



AS (24) RP 3 E
Original: English

REPORT

FOR THE GENERAL COMMITTEE ON DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS

***“THE ROLE OF THE OSCE IN THE CURRENT SECURITY
ARCHITECTURE: A PARLIAMENTARY PERSPECTIVE”***

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BUCHAREST, 29 JUNE – 3 JULY 2024

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Rapporteur: Mr. Malik Ben Achour (Belgium)

Since the landmark Helsinki Final Act of 1975, our organization has forged a vast set of norms and standards based on a comprehensive approach to security that rests upon the belief that upholding human rights and the rule of law are fundamental to lasting stability across the OSCE region. All OSCE participating States have recognized that only democracies built upon responsive and responsible governance, rule of law, human rights, civic participation, and peaceful transfers of power through sound electoral processes make their societies more secure and prosperous. Yet our region not only continues to face daunting human rights challenges, but in many countries, we increasingly observe the regression of human rights and democratic institutions, and the repercussions of these deeply troubling trends are clear.

Freedoms of speech, assembly, and the press are being curtailed, and dissenting voices are silenced and face threats, violence, wrongful imprisonment, and death.

Discrimination in its various manifestations, such as based on sex, race, ethnic and social origin, religion and belief, political opinion, membership of a national minority or sexual orientation, persists and hinders the full and equal participation of many in our societies and further perpetuates marginalization, particularly of vulnerable groups.

Governance is progressively exploited by authoritarian forces and extremist groups, and the loss of trust in democratic structures is fueling tensions and heightening instabilities within OSCE countries.

Ongoing military conflicts, along with the deliberate targeting and killing of civilians, illegal detentions, abductions, mass deportations, and sexual violence amounting to gross violations of international humanitarian law are being perpetrated by and in OSCE participating States.

While countries in the region have demonstrated immense compassion by generously welcoming refugees from neighboring Ukraine, the displacement caused by conflict, war, or lack of prospects continues to be met with mistreatment, violence, and illegal pushbacks across the OSCE, and the lack of sufficient safe and legal routes for refugees keeps claiming lives and exacerbating humanitarian suffering in our region.

These are a few of the monumental human rights challenges facing our region. In view of such abuses, it is paramount that we confront these issues with renewed dedication and commitment to the founding principles of our organization. As representatives of one billion citizens, for many of whom their human rights remain

distant aspirations, we need to come together and leverage our collective influence to address human rights violations, advocate for justice, and hold leaders, governments, and international bodies accountable.

I. People Affected by Armed Conflict

Since February 2022, the OSCE has been operating in a different reality. The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shattered established norms of international humanitarian law and continues to impose horrific human costs by inflicting unthinkable suffering on millions of people. The exceptional challenges posed by the conflict must compel us to redouble our efforts, with a focus on placing the acute humanitarian crisis at the forefront of our discussions.

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine verified 30,457 civilian casualties since 24 February 2022 – comprised of 10,582 killed and 19,875 injured – with the actual numbers likely to be significantly higher.¹ The most recent findings of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine confirm that Russian authorities continue to perpetrate a wide range of war crimes and human rights violations in Ukraine, including willful killings, deliberate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, unlawful confinement, torture, rape and other sexual violence, as well as unlawful transfers and deportations of children.

New evidence strengthens previous findings that the torture used by Russian authorities in Ukraine and in the Russian Federation is widespread and systematic. Accounts of Ukrainian civilians being illegally detained and subjected to mistreatment confirm egregious human rights abuses. Moreover, prisoners of war in Russian custody are held under inhumane conditions, suffering starvation, mental abuse, beatings, mutilations, and sexual violence, amounting to severe breaches of the protections pertaining to combatants under international humanitarian law. The disproportionate toll of Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine on internally displaced and marginalized communities, particularly women and children, and instances of gender-based violence and violence targeting children, are particularly notable.

Nearly 20,000 Ukrainian children are reported to have been forcibly deported from Ukraine by Russian authorities. Under different pretexts, such as security, child welfare, or medical treatment, children are separated from their families and taken to orphanages, foster families, or "recreation" camps whereby the Russian Federation is attempting to permanently alter the demographic makeup of Ukraine and erase Ukrainian culture. These actions clearly constitute crimes against humanity.

¹ [https://ukraine.un.org/en/253322-civilian-deaths-ukraine-war-top-10000-un-says#:~:text=At%20least%2010%2C000%20civilians%2C%20including,Ukraine%20\(HRMMU\)%20said%20today.](https://ukraine.un.org/en/253322-civilian-deaths-ukraine-war-top-10000-un-says#:~:text=At%20least%2010%2C000%20civilians%2C%20including,Ukraine%20(HRMMU)%20said%20today.)

UNHCR has recorded nearly six million refugees from Ukraine across Europe and a further 500,000 beyond Europe, 90 percent of whom are women and children. The majority are biding their time in neighboring countries, including Poland and Moldova, hoping to return one day. While the number of refugees seeking protection is not expected to significantly increase, countries hosting Ukrainian refugees are facing insufficient human and financial resources to fully integrate Ukrainian refugees into national systems.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) notes that over 7.1 million people have been internally displaced since the invasion of Ukraine. While the situation has become protracted, particularly in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine, where shelling and targeted attacks on infrastructure have tragically become a part of daily life, internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine continue to lack access to the most pressing needs, including health services, food, shelter, hygiene items and psychological support.

The dire humanitarian situation in Ukraine and the flagrant human rights violations not only demand our condemnation, but our action. The General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions has consistently raised the situation in Ukraine through its resolutions and statements, and it is imperative that we remain cognizant of the most severe humanitarian crisis in the OSCE region since the founding of our organization. We are in a unique position to amplify our voices on a regional stage to shape political discourse and international responses vital for garnering diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian support for Ukraine. With a view to the future, it is crucial that we leverage our parliamentary influence towards bolstering accountability mechanisms, whether through national, regional, or international judicial avenues, to ensure that perpetrators of the crimes committed in Ukraine are brought to justice, as such abhorrent atrocities cannot be met with impunity. In this regard, the OSCE PA Parliamentary Support Team for Ukraine assumes a pivotal role within our Assembly in addressing human rights violations in Ukraine. We must also continue to strengthen our collaboration with the OSCE executive bodies, institutions, and relevant external partners to support Ukraine's resilience and advance its recovery efforts.

While the Israel-Hamas conflict does not fall within the OSCE region, we cannot turn a blind eye to the unspeakable impact which this war has had on civilians and the unparalleled humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in Gaza, which is worsening every day. The 7 October 2023 terrorist attacks committed by Hamas claimed 1,200 lives; over 250 people were taken hostage (many of whom remain in captivity) and are reported to have been exposed to sexual violence and other degrading, inhumane treatment in the Gaza Strip. The toll which Israel's war on Gaza has taken on the Palestinian people is devastating. Israel's bombardment and extensive military operations have resulted in harrowing casualties: 34,000 deaths, including nearly 14,000 children, over 70,000 injuries, and the forced displacement of over 1.7 million people, representing 75 percent of Gaza's population. Children, who are disproportionately wearing the scars of the war, are

being killed at an unprecedented rate and dying from injuries, hunger, and disease at the fastest pace on record.² The widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, including residential buildings and particularly medical facilities, and the consequent collapse of Gaza's health system has further exacerbated the crisis and caused catastrophic levels of acute food insecurity, which is affecting 2.2 million people.

While potential security threats and the possible spillover effects emanating from the war are better addressed by our General Committee on Political Affairs and Security, we cannot spare any effort to vigorously advocate for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2728, which demands an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and calls for the unconditional release of all hostages as well as ensuring unimpeded access of humanitarian aid into Gaza. Moreover, in its preliminary ruling of 26 January 2024, the International Court of Justice issued provisional measures, including for Israel to take all measures to prevent genocidal acts and take immediate and effective steps to ensure the provision of humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza. This should also guide and inform our discussions and efforts in response to the relentless months of violence and destruction. Only through a concerted and genuine commitment to a political process based on international law, which must encompass mechanisms for accountability and justice as well as comprehensive measures to address the humanitarian crisis, the socio-economic fallout, and the need for reconstruction, can the region move towards stability and security.

II. The Plight of Refugees, Forcibly Displaced Persons, and Migrants

The plight of those who need to flee or have been displaced, either outside or within their state's borders, as well as individuals who are not recognized as belonging to any state, remains a pressing concern throughout the OSCE region. Ongoing armed conflicts, persecution, poverty, environmental disasters, and the effects of climate change compel millions of people to seek refuge elsewhere. In this respect, ensuring the safety, rights, and security of refugees and migrants poses multifaceted challenges, which are often compounded by host countries' limited capacities. Moreover, balancing humanitarian needs with national security considerations further complicates response efforts, which is why we must strengthen our work to uphold human rights, including the right to seek asylum, promote stability, and mitigate humanitarian crises.

The forcibly displaced population in Europe alone is projected to increase by two per cent in 2024, amounting to almost 25 million people, with the war in Ukraine exacting a brutal toll with six million refugees across the region. Countries that have welcomed the vast majority of Ukrainian refugees, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Moldova, have demonstrated strong solidarity and resilience – yet the sheer scale of the influx of people places immense strains on the resources and infrastructure of these host nations,

² <https://www.savethechildren.net/what-we-do/emergencies/israel-gaza-war>

particularly those with limited capacities and resources to facilitate the full integration of Ukrainian refugees into national systems.

In 2023, a record-breaking number of 270,000 irregular arrivals were recorded across the various Mediterranean routes, marking the highest figure since the migration crisis of 2015-2016. Particularly notable was the Central Mediterranean route, which witnessed a 50 percent surge in crossings compared to the previous year. At the same time, the Central Mediterranean route continues to be the deadliest route for migrants in the world, with at least 3,105 deaths and disappearances recorded last year. Further, moving through irregular channels, refugees across the Mediterranean routes, especially women and unaccompanied children, face high risks of abuse, exploitation, and human trafficking; on the other hand, countries along the Mediterranean routes face significant challenges associated with the large influx of migrants as well as security concerns, such as the potential infiltration of terrorist elements or criminal networks among mixed migration movements.

Following renewed hostilities in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan in September of 2023, over 100,000 ethnic Armenians fled to the Republic of Armenia, with half of the refugees reported to be elderly and children. The influx of refugees amounts to nearly three per cent of the entire population of the Republic of Armenia, underscoring the magnitude of the challenge faced by the country. Besides responding to prevailing basic humanitarian needs, refugees from the Karabakh region require their long-term needs to be addressed, including access to education, employment, and psychological support.

These instances serve as stark reminders that we must redouble our commitment to action concerning refugees, migrants, and other vulnerable individuals on the move in need of protection. Our aim should be to ensure the dignified treatment of those crossing borders as well as those displaced within their own countries, and to uphold their human rights in line with international obligations, OSCE commitments, and other international standards. Specifically, it is imperative that we focus on providing safe and legal channels for people to seek asylum, and the establishment of legal migration pathways making wider use of legitimate entry and resettlement schemes for those in need of safety and protection in Europe to prevent them from embarking upon dangerous journeys.

The General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights, and Humanitarian Questions will continue to work closely with the Assembly's Ad Hoc Committee on Migration, as well as explore avenues for closer engagement with OSCE field operations and Institutions, such as the ODIHR and the High Commissioner on National Minorities, given their expertise and vital contributions to migration-related issues within the human dimension and their recognized role in human rights monitoring. Furthermore, we must capitalize on our organization's expansive geographical reach and its diverse membership, including with the Mediterranean and Asian Partners for Co-operation, recognizing them as indispensable partners in addressing these pressing challenges.

III. Fundamental Freedoms in the OSCE Region

The freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, including a free and independent press, are indispensable for democracy and security by promoting democratic engagement, safeguarding of public interests, enabling access to information, and ensuring government accountability. Nevertheless, troubling trends observed across OSCE participating States indicate a shrinking space for civil society and independent media. Journalists, human rights activists, and dissenting voices are facing escalating threats, including harassment, physical assaults, legal pressure, targeted surveillance, arbitrary detention, and deadly violence.

We must recognize that fundamental freedoms can only be understood in the context of political and social dynamics, where restrictions on civil and political liberties are intricately tied to those in power. To assess the magnitude of the current violations we are witnessing, it is vital to grasp their broader societal implications. The return of war in Europe, exemplified by the conflict in Ukraine, has inflicted immense suffering and poses a threat to established norms. Concurrently, the global decline of democracy, coupled with the rise of authoritarianism and harsh repression of civil society and media, reflects an alarming new reality.

In the Russian Federation and Belarus, the suppression of free and independent media persists, which has resulted in virtually total governmental control over media and information spaces in both states as numerous media outlets have been compelled to fully cease operations. Further, authorities continue to harass, intimidate, and prosecute human rights defenders and forcibly shut down human rights groups. The right to assembly remains defunct, and opposition groups and anti-war protesters face severe police crackdowns, with hundreds arrested, and many of them subjected to closed trials and severe legal penalties.

The criminalization of peaceful protests in solidarity with the Palestinian people and in support of a Gaza ceasefire in a number of OSCE participating States has been deeply troubling and has raised grave concerns as it pertains to freedoms of speech and assembly. Suppressing dissent through legal measures not only undermines the democratic principles of expression and assembly, but it also obstructs the avenues for citizens to voice their support for humanitarian causes and hinders efforts towards fostering dialogue and understanding in addressing complex geopolitical issues.

It is equally important that we acknowledge that restrictions on political and civil liberties are not limited to a few OSCE participating States. Regarding freedom of expression, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has highlighted cases of journalists and media workers being imprisoned, arbitrarily arrested, or detained across the OSCE region. Concerns about independent media outlets facing increasing pressure, including forced closure and broadcasting bans for critical commentary have been raised on numerous occasions. Further, we are

observing that national security interests are increasingly instrumentalized to curtail political and civil liberties, and while States have a right to ensure security, measures negatively impacting civil society, human rights defenders, and media freedom, such as the introduction of a *foreign agent* law in several OSCE countries, is particularly worrisome.

Moreover, we must continue to monitor media concentration, particularly in terms of its influence on public opinion, and the trend of a few entities controlling a significant portion of media outlets. The consequent heightened potential for bias, agenda-setting, and the shaping of public discourse can lead to a narrowing of public debate, the suppression of dissenting voices and the propagation of misinformation and propaganda.

Social media platforms, with their extremely vast reach, can rapidly become breeding grounds for the radicalization of individuals in their political beliefs, fostering an environment ripe for extremism. Unchecked proliferation of misinformation and fake news often manipulate users' perceptions as they are exposed to increasingly polarized content tailored to their biases, and they become susceptible to radical ideologies. The consequences we are witnessing are profound, as the unchecked spread of extremist views not only undermines our democratic discourse, but increasingly fuels divisions within societies and poses significant threats to stability in our region.

Given the advancement in digital technologies, we need to remain cautious about the numerous obstacles within the digital sphere threatening to potentially erode media freedom and the diversity of voices. Notably, the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence poses significant dangers to media freedom and the spread of fake news. As artificial intelligence technologies advance, they can be increasingly leveraged to manipulate information, fabricate stories, and disseminate misinformation at an unprecedented scale and speed, exploiting vulnerabilities in online platforms and amplifying false narratives that sow confusion and distrust in the media. Left unchecked, these developments will undermine the fundamental principles of media freedom, impairing people's ability to access accurate information and make informed decisions in democratic societies. Yet, artificial intelligence can serve as an effective tool in safeguarding human rights and combating crimes such as human trafficking, given its ability to rapidly process vast amounts of data, which enables law enforcement authorities to optimize investigative efforts.

When we address fundamental freedoms as such, we must stress that these freedoms must be universally enjoyed without discrimination based on gender, race, sex, sexual orientation, or belief, as they form the foundation of just and equitable societies. Too often, individuals are denied these rights based on arbitrary factors, which not only perpetuates systemic injustices but also stifles human potential and progress. In the OSCE region, significant segments of the population still face barriers to full participation in society due to unequal access to rights. Discriminatory laws, social norms, and economic disparities continue to

marginalize minority groups, hindering their ability to exercise their rights and contribute fully to their communities. True equality demands from us that we dismantle these barriers and recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, regardless of identity or background so that our societies thrive on the principles of inclusivity, justice, and respect for human rights.

IV. Safeguarding and Strengthening the OSCE Human Dimension

Promoting and safeguarding human rights and democratic principles with a view to ensuring accountability is vital to enhancing human security throughout the OSCE area. The progressive erosion of democratic institutions and the weakening of the rule of law we are witnessing to varying degrees across OSCE participating States demands our vigilance and our action, given the profound dangers these deeply troubling trends pose to the fabric of our societies. They continue to pave the way for authoritarianism as accountability mechanisms crumble, consequently leaving room for corruption, the abuse of authority, and the suppression of dissent as fundamental rights and freedoms become increasingly vulnerable to infringement. Democratic institutions serve as the bedrock of free and just societies and are indispensable for the thorough protection of human rights.

Therefore, it is imperative that we remain consistent when addressing human rights violations and advocate for the protection of human rights; only by maintaining unwavering principles and standards across all situations can we demonstrate integrity, credibility, and a genuine commitment to human rights. In light of years of democratic backsliding within the OSCE area and the systematic misuse of the consensus rule and politicized withholding of financial resources that continue to obstruct the crucial work of the OSCE's institutions and its field operations, our vigilant advocacy for human rights protections can send a powerful message to governments of OSCE participating States. Because of the diplomatic deadlock stemming particularly from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the delays in adopting the Organization's budget, the OSCE has been facing an existential crisis that can only be overcome through pursuing sustainable solutions and increasing high-level engagement that we must support by all possible means. Our steadfast commitment is not only vital for navigating the OSCE's existential crisis but, more importantly, for serving the people of the OSCE region who directly experience the repercussions and endure the dire consequences of severe threats to human rights daily. Human rights are inalienable rights, and only by exhibiting unwavering dedication to the values we champion – consistently and without exception – can we safeguard the inherent dignity and freedoms of over one billion citizens in our region and beyond.