, a **study on human trafficking in Roma communities** was conducted⁹, the results of which show that the percentage of child arranged marriages is lower. In addition to child arranged marriages and forced marriages of children, violence is also present in families. The biggest risk factors are unemployment and discrimination as well as prejudice against Roma. The conclusion is that girls from Roma communities under the age of 18 are the most vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking. Members of the Roma community

are not ready to report cases of human trafficking and therefore do not report them because they are afraid of organized criminal groups and do not trust representatives of institutions that they can protect them.

Cooperation with state-level institutions continued through participation in consultative meetings of NGOs for the development of an operational plan and implementation of the Gender Action Plan BiH 2023-2027 as well as the Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, held in December 2014 in Sarajevo and organized by the Agency for Gender Equality and the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

ENVIRONMENT (CHAPTER 27)

Gender-disaggregated data on the impact of climate change on women and vulnerable groups in BiH is still lacking, hindering effective laws and strategies. Men own more than 60% of immovable property, and women's agricultural work often remains unrecorded and unpaid.¹⁰ Women in rural areas are under recognized, and face gaps in energy access, education, and decision-making. They are more affected by energy poverty, with no gender considerations in energy efficiency funding.¹¹ In BiH's environmental, transport, and energy boards, only 7 women (10.4%) are members, none in leadership roles.¹² Women activists also face legal threats, such as the ongoing SLAPP lawsuit against Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak, and defamation charges against Amela Šabić Ahmečković, impacting their health.

The Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (CF) results and strategies are focused on vulnerability and reaching out to persons at risk of being left behind¹³ to ensure they are not left behind and to more broadly address any form of discrimination. To do this, results will be achieved in broad partnership with civil society and social partners, academia, media, as well as human rights and gender equality institution, the private sector, and international partners. Furthermore, local capacity development is a key element to achieve CF priorities and results. Local authorities, community-based organizations and small and medium-sized enterprises will be engaged through area-based, integrated, and multi- sectoral programming, including local economic development.

⁹ Research on the perceptions and attitudes of the Roma population on human trafficking, Bolja Budućnost (2023)

¹⁰ See Report on Mapping the Gender Component in Data and Legislation in the area of Climate Change, Environment and Biodiversity (2022): <https://shorturl.at/zABR5>

¹¹ See: National gender profile of agriculture and rural livelihoods – Bosnia and Herzegovina (2021):

¹² Report on Mapping the Gender Component in Data and Legislation in the area of Climate Change, Environment and Biodiversity (2022): <https://shorturl.at/zABR5>

¹³ UN, Country Analysis, DRAFT January 2025. Persons at risk of being left behind: Women survivors of violence (high prevalence of gender-based violence; 48% of women affected); Children (especially from low income households, Roma and minority communities); Roma communities (experience systemic and historical discrimination); LGBTI individuals (discrimination persists); Persons with disabilities (workplace discrimination and barriers in infrastructure); Civilian victims of conflict (absence of reparation mechanisms); Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (increasing irregular migration, with unmet protection needs); Stateless people and people at risk of statelessness; Internally Displaced Persons; Older persons (excluded from social protection benefits).

Roma women live mostly in settlements in rural areas, although there are also families who have integrated and live in the city. Roma settlements are mostly illegal and do not have a developed infrastructure. Many families do not have electricity, water, sewage. Most are engaged in collecting secondary raw materials and are in front of buildings and dumps of iron and other

materials that give an ugly image of the community. Women and children are not safe because they also help in disassembling and separating materials and there is a possibility of some infectious diseases. Women are in a very difficult situation without water and electricity because they cannot maintain regular hygiene for themselves or their children.

Recommendations for the 2025 Country Report

1. Urge BiH authorities to align the election legislation with the Gender Equality Law to enhance women's public and political participation including full respect of the 40% gender quota
2. Urgently call for the withdrawal of the Law on the Special Register and Publicity of the Work of Non-profit Organizations in RS and strongly oppose this entity's adoption of the Draft Criminal Code, which excludes gender identity as a protected characteristic
3. Call authorities to adopt public policies aimed to ensure wellbeing and safety of women human rights defenders, and establish accessible and efficient mechanisms for legal aid, psychological support, and protecting security of WHRD against threats and attacks, including SLAPP and defamation lawsuits
4. Recommend the establishment of meaningful consultation mechanisms with civil society, including women CSOs, in the context of the EU accession negotiations
5. Call for consistent harmonization of the legislation and policies across BiH regulating gender-based violence with the Istanbul Convention, 2012/29/EU Victim's Rights Directive, and 2024/1385 EU Directive on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence as integral part of EU Acquis.
6. Urge for enabling sufficient and consistent funding for specialized support and assistance for domestic violence survivors through planning and allocation of public budget funds for these services at all levels
7. Include sex-disaggregated data and a focus on women and girls, victims of human trafficking in Chapter 24 (Freedom and Security)
8. Call for effective implementation of the Strategy Against Human Trafficking 2024-2027 by creating Action Plans at the cantonal level in close cooperation with non-governmental and international organizations
9. Call for ensuring the presence of all stakeholders in the implementation of activities and measures within the Gender Action Plan of BiH 2023-2027 and the Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325
10. Call authorities to implement the legalization of buildings, water and electricity connections through the Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women 2021-2025 in the field of housing through city administrations and international organizations in cooperation with Roma associations.



KOSOVO

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

On February 9, 2025, Kosovo held parliamentary elections. The Central Election Commission announced that Prime Minister Albin Kurti's Self-Determination Movement Party (Vetevendosje!) secured 42.30% of the vote, translating to 48 seats in the 120-seat parliament. Despite being the largest party, they fell short of a majority, necessitating coalition talks to form a government. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) obtained 24 and 20 seats, respectively.

In April 2024, Prime Minister Albin Kurti announced plans to legalize same-sex civil unions as part of a new civil code, aiming to

position Kosovo among the progressive nations in the Western Balkans regarding LGBTQI+ rights. However, the proposal faced opposition from some lawmakers and religious leaders, leading to delays in its implementation. The draft defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman but allows for civil partnerships between same-sex couples.

In response, the New Kosovo Alliance (AKR), the Justice Party (PD), and some members of the ruling Vetevendosje! formed the "Family List" Coalition, opposing the legalization of same-sex civil unions and reflecting the rise of anti-gender movements within the country.

DEVELOPMENTS ON NORMALISATION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN SERBIA AND KOSOVO AND TENSIONS IN NORTHERN KOSOVO

As of 2025, the normalization between Kosovo and Serbia remains an unresolved and complex issue. After the leaders of the two countries agreed (without signature) on the Ohrid Agreement in 2023, setting the necessary steps to move towards normalisation of relations, implementation has been limited. Tensions between the two countries flared up again in 2023 culminating in violent clashes taking place in northern Kosovo in May followed by the attack near the Serbia Orthodox Monastery in Banjska. There has been no significant advancement since, aside from the resolution of the licence plate issues. In 2024, with the political crisis in Serbia ignited by the collapse of the canopy in the Novi Sad station which caused 16 deaths and led to wide-spread protests across the country as well as the pre- and post- political blockage in Kosovo due to parliamentary elections, the process has stagnated.

In February 2025, Peter Sørensen's was appointed EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. In a meeting with the President of Kosovo the EU Representative has also highlighted that the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue remains focused on the Association of the Serb-majority municipalities, making it a priority point. The Agreement and its implementing annex have thus become an integral part of the respective EU accession processes of the two Balkan countries, making the implementation of all measures put on paper de facto binding.

WCSOs have time and again raised the issue of the insufficient participation of women in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue as well as little attention to priorities raised by women's rights advocates and women peacebuilders from Kosovo.¹⁴

¹⁴ A seat at the table, womens contributions to and expectations from peacebuilding processes in Kosovo, KWN (2021).

In August 2024, Kosovo authorities shut down five "parallel" institutions serving the ethnic Serb minority in the north, citing violations of

Kosovar laws. This action drew criticism from international actors, including the United States, and heightened regional tensions.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS AT LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY LEVEL SINCE JUNE 2024

- Medically assisted fertilization, known as IVF, began to be regulated through administrative instruction which was adopted in 2013. However, the **IVF law** as a whole has not been approved due to rejection by some MPs who opposed three paragraphs that foresee the right to reproduction for unmarried women and same- sex partners
- The **Action Plan for the Rights of LGBTI Persons in the Republic of Kosovo** (2024-2026) was adopted in 2024 and serves as a comprehensive national document designed to set clear objectives for improving the status and well-being of LGBTI individuals in Kosovo. Its development followed a well-structured methodology, drawing on best practices from EU member states and frameworks established by the Council of Europe
- The **Labour Law NO. 03/L-212** is still not adopted, it contributes to continued discrimination against women, and it was removed from the legislative calendar for 2024 despite continuous advocacy of WCSO's
- The **Law on Local Government Finance No. 03/ L-049**, Law on Public Financial Management and Accountability No. 03/L-048 and the Law on Procurement NO. 04 / L-042 are under amendment and need to include Gender Responsive Budgeting and have not been put out for consultation yet
- The **Draft Law on Social Housing** is still not adopted, KWN has sent its comments
- The adoption of the **draft Civil Code of Kosovo** has stagnated due to objections of assembly members mainly on same sex marriages. Among others, the adoption of the Civil code would make possible for the equal share of joint marital property between women and men spouses in Kosovo, as the draft Civil code has also integrated an article recognizing the contribution provided at home from each partner, when sharing joint marital property
- The **Law No. 08/L-332 on Budget Appropriations** for the Year 2025 was amended in 2024 and was not made available for public consultation. There was a 3% increase in the budget line related to gender equality, specifically for the Agency for Gender Equality. The budget line titled "Gender Affairs" exists in only 42% of municipalities, although it is required in all municipalities as part of implementing the Action Plans for Gender Equality. Budget allocations for basic expenses for shelters for domestic violence increased by 67%. Since 2019, this budget line has increased by 184%, following the continuous recommendations of KWN, its members, and shelter advocates. The budget for the Victim Protection and Assistance Office increased by 31%.
- **Cyberviolence in Kosovo's Civil Code:** In line with the Council of Europe's Directive on Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, KWN has advocated to incorporate cyberviolence into the civil code,¹⁵ which includes harassment, threats, defamation, publication of intimate material without consent, and other forms of abuse that occur through online platforms. Currently, the criminal legislation in Kosovo does not specifically include cyber violence, leaving a legal vacuum in the protection of victims of this form of violence.

¹⁵ See proposal by KWN

<https://womensnetwork.org/publications/proposals-for-the-inclusion-of-cyber-violence-in-the-criminal-code-of-the-republic-of-kosovo/>

DEVELOPMENTS ON GENDER EQUALITY

The Law on Local Elections and the Law on General Elections are still not implemented and harmonised with the Law on Gender Equality, which mandates 50% equal representation of women and men; emphasises that women continue to be underrepresented. In the recent parliamentary elections, women won 44 seats in the Assembly, making up 36.7% of the parliament, exceeding the legally mandated 30% gender quota. Political entities generally complied with the quota requirement in their candidate lists, though few went beyond it. During the electoral campaign it was noted that women faced unequal campaign conditions, including limited media presence and online harassment. No official institutions have been established to date following the elections, and comprehensive gender representation statistics remain pending. In general, the electoral campaigns for Kosovo's general election saw increased levels of hate speech targeting women political candidates.

Despite existing legal frameworks aimed at addressing violence against women, enforcement remains weak. On December 10, 2024, Kosovo initiated the electronic monitoring mechanism for individuals suspected of committing criminal offenses, specifically using electronic bracelets. However, since the launch, there has been limited information regarding their effectiveness and proper functioning. To date, only three electronic bracelets have been

deployed for individuals convicted of criminal offenses. These devices have encountered technical challenges, including issues with battery stability and the ease with which they can be removed by the monitored individuals.

Femicide was very much prevalent during this period with several tragic incidents, exposing significant gaps in protective measures and inadequacies in the justice and social welfare system in preventing recidivist gender-based violence.

Growing challenges in operating as feminist organizations with anti-gender groups. Though this is not as explicit as in other countries in the WB, it is still very evident when we try to advocate for issues such as same sex marriage or abortion and assisted fertility.

There are no shelter services for LGBTQI+ individuals, even though the National Strategy on Protection Against Domestic Violence and Violence Against Women foresees the action of "provision of support and shelter services for special groups (boys and men victims of domestic violence, LGBTQI+ persons, etc.)." Although the Municipality of Pristina allocated a budget line in 2022, this shelter was never built, and the budget was spent elsewhere. LGBTQI+ individuals who need shelter must go to shelters in Albania, which makes their situation very challenging.

ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONSULTATIONS

This period has been marked by limited cooperation between the government and civil society. Currently, women's organisations are engaged in consultations with the Agency for Gender Equality (AGE) regarding the adoption of the Gender Equality Plan for the period 2025–2035, where women's

organisations participate as members of one of the working groups. However, there have been no updates regarding consultations on any other law or policy and specifically the Labour Law, despite its inclusion in the parliamentary legislative agenda for 2025, with adoption anticipated by June 2025.

The reduction in funds from specific donors like USAID in Kosovo has had significant impacts on organizations working for marginalized communities. These organizations often rely on external funding to implement their programs and support vulnerable populations, such as Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian communities, and other marginalized groups, including women, LGBTQI+ individuals, and persons with disabilities.

There is more to be done to make sure that the public consultation platform reaches diverse Women Civil Society Organizations, and that they are decently asked to provide their input on the drafting of public policies, especially from a gender perspective. Informative sessions or campaigns that would reach grassroots WCSOs and women in the rural areas are crucial to a successful public consultation process.

Recommendations for the 2025 Country Report

1. Call for the adoption of the amendments to the Labour Law in line with the EU Work-Life Balance Directive, including well-regulated maternity, paternity and parental leave and allocate resources for appropriately financing these leaves as well as for investing in expanding the availability of care services
2. Call for the adoption of the Civil Code and Law on Civil Status to safeguard the fundamental rights of all individuals including those of diverse genders, gender identities and sexual orientations and to eradicate discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in Family law
3. Call for the harmonisation of the Law on Local Elections 2008/03-L07 and Law on General Elections No. 03/L-073 with the Law on Gender Equality to ensure equal representation of women and men in elected bodies
4. Ensure the upcoming Law on Finance institutionalises gender-responsive budgeting in line with the requirements of the Law on Gender Equality
5. Call for better coordination among institutional actors to address and prevent gender-based violence and recommend adequate allocation of resources for social services
6. Include a gender perspective in the section on normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, and report on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda as part of the EU-facilitated dialogue; encourage the governments of Kosovo and Serbia in the current round of negotiations to ensure that women are included as part of negotiation teams and to consult with women's organisations especially those in Mitrovica and Northern Kosovo
7. Improve the intersectional perspective in the report, recognising how gender intersects with other social markers including age, disability, ethnicity, urban/rural location, and how this leads to multiple discrimination in relation to, among others, access to education, employment, property and health services in relevant chapters
8. Recognise the role of women's rights organisations in providing services to women victims/survivors of gender-based violence and their active role in peacebuilding, remembrance and reconciliation. Ensure expertise of women's rights organisations is called upon in gender mainstreaming of legislation and policies
9. Recommend the adoption of specific affirmative measures targeting women to increase their active participation in the labour market and to close the gender pay gap
10. Increase the number of chapters that are gender-mainstreamed, including chapter 11 (Agriculture and rural development), Chapter 27 (Environment and Climate Change), Chapter 28 (Consumer and health protection)



MONTENEGRO

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Montenegro continued to work on EU integration and related reforms, mostly in terms of better normative framework. The Facility Agreement for the Reform Agenda 2024-2027 was adopted in January 2025, leaving less than three months to initiate the establishment of the Monitoring Committee. CSOs participation in the Committee would be one of the key prerequisites of independent assessment and transparency of the process.

In March 2025, the Montenegrin government and opposition reached an EU-mediated agreement aimed at resolving the political and constitutional crisis triggered by the controversial dismissal of Constitutional Court

judge Dragana Đuranović. The opposition, led by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), had previously boycotted parliament, calling the dismissal an attempted “constitutional coup”. As per the signed document, the parties involved agree to take all necessary steps towards the full implementation of the opinion of the Venice Commission within 15 days after its receipt. Until then, the process of selecting a Constitutional Court judge initiated by the constitutional committee of the Montenegrin parliament on December 12 is suspended. The government and the opposition have also agreed to work jointly towards completing the election reform process in the country by the end of 2025 at the latest.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS AT LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY LEVEL SINCE JUNE 2024

- **Draft Law on Government:**
 - Still excludes gender quotas, despite proposals by Women's Rights Center (WRC).
 - Withdrawn for two years; now reintroduced for prompt adoption.
- **Strategy for Protection of Victims' Rights:**
 - Working Group established in April 2024; held first meeting only in February 2025.
 - First draft still pending.
 - National law remains unaligned with EU Directive 2012/29/EU on victims' rights.
- **Criminal Procedure Code (CPC):**
 - Working Group for amendments expected in March 2025.
 - Key priorities: introduce victim protection measures (e.g., restraining and eviction orders).
- **Criminal Code Amendments:**
 - Femicide recognized as aggravated murder motivated by gender-based reasons (Art. 144, pt. 9).
- WRC proposed clarifying “gender-based reasons” and strengthening enforcement of safety measures (Arts. 77a, 77b).
- Calls for judiciary sentencing guidelines in gender-based violence cases.
- **Law on Protection Against Domestic Violence:**
 - No progress on adoption; draft prepared in 2023.
 - Unique Database on Gender-Based Violence still not operational.
- **Law on Free Legal Aid:**
 - Needs amendment to include specialized NGO legal support as state-funded.
 - No updates since public debate in April 2024.
 - Similar EU practice exists (e.g., Croatia).
- **Law on Budget and Fiscal Responsibility**
 - Amendments were adopted on February 15th, 2024.
 - No introduction of gender-responsive budgeting—missed opportunity.

- **Draft Law on Business Entities:** The Law amending the Law on Business Entities (article 327a) includes a provision that at least 40% of the total number of non-executive directors in the board of directors, i.e. at least 40% of the members of the supervisory board or at least 33% of the total number of all director positions, including executive and non-executive directors, should be represented by less represented gender.
- **The changes to the Law on NGOs,** stuck for four years, underwent a revision starting from December 2024. However, no single consultative meeting between the line Ministry and NGOs was organised.

A number of **key human rights laws** in Montenegro are still pending adoption or implementation:

- The **Law on Protection of Equality and Prohibition of Discrimination** has been awaiting adoption for three years.
- The **Law on Gender Equality** is set to be amended by mid-2026 to improve gender equality mechanisms and strengthen coordination.
- The **Law on Legal Gender Recognition** based on Self-Determination, planned for 2023, is blocked by the Government despite international calls for its adoption (e.g., CPT, UN CEDAW).
- The **Law on Same-Sex Partnerships** remains largely unimplemented due to lack of harmonization with 27 related laws and bylaws—only six were amended initially, with no further progress.

DEVELOPMENTS ON GENDER EQUALITY

Harmful gender and patriarchal norms in Montenegrin society negatively affect vulnerable groups, particularly women and LGBTIQ+ individuals, contributing to increased violence and undermining human rights.¹⁶ In such 'culture' conflict resolution more often involves force and use of weapon, as happened on January 1st when another mass murder took place in Cetinje, the second in two and a half years.

Male-dominated decision-making fosters political hostility, hate speech and marginalization of women and minorities, often using nationalism and religious influence to suppress diverse voices. Anti-gender and

anti-trans statements by parts of the government contradict Montenegro's European values.¹⁷

The educational system is becoming more conservative, with funds directed towards religious schools despite the country's lack of basic services.¹⁸ The State Audit Institution revealed that from 2019 to 2023, 8.75 million euros were allocated to religious organizations, predominantly the Serbian Orthodox Church. Moreover, a public petition for religious education in public schools gained significant support, while the Capital City planned construction of 22 religious institutions only in Podgorica.

¹⁶ These harmful gender norms have been addressed in recent reports by UN treaty bodies, such as CEDAW and Human Rights Committee (March 2025), as well as by the CoE GREVIO (November 2024).

¹⁷ More at link: <https://borba.me/mandic-donald-tramp-saopstio-da-postoje-samo-dva-pola-i-ucinio-da-se-sad-vrate-zdravom-razumu-i-bogunvo-sektor-i-majstori-kolumni-zanimemil/>

¹⁸ The fund of 1 800 000 euros, was allocated from the state budget to the religious gymnasium founded by the Serbian Orthodox Church, according to two Government's decisions. More at: <https://www.gov.me/clanak/saopstenje-sa-9-sjednice-vlade-crne-gore>

ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

The 44th Government of Montenegro holds the lowest percentage of women in executive power since 2012, marking a significant step backward in gender representation. Parliament continues to lack women from underrepresented groups, and barely meets the legally required quota of 27 percent, falling short of international standards and repeated recommendations by ODIHR and CEDAW, which call for gender parity.¹⁹

A persistent and unaddressed problem is the illegal and non-transparent use of funds allocated to women's branches within political parties. The State Audit Institution has confirmed these findings, yet there has been no

accountability. In April 2024, the Anti-Corruption Agency submitted an initiative to amend the Law on Financing Political Entities and Election Campaigns, along with the Law on Misdemeanors, to improve transparency and enforce penalties, but the Parliament has yet to act.

Despite the early promise shown by its previous convocation, the new Parliamentary Women's Club has become inactive, reportedly due to political pressure. It has remained silent even on issues most directly affecting its mandate, such as hate speech targeting women in politics, electoral reform, and sexual violence cases that sparked public outrage.

ON HATE SPEECH, GENDER EQUALITY, THB

Montenegro still doesn't have track record on prosecutions of hate crimes and hate speech. The most common hateful narratives in the past years were made in relation to gender,²⁰ specifically targeting women in politics and women human rights activists. Public attacks on women's rights defenders often stem from family perpetrators or their supporters. Emergence of groups identifying themselves as "protectors of men's rights" and media coverage they receive creates concerns.

The recent attack on activist Vanja Čalović was particularly concerning, coming shortly after her strong criticism of the government's agreement with the UAE. It involved the renewed dissemination of fabricated and sexually explicit content that had previously been used by the former DPS regime in an attempt to intimidate her-this time shared from a Facebook profile linked to the ruling party, Europe Now. The

smear campaign sparked strong condemnation from civil society organizations.²¹ Following a strong response from civil society, Facebook profile was taken down and the Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica launched an official investigation ex officio for the criminal offense of "Endangering Security."

Twenty cases of intimidation or attacks on media workers occurred in 2024²², four since November 2024, out of which two most brutal were directed to women. Such incidents threaten not only the media freedom but tend to silence women journalists known for their critical reporting on power structures. As for disseminated media context, although significantly more women are among program editors and presenters (75% and 81%), they are still scarcely included among interlocutors (only 26,47%), particularly in TV shows dealing with politics, violence, crime, economy and society.

¹⁹ CEDAW/C/MNE/CO/3, page 8: Amend Electoral Law to introduce the zipper system, requiring political parties to create a candidate list alternating between female and male candidates, and approve said amendments prior to the 2027 general elections, with a plan to achieve parity in political representation;

²⁰ Monitoring report on hate speech in Montenegro, see more at:

https://www.reportingdiversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/MRHS_Montenegro-FINAL.pdf

²¹ Portal Vijesti, April 20, 2025, at : <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/755295/gradjanski-aktivisti-i-nvo-osudili-napad-na-vanju-calovic-markovic-sa-bot-profila-pes-a>

²² See more at: <https://sindikatomedija.me/saopstenja/nadlezni-da-konacno-kazne-sve-napade-na-medijske-radnike/>

ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONSULTATIONS

The Ministry for Regional Investment Development and Cooperation with NGOs has reopened the Council for Cooperation Between the State and NGOs²³, a body that had been inactive for years. However, gender equality was notably excluded from the list of 12 priority areas of NGO activity, making it visible only indirectly through the category of protection of human and minority rights. This limits the opportunity for direct representation of women's rights organizations and restricts broader participation, as only one representative is appointed per area of work.

There is still no comprehensive system in place to track funds allocated for the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and support services, an issue already highlighted in the 2023 Country Report. Meanwhile, the social care system continues to place financial burdens on licensed women's civil society organizations (WCSOs) that provide specialized services, without ensuring their financial sustainability. These organizations also face increasing institutional oversight and costs due to licensing requirements, while the commitments outlined in the 2024 Action Plan for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention²⁴, and supported by GREVIO recommendations²⁵, remain unfulfilled— especially the obligation to secure the independence of specialized services.

State funding for civil society-led services remains both insufficient and unfairly distributed. The Ministry of Social Welfare selects CSO service providers through public procurement or partnerships, as outlined in the Law on Social and Child Welfare. However, the criteria used often result in the selection of organizations lacking relevant experience or specialization, making them unfit to work with specific vulnerable groups. For instance, in the field of LGBTIQ+ rights, only about one-third of available funding reaches organizations with proven expertise in that area. A similar trend is seen with funding for organizations focused on disability rights and gender equality.

According to the Women's Rights Centre analysis²⁶, in 2024, the Ministry allocated €160,397.84 for the protection from violence against women and domestic violence, of which only €61,802.84 (38.5%) went to women's NGOs, with the remainder going to other NGOs without relevant specialization. Shelters received €200,000 in funding. In comparison, in 2023, €300,000 was allocated for the same purpose, with €187,285 (62.4%) going to women's NGOs, while each shelter received €50,000. Despite legal obligations, local municipalities provided little to no support for these essential services.

²³ Public call at the link: <https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/16886771-ae08-472d-9c33-1aa86c458ee7>

²⁴ See the full report at link: <https://wapi.gov.me/download-preview/b04447a9-b03d-41ad-a01d-9bf9ea7d398f?version=1.0>

²⁵ See First thematic evaluation "Building trust by delivering support, protection and justice", para.30, published on 22 November 2024.

²⁶ The data were obtained from the web page of the Government of Montenegro: <https://www.gov.me/clanak/odluka-o-finansiranju-usluge-smjestaja-u-prihvatilistu-sklonistu>

SOCIAL POLICY AND EMPLOYMENT

Montenegro continues to face a lower employment rate among women (46.7%) compared to men (53.3%), along with persistent horizontal and vertical occupational segregation, which devalues feminized sectors such as education and healthcare where wages barely exceed the legal minimum. The gender pay gap remained significant at 21% in 2023, particularly affecting older and higher-earning women, and is accompanied by a 12% gender pension gap.²⁷

Final preparations are being made for the adoption of the amended Labour Law to transpose the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. However, the latest draft reviewed by the Women's Rights Center still omits Article 5(1), which guarantees every worker the right to four months of parental leave before a child turns eight.²⁸ Although Montenegro has ratified ILO

Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment, its provisions have not yet been transposed into national law. The Labour Law and the Law on Prohibition of Harassment at Work still need to be fully harmonized with the Convention.

The Draft Law on Amendments to the Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities sparked protests from associations of persons with disabilities. Instead of addressing the misuse of Disability Fund subsidies by employers, the draft narrows hard-won measures to improve employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. Allegations of abuse are based solely on the amount of earnings, revealing deep-rooted bias and discrimination, especially toward women with disabilities, who continue to face higher unemployment rates than men.²⁹

STATISTICS

Progress was made in gender statistics through MONSTAT's 10th edition of Women and Men in Montenegro (2024), which nearly doubled the number of sex-disaggregated indicators—from 80 to approximately 150.³⁰ These additions followed proposals from the Women's Rights Center based on their Gender Analysis of Official Statistics, discussed during several joint workshops with MONSTAT and other institutions.

However, statistical gaps persist in areas such as domestic and gender-based violence, income and salaries, health, and social security. MONSTAT remains under-resourced and understaffed. To meet Chapter 18 benchmarks, 103 current employees must implement over 550 EU regulations and guidelines in the next two years, despite the systematization act foreseeing 170 employees. In comparison, Croatia carried out a similar process with 500 staff.

²⁷ MONSTAT. Women and Men in Montenegro 2024.

²⁸ Draft Labour Law, Working version accessed by Women's Rights Center in February 2024.

²⁹ Disability associations protest amendments – Vijesti, March 2024: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/694130/izmjene-zakona-o-zaposljavanju-osoba-sa-invaliditetom-naljutile-udruzenja> 30 MONSTAT, Women and Men in Montenegro 2024

³⁰ MONSTAT, Women and Men in Montenegro 2024

Recommendations for the 2025 Country Report

1. Recommend amending the Draft Law on Government, mandating that at least 40% of the Government consists of members of the least represented gender
2. Reintroduce an analysis of women's political participation in the section on parliament and recommend adhering to CEDAW recommendations to amend the Electoral Law and strengthen the parliamentary representation and participation of women in political and public life
3. Include a recommendation to adopt the amendments to the Law on Domestic Violence and align the definition of gender-based violence and violence against women across legislation in line with the Istanbul Convention and GREVIO recommendations (which is now part of the narrative of the report)
4. Recommend aligning the Labour Law with EU *acquis*, including the Work-Life Balance Directive and international conventions, guaranteeing equal pay principles, preventing harassment at work and preserving basic labour rights for persons with disabilities, particularly women as unproportionally discriminated.
5. Recommend the adoption of specific affirmative measures targeting women, particularly from marginalised groups, to increase their active participation in the labour market and to close the gender pay gap in Chapter 19
6. Recommend that the system of licencing of NGOs providing specialised services to women victims/survivors of gender-based violence be mindful of the principles of confidentiality and autonomy of women's rights organisations, and ensure their funding, in line with 2024 GREVIO recommendations.
7. Ensure that a monitoring mechanism of the Reform Agenda includes civil society is set up to monitor transparency and efficiency in the use of funds. WCSOs should also be included in the monitoring mechanism.
8. Recommend aligning the future Strategy for Protection of Victims Rights, as well as amended Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) with the Victims' Rights Directive 2012/29/EU and the Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code of Montenegro with the new EU Directive on violence Against Women and Domestic Violence.
9. Ensure that comprehensive human rights legislation is in place by adopting the Law on Protection of Equality and Prohibition of Discrimination and the Law on Legal Gender Recognition based on Self-Determination
10. Recommend establishing a multisectoral coordination mechanism at national level to collect data on hate crimes and to issue general instructions for recording, verifying and consolidating information on criminal acts committed out of hatred, in line with the CoE General Recommendation No. 1



NORTH MACEDONIA

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS SINCE JUNE 2024

The 2024 parliamentary and presidential elections marked a major political shift in North Macedonia. The center-right VMRO-DPMNE party, led by Hristijan Mickoski, secured a parliamentary majority and formed a coalition government with VLEN and ZNAM. Mickoski became a Prime Minister on June 23. The coalition also backed the **country's first woman president - a symbolic milestone overshadowed by her support for erasing gender from education reforms**. Despite meeting quota requirements, most women candidates were placed at the lowest legally allowed positions, and only 25% led electoral lists.³¹ **Gender equality was absent from campaign narratives, and women had minimal visibility in political events.**

On October 29, 2024, the Parliament adopted a long-term National Development Strategy³² which lacks specific commitments to gender justice. Meanwhile, a coordinated anti-gender movement-comprising over 30 actors-continues to undermine democratic reforms. It has blocked the Gender Equality Law, pressured municipalities to erase gender-sensitive language and obstructed national legislation on labor rights, workplace harassment, and gender recognition. Recent education reforms, passed through opaque processes, eliminated all gender-related provisions, with institutional and political support enabling smear campaigns and disinformation. Gender and LGBTQI+ rights defenders face growing pressure, disinformation and state inaction. Democratic backsliding mirrors regional authoritarian trends, despite EU commitments.³³

KEY DEVELOPMENTS AT LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY LEVEL SINCE JUNE 2024

- **Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth 2025–2027** (adopted March 24, 2025) (Chapters 19, 23, and 24): Focuses on gender equality, intersectional discrimination, institutional strengthening, and gender mainstreaming in employment, education, and social protection. Includes support for women survivors of GBV and improved data collection.
- **Preventive Health Programs for 2025** (adopted February 4, 2025): *Program for participation in health care and Program for active protection of mothers and children* declare exemption from co-payments and access to free medical services for GBV survivors and marginalized

women. Although aligned with EU directives (2012/29/EU, 2004/113/EC), the measures remain mostly declarative. There is no dedicated funding for survivors' healthcare rights; crisis center access is restricted to cases with ongoing criminal procedures; funds allocated only for sexual violence response, not other forms of GBV, and are insufficient for crisis center sustainability; programs are adopted annually, with no long-term funding guarantees.

- **National Strategy for Prevention and Protection against GBV and Domestic Violence (2026–2033) and National Action Plan (2026–2029)** – under development: Drafted in alignment with the *Istanbul Convention* and EU *Acquis (Gender*

³¹ Republic of North Macedonia Parliamentary Elections and Presidential Election Second Round 2024.

³² THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2024-2044

³³ Velichkovska, M., Milenkovska, S. & Atanasovska, G. (2024). Censorship, boycott and reduction of the space for action of LGBTIQ activists and artists as a result of hate speech. Skopje: Institute for Media and Analytics.

Equality Strategy 2020–2025, Directives 2024/1385, 2006/54/EC, 2004/113/EC, 2012/29/EU, 2011/36/EU). Major concern: absence of secured and adequate budgeting during the development process.

- **Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2027** (adopted after delay): Replaces the expired 2013–2020 Strategy; adopted for six years (not eight, as prescribed by law) to allow future flexibility. A new Gender Equality Action Plan 2025–2027 is currently being

developed to operationalize strategy goals.

- **Legal Gender Recognition:** No legislative progress has been made to fulfill the European Court of Human Rights' mandate for a "quick, transparent, and accessible" process.
- **Draft Laws on Secondary Education** (proposed November 2024): Excludes provisions protecting sexual orientation and gender identity, indicating a lack of protection for LGBTQI+ students.

DEVELOPMENTS ON GENDER EQUALITY AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

Power and Decision-Making: Regression Behind Symbolic Gains

Despite legal reforms, progress toward gender-balanced political participation in North Macedonia has stagnated and, in key areas, regressed. Women's representation in Parliament rose slightly from 38.4% in 2021 to 39.2% in 2024, but this masks deeper disparities. Ministerial representation dropped sharply—from five women in 2023 to just three in 2024 (12.5% of the cabinet). Local leadership remains especially unequal, with only two female mayors among 81 municipalities since 2021, ranking North Macedonia among the lowest in Europe.³⁴ While parliamentary quotas have sustained some balance, the absence of mandates for executive roles, coupled with entrenched patriarchal norms and party gatekeeping, continues to block women from meaningful power.³⁵

The 2025 local elections offer a chance to align governance with the **National Gender Equality Strategy (2022–2027)**³⁶, but without structural reforms, symbolic milestones - such as electing the first woman president - will remain hollow. Although the president's campaign referenced women's inclusion and the Women, Peace and Security agenda, no concrete policies or institutional appointments followed.³⁷ Both top

positions in the President's office are held by men - one known for misogynistic and disinformation-driven media narratives - further undermining credibility and exposing the gap between rhetoric and real change.

Gender Equality in Political Programs: Systemic Omissions

Analyses of political party programs leading up to the 2024 elections reveal widespread avoidance or misrepresentation of gender equality.³⁸ VMRO-DPMNE's platform notably reverted from the term "gender" to "sex," reducing the scope of protections and inclusivity. References to gender equality were minimal or absent in the platforms of coalition partners VLEN and ZNAM. Only limited and conservative commitments - such as childcare expansion - were present, with no pledges on political inclusion, anti-discrimination, or combating gender-based violence. Such omissions suggest not only a lack of political will but an active distancing from equality discourse under the pressure of anti-gender narratives.

Normalisation of Anti-Gender Mobilisation and Institutional Complicity

The most significant democratic regression has been the mainstreaming of anti-gender narratives, increasingly institutionalised through

³⁴ Gender Mainstreaming in the EU Accession Process Research in Action (2024).

³⁵ Women in Politics 2: The Path to Political Office and Influence at the Local Level in North Macedonia 2024

³⁶ Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2027. Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no.170/22.

³⁷ Instead, the centre was established in Kosovo last year, signaling a missed opportunity for national leadership in advancing the WPS agenda within the NATO framework.

³⁸ Analysis of Political Party Programmes from a Gender Perspective, Research in Action (2024).

a network of over 30 coordinated actors, including political parties, religious institutions, pseudo-experts, and municipal authorities. The Macedonian Orthodox Church remains a key influencer, framing gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights as threats to national identity.³⁹ This rhetoric has not only remained unchallenged by state institutions but has often been replicated by them, creating a hostile and unsafe environment for civil society and minority groups.⁴⁰ Parliamentary representatives from the ruling coalition have begun to endorse anti-gender positions, resulting in legislative delays and active obstruction of legislation. Key bills - including the Gender Equality Law and the Civil Registry Law (affecting legal gender recognition) - remain stalled.⁴¹ This institutional resistance is coupled with efforts to strip gender-related terminology and protections from education laws and public administration protocols. Such moves represent a serious breach of EU legal standards and contradict North Macedonia's own legal obligations under international human rights frameworks.

LGBTQI+ Rights: Rising Stigma, Failing Protections

The situation of LGBTQI+ communities continues to deteriorate. Despite legal protections (inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in anti-discrimination laws), implementation is weak and public hostility remains high - 81% of citizens would not accept an LGBTQI neighbor.⁴² Institutional violence is systemic, with over 255 documented cases between 2021 and 2023 involving denial of services and abuse by healthcare, education, and police institutions.⁴³ Activists face growing threats, surveillance, and harassment. In June 2024, LGBTQI youth CSO Ekvalis had to relocate its summer school due to death threats and smear campaigns, with no protection provided by state institutions despite filing complaints. The sudden halt of USAID funding further exacerbated risks, forcing the closure of key

services and several LGBTQI+ initiatives and leaving many without legal or psychosocial support. Trans individuals and feminist activists report rising online harassment, while over 76% of LGBTQI individuals who experience discrimination choose not to report it, fearing inaction or retaliation (Coalition Margins). The anti-gender backlash is having concrete, harmful effects on civil society and LGBTQI rights.

Gender-Based Violence: From Legal Reform to Structural Neglect

Although North Macedonia has ratified the Istanbul Convention, its implementation remains weak. The European Commission's 2024 report highlights chronic underfunding, poor inter-institutional coordination, and inadequate training of professionals. Survivors face legal, economic, and procedural barriers to justice and safety. Ministries continue to withhold necessary funds for enforcing the Law on GBV⁴⁴, though the upcoming 2026–2033 Strategy offers a critical opportunity to reverse this trend. Recent data shows 87% of women survivors face economic fallout⁴⁵ - including income loss, housing insecurity, and healthcare costs. Alimony mechanisms are largely ineffective, with only 27% receiving timely payments⁴⁶, and court decisions are poorly enforced. Survivor rights - such as access to legal aid or exemption from court fees - are rarely upheld, leaving many retraumatized by civil proceedings.⁴⁷ Technology-facilitated GBV is rising, yet remains largely unaddressed in legislation, aside from a narrow cyberstalking provision, the Criminal Code does not explicitly recognize technology-facilitated GBV.⁴⁸ Women with disabilities are especially vulnerable due to inaccessible reporting systems, exclusion from prevention materials, and restrictive caregiving contexts.⁴⁹ Such intersecting exclusions highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms, inclusive policymaking, and comprehensive survivor-centered services.

³⁹ Anti-gender mobilizations in North Macedonia: A transnational tool-kit for domestic actors against gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Sarajevo

⁴⁰ Report on the needs and priorities of LGBTI+ people in the Republic of North Macedonia

⁴¹ Western Balkans and their uneasy road to (gender) democracy | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Warszawa | Polska

⁴² DANGER OF (NON)EXISTENCE Institutional violence, access to rights and attitudes towards the LGBTQI+ community in North Macedonia (2021/2023)

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Articles 17–21 of the Law on Prevention and Protection against Gender-Based and Domestic Violence

⁴⁵ Association ESE, Analysis on costs incurred as a result of domestic violence 2024

⁴⁶ Association ESE, Does Child Alimony Meet Children's Needs? 2024

⁴⁷ Association ESE, Impact of Court Fees on Women Survivors of Domestic Violence, 2021

⁴⁸ Analysis of the legislation related to technology facilitated gender-based violence, Association ESE (2023)

⁴⁹ Invisible threats: Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TfGBV) Against Persons with Disabilities, UNFPA (2024).

Roma women

Roma women face systemic and compounded discrimination across employment, healthcare, and education. Most work informally without social protection, literacy and early school dropout rates remain alarming, and only 2% of Roma children attend early education.

Healthcare gaps persist: just 57% of Roma women are registered with a gynecologist, and only 12% are included in cervical cancer screening.⁵⁰ Housing insecurity is widespread, with 40% living in illegally constructed household units and 97% lacking basic infrastructure.⁵¹

ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONSULTATIONS

Civic space in North Macedonia continues to shrink, driven by political instability, institutional reshuffling, and growing anti-democratic rhetoric. Women's rights groups and gender-focused CSOs face increasing exclusion from policymaking. While the government has formally reactivated the Council for Cooperation with Civil Society, no structural reforms have been introduced to improve its effectiveness or transparency. The reactivation came only after the Council's mandate had expired, with no reflection on past shortcomings-such as its previous ineffectiveness due to unilateral budget decisions and the absence of follow-up mechanisms.

Consultations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) and the National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAA) remain limited, unstructured, and often gender-blind. The NPAA remains unrevised since 2023, and there has been no public update on its status in 2024. Gender equality advocates are routinely excluded from key reform processes, including Labour Law reform, while ENER - the national legislative consultation portal - is rarely used meaningfully, and essential working groups, such as the one on Labour Law, have been disbanded without explanation. While national strategies nominally commit to civil society engagement in the EU integration process, implementation is ad hoc and non-transparent. Despite repeated

recommendations since 2022, the HRD's and organisations' monitoring⁵² shows no substantial improvement.

One notable improvement has been the inclusion of women's CSOs in two rounds of consultations related to the SAA Sub-Committee on Justice, Freedom and Security. Additionally, the participation of gender equality actors in the 2025 visit of the European Economic and Social Committee marks a shift toward more inclusive EU engagement. However, these remain isolated advancements.

A significant setback came in January 2025, when USAID halted funding for gender and diversity initiatives across the region. Over 30 organizations lost support overnight, leading to staff layoffs and the suspension of essential services such as legal aid for GBV survivors and LGBTQI youth programs. The lack of domestic alternatives or contingency planning exposed the sector's vulnerability, especially for those working with marginalized communities.

In the context of shrinking civic space, civil society's watchdog role is increasingly under threat, with activists facing mounting disinformation, defunding, and delegitimization. To safeguard its role in the EU accession process, national institutions must institutionalize transparent consultations, re-establish functional working groups with clear mandates, and apply gender markers accurately

⁵⁰ Association ESE, When life on the margin determines health - Access to primary health care for the Roma population in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022

⁵¹ Reactor - Research in action, Contribution to the Progress Report in implementing the Action Plan for Implementing the Strategy for Cooperation with and Development of Civil Society 2022-2024

⁵² Follow-up assessment of Western Balkans EU accession process from a gender perspective Reactor Research in action

and consistently across IPA programming. Without these structural reforms, public trust

and genuine alignment with EU democratic standards will remain elusive.

COMPANY LAW

The 2023 country report identified the need to align with the EU Directive 2022/2381 on improving gender balance on corporate boards, yet the issue was entirely absent in 2024 reporting. According to the Directive, by 2026, member states must ensure that at least 40% of non-executive or 33% of all director positions

are held by the underrepresented sex. In North Macedonia, men hold 100% of CEO roles, 73.2% of executives, and 75.9% of non-executive position.⁵³ The absence of this issue from the 2024 report is a concerning oversight, given the scale of gender imbalance in leadership.

CONSUMER AND HEALTH PROTECTION

The launch of the first national breast cancer screening campaign and a doubling of cervical screenings in 2023 is positive. However, the approach remains insufficiently population-based. Screening efforts are largely driven by international and civil society actors, not the national health authorities. The cervical cancer

screening program aims to reach 75% of women aged 21–59, but recent monitoring reports indicate actual coverage is [only 15%](#) over three years. Transparency is lacking, as no public reporting on implementation or budget execution has been published.

SOCIAL POLICY AND EMPLOYMENT

The 2024 country report's renewed reference to women is a welcome step but requires close follow-up. Despite the National Employment Strategy (2021–2027) planning a new Action Plan (2024–2027), no progress has been reported. The Strategy for Formalising the Informal Economy (2023–2027) lacks clear gender dimensions, and employment measures remain insufficiently gender-sensitive. In 2023, 46% of active labour market measure beneficiaries were women, but 2024 data is still lacking. [Rural women remain poorly integrated](#) into the labour market, highlighting the need to strengthen the Employment Service Agency.

The Law on Labour Relations remains misaligned with EU standards, lacking key provisions such as paternity and shared parental leave. Its urgent revision must ensure compliance with the EU Work-Life Balance Directive and ILO Convention 190, ratified in 2023. Adoption of the new **Law on Harassment at Work** should also be prioritized. Gender gaps in labour force participation remain stark - 57% of working-age women are economically inactive, compared to 38% of men. Poor childcare infrastructure is a major factor. In 2021, there were only 1.3 kindergartens per 1,000 preschool-age children, with over half of municipalities below 30% coverage. Municipalities with kindergartens show better

⁵³ Ibid.

female employment outcomes, underscoring the care-work nexus. The Programme for Social Security of Women Farmers (2024) introduces maternity benefits but remains discretionary,

lacking legal permanence. Despite prior calls, the 2024 report omits data on the gender pay gap, which remains unmeasured.

STATISTICS

Gender mainstreaming in the statistical system remains weak. The State Statistical Office (SSO) suffers from understaffing and high turnover. Key indicators - such as the gender pay gap - have not been updated since [2018](#). The second edition of the [National Gender Equality Index \(GEI\)](#) reveals major data gaps, particularly in the Domain of Time, where data is over a decade

old. National authorities must be urged to regularly produce gender-disaggregated and updated data to support policy development and EU monitoring. The State Statistical Office suffers from underfunding and high turnover, affecting its capacity to produce timely, gender-sensitive statistics.

Recommendations for the 2025 Country Report

1. Recommend full implementation and adequate funding of the Istanbul Convention and Gender-Based Violence Legislation. Ensure that the upcoming National Strategy for Prevention and Protection against GBV and Domestic Violence (2026–2033) addresses systemic gaps through sustainable financing, inter-sectoral coordination, gender-sensitive data, public education, and survivor-centered justice and support services.
2. Improve access to justice and legal protection for GBV survivors and strengthen institutional response and public awareness. This should include amendments of the Law on Free Legal Aid to guarantee access to secondary legal aid for women survivors of GBV and domestic violence, especially those facing intersecting forms of discrimination (e.g. Roma women, women with disabilities, LGBTQI+ persons).
3. Address the economic dimension of GBV through targeted state support by recognizing the economic consequences of GBV and domestic violence and recommend the adoption of measures for financial support and/or establishment of a state compensation fund. This fund should provide financial support to women survivors and their children, including compensation for unpaid child alimony and other GBV-related economic losses.
4. Strengthen the Human Rights Data Collection and Monitoring System ensuring a comprehensive, transparent, and sustainable system for monitoring and data collection on the implementation of human rights legislation, policies, and strategies
5. Urge the state to safeguard existing gender equality and anti-discrimination protections, address the safety of human rights defenders, ensuring that no acquired rights are weakened through non-transparent legislative procedures or political pressure from anti-gender movements. All legal reforms must be subject to inclusive public debate, grounded in international human rights standards, and include meaningful civil society engagement at all stages. Ensure Transparency and Independence in the Work of the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (CPPD)..

6. Recommend institutionalizing transparent and inclusive mechanisms for civil society participation including women's rights groups, LGBTQI+ organizations, and grassroots CSOs in the EU integration process, legislative reform, and public policy development. This includes regular consultations, structured feedback mechanisms, and institutional recognition of their monitoring and watchdog role, especially in sensitive areas like reproductive rights, minority rights, and social inclusion.
7. Recommend the urgent adoption of the long-delayed Law on Gender Equality, alongside the establishment of the Secretariat for Gender Equality as a key inter- institutional coordination body. This legislation must embed intersectionality, prohibit all forms of gender-based discrimination, and be fully harmonized with EU gender directives.
8. Recommend strengthening political participation and leadership of women, including Roma women, young women and LGBTQI+ persons by calling for urgent amendments to the Electoral Code to introduce quotas where absent and enforce 50-50 gender parity in all elected and appointed bodies. Political parties must be held accountable to ensure women's representation, particularly at the local level and within executive functions.
9. Recommend the adoption of legislation on legal gender recognition based on self-determination, in line with ECtHR jurisprudence, and mandate inclusion of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) as protected grounds across labor, health, education, and anti- discrimination laws.
10. Recommend the adoption of dedicated programming and budget lines addressing systemic exclusion faced by Roma women, persons with disabilities, and other structurally marginalized groups. This includes ensuring access to early childhood education, maternal and reproductive healthcare, mobile health services, clean water, and vocational training. Anti-discrimination measures in employment and education must be enforced, and intersectional data must be collected to monitor disparities and guide policy.



SERBIA

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS SINCE JUNE 2024

Since July 2024, wide-spread protests have been taking place in Serbia. In August 2024, **citizens rose against lithium-mining projects which would lead to environmental destruction and public health concerns**. As the protests united citizens around environmental and democratic demands, the government responded with heightened repression-arresting at least 33 activists in 17 cities, launching smear campaigns against 39 organizations and 11 donors, and subjecting civil society to surveillance and intimidation. This orchestrated attack on civil society reflects the government's growing fear of citizen mobilisation and its intent to suppress democratic dissent and maintain centralised control.⁵⁴

In November 2024, after the collapse of a concrete canopy at the newly renovated railway station in Novi Sad which killed 16 people and seriously injured two others, citizens took to the streets to denounce corruption, negligence, and a lack of transparency in the station's reconstruction. **Citizens demanded a swift and thorough investigation but the government responded with repression**-over 20 activists and citizens were arrested, many by unidentified individuals operating outside institutional frameworks. Protests continued through 2025, with students leading peaceful demonstrations, including local and large-scale protests in cities like Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Novi Pazar, and Kragujevac. Protesters were attacked by vehicles, and in Novi Sad, individuals from ruling party offices assaulted students with baseball bats. Other repressive tactics have also been used such as smear campaigns, scare tactics, surveillance (wiretapping, microphones in offices), hacking of devices, release of personal information to the public, mass arrests and illegal detainments.

The government launched a **fear-based campaign branding protesters as "foreign mercenaries" attempting to stage a coup**. State officials, pro-government media, and the ruling party worked in unison to discredit and

intimidate demonstrators. Leading up to the major protest on March 15, President Vučić issued alarming statements, predicting violence and urging parents not to let their children attend. Meanwhile, a police-guarded pro-government camp-comprising convicted criminals, far-right figures, and veterans of the disbanded Special Operations Unit-was set up in central Belgrade, escalating tensions further.

Despite these efforts to suppress public dissent, **the March 15 protest in Belgrade became the largest in Serbian history, drawing between 275,000 and 325,000 participants**. Anticipating possible clashes with the pro-government camp near the National Assembly, students cleverly redirected the protest to Slavija Square, avoiding confrontation. Still, the day was marred by intimidation tactics-masked individuals roamed the city, sacks of stones were discovered, a car drove into a group of protesters, and during the 15-minute silence for the Novi Sad victims, and most notably, a loud blast and sound wave caused by an alleged sound cannon, and later confirmed by NGO Earshot to be an illegal sonic weapon.⁵⁵ This use of an illegal weapon during a moment of silence caused mass panic and injuries. Simultaneously, projectiles were thrown from the pro-government camp. Citing safety concerns, the organisers ended the protest early, but the historic mass turnout stood as a powerful display of civic resistance and public demand for accountability, transparency, and justice.

In November 2024, primary and secondary school teachers launched strikes demanding better working conditions and higher wages, actions which overlapped with student protests. As solidarity grew, teachers began supporting student demands, expanding from one-day work stoppages to legally mandated reductions in class hours. This is coupled with numerous ongoing strikes and general strikes across various sectors including retail, grocery, nightlife, (air) transportation, manufacturing, all adding to both civil unrest and increased

⁵⁴ In December 2024, Amnesty International issued a report with an overview of the use and procurement of highly invasive spyware by the Serbian authorities

⁵⁵ <https://n1info.rs/english/news/earshot-confirms-use-of-sonic-weapon-at-protest/>

pressure from the ruling regime. In an attempt to quell the protests, the Ministry of Education abruptly suspended the first semester, citing safety concerns.⁵⁶ Despite opposition from most members, representative unions signed a strike moratorium and a Special Collective Agreement containing discriminatory provisions. After

media statements of the President of Serbia that February salaries would not be paid, the Ministry instructed schools to unlawfully withhold or reduce payments. To-date, salaries have either been significantly reduced to either the equivalent of a few Euros, or down to zero.⁵⁷

KEY DEVELOPMENTS AT LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY LEVEL SINCE JUNE 2024

- The **Draft Law on Amendments to the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children** (August 2024) contains a discriminatory provision in relation to children, because it does not allow them to exercise guaranteed rights due to the actions of their parents, which they cannot to influence.
- The **Draft Law on Amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code** (CPC) (October 2024). Concern was expressed about most of the proposed changes, which collapse the concept of prosecutorial investigation and the prosecution as a prosecuting authority, as well as against the collapse of the achieved rights of injured and particularly sensitive victims and witnesses. The proposed changes also failed to comply with Chapter 3 of Directive 2024/1385/EU on the fight against violence against women and domestic violence.
- The **Draft Law on Amendments to the Criminal Code** (CC) (October 2024). Despite the recommendations of the GREVIO expert group, no harmonisation was proposed with regard to the amendment of the definition of rape, nor was the harmonisation of the definition of sexual harassment carried out. It is particularly disappointing that the amendments to the

CC did not provide for the introduction of a new criminal offense Unauthorised sharing and misuse of a video of intimate content and thus failed to comply with Chapter 2 of Directive 2024/1385/EU on the fight against violence against women and domestic violence. The proposal to make femicide a new crime was also rejected, although it was supported by the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue (MHMRSD).

- The **Law on Suppression and Prevention of Trafficking in Human Beings** (initiated in 2024, still in drafting phase). The adoption of this law is listed in the Reform Agenda, under the section on fight against organized crime. However, despite detailed description of the process in RA, there are already many deviations in the process of drafting of the document (see below, section on trafficking in human beings).
- The **draft Law on the Agents of Foreign Influence**, proposed by one party from the ruling coalition, although not discussed in plenary session of the National Parliament, before the dissolution of the Government may still find its place in the beginning of the newly formed Government (if that happens).

⁵⁶ More details here: https://vreme.com/en/vesti/ekspresni-raspust-vlada-bezi-od-protesta-u-skolama/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁵⁷ <https://vreme.com/en/drustvo/nova-ekonomija-oko-20-000-nastavnika-nije-dobilo-februarsku-platu/>

DEVELOPMENTS RELATED TO NON-DISCRIMINATION, GENDER EQUALITY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The Reform Agenda of the Republic of Serbia, linked to the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, is presented as an opportunity for accelerated implementation of reforms. In **the Fundamental Rights sub-area, the planned reform is set to a minimum⁶ – the adoption of laws and plans** (which should have been adopted much earlier, based on the Revised AP for Chapter 23), **which does not ensure their quality, effective implementation and achievement of positive changes.** The key recommendations of the European Commission regarding the Revised AP23, as well as the recommendations of international treaty bodies, remain unanswered in the program of the new Government.

Despite the numerous activities of the MHMRSD, they remain without real effects, because the political context in which they are implemented is an inversion of the desired state. Discriminatory treatment of representatives of national minorities and foreigners has continued, and citizens of Romanian and Croatian nationality were again and particularly targeted. Labelling, hatred and threats are addressed to anti-war activists, journalists, professors, artists, opposition politicians, who are called "the biggest criminals against the Serbian people" (there are 43 names on the list, and it should be noted that it is "not even close to a complete list"), while at the same time war criminals are being glorified. The case of two LGBTIQ+ people who accused two police officers of torture (February 2024) ended with the court ruling that the police officers were not guilty.

In the Prime Minister's Declaration of Position paper, **the rights of women were replaced by the rights of the family, and they were reduced to objects that give birth.** In just one day, 18,000 citizens and at least 45 CSOs signed a statement against the election of the new Minister of Education, who publicly supported

repressive measures and denied the legitimacy of student demands, and who was accused of sexually harassing female students (during his professorship). The Decision of the Constitutional Court on the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality was suspended and the procedure for assessing its constitutionality was initiated. An open letter with questions for the Constitutional Court was signed by 38 professors of Law faculties in Serbia⁷. There was no response to the open letter, nor did the Court make a decision regarding the Law. The Cabinet of the Minister without portfolio in charge of coordination and activities in the field of gender equality has still [not released](#) any publicly available information about the composition of the cabinet, services and program activities.

The **Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy for the prevention and fight against gender-based violence against women and domestic violence for the period 2021-2025** passed the public hearing unnoticed (a comment was submitted only by the MHMRSD) and has not yet been adopted. By the end of 2024, at least 17 women were killed in an intimate relationship in Serbia. Comparing to 2023, there is an increase in the number of murdered women who [previously reported](#) violence (in 8 cases in 2024 compared to 4 in 2023). This is very worrying, especially when reviewing cases of two femicide perpetrators who were previously convicted of a more serious form of domestic violence or attempted murder of a partner. Since the beginning of 2025, four women have been killed by their partners or men relatives. One perpetrator was [twice sentenced](#) to prison terms for committing the crime of domestic violence against his mother. In 2024, the police registered almost 4,000 fewer incidents of domestic violence than in previous years, a phenomenon that, for now, remains without an official explanation. Institutions are particularly insensitive to

reports of sexual violence, including sexual harassment and reports of digital violence against women. The problem is also the modest human resources of the competent services (small number and insufficiently trained professionals). Obstetric violence hardly gets the attention of the authorities, as does its judicial epilogue.

There is no systemic support for specialised women's organizations providing assistance to women who have experienced gender-based violence (not even for accredited organisations). For the sixth year in a row, women's organization providing support to women who have experienced violence have

not received funds collected on the basis of deferred prosecution, despite women's rights CSOs being the leading actor implementing the Istanbul Convention in Serbia. At the end of September 2024, the Cabinet of the Minister without Portfolio, in charge of coordination and activities in the field of gender equality, announced a public competition for the allocation of funds (55 million dinars, slightly more than 470,000 euros) for the implementation of measures aimed at preventing family and peer violence, for activities that should be implemented by December 20, 2024, a deadline far too short for proper implementation of important victim-support services.

TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS (CHAPTER 24)

In 2024, Serbia began drafting the **Law on the Suppression and Prevention of Human Trafficking** as part of its EU accession-driven Reform Agenda, specifically under the section on combating organised crime. However, the process has been marked by a lack of rigor: no ex ante impact analysis was conducted, and workshops with stakeholders were held without formal records. This has prevented both the Working Group members and the wider public from accessing critical information on the document's development, particularly the

rationale for rejecting proposals, including those from CSOs. The Ministry of Interior attributed these shortcomings to "staff shortages," but CSOs argue it reflects a broader disregard for transparency. Key proposals aimed at improving prevention and the National Referral Mechanism for trafficking victims-such as the establishment of a Compensation Fund, details on the role and position of CSOs, and service provisions for victims-have yet to be included in the final draft.

NORMALISATION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN SERBIA AND KOSOVO

Communities are not involved in the EU mediated Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and women remain side-lined. When it comes to communication between citizens, it is mostly done thanks to the efforts and programs of the non-governmental sector. The non-governmental sector, despite limited resources, is also ensuring most of the on-going dialogue between activists, including women's groups, from Serbia and northern Kosovo, where inter-

ethnic tensions continue to affect the daily lives of citizens. There is a lack of analysis of how the conflict and the current deadlock in communication between Serbia and Kosovo affect the security, status and well-being of citizens both men and women, with minorities on both "sides" being the most disproportionately at-risk. Ongoing lack of political will to implement the Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda through the EU-

mediated dialogue puts women in a disadvantaged position when it comes to ensuring their rights and needs are represented in the talks and dealt with in the agreements.

Two years after the adoption of the Agreement on the Road to Normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia in February 2023 in Brussels, its implementation can be described as limited.

The community of Serbian municipalities in northern Kosovo has not been established, on several occasions the state of Serbia has shown that it doesn't respect the obligation not to

block the international recognition of Kosovo. In the parliamentary elections in Kosovo, in February 2025, among the Serb minority, the Serbian List won, a political party which represents an outpost of the Serbian regime in Kosovo. Kosovo and other neighbouring countries have also raised alarm over the fact that Serbia has been engaging in rearmament, notably the fact that Serbia officially owns 250 tanks (compared to Germany's 295).⁵⁸ Rearmament is not in line with peacebuilding efforts and risks creating added barriers to multi-track negotiations.

ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONSULTATIONS (CHAPTER 23)

Consultation between government bodies and CSOs has steadily declined over the past year. The last meaningful, though unproductive, engagement occurred during the drafting of judicial laws in response to constitutional amendments. Since then, the only discussions involving CSOs were in October 2024, concerning amendments to the Criminal Code, Criminal Procedure Code, and the Law on the Judicial Academy. These processes lacked transparency within the working groups, with government officials' unwillingness to share information, and a rushed 30-day public consultation on laws developed over two to three years.⁵⁹ This led to calls for a proper consultation process in early 2025, but no steps have been taken-especially following the dissolution of the Government.

The National Convent on the EU [concluded](#) (December 2024) that due to the current social and institutional crisis, there are no conditions for holding the annual plenary session, which was established as a regular dialogue mechanism on Serbia's progress in the process of European integration. The members of the

Council for the creation of an encouraging environment for the development of civil society from the ranks of civil society organizations unanimously decided not to participate in the work and not attend the meetings of the Council in the coming period. As political tensions rose, fuelled by widespread protests, CSOs collectively withdrew from all government and National Assembly-led working groups.⁶⁰ **This decision reflected growing concern that civil society's formal involvement is being used to simulate democratic legitimacy, while human rights and the rule of law continue to deteriorate.**

In Serbia, women's CSOs are still exposed to pressure and harassment, just because they publicly decry the non-transparent money flows of local governments. This was pointed out in [the Open Letter](#) of Women's CSOs the MHMRSD. The Ministry immediately responded by meeting with the representatives of the organizations in Leskovac, yet women's rights organisations are still marginalised. The situation for CSOs has been deteriorating dramatically as of November 1, 2024.

⁵⁸ <https://www.dw.com/en/whats-behind-serbias-rearmament/a-70712413>

⁵⁹ <https://eukonvent.org/produziti-javnu-raspravu-o-izmenama-i-dopunama-krivicnog-zakonika-i-zakonika-o-krivicnom-postupku/> and <https://eukonvent.org/javna-rasprava-o-nacrtu-zakona-o-pravosudnoj-akademiji-preuranjena-proces-izrade-pracen-proceduralnim-propustima/>.

⁶⁰ <https://yucom.org.rs/obustava-saradnje-sa-zakonodavnom-i-izvrsnom-vlascu-u-srbiji/>

SOCIAL POLICY AND EMPLOYMENT

Since its introduction in March 2022, the Social Card Law has led to the exclusion of over 55,000 vulnerable individuals from social assistance—often without clear justification—disproportionately affecting Roma communities.⁶¹ Despite ongoing warnings, the state has failed to address the system's discriminatory effects, and the number of affected persons continues to grow.

Another challenge in the digitalization of social protection is the System for the Protection and Automation of Social Protection Instruments (SOZIS), introduced as a software tool for social work centers.⁶² Due to the malfunctioning SOZIS system, the Republic Institute for Social Protection failed to produce the 2023 summary report on social work centers, raising concerns about reporting for 2024—both crucial for monitoring social protection.

Access to housing Despite the fact that Serbia improved its legislation by adopting the Law on Housing and Building Maintenance⁶³ which

regulates the resettlement procedure¹⁵, the implementation of this procedure is not consistent. In cases of forced evictions, families are not provided with alternative accommodation, contrary to the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Child and the Art. 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This happens not only in cases of forced evictions, but also in situations when Roma families lose their homes in a fire or other types of accidents and need assistance for securing alternative accommodation. The A 11 Initiative observed a number of cases when the only alternative offered by Centres for Social Work to Roma families was separation of family members. Practice showed there were no guaranteed protection of the child's right to preservation of family relations in cases of involuntary resettlements. Moreover, despite Article 103 of the law mandating housing assistance for homeless individuals, its application is inconsistent, leaving Roma families without support and enabling arbitrary decision-making.

⁶¹ A 11 Initiative casework; Human Rights Watch, 2024

⁶² Official Gazette RS, No. 83/2022

⁶³ Official Gazette of RS, no.104/2016 and 9/2020

Recommendations for the 2025 Country Report

1. Condemn the government's curtailing of political and civil liberties and attacks on human rights defenders, civil society, students, academics, journalists, all other dissenters. Recommend the government to fully respect and guarantee the freedom of expression, assembly and association, and prosecute hate speech, verbal attacks and smear campaigns against civic actors, including HRDs.
2. Recommend authorities to refrain from dismantling key legislation on gender equality and move on decisively to further align legislation with the EU acquis, including the Istanbul Convention, the Directive on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, the Victims' Rights Directive, the Work-Life Balance Directive, among others.
3. Recommend authorities to adopt outstanding action plans and the protection of rights of LGBTQI persons and minorities, full implementation of Law and Strategy on Non-discrimination and implementation of hate crime legislation
4. Include an analysis of factors preventing women's political participation at national and local level coupled with clear recommendations on the implementation of the newly introduced quota of 40% for the least represented gender
5. Closely monitor and report on the implementation of the Programme to Prevent and Suppress Human Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, labour exploitation as well as multiple exploitations, with particular attention to the rights of victims/survivors
6. Continue to acknowledge the role of women CSOs, who are increasingly under attack, on providing support to victims of gender-based violence, advocating for legal and policy changes to improve the situation of women and girls and reaching out to the most vulnerable.
7. Uphold the European Social Charter and International Labour Organisation Conventions for the right to strike and organise workers, in accordance with international standards, as well as to enable efficient inspection and legal procedures. Ensure that amended laws do not provide institutions space to use financial sanctions and repressive measures against strikers.
8. Ensure that the digitalisation of social protection does not undermine access to rights, especially for the most vulnerable groups. The social card system must be transparent, fair, and aligned with international standards to prevent unjust suspensions of social assistance and further marginalization of vulnerable communities.
9. Include a gender perspective in the description of the outstanding legacies of the 1990s' conflicts, including sex-disaggregated data on refugees, IDPs and missing persons, and victims/survivors of war-time sexual violence and include a reference to UNSCR 1325 in Chapter 31 (Foreign and Security Policy) and in the section on Normalisation of Relations between Serbia and Kosovo
10. Ensure and monitor completion of the drafting process and adoption the National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Resolution 1325, bearing in mind GAP III Chapter 3.5. Integrating the women, peace and security agenda, and contribution to lasting and stable peace in this area.

**For all women's rights,
in every corner of the world.**