

Annual Rule of Law Report - Council of Europe contribution



2026

Directorate General Human Rights and Rule of Law (DG I)

North Macedonia

I Justice System

COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

[Memorandum](#) on the human rights of Roma and on issues related to the right to a clean and healthy environment in North Macedonia, published on 29 July 2025.

The Commissioner highlighted issues regarding the **lack of access to justice for human rights violations related to environmental degradation** (paras 55-62). He recommended, among other things, that the authorities ensure that the legislative framework enables individuals' effective access to justice in relation to violations of human rights related to environmental matters and of the right to a healthy environment; consider expanding the jurisdiction of the Constitutional Court to cover all constitutionally protected human rights, including the right to a healthy environment; and introduce training of judges and prosecutors about human rights and the environment, both in the academic curriculum and in ongoing legal training.

CEPEJ

The European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) regularly collects data on judicial systems concerning efficiency and quality of the justice system.

In the framework of the Dashboard Western Balkans project, CEPEJ prepares annually Country profiles. [Country profile – Dashboard western Balkans - North Macedonia \(2024 data\)](#)

EXECUTION OF JUDGMENTS OF THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Official statistics on the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights are published in the Committee of Ministers [Annual reports on the execution](#) (next edition to be published in March 2026). The Department for the Execution of Judgments can be consulted for any question on statistics: DGI-Execution@coe.int.

[X](#) (29683/16) (enhanced supervision) concerns a violation of the transgender applicant's right to respect for his private life on account of the absence of quick, transparent and accessible procedures in national legislation that would allow the change of the sex/gender marker on his birth certificate.

Latest decisions of the Committee of Ministers: [CM/Del/Dec\(2025\)1537/H46-23](#)

Latest submissions: [DH-DD\(2025\)693](#)

Vasilkoski and Others group (28169/08) is the oldest group of cases against North Macedonia. It concerns, inter alia, violations of the applicants' right to liberty on account of the lack of concrete and sufficient grounds for their detention, non-observance of the principle of equality of arms in the proceedings for review of the applicants' detention and the lack of a speedy review of the applicants' detention.

Latest submissions: [DH-DD\(2017\)741](#)

Free legal aid

The system of the free legal aid in North Macedonia turns gradually more effective and it contributes to the fairness and accessibility of justice. The free legal aid serves the more vulnerable groups of society, such as women, disabled persons, marginalised groups, victims of domestic violence, children, Roma. The Ministry of Justice, CSOs, the Bar Association and the Legal Clinics, work on the **awareness-raising initiative**, which should lead to a further increase in applications for free legal aid. According to the statistics in the Ministry of Justice, the [Annual Report on FLA for 2024](#)¹, the primary legal aid was provided in 5,030 cases, which represents a **1582% increase in comparison to 2019** (299 cases). In addition, the total number of the approved requests for the secondary legal aid in 2024 (174) also saw an increase of 93% compared to 2019 (90 approved requests). The rights holders become better informed about their rights and relevant after the [micro promotions](#) and other [promotional activities](#) that had been conducted with the support of the free legal aid and had reached more than **430,000 people**.

With the account of Council of Europe recommendations, Parliament adopted amendments to the Law on Free Legal Aid and its alignment with the Law on Expertise. It allowed the Ministry of Justice to introduce the [Rulebook outlining the procedure for payment of expert witnesses in Free Legal Aid cases](#) in June 2025. This by-law and the accompanying [Guidelines](#) were prepared with the support of the Council of Europe co-operation project.

The [National Coordination Body for implementation of the Law on Free Legal Aid \(NCB\)](#) continues to provide a notable contribution to the **significantly improved communication, collaboration and the partnership** among the Ministry of Justice, the Bar Association, CSOs, Legal Clinics and other institutions involved in the provision of free legal aid. It concerns sharing information, [co-ordinating](#) on individual cases and timely collecting the data necessary for processing legal aid applications.

The continued capacity-building support to the legal aid providers (the Regional Offices, [the lawyers](#), [CSOs and legal clinics](#)) through trainings, [peer to peer visits](#), advice and support, contributed to a significant improvement of the quality and accessibility of free legal aid. In particular, in 2025, **220 legal aid providers** improved their knowledge on free legal aid with a special focus on dealing with children and cases of domestic and gender-based violence.

A significant advancement in the digital transformation of the legal aid system in North Macedonia was the development and hand-over to the Bar Association of the [software for appointment of ex-officio lawyers](#). The software is designed to streamline processes, enhance efficiency, and ensure greater accessibility to legal aid. Its sophisticated data management features should improve the Bar Association's daily workflow, boosting operational efficiency and effectiveness. After the lawyers' data are fully integrated into the system, the President of the Bar Association should introduce the software to the media and other key stakeholders. The implementation of the new software will ensure transparency and non-discrimination in the appointment system.

The development of **technical specifications for a software to process free legal aid applications** was completed. In collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Digital Transformation, this process was supported by the free legal aid Action. The software is expected to be developed in 2026 and it will represent a key step towards modernising and digitalising the legal aid system in North Macedonia.

¹ The report for 2025 is not published yet.

However, the Free Legal Aid Department of the Ministry of Justice still faces a severe understaffing situation. In addition, there are still inadequate working conditions at the premises of some of the Regional Offices for free legal aid: this issue should be addressed by the Ministry of Justice in due course. There is also a need for establishing a system for continuous education for the staff of the regional offices.

The establishment of a single entity for management of the free legal aid system in North Macedonia is in line with the “Feasibility Study on establishing a single body for the management of the free legal aid system in North Macedonia” ^[1] and in line with the new [Strategy for the Reform of the Judicial Sector 2024-2028](#).

There is an urgent need for the Ministry of Justice to start the second phase of the amendments to the Law on Free Legal Aid, in line with [recommendations](#) of the National Coordination Body and in line with the Strategy for Judicial Sector Reform. The scope of the law should address challenges related to the implementation of provisions on legal aid for victims of crime and human trafficking.

Another pressing challenge is the need for the Ministry of Justice to fulfil its legal obligation of providing direct financial support (grants) to the authorised associations and legal clinics for projects aimed at offering primary legal aid (Article 11 of the Law on Free Legal Aid). In 2025, the call for grants was not published, leaving many authorised CSOs and legal clinics struggling to provide free legal aid services due with their limited resources.

Ensuring effective **Legal Aid in Criminal Proceedings** continues to pose a challenge. There is a pressing need to revise the criteria for accessing legal aid in criminal proceedings, including in cases of mandatory defence, defence of indigent persons and cases of representation of the interests of victims of crime. It should be done in accordance with the [EU/CoE recommendations](#) to ensure better implementation of Article 75 of the Criminal Procedural Code.

HELP Programme

Through the translation and adaptation of 32 HELP courses to the national legislation and practice, the **Council of Europe HELP Programme has enabled 1,682 legal professionals in North Macedonia to access high-quality training on human rights, including its EU dimension**. This has resulted in 1,336 enrolments and 239 certifications through self-learning, complemented by 90 tutored courses delivered in cooperation with the national partners (Judicial Academy and Bar Association), reaching 4279 participants with a 77% success rate.

General information

- Number of **users** of HELP Platform from North Macedonia: **1,682**
- Number of **HELP courses** translated and adapted in Macedonian: **32**
 - **1,336 enrolments, 239 certifications in self-learning format**
 - **90 tutored courses organised since 2017 (4,279 participants, 77% success rate)** implemented in partnership with the **Judicial Academy and Bar Association** and in cooperation with various Council of Europe projects (mainly implemented within the Council of Europe Office in Skopje)

HELP in the Western Balkans has a long-established cooperation with the **Judicial Academy** of North Macedonia. However, it should be noted that a level of cooperation decreased with the appointment of the new Director of the Academy of Judges in October 2024. The implementation of HELP courses continued in 2025.

In May 2025, the HELP course on [Property Rights](#) was launched for 61 candidate judges and prosecutors from North Macedonia.

The largest number of HELP courses in North Macedonia are organised with the Bar Association of North Macedonia. Only during 2025, four HELP courses were organised with the Bar Association with the support of EU/CoE project based at the CoE Office in Skopje.

The HELP in the Western Balkans project is targeting the implementation of the HELP courses that correspond to the priorities of the CoE [Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights](#).

^[1] Feasibility Study on establishing a single body for the management of the free legal aid system in North Macedonia, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/fla-fisibility-study-nmk-12-22-eng-/1680a973d0>

In 2026, HELP in the Western Balkans will seek the support from other CoE projects and actions for the implementation of the following priority topics as defined by the Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights country [factsheet](#)

- Freedom of Association
- Right to Liberty and Security
- Prohibition of Discrimination
- Action of security forces - use of force and effective investigations
- Protection of Private and Family life

VENICE COMMISSION

[CDL-AD\(2025\)036](#) Joint Opinion of the Venice Commission and the Directorate General Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI) of the Council of Europe on the draft laws on the Public Prosecutor's Office and on the Council of Public Prosecutors.

[CDL-AD\(2025\)026](#) Opinion on the draft Law on the Judicial Council.

[CDL-AD\(2025\)013](#) Joint Amicus curiae brief of the Venice Commission and the Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity (DGII) on international and European standards on the use of minority languages in public life and in the judicial procedures, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 142nd Plenary Session (Venice, 14-15 March 2025).

GENDER EQUALITY

Western Balkans - Judicial training institutions in Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia are applying new competencies to enhance equal access to justice for women and men through an innovative peer-to-peer mentoring programme for legal professionals, supported by the cooperation project, "[Women's access to justice in the Western Balkans](#)".

II Anti-corruption framework

GRECO

[Addendum to the Second Compliance Report](#) (9 July 2025)

5th round: Preventing corruption and promoting integrity in central governments (top executive functions) and law enforcement agencies

III Media pluralism

COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

In his [Memorandum](#) published on 29 July 2025 the Commissioner also noted concern about a reported increase in the **use of vexatious lawsuits or so-called strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) to silence investigative journalists and activists working on the environment** (para 64), and recommends that the authorities build on the existing legal framework to increase legislative and policy protections against SLAPPs, in line with the Council of Europe standards, such as the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)2 on countering the use of SLAPPs.

HELP PROGRAMME

In 2025, two HELP courses were organised with the Bar Association of North Macedonia with the support of the project [Protecting Freedom of Expression and of the Media in North Macedonia \(PRO-FREX\) - Council of Europe Programme Office in Skopje](#)

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN DIGNITY

In 2025, the action [“Protecting Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Media in North Macedonia” \(PRO-FREX\)](#) delivered substantial results in the areas of media freedom, safety of journalists, and access to information. Implemented by the [Council of Europe Division for Cooperation on Freedom of Expression](#), the action forms part of the European Union–Council of Europe joint programme Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye, implemented over the period 2023–2026.

The action strengthened the knowledge and skills of legal professionals through a series of targeted training activities. In close cooperation with the Bar Association, the HELP online courses on Freedom of Expression and the Protection of Journalists were successfully relaunched. In addition, several cascade training sessions were organised in cooperation with the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors and the Bar Association, focusing on Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs), defamation, and hate speech. In cooperation with the Ministry of Interior, specialised police training on the safety of journalists was carried out. Importantly, the National Focal Point proposed that spokespersons of the Regional Police Departments across the country—or designated media contact persons—serve as local contact points for journalists to report safety-related concerns. In the area of journalist safety, PRO-FREX organised also several workshops on ethical reporting, monitoring and reporting on gender-based violence, and the protection of journalists. The action provided a three-day training for journalists and lawyers based on the Council of Europe Training Programme on SLAPPs and published Guidelines for Journalists facing SLAPPs. Following North Macedonia’s ratification of the Tromsø Convention in late 2024, PRO-FREX supported the alignment of the Law on Free Access to Public Information with the Convention’s principles through participation in the Ministry of Justice Working Group, an analysis of administrative case law, and targeted training for civil servants on access-to-information standards. In response to emerging challenges related to artificial intelligence and digital developments affecting media freedom, the action prepared a National Analysis on the impact of AI and new technologies on the media.

IV Other institutional issues related to checks and balances

PACE

Monitoring committee

North Macedonia | [Doc. 16316](#)

In 2025, the co-rapporteurs Ms Sibel Arslan (Switzerland, SOC) and Mr Joseph O’Reilly (Ireland, EPP/CD) followed closely the developments in North Macedonia and reported to the committee at its June, October and December meetings.

A fact-finding visit to Skopje took place on 23-25 April 2025, for the first time since 2019. During their visit, the co-rapporteurs examined in particular the situation in the judiciary, the measures taken to fight against corruption, the electoral framework, the human rights issues and the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. They recognised some progress as regards ensuring transparency of work of the Judicial Council and the functioning of the judiciary in general. However, they were concerned about numerous allegations of politicisation of the judiciary and widespread corruption throughout the public sector, as well as the lack of effective measures to combat these phenomena. They also noted that there was an urgent need to reform the electoral framework, in line with long-standing recommendations from the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission. They also concluded that political freedoms – including the rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression, and media pluralism – were generally respected and that North Macedonia, as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-confessional country, could serve as a model for other countries in promoting a “living together” culture and mentality. They were nevertheless concerned about the poor conditions in some places of detention (especially in the Idrizovo prison) and urged the authorities to implement without delay the outstanding recommendations of the CPT.

During their visit, the co-rapporteurs called on all political parties to find a compromise to implement the “French proposal” by including a reference to the Bulgarian ethnic minority in the Constitution, which is a condition for moving ahead in the negotiation process on accession to the European Union.

Following the visit, the co-rapporteurs prepared a draft report on post-monitoring dialogue with North Macedonia, which was examined for the first time by the Monitoring Committee on 1 October 2025. On 9 December 2025, upon receipt of the authorities’ comments, the committee adopted the report, in which it proposed to close the post-monitoring dialogue and follow the developments in the country with regard to the rule of law, pluralist democracy and human rights in the framework of its periodic reviews.

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O’Flaherty, visited North Macedonia at the same time as the co-rapporteurs (22-25 April 2025). In his memorandum published in July 2025, the Commissioner commended North Macedonia’s long-standing commitment to address human rights issues faced by Roma and commended, in particular, the adoption of the National Strategy for Roma Inclusion (2022–2030) and the efforts made by government bodies, the Ombudsperson, and the Commission on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination. However, he was concerned about environmental risks disproportionately affecting Roma, including air and waste pollution, lack of sanitation, and by exclusion from public services.

Moreover, 2025 was another electoral year in North Macedonia. On 19 October 2025, the first round of local elections was held. The main ruling centre-right VMRO DPMNE party crushed its main rival, the Social Democrats (SDSM), so extending its domination of politics to local level. VMRO DPMNE came first in 53 of the country’s 81 municipalities. The turnout was just under 48%, a slight decline from the 50% who voted in the previous local elections in 2021. In those municipalities where a mayor was not elected in the first round by winning more than half of the votes, a second round was held on 2 November. Consequently, the ruling VMRO DPMNE party won in 21 out of the 33 municipalities where second rounds were held (also in Skopje), confirming its overall dominance at the local elections. In total, after the two election rounds, the party is set to govern 54 of the country’s 81 municipalities. This is 12 more than in the previous 2021 local polls, when it won in 42.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities observed the elections, along with the OSCE/ODIHR and the European Parliament. In its statement of 20 October, it welcomed the fact that election day was well-organised, which was “a positive backdrop for resolving outstanding issues affecting local democracy in North Macedonia”, such as “the overly-politicised environment and perception about corruption that erode public confidence in institutions”. It also regretted the low number of women mayoral candidates and the lack of accessibility for voters with disabilities and older people as well as the absence of local media, particularly outside the capital.

[Resolution 2645 \(2026\)](#) was adopted on 29 January 2026 in which the Assembly decided to close the post-monitoring dialogue and follow the developments in the country with regard to the rule of law, pluralist democracy and human rights in the framework of its periodic reviews.

CPDL

Civil Control Mechanism and the National Preventive Mechanism within the Ombudsperson’s Office: There was no improvement in 2025 – the Ombudsman’s Office faced serious [shortage](#) of funds, and it was largely [dysfunctional](#) in the second half of the year after the Ombudsman’s term ended and the Parliament failed to elect a successor. In addition, the Parliament appointed three CSOs in April, which would join the Civil Control Mechanism, part of the Ombudsman’s office; none of the three CSOs has any background in police and oversight, as two of them deal with rural development and the third one specializes in informatics promotion.

COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

[Statement](#) following the Commissioner’s visit to North Macedonia from 22 to 25 April 2025 (published 29 April 2025). The Commissioner called on the authorities to adopt the law on the **Ombudsman institution** and strengthen the institution so that it can apply for A Status as National Human Rights Institution, under the UN Paris Principles.

VENICE COMMISSION

[CDL-AD\(2025\)046](#) Opinion on the draft law on adequate and fair representation.

[CDL-AD\(2025\)036](#) Joint Opinion of the Venice Commission and the Directorate General Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI) of the Council of Europe on the draft laws on the Public Prosecutor's Office and on the Council of Public Prosecutors.

[CDL-AD\(2025\)026](#) Opinion on the draft Law on the Judicial Council.