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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

2026 Rule of Law Report

The rule of law situation in the European Union

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rule of law lies at the heart of the European project as one of the values on which the European Union is founded. The EU's prosperity, security and democratic resilience depend on respect for the rule of law and the Union's common values. Europeans consider democracy, human rights and the rule of law to be among the EU's greatest strengths[1]. At a time when the international rules-based order, fundamental rights and democratic systems increasingly come under pressure, safeguarding these values is more important than ever. Strong rule of law standards are essential not only to uphold citizens' trust in public institutions, ensure the protection of their rights, and underpin democracy, but also to reinforce Europe's attractiveness for investment and business activity and boost the Union's long-term competitiveness.

Since its launch in 2020, the Rule of Law Report has become a well-established instrument, with its recommendations increasingly acting as drivers of reform thanks to closer engagement with Member States throughout the annual cycle. The stronger focus on the Single Market dimension, introduced last year, reflects the central role of the rule of law for ensuring legal certainty, and a predictable environment where businesses can benefit from the Single Market on an equal footing across the Union.

In a context of continued geopolitical instability, promoting and protecting the rule of law beyond its borders remains a key strategic goal for the Union. The participation of enlargement countries alongside EU Member States in the Rule of Law Report and the gradual inclusion of additional enlargement partners, as and when ready[2], further supports their reform efforts to anchor the rule of law firmly and irreversibly ahead of accession, and to guarantee that these high standards are sustained after accession.

Through its annual assessment of the state of the rule of law in each EU Member State, the Report provides a single reference point that contributes to dialogue and mutual trust between the EU and Member States. Its recommendations are meant to guide action by Member States in undertaking reforms that address key challenges and strengthen the rule of law, which has contributed to building positive reform dynamics[3]. The Report's findings are also a source of information in the application of other instruments, notably the Conditionality Regulation[4]. The essential role of the Report in promoting reforms, supporting good governance and ensuring that rule of law challenges are being addressed in a pre-emptive manner is also reflected in the Commission's proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)[5].

2. UPHOLDING THE RULE OF LAW: DEVELOPMENTS AND ACTION AT EU LEVEL

The Rule of Law Report is a central pillar of the EU's rule of law architecture[6]. This architecture consists of a diverse set of instruments that aim to foster, protect and uphold the rule of law

1 In Flash Eurobarometer 569 "Challenges and priorities in the EU", of September 2025, Europeans identified respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as the EU's main strengths (36%).

2 Since 2024, the report has covered Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The selection reflects the progress made in their respective accession process or advancement in their level of preparedness on rule of law.

3 47% of the recommendations issued in the 2025 Rule of Law Report have been fully or partially implemented.

4 Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget.

5 COM(2025) 570 final.

6 In addition to the Rule of Law toolbox, other instruments (described in more detail below) include the EU Justice Scoreboard, the European Semester, EU financial support for structural rule of law reforms and civil society, infringement procedures, the Article 7 TEU mechanism to address serious breaches of rule of law,

across the Union. The Report's objectives are to **promote** a strong rule of law culture**, prevent** rule of law problems from emerging, and to **respond** effectively to serious and persistent challenges.

2.1 An integrated rule of law cycle

In her 2025 State of the Union speech, President von der Leyen called for an **integrated annual cycle on the Rule of Law**, built around a common rhythm, clear milestones, and contributions from all EU institutions. The institutions have a shared duty to help promote and uphold the rule of law under their respective prerogatives. As part of this year's rule of law cycle, the Commission has sought to further deepen engagement with the European Parliament and Member States by strengthening outreach and coordination.

The Report is prepared through consistent and intensive engagement with the Member States and other stakeholders at national and EU level[7]. It encourages sustained and targeted efforts to address the challenges it identifies, based on a common understanding. It also fosters cooperation between Member States, as well as with the Commission, international bodies and actors such as the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, prompting reforms based on the most appropriate solutions, while also taking specific national contexts and legal traditions into account.

With the Member States, the Commission cooperates closely at both political and technical level, also to improve the tracking and follow-up of recommendations. This increased engagement allows it to support the implementation of reforms, monitor progress throughout the year and ensure that recommendations remain closely aligned with developments on the ground. At technical level, regular meetings of the **Network of Rule of Law Contact Points** provide a forum for exchange of experiences and discussing issues of common interest raised in the Rule of Law Reports[8]. Input from Member States authorities is a key source of information for the Report.

At political level, the **Rule of Law dialogue** in the General Affairs Council has further consolidated as a forum for political exchanges on rule of law matters between the Member States[9]. It provides a platform for constructive dialogue on best practices and discussions on how to tackle shortcomings, based on the Rule of Law Report. Since 2024, Ministers from the enlargement countries covered by the Rule of Law Report participate in these dialogues alongside Member States' ministers[10]. The Justice and Home Affairs Council also continued to discuss topical rule of law questions during each six-month Council Presidency[11]. In 2025, under the Danish Presidency, the Council organised an informal meeting of culture and media ministers, who issued a declaration stressing the **importance of free, independent and diverse**

Council's annual structured rule of law dialogues, and budgetary safeguards under the current Multiannual Financial Framework.

7 Over 600 meetings were held to prepare this year's Report.

8 One topic of the exchanges on good practices were initiatives at national level to raise awareness of the rule of law and to promote recruitment to the judiciary.

9 The General Affairs Council held a horizontal discussion on rule of law developments in September 2025, and country-specific discussions in November 2025 and January and May 2026.

10 Ministers from Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia attended an exchange of views on the rule of law situation in their countries at the General Affairs Council on 16 September 2025.

11 In October 2025 and March 2026, the Justice Council discussed political participation and lawyers' independence.

media[12]. At the May 2026 General Affairs Council, the 2023 Presidency conclusions on the evaluation of the annual rule of law dialogue reached support by all Member States[13].

The **European Parliament** has continued to make important contributions to the annual rule of law cycle through regular discussions in plenary and committee, helping to increase the prominence of rule of law issues at EU and national levels. In 2025, the Parliament brought forward the timing of its own-initiative Report on the Commission's Rule of Law Report in view of enabling a more integrated cycle. It is important to favour synergies between the Commission's rule of law toolbox and other existing initiatives to ensure the annual rule of law cycle becomes even more effective at helping Member States implement positive reforms, and the Commission will continue to work with Parliament and Council to improve and enhance the dialogue on the cycle. In that context, it welcomes the work of the Democracy, Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights Monitoring Group (DRFMG) of the Parliament's LIBE Committee. It provides a valuable forum for both horizontal and country-specific discussions which the Commission will continue to actively engage in, including to support the preparation of the Rule of Law Report and follow-up to its recommendations.

Discussions on the rule of law also continued in other fora. The **European Economic and Social Committee** held its sixth annual conference on fundamental rights and the rule of law. The Commission organised several **national rule of law dialogues**[14] in close cooperation with the Fundamental Rights Agency. These dialogues are an important part of a follow-up process, bringing together various national stakeholders and authorities to involve them more closely in the follow-up to the Rule of Law Report including in the implementation of its recommendations.

The Rule of Law Report continues to serve as a catalyst for deeper engagement with **civil society and other stakeholders**. Civil society organisations and professional groups representing judges, prosecutors, lawyers and journalists play an important role in promoting and safeguarding the rule of law. Their expertise and on-the-ground insights are essential to ensure a comprehensive and evidence-based Rule of Law Report.

2.2 Supporting the rule of law through the EU budget

The rule of law is central to the functioning of European economies, particularly the Single Market, which relies on effective justice systems, strong anti-corruption frameworks and sound lawmaking. Rule of law issues therefore feature increasingly prominently as part of the European Semester and in EU support for investments and national reforms.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility has demonstrated how the EU budget can be effective in advancing rule of law reforms within Member States, including to strengthen judicial systems, advance digitalisation for greater efficiency, improve judicial infrastructure, reinforce institutions fighting corruption and improve the quality of law-making. No less that twenty-one of the Member States included commitments related to the rule of law in their Recovery

[12] Declaration on the necessity of culture and media as a safeguard for our European democracies, 4 November 2025, available at: declaration-on-the-necessity-of-culture-and-media.pdf

[13] With Hungary endorsing the Presidency conclusions.

[14] In November 2025, a national rule of law dialogue was organised in Czechia, on efficiency of the justice system. In January 2026, a national rule of law dialogue on media freedom and pluralism was organised in Croatia. For further information on dialogues: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/annual-rule-law-cycle/national-rule-law-dialogues_en

and Resilience Plans (RRPs)[15]. These commitments translated into around 285 milestones and targets, corresponding to 75 reforms and 36 investments to strengthen the rule of law which are gradually being finalised[16]. Examples include improving judicial efficiency by restructuring courts or strengthening anti-corruption efforts by reinforcing institutions focused on combating corruption. Overall, these measures are worth more than EUR 3 billion. Some RRPs also drive improvements to the legislative process, for example by mandating public consultations and impact assessments. In certain instances, RRP commitments on the rule of law were deemed essential for safeguarding the EU's financial interests and meeting them is therefore a prerequisite for receiving any disbursement following a payment request[17].

Building on the lessons learned from funding rule of law reforms under the current MFF and NextGenerationEU, the Commission's proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028-34 strengthens the link between the Rule of Law Report's recommendations and financial support. The combination of strong rule of law safeguards and support for investments and reforms will protect the EU budget and ensure that it effectively contributes to strengthening the rule of law in the EU.

Under the Commission's proposal for the next MFF, the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRP Plans) will provide a single coherent framework for EU funds implemented by Member States and regions. Upholding Union values in accordance with Article 2 TEU, including the rule of law, is a general objective of this framework. The Commission has proposed that NRP Plans address challenges identified in the EU policy reference framework, including those identified in the Rule of Law Report as well as the European Semester and its country-specific recommendations. Member States are therefore expected to include in their Plans investments and reforms that protect and strengthen the rule of law, guided by the Report and its results-oriented recommendations – covering areas such as the strengthening of justice systems, anti-corruption frameworks, media pluralism and effective checks and balances. Such reforms may also contribute to better governance by enhancing the efficiency of public administration, including judicial authorities, and the institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders in Member States, regions and local communities. The Single Market focus of the Rule of Law Report will, in combination with the European Semester[18], also help Member States identify rule of law reforms to be supported in NRP Plans that are economically relevant, including those still pending from current RRPs. Once submitted, the NRP Plans will be discussed between the Commission and Member States with milestones and targets for the agreed reforms. With a view to support Member States in identifying and prioritising rule of law investments and reforms that can be supported through the Plans, **in this 2026 edition of the Rule of Law Report, the Commission has further consolidated its recommendations,**

[15] 21 Member States committed to implement reforms and investments related to the rule of law: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and Finland.

[16] Under the RRF Regulation, reforms and investments need to be implemented by 31 August 2026 and all payments must be executed by 31 December 2026. The Commission is assessing compliance with the agreed milestones upon the evidence submitted by Member States to support their payment requests. In line with the applicable Financing Agreements and Loan Agreements, Member States have until 30 September 2026 to submit their remaining payment requests, following which the Commission intends to provide its preliminary assessment of the fulfilment of the milestones and targets by 20 November 2026.

[17] In addition to the strong safeguards that protect the EU's financial interests from risks related to breaches of the rule of law – in particular the Regulation 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget, which will continue to apply after the end of the current long-term EU budget. See also section 2.4.

[18] Issues addressed in relevant European Semester country-specific recommendations include improving judicial efficiency and anti-corruption measures. See Communication on the 2026 European Semester – Spring Package. COM(2026) 200 final.

making them more targeted and operational. The recommendations are intended to identify the key issues and challenges which need to be addressed, while leaving Member States the flexibility on how to achieve these outcomes, taking into account their national legal and institutional framework.

The proposed Regulation also embeds strong safeguards for compliance with the **rule of law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU** in the implementation of the NRP Plans, requiring Member States to respect these fundamental principles throughout the MFF. Compliance with horizontal conditions on the rule of law and fundamental rights will be a prerequisite for receiving support under the NRP Plans. At any time during the implementation of the plans and following exchanges with the Member States concerned, there will be a possibility to block payments made to a Member State for specific measures affected in case these horizontal conditions are not or no longer fulfilled[19]. Information from the Rule of Law Report will be used as one of the sources to support the Commission's assessment of the respect of the horizontal conditions, reflecting the Rule of Law Report's established role as a tool to identify rule of law challenges and reform priorities through an evidence-based process grounded in dialogue with Member States. However, there will be **no automatic link** between the Rule of Law Report's recommendations and the approval of the NRP Plans, nor with the assessment of compliance with these horizontal conditions, the latter requiring also establishing the (potential) impact of the deficiencies identified on the implementation of the funds.

The EU has other **funding sources** to help strengthening the capacities of the judiciary, media, and civil society to uphold the rule of law. Under the current MFF, this includes programmes such as the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme, the 2021-2027 Justice programme, the European Social Fund Plus and Creative Europe. Under the next MFF, this support will be reinforced, including for the indispensable work of civil society organisations in monitoring rule of law compliance, exposing corruption and advocating for reforms. The budget of the new Justice Programme would, according to the Commission proposal, more than triple, with a stronger focus on the digitalisation of justice systems. In addition, the new AgoraEU programme, with a proposed budget of around EUR 8.6 billion, would bring together support for culture, media, rights and values under a single framework, to strengthen democratic participation, societal resilience, media freedom, fundamental rights, equality and the rule of law across the EU.

2.3 Promoting and safeguarding the rule of law by EU policies and legislation

The Rule of Law Report has been a driving force behind the development of new EU policies and legal instruments in a variety of areas spanning justice, media pluralism and anti-corruption.

Supporting Member States in the implementation of new rules on media freedom

Since 8 August 2025, the vast majority of provisions of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) are applicable. The EMFA includes specific provisions on the transparent and fair allocation of state advertising, the transparency of media ownership, the independent functioning of public service media and the availability of financial resources to fulfil its public service role. It also introduces measures to protect journalistic sources and confidential communications. The past year has seen intense activity involving the European Commission and the authorities of the Member States to ensure alignment of national legislation and practices in these crucial areas which are also central to the media pillar of the Rule of Law

[19] The Commission has proposed that when the conditions are not fulfilled, Member States nevertheless need to continue payments to final beneficiaries and amounts lost due to unresolved breaches may be reallocated to other Union instruments or programmes implemented under direct or indirect management.

Report. The Commission has launched first actions to enforce the EMFA in December 2025[20]. As the EMFA is now almost fully applicable[21], follow-up to the issues fully covered by the EMFA under the 2025 recommendations will be ensured as part of the Commission's support to Member States in the application of the EMFA and enforcement of this legislation. The Rule of Law Report will, however, continue to monitor significant developments in these areas and report on their impact.

Protecting journalists in the EU

To protect journalists, human rights defenders and other actors engaged in public debate from abusive litigation intended to silence their participation in matters of public interest, the Commission has continued to work with Member States to support their transposition and implementation of the new anti-SLAPP Directive. The Directive establishes minimum procedural safeguards against abusive lawsuits targeting journalists, human rights defenders and others in cross-border civil proceedings[22]. While the Directive requires Member States to have anti-SLAPP safeguards in place for cross-border cases, several Member States have extended such safeguards also to domestic cases, which helps improve legal certainty and strengthens the protection of SLAPP targets across the board, in line with the Commission's anti-SLAPP Recommendation[23]. In line with this Recommendation, several Member States have also de-criminalised defamation, an important step towards limiting the use of defamation laws in proceedings that can have a chilling effect on public debate and participation. In May 2026, the Commission held a high-level event to inaugurate the renewed Expert Group against SLAPPs and launch the review of the anti-SLAPP Recommendation. As also highlighted in the previous reports, many Member States have already taken concrete steps to address SLAPPs, including through specialised training, awareness-raising initiatives and support mechanisms for targeted journalists and human rights defenders. As also committed in the European Democracy Shield, the Commission will continue to support a stronger enabling environment and safety for journalists and for quality newsreporting, including by updating its Recommendation on the safety of journalists.

A strategic framework to support and empower civil society

The Commission has also adopted a first EU Strategy for Civil Society, which recognises civil society's essential role in upholding EU values, including the rule of law, and sets out a framework for action for an an open, safe and enabling civic space. The Strategy sets out concrete commitments across three mutually reinforcing objectives: strengthening engagement with civil society, protecting and supporting civil society, and ensuring adequate, sustainable and transparent funding. It proposes actions at EU and national level in close cooperation with partners, civil society organisations and Member States.

New rules to strengthen the fight against corruption

The entry into force of the Anti-Corruption Directive on 31 May 2026 was an important milestone to protect our democracies, economies and institutions from the damaging effects of corruption. The new rules establish a modern and harmonised framework to prevent, detect and

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[20] The Commission opened an infringement procedure against Hungary with the adoption of a Letter of Formal Notice; it has also launched follow-up with several Member States through administrative or EU pilot dialogues.

[21] Article 20 of EMFA will start to apply from 8 May 2027.

[22] At this stage, several Member States have notified the Commission of full transposition, though several others are at an advanced stage in the legislative process.

[23] Complementing the Directive, the 2022 anti-SLAPP Recommendation encourages Member States to develop a broader framework of protection measures covering also domestic cases and all areas of law as well as training, awareness-raising, support to victims and data collection.

sanction corruption in the EU. The Commission will support Member States in meeting the transposition deadline for the relevant provisions by 1 June 2028[24]. Furthermore, the Commission is planning to adopt an **EU Strategy against Corruption** this year, aimed at streamlining and better coordinate anti-corruption efforts in the EU. The EU Network Against Corruption continues to provide a forum for cooperation and exchange of good practices to support EU-wide efforts to foster integrity and fight corruption[25].

Digitalisation for more efficient, resilient and secure justice systems

The Digital Justice@2030 strategy and the Judicial Training Strategy 2025-2030, adopted in November 2025, aim to accelerate digitalisation of national justice systems to make EU justice systems more efficient, resilient and secure. Specific actions include improving full digital access to case law, improving videoconferencing, and achieving fully digital cross-border judicial proceedings. This should help courts to provide faster and more effective legal protection, thereby increasing growth and competitiveness, and ease the strained budgets for national justice systems. Harnessing the digitalisation potential requires justice professionals to acquire the relevant skills, knowledge and awareness.

Reinforcing democracy, fundamental rights and financial integrity in the EU

Rule of law and democracy are mutually reinforcing values. The adoption of the European Democracy Shield in November 2025 highlights the importance for healthy democracies of trusted institutions, free and fair elections, free and independent media contributing to the integrity of the information space, and an enabling environment for civil society. It emphasises the Commission's strong commitment to enhancing democratic resilience across the Union as an integral element of its work together with other EU institutions and bodies, the EU Member States, candidate countries and potential candidates and partners and citizens to defend and uphold EU values. The actions it sets out are being progressively rolled out by 2027.

The 2026 edition of the annual **report on the application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights** will focus on the role played by independent fundamental rights bodies, namely National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), equality bodies and ombuds institutions. These state-mandated actors promote, protect, and monitor fundamental rights at the national level, support victims, and contribute to international human rights reporting. Building on the Charter strategy and its 2025 mid-term review, the report will highlight their role in national fundamental rights systems and EU policymaking, including in protecting the rule of law.

Protecting the Union's financial interests is also essential to ensure trust in EU institutions and the broader rule of law framework. In this context, the review of the **EU anti-fraud architecture** is ongoing, with all relevant actors actively engaged in identifying solutions to strengthen the protection of the Union's financial interests. The review focuses on enhancing deterrence, increasing synergies and efficiency, and avoiding duplication throughout the anti-fraud cycle, from prevention and detection to investigation, correction, sanctioning and recovery.

Fostering a Rule of Law culture

Enhancing the awareness of European citizens, national authorities, and relevant stakeholders of the rule of law as a bedrock of successful democratic societies is a key objective of the

[24] Directive 2026/1021 of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating corruption.

[25] Two meetings took place in the reporting period, in October 2025 and June 2026. These discussions provided input for the preparation of the upcoming Anti-corruption Strategy. The Network brings together representatives of EU Member States, practitioners, civil society, international organisations, and EU institutions and agencies.

Commission. In May 2026, the Commission launched the 'Protect What Matters' campaign, which focuses on democratic principles and aims to raise awareness of core values relevant to the rule of law, including media freedom. Several Member States implemented initiatives for raising awareness of the rule of law, including a 'Rule of Law week' in the Netherlands and Belgium to encourage public debate[26].

Rule of law at the core of the enlargement process and external action

The EU remains unwavering in its commitment to defending democratic principles and the rule of law, particularly in the face of Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, a blatant violation of international law. The rule of law is essential to democratic resilience and to counter external threats, such as foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). In its external action, the EU seeks to support the rule of law through dialogue and cooperation with partner countries, notably in its neighbouring regions.

At the heart of the **EU's enlargement policy** lie the so-called 'fundamentals' – the consolidation of democratic structures, the upholding of the rule of law, and the protection of fundamental rights[27]. Progress in these areas is rigorously assessed in the Commission's annual Enlargement package, with tangible and sustained reforms serving as the benchmark for advancing negotiations. The EU continues to work closely with the Council of Europe (including the European Court of Human Rights, the Venice Commission, CEPEJ[28], and GRECO[29]) and the OECD Anti-Corruption Network to support enlargement partners in aligning with European standards, ensuring that reforms are both credible and enduring.

The EU will progressively integrate additional enlargement partners into the Rule of Law Report beyond the four already covered when they make progress in the formal accession process. This approach reinforces the expectation that high rule of law standards are not only prerequisites for accession, but also an integral part of EU membership.

The rule of law is also central to **key EU support mechanisms**, including the Western Balkans Reform and Growth Facility, the Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova, and the Ukraine Facility. General access to these unprecedented funding instruments is conditional on adhering to the rule of law and disbursements depend on the implementation of a reform agenda that delivers on the fundamentals As regards the next MFF, one of the main objectives of the new Global Europe instrument is to uphold and promote the Union's values and interests worldwide. The instrument will continue supporting civil society organisations, human rights and democracy abroad, with funding under both its geographic and global pillars, and a clear emphasis on good governance and the rule of law. It will remain possible to discontinue Global Europe funding in case of a degradation in democracy, human rights, or the rule of law.

In relation to enlargement partners, external support will continue to promote the rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy as part of the fundamental requirements under the accession process through performance-based growth plans rewarding progress in key reforms, with the aim of ensuring that enlargement partners remain firmly on the path towards European integration.

The EU continues to strengthen its commitment to **international legal standards** through its ongoing review under the UN Convention against Corruption and its accession process to the

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[26] These good practices were shared at the occasion of the meeting of the national contact points on the rule of law, 23 October 2025.

[27] These remain the cornerstone of accession negotiations, as emphasised by the revised enlargement methodology as set out in COM(2020) 57 final.

[28] Council of Europe European Commission for the efficiency of justice.

[29] The Group of States against Corruption.

European Convention on Human Rights. This broader commitment to a rules-based international order is also reflected in the continued support for the International Criminal Court to ensure accountability for the most serious international crimes.

2.4 EU action to respond to breaches of rule of law

Alongside its preventive and dialogue-based approach, the EU's rule of law toolbox also includes several instruments to address breaches to the rule of law, including infringement procedures, the Article 7 TEU procedure, and tools to protect the EU budget.

Responding to rule of law challenges

The Commission has continued to fulfil its role as guardian of the Treaties by launching infringement procedures to address breaches of the rule of law where necessary. At the same time, the **Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU)** has further developed its case-law on the rule of law. This included rulings on the principle of effective judicial protection and primacy of EU law[30], judicial appointment procedures[31], and rulings of national courts not considered to be independent[32]. In a landmark ruling, the CJEU held that Hungary's anti-LGBTIQ+ law violated internal market legislation, several fundamental rights set out in the Charter and Article 2 of the TEU[33]. This marks the first time that the Court found a violation of Article 2, which enshrines the values on which the European Union is founded, including the rule of law.

The application of the **Article 7 TEU mechanism** should continue, including in a future enlarged Union[34]. The Article 7(1) TEU procedure, allowing the Council to determine the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach of the EU's values and to follow up on such risks, continues in relation to Hungary. The Council held a state of play discussion in June 2026, during which Hungary updated on its plans and concrete steps to address the concerns raised in the European Parliament's reasoned proposal and by Member States in previous Council meetings.

Protecting the EU budget from breaches of the principles of rule of law

Effective financial management can only be guaranteed where public authorities operate in compliance with the law, where violations are properly investigated and prosecuted, and where arbitrary or unlawful actions by public authorities are subject to judicial oversight.

The **Conditionality Regulation** is an important tool to protect the EU budget from breaches of rule of law principles. The protective measures adopted by the Council in December 2022 following the procedure launched regarding Hungary by the Commission under the Conditionality Regulation remain in force. The Commission is engaging with the Hungarian authorities on actions that need to be taken to address the relevant concerns. The new Hungarian Recovery and Resilience Plan, as approved by the Council on [12 July 2026], contains rule of

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30 Judgment of 18 December 2025, Case C-448/23, held that the Polish Constitutional Court had infringed the principle of effective judicial protection and disregarded the primacy, autonomy, effectiveness and uniform application of EU law. The CJEU also held that the Polish Constitutional Court does not constitute and independent and impartial tribunal, on account of serious irregularities vitiating the appointment of three of its judges in December 2015 and of its President in December 2016.

31 Judgment of 24 March 2026, Case C-521/21, held that an irregularity committed during the appointment of a judge is not in itself sufficient to find that that judge is not independent.

32 Judgment of 4 September, Case C-225/22, held that a national court must consider as null and void a decision by a higher court of last instance that does not satisfy conditions of independence and impartiality established by EU law, where that decision refers a case back to the lower court for re-examination and such a consequence is essential in view of the procedural situation at issue in order to ensure the primacy of EU law.

33 Judgment of 21 April 2026, Case C-769/22.

34 Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029.

law-related audit and control milestones to effectively protect the EU's financial interests. The **horizontal enabling condition** under the Common Provisions Regulation is another important tool to ensure that the Charter of Fundamental Rights is respected when Member States implement EU funds.

Through their work to protect the Union's financial interests, the **European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO)** and the **European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF)** make a critical contribution to protecting the EU budget, upholding the rule of law and fighting corruption. Established as a mechanism of enhanced cooperation in October 2017, the EPPO has gradually been joined by additional Member States[35]. On 29 May 2026, Hungary notified its intention to participate in the EPPO and on 10 July, the Commission adopted a decision confirming Hungary's participation. This also has broader implications for the EPPO, as the EPPO Regulation will cease to be an act under enhanced cooperation[36] and will become part of the *EU acquis*. This will also entail that all relevant implementing acts will have to be accepted by candidate States for accession to the Union.

3. KEY ASPECTS OF THE RULE OF LAW SITUATION AT NATIONAL LEVEL

Methodology of the Rule of Law Report and its recommendations

The assessment in the country chapters for each Member State and enlargement country covered has been prepared in line with an established methodology used for previous editions of the report. For the enlargement partners, the Commission's annual Enlargement package covers the state of preparedness and progress in aligning with the EU *acquis* and European standards, including on all aspects of rule of law. The Rule of Law Report country chapters of the selected enlargement partners may refer to the guidance issued to them in the enlargement process and underline the complementarity between that process and the Rule of Law Report.

The country chapters rely on a qualitative assessment carried out autonomously by the Commission, focusing on a synthesis of significant developments since July 2025. In each country chapter, the analysis focuses on topics where there have been significant developments, both positive and negative, or where significant challenges identified in previous reports persist. On topics covered by recommendations, the analysis contains a qualitative assessment of the progress made by Member States towards implementing the 2025 recommendations[37]. The recommendations included in this 2026 annual report are based on a thorough assessment of the situation related to key challenges. Their objective is to support Member States in their efforts to advance reforms in the four areas of the report[38]. There are no recommendations for enlargement countries in this report, as such recommendations are issued in the context of the annual Enlargement package.

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35 Regulation (EU) 2017/1939 ('EPPO Regulation') was adopted in October 2017 by 20 Member States under enhanced cooperation. Malta and the Netherlands joined in 2018 and Poland and Sweden in 2024.

36 Under Protocols No 21 and No 22 to the Treaties, Ireland and Denmark in principle do not take part in measures adopted in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice. This is without prejudice to the possibility for Ireland to notify its intention to the contrary under Article 4 of Protocol No 21.

37 Depending on the progress made on the various subparts of each recommendation, and whether the recommendations were carried through from the 2025 report, the Commission concluded in each case using the following categories: no (further) progress, limited (further) progress, some (further) progress, significant (further) progress, and full implementation.

38 The principles on the basis of which the recommendations were prepared are the same as previous years (see COM(2022) 500, p.3-4). The recommendations are without prejudice to any action proceedings the Commission may initiate under other legal instruments.

The report is the result of close collaboration and dialogue with national authorities. The report draws on input from national authorities, international organisations, and relevant stakeholders as well as the Commission's own data gathering[39]. All sources used to inform the assessment are well documented in each country chapter[40]. Authorities in Member States and enlargement countries were invited to provide written input and participate in dedicated country visits[41]. A targeted stakeholder consultation also provided valuable cross-cutting and country-specific contributions[42]. The Council of Europe provided an overview of its recent opinions and reports[43]. Prior to the adoption of this report, national authorities have been given the opportunity to provide factual updates to their country chapter. The adopted report serves as a basis for subsequent Commission discussions with national governments and parliaments.

3.1 Justice systems

Efficient, well-functioning and independent justice systems are indispensable for applying and enforcing EU and national law. Judicial independence is essential to guarantee fair proceedings and effective judicial protection of individual rights[44], while access to independent courts and judicial review constitutes a core element of the rule of law.

When structuring and reforming their justice systems, Member States must fully comply with the requirements established by EU law and the CJEU case law. They should also take into account European standards developed by the Council of Europe and the Venice Commission, including the latter's updated Rule of Law Checklist adopted in December 2025. European judicial networks and associations play an important role in promoting and safeguarding the rule of law and contribute to the development of European standards[45]. Lawyers and bar associations also make a significant contribution to the rule of law, as do public notaries.

Perceptions of judicial independence across the EU

As set out in the 2026 EU Justice Scoreboard, Eurobarometer surveys conducted in 2026 show that the perception of judicial independence among the general public, increased or remained

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[39] For example, the EU Justice Scoreboard provides comparative and reliable data on the efficiency, quality and independence of justice systems in the EU Member States. It aims to assist the EU and Member States improve the effectiveness of their national justice systems.

[40] The sources used include written input received from Member States, contributions received during the targeted stakeholder consultation, information produced by international organisations such as the Council of Europe, the OECD and the UN, and the input provided during country visits. Due consideration is given to information from the sources used, taking into account their reliability and relevance. These sources inform the Commission's assessment, but the Commission's conclusions remain its own responsibility.

[41] Member States' input can be found here: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2026-rule-law-report-input-member-states-and-enlargement-countries_en. Information on the country visits can be found in the country chapters. During these country visits, held online and in person, the Commission spoke to Member States' national authorities, including judicial and independent authorities, law enforcement, and other stakeholders, such as journalists' associations and civil society.

[42] Stakeholder input can be found here: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2026-rule-law-report-targeted-stakeholder-consultation_en.

[43] The Council of Europe input to the Rule of Law Report can be found here: https://commission.europa.eu/document/b2e4463e-772f-46d3-af7a-92658e1fe48e_en.

[44] Article 19 of the Treaty on European Union, and Article 47 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights

[45] Such as the European Network of Councils for the Judiciary, the Network of the Presidents of the Supreme Judicial Courts of the EU, the Association of the Councils of State and Supreme Administrative Jurisdictions of the EU, the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe, and Council of Europe European Commission for the efficiency of justice (CEPEJ), the Network of Public Prosecutors or equivalent institutions at the Supreme Judicial Courts of the Member States of the European Union – the NADAL Network, and the Council of the Notariats of the European Union (CNUE).

stable in 17 Member States when compared to 2025, while it decreased in ten Member States[46]. Among companies, the perception of independence has increased or remained stable in 18 Member States when compared to 2025, and it decreased in nine Member States[47]. In Denmark, Finland, Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, and Ireland, the level of perceived independence continues to be particularly high among the general public or companies (above 75%), while it remains very low in Croatia and Bulgaria (below 30%). As regards enlargement countries, Eurobarometer results show very low to average levels of perceived independence.

Councils for the Judiciary and procedures for the appointment and dismissal of judges as key safeguards for judicial independence

The procedures for appointing and dismissing judges, along with the powers and structure of the Councils for the Judiciary, are central to preserving judicial independence. Where Councils for the Judiciary exist, they serve as a buffer between the judiciary and other branches of power in areas such as appointments, career development and justice system management[48]. The Council of Europe has developed European standards on how these Councils should be designed to effectively protect their independence, including as regards composition[49]. For Councils for the Judiciary to operate efficiently, they require sufficient resources and administrative independence.

Several Member States took forward measures to strengthen the independence and effectiveness of Councils for the Judiciary. In the Netherlands, the Government proposed to give the judiciary its own budget and to remove the role of the Minister of Justice and Security in the appointment of members of the Council for the Judiciary. For Spain, steps were taken to advance the process of adapting the appointment procedure for the Council of the Judiciary's judges-members, with the adoption of an opinion of the Venice Commission on two alternative models. In Portugal, in light of ongoing discussions on strengthening its legal framework, the Council for the Judiciary adopted a Code of Conduct for its members, aimed at safeguarding its independence and credibility. In Finland, constitutional amendments to further safeguard the independence of the judiciary are in preparation.

As regards enlargement countries, in North Macedonia, Parliament adopted a new Law on the Judicial Council with a view to align with European standards. In Serbia, legal amendments removed some of the existing safeguards to protect prosecutorial autonomy and judicial independence, hampering the implementation of the constitutional reform of 2023; subsequently the Venice Commission confirmed that Serbia addressed the considerable part of its recommendations on these amendments.

At the same time, concerns regarding the Council for the Judiciary remain in Bulgaria, as no steps have been taken to address the long-standing issues with the composition and functioning of the Council. In Estonia, the Parliament adopted the reform of the Council, which does not take account of European Standards. In Slovakia, a draft amendment of the Constitution and the Judicial Council Act limiting the reasons for the dismissal of members of the Judicial Council is in the legislative process.

46 2026 EU Justice Scoreboard, Figure 48.

47 2026 EU Justice Scoreboard, Figure 50.

48 The CJEU has recognised that where a Council for the Judiciary participates in an appointment process involving political bodies, it can contribute to making that process more objective. See for example judgment of 2 March 2021, Case C-824/18, AB and Others (Appointment of judges to the Supreme Court – Actions).

49 See in particular Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)12 of the Council of Europe.

Procedures for appointing and dismissing judges are key for judicial independence and for public perceptions. The CJEU has set out that judicial independence requires that the conditions and rules governing judicial appointments must be sufficient to prevent reasonable doubts about whether judges are impervious to external factors[50]. In several Member States, efforts to improve judicial appointment procedures are ongoing, including as a follow up to the 2025 recommendations. In Greece, appointments to the highest positions in the court system were made with the involvement of the judiciary. In Slovenia, the new Judges Act transferred the power to appoint Supreme Court judges from Parliament to the Judicial Council. In Latvia, steps are being taken to introduce safeguards to protect the appointment procedure for judges of the Supreme Court from undue influence. While there were no plans to change the nomination system for lay judges in Sweden, measures are being examined by the Lay Judges Association to strengthen their functioning in the courts.

In other Member States, reforms to judicial appointment procedures are progressing slowly, while concerns remain on taking European standards into account on judicial appointments. In Malta, while political debate continued on the appointment of the Chief Justice, reforms to involve the judiciary in the process are still pending. In Finland, limited steps were taken on the issue of the appointment of lay judges. In Bulgaria**,** the widespread use of secondments continues to raise concerns as it may have a negative effect on seconded magistrates faced with the risk of termination of their secondment. In Albania, the vetting process of all judges and prosecutors was fully completed following the finalisation of the appeal phase, further strengthening judicial independence, accountability and integrity across the justice sector.

According to European standards, while criticising judicial decisions is a normal aspect of democratic discourse, the executive and legislative powers should avoid criticism that undermines the independence of or public confidence in the judiciary[51]. Challenges in this respect have been raised in both Member States and enlargement countries. In Albania, the judiciary remains resilient but attempts of undue influence on justice institutions and personal attacks on magistrates continued. In Montenegro, while the Judicial and Prosecutorial Council have an established reporting mechanism for instances of undue influence, criticisms and attacks against prosecutorial authorities and their decisions have continued. In Serbia, political pressure on the judiciary and the prosecution increased significantly, with limited follow-up from state bodies.

Autonomy and independence of the prosecution service

While the structure of national prosecution services differs from one Member State to another, institutional safeguards are necessary to ensure the autonomy of the prosecution service, so that it can act without interference[52]. This autonomy is crucial for enforcing both national and European criminal laws.

Reforms to strengthen institutional safeguards for the prosecution service continued at varying speed in several Member States. In Bulgaria, Parliament adopted amendments to introduce automatic judicial review for prosecutorial decisions in case of termination and suspension of investigations for corruption-related crimes. Furthermore, a new law has been adopted to address procedural issues still affecting the full operationalisation of the mechanism for the

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[50] See judgments including those of 15 July 2021, C-791/19 Commission v Poland; of 20 April 2021, C-896/19 Repubblika and Il-Prim Ministru; and of 2 March 2021, C-824/18 AB and Others (Appointment of judges to the Supreme Court).

[51] Council of Europe, Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on judges: independence, efficiency and responsibilities, 17 November 2010, CM/Rec(2010)12, para. 18

[52] See compilation of Venice Commission opinions and reports concerning prosecutors https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-PI(2022)023-e

effective accountability and criminal liability of the Prosecutor General, while a new *ad hoc* prosecutor for the investigation of the Prosecutor General was appointed. In Spain, a draft law to strengthen the statute of the Prosecutor-General by decoupling the term of office of the Prosecutor General from that of the Government, is under discussion in Parliament. In Cyprus, the ongoing reform of the Law Office, which plans to establish the Office of the Public Prosecutor General and the introduction of an effective review of decisions not to prosecute or to discontinue proceedings, remains under discussion before Parliament. In Austria, the Government submitted a draft law to create a Federal Prosecution Office to public consultation, with the aim to separate the prosecution service from its current hierarchical subordination to the Ministry of Justice. In Poland, limited further steps have been taken to separate the office of the Minister of Justice from that of the Prosecutor General and to ensure functional independence of the prosecution service from the Government.

Challenges have also been identified or remain in some areas. In Slovakia, the legal framework concerning the power of the Prosecutor General to annul final decisions of lower-ranking prosecutors remained unchanged. In Hungary, the election procedure for the Prosecutor General, combined with the hierarchical structure of the prosecution service, gives rise to a risk of undue political interference in individual cases.

In Montenegro, constitutional amendments aimed at strengthening the independence of the Judicial and Prosecutorial Councils have been adopted by the Government. In North Macedonia, the Parliament adopted new amendments to the Law on the Council of Public Prosecutors to strengthen the autonomy of the prosecution service, but further revisions are needed. In Serbia, concerns regarding prosecutorial autonomy remain and the effectiveness and confidentiality of criminal investigations are hampered by shortcomings in law and practice.

Ensuring accountability and safeguarding independence in disciplinary procedures

As confirmed by CJEU caselaw, disciplinary procedures must not be used as a form of political control over the judiciary[53]. Safeguards must include clear rules that define what constitutes a disciplinary offence and the applicable penalties. Disciplinary proceedings should be conducted by an independent body, respect the right of defence, and be subject to challenge in court[54].

Several Member States strengthened the safeguards in disciplinary proceedings. In Czechia, the new two-instance disciplinary procedure for judges, prosecutors and bailiffs is reported to function well. In Slovenia, the amendments to the Judicial Council Act and a new Judges Act overhauled the disciplinary framework for judges, with more precise definitions and procedural changes.

In some Member States, disciplinary actions concerning judges present various challenges. In Romania, some magistrates continued feeling undue pressure and their professional associations issued public statements demanding an end to disciplinary pressure on magistrates exercising their right to free speech. In addition, judges were recused by the High Court of Cassation and Justice because of their intention to refer questions to the Court of Justice of the European Union. In Slovakia, the reform of the disciplinary proceedings for judges, prosecutors, bailiffs and notaries, increasing the Judicial Council's powers over the judiciary, is subject to constitutional review.

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[53] The CJEU has recalled this principle in cases referring to the disciplinary chamber of the Polish Supreme Court (Judgment of 5 June 2023, C-204/21, *Commission v Poland*) and the Romanian Judicial Inspection (Judgments of 11 May 2023, case 817/21 *Inspecţia Judiciară*, and of 18 May 2021, C-83/19 etc *Asociaţia 'Forumul Judecătorilor din România' and Others v Inspecţia Judiciară and Others*).

[54] Judgment of 25 July 2018, *LM*, C-216/18 PPU, para. 67.

Efforts to improve the quality and efficiency of justice

The justice system needs sufficient resources to work effectively. This includes making the necessary investments in physical and technical infrastructure and ensuring well qualified, trained and adequately paid staff. Member States have continued to invest in their justice systems, often despite a restrictive budgetary context, in several cases with EU support via their Recovery and Resilience Plans.

In Germany, with the new Pact for the Rule of Law and a joint campaign to attract qualified personnel, significant steps have been taken to increase resources of the judiciary and address recruitment challenges. In Belgium**,** the Parliament adopted a law to make positions in the judiciary more attractive by aligning employment conditions more closely with those of civil servants outside the judiciary. In the Netherlands, the judiciary will receive increased allocations as of 2027 to improve working conditions in the justice system and to address staff shortages. In Greece, the recruitment of prosecutors aims to address staff shortages. However, adequate resources remain a recurrent challenge; for example in Portugal, recruitments for judicial and prosecutorial posts are underway but concerns remain regarding the shortage of judicial clerks and the deteriorating conditions and security in court and prosecution premises. In Estonia, the workload within the judiciary remains a challenge, while competitions to fill in vacancies have been announced.

The level of judges' remuneration can impact judicial independence and is also relevant to the attractiveness of the judicial profession[55]. In Sweden, the National Courts Administration and the judges' trade union agreed on a new collective agreement, clarifying existing safeguards and introducing additional measures to support judicial independence with regard to the judges' salary system. In Hungary, salaries in the justice system have been increased further, while no measures have been taken to ensure that such increases are carried out in a structured way.

Digitalisation can strengthen Member States' justice systems and make them more accessible, efficient, resilient and ready to face current and future challenges. Digitalisation initiatives have continued to advance in Ireland, Greece, Luxembourg, France, Slovenia and Estonia. In Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Finland, while projects to improve the level of digitalisation are advancing, some gaps and challenges still remain. However, in some Member States, implementation is still lagging. In Czechia**,** efforts to digitalise the justice system continued to face delays, with stakeholders noting the lack of interoperability between systems for different courts and the often incomplete or inconsistent publication of judicial decisions online. In Malta, investments in the digitalisation of justice are advancing at a limited pace, and a number of systems are still to be implemented. In Spain, work to further enhance the high level of digitalisation of justice continued, while the limited interoperability between national and regional case management systems remains a challenge.

Albania**,** Montenegro and North Macedonia face continued challenges with ensuring sufficient human resources in the judiciary. In Serbia, the implementation of the IT solution for the new prosecutorial case management system is ongoing.

An efficient justice system manages its caseload and backlog of cases and delivers its decisions without undue delay. This is essential for the protection of rights, legal certainty and public confidence. Excessively lengthy judicial proceedings and case backlogs may also negatively affect the business environment. In some Member States, measures are being implemented to improve efficiency. In Croatia, some steps have been made to improve the efficiency of justice,

[55] CJEU judgment of 25 February 2025 in joined cases C-146/23 and C-374/23 where the Court clarified that under Article 19(1) TEU, detailed rules for determining the remuneration of judges must be objective, foreseeable, stable, transparent and enshrined in law.

while backlogs and length of proceedings continue to be a serious concern. In Greece, efforts to decongest civil courts and reduce delays include transferring non-litigious cases to lawyers and notaries, the digital publication of wills and revisions to the Code of Civil Procedure. In Spain, the implementation of the new law on the efficiency of justice is already showing positive results, although there are challenges linked to resources and consistency of implementation across regions. In France, reforms are being considered to improve the efficiency of the justice system, while stakeholders express concerns that these may amount to a restriction of the right to appeal.

While improvements were registered in some Members States as regards the length of court proceedings, such as in Romania**,** long-standing challenges persist in other Member States. In Belgium and Portugal, measures to expedite court procedures are still pending. In Italy, while the positive trend in reduction of the disposition time continued, the length of judicial proceedings remains a serious issue.

In North Macedonia, the efficiency of the justice system continued to decline, as the duration of proceedings increased in almost all case categories, with the exception of criminal cases. In Serbia, the efficiency of the justice system in civil and commercial cases remains stable, but there is a negative trend in criminal cases and serious challenges in handling of administrative cases and constitutional complaints have not been addressed.

Access to justice and the role of lawyers in the justice system

Lawyers, bar associations, public notaries and other legal professionals are essential to the effective functioning of the rule of law. As recognised by the CJEU, legal professional privilege and the confidentiality of lawyer-client communications constitute general principles of EU law, closely linked to the rights of the defence and the proper administration of justice[56]. In 2025, the Council of Europe adopted the European Convention on the Profession of Lawyer which, for the first time, codifies safeguards aimed at ensuring that lawyers can act independently of the executive and other undue influences[57].

While the independence of lawyers in the EU is generally ensured, allowing lawyers to freely pursue their activities of advising and representing their clients, challenges persist. In Belgium, lawyers continue to call for additional procedural safeguards to protect their independence and legal professional privilege. In the Netherlands, changes were made to the regime of visual supervision of lawyer-client conversations in high-security prisons, amid concerns by lawyers.

The availability of legal aid and the level of court fees have a major impact on access to justice. In several Member States, steps are being taken to improve the legal aid system, such as in Latvia, where access to legal aid in proceedings before the Constitutional Court was expanded. In Denmark, the Judicial Council continued its work on the review of the legal aid system, and in Ireland, further steps have been taken to reduce the costs of litigation with the ongoing drafting of the Civil Reform Bill, while a review of the Civil Legal Aid scheme was published and reform of the Criminal Legal Aid system is planned. In Bulgaria, amendments to the legal aid rules increased the remuneration for lawyers. Meanwhile, in Lithuania, discussions on the level of remuneration of legal aid providers were suspended in 2026 and the envisaged new features of the Legal Aid Information System to reduce the administrative burden for legal aid providers are planned for this year.

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56 Case C-155/79, AM & S Europe Ltd v Commission, paras. 18–21; Case C-550/07 P, Akzo Nobel Chemicals and Akcros Chemicals v Commission, paras 42–46 and 54; Case C-694/20, Orde van Vlaamse Balies and Others, paras. 26–30 and 34–36.

57 CM(2024)191-add1final. As of June 2026, 24 EU Member States had signed the Convention.

3.2 *Anti-corruption framework*

Corruption undermines security, fair competition and prosperity, weakens the quality of public services, distorts public resource allocation and erodes people's trust in democracy, public institutions and the rule of law. It is often linked to other crimes, including money laundering and drugs trafficking, and it is one of the main tools used by organised crime groups to infiltrate and influence institutions and legitimate businesses. A comprehensive approach to fighting corruption relies on a combination of preventive and repressive measures in a robust legal and institutional framework, with effective investigations and prosecutions.

Corruption perceptions across the EU

The results of the Corruption Perceptions Index consistently show that eight of the 20 countries ranking best internationally are EU Member States[58], while differences remain[59]. Enlargement partners score below the average in this ranking[60]. The 2026 Eurobarometer surveys on corruption show that corruption remains a serious concern for citizens and businesses in the EU. About seven in ten Europeans (71%) believe that corruption is widespread in their country and almost five in ten Europeans (48%) consider that the level of corruption has increased in their country. Only 35% of citizens think that their government's efforts to combat corruption are effective. Similarly, most European companies (65%) consider that the problem of corruption is widespread in their country and only about half (53%) consider it likely for corrupt people or businesses to be caught or reported to the police or prosecutors.

Strengthening the strategic and legal framework to combat corruption and the capacity of institutions

The importance of having effective and coordinated anti-corruption policies is recognised in international law[61]. National strategies help Member States take a comprehensive and coherent approach, integrating anti-corruption efforts across all relevant policy sectors. With the Anti-Corruption Directive, their adoption will become mandatory by June 2029. Almost all Member States and the enlargement countries currently have national anti-corruption strategies in place and are in the process of implementing them[62]. Ireland adopted its first anti-corruption strategy, Italy a new one, and Spain its first State Anti-Corruption Plan.

Tackling corruption effectively requires both a strong legal framework and independent bodies to enforce it. Overall, the legal frameworks in Member States and the enlargement countries covered by this Report are well developed, with efforts underway or planned to address specific gaps. The transposition of the Anti-corruption Directive in national legislation provides a further opportunity to Member States to strengthen and harmonise their legal frameworks.

58 8 Member States are in the top 20, as in the previous year. Three Member States (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) score 80/100 or above on the index, with others (Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany, Estonia and Ireland) scoring above 70/100.

59 Scores below 50 can be seen in Malta (49), Slovakia (48), Croatia (47), Romania (45), Bulgaria (40), and Hungary (40).

60 Scores below 50 can be seen in Montenegro (46), North Macedonia (40), Albania (39) and Serbia (33).

61 Parties to the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) are required, in accordance with the fundamental principles of their legal systems, to develop and implement or maintain effective, coordinated anti-corruption policies that promote the participation of society and reflect the principles of the rule of law, proper management of public affairs and public property, integrity, transparency and accountability. All Member States and the EU are parties. Notably, Directive (EU) 2026/1021 on combatting corruption requires that Member States have in place a national anti-corruption strategy by 1 June 2029 (art. 21).

62 Currently 23 Member States have dedicated anti-corruption strategies or programmes; almost all others have anti-corruption components in other national strategies and action plans.

Several Member States have taken forward criminal law reforms to strengthen the fight against corruption. In Sweden, the government proposed further legislative reforms to strengthen the criminal justice framework and improve accountability for corruption in line with international recommendations. In Spain, the revision of the Code of Criminal Procedure with a view to make the criminal procedure more effective, is under discussion in Parliament. Bulgaria adopted several legislative amendments to implement international recommendations on foreign bribery.

In a few countries, shortcomings persist. In Slovakia, while the 2024 criminal law reform was adjusted to ensure the protection of the EU's financial interests and the Slovak government has engaged actively to this end, the criminal law and institutional reforms of 2024 still raise specific anti-corruption concerns and previously identified risks continue to materialise. In North Macedonia, amendments to the Criminal Code were adopted, which presented several shortcomings compared with the previous framework, while a comprehensive reform is in preparation.

Several Member States are taking steps to strengthen their anti-corruption institutions. In Belgium, a legislative proposal to create a new section with earmarked resources within the federal prosecution service for investigating serious financial and economic crimes was tabled in Parliament. In Cyprus, the Independent Authority against Corruption has been strengthened with the adoption of new legislation on recruitment. Spain has launched the legislative process to set up the Independent Authority for Public Integrity as a central body for the prevention, supervision and prosecution of corruption. In Latvia, the competences of the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau have been strengthened with a view to strengthening risk analysis. Bulgaria adopted a new anti-corruption law re-establishing the Anti-Corruption Commission with stronger guarantees for its political independence. In Hungary, new legislation aims to reinforce the powers of the Integrity Authority and to ensure that it has access to data necessary for carrying out its work.

To tackle increasingly complex corruption cases, law enforcement, prosecutors, and the judiciary must be sufficiently specialised and well-resourced. In Spain, new judicial and prosecutorial posts were created to strengthen the handling of corruption cases. In Malta, the Police and the Attorney General have further increased their human resources, while the capacity of the Permanent Commission against Corruption to effectively contribute to the investigation and prosecution of corruption cases remains limited. Some challenges remain in a few Member States. In Ireland, resource challenges remain for the investigation and prosecution of corruption offences. In Austria, reporting obligations and the new rules on seizure of electronic devices are seen as a burden on prosecution services.

Close cooperation between law enforcement authorities and other agencies[63], as well as access to and interconnection between information databases, are crucial for an efficient fight against corruption. In Ireland, cooperation among responsible authorities functions well. In Finland, the National Bureau of Investigation, the Tax Authority and the Competition and Consumer Authority have strengthened their cooperation in the field of corruption prevention.

The cooperation between national authorities and the EPPO is reported to be overall good in the participating Member States. Furthermore, the EPPO is now fully operational in Poland and Sweden to investigate and prosecute crimes affecting the financial interests of the Union. On 29 May 2026, Hungary notified its intention to participate in the enhanced cooperation on the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) [and the Commission subsequently adopted a decision confirming Hungary's participation].

[63] Such as financial intelligence units and tax, audit, competition and other administrative authorities.

In Ireland, the 2025 Programme for Government contains a commitment to sign up to the EPPO.

In Albania, the institutional framework for corruption prevention has improved but coordination between institutions in charge of corruption and law enforcement remains weak. In Montenegro, the effectiveness and coordination of law enforcement institutions in the area of corruption increased. In Serbia, there are concerns about the obstacles and attempts of undue influence to the effective functioning of the Prosecutor's Office for Organised Crime.

Removing obstacles to criminal investigations and prosecutions and improving the track record for high-level corruption

The effective investigation and prosecution of corruption is essential to ensuring accountability and maintaining public confidence in the rule of law. According to the Special Eurobarometer on citizens' attitudes towards corruption, around two thirds of Europeans (69%) believe that high-level corruption cases are not pursued sufficiently. The effective investigation and prosecution of corruption can be hindered by legal shortcomings, such as unclear or burdensome procedures to lift immunities or short time limitation periods. These obstacles are particularly problematic for complex corruption cases, where they may lead to delays and undermine effective enforcement.

Several Member States have strengthened efforts to ensure a more effective investigation and prosecution of corruption offences, including by allocating additional resources. In France, efforts to prosecute corruption are being reinforced, including in high-level cases, with additional human resources allocated to investigation authorities, and new legislative tools in place. Human resources in services working on anti-corruption significantly increased in Luxembourg. In Croatia, several laws were revised, including the Law on the Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organised Crime, and institutional changes were introduced to achieve greater efficiency in corruption investigations and prosecutions.

In other Member States, there are some obstacles to the effective investigations and prosecution of corruption, in particular as regards high-level cases. In Malta**,** new investigations and prosecutions were opened and efforts continue to increase investigative capacity, while a robust track record of final judgements in corruption cases remains to be achieved. In Romania, the track record in prosecuting both petty and high-level corruption has been maintained, while lower courts have continued to close corruption cases and annul convictions, including in high level ones, following rulings by the High Court of Cassation and Justice on the statute of limitations. Bulgaria and Hungary are yet to demonstrate a solid track record of investigations, prosecutions and final convictions in high-level corruption. In Slovakia, the capacity to detect, investigate and prosecute high-level corruption has further deteriorated, with the numbers of corruption cases detected and prosecuted showing a sharp decline.

In Albania, the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK) has continued to deliver positive results in fighting high-level corruption and building a solid track record of investigations, prosecutions and convictions. In North Macedonia, despite recent efforts to investigate and prosecute corruption, delays in court proceedings, infrequent final convictions, and limited resources continue to impede the development of a strong track-record of high-level corruption cases. In Montenegro, the number of final rulings and convictions in cases of high-level corruption has increased. In Serbia, challenges remain in establishing a robust track record of investigations, indictments and final convictions in high-level corruption.

Fighting corruption as an enabler of organised crime

Organised criminals exploit corruption to further their goals, undermining both public and private institutions. Countering the risks of organised crime infiltrating or exerting improper influence over the public sector remains a key priority for multiple Member States. In Sweden, the growing threat of organised crime infiltrating public services through corrupt practices has led to the adoption of a number of measures, including new obligations for municipalities and regions to protect politicians from threats and violence. In the Netherlands, the fight against corruption linked to organised crime remains an important priority, with a national risk assessment on corruption risks linked to subversive organised crime published in March 2026. In France, a law that introduced several measures aimed at reinforcing the fight against corruption when linked to organised crime is being implemented.

Strengthening the corruption prevention and integrity framework

Preventing corruption starts with strong institutions that operate with integrity, transparency and accountability. In this context, enhancing transparency, ethics and integrity in public authorities is essential to combat corruption, alongside targeted measures on conflicts of interest, lobbying and revolving doors.

- *Preventing conflicts of interest*

Conflicts of interest arise when a public official has a private or professional interest that could interfere with the impartial and objective performance of their duties. To prevent such situations, most Member States have measures in place covering a wide range of elected and appointed public officials. In some Member States, the integrity framework has been complemented with codes of conduct[64] and measures to prevent conflicts of interests. In Cyprus, a comprehensive strategy for the integrity of persons entrusted with top executive functions is being prepared. In Slovakia, a Code of Conduct for persons with top functions was adopted in August 2025. In Spain, legislation has been prepared to reinforce the Council for Transparency and Good Governance and to establish a comprehensive regime for the prevention of conflicts of interest in the public sector. In Bulgaria, further measures have been taken to strengthen integrity in the police and the judiciary, including revised codes of ethics. As regards enlargement countries, in Albania, legislation on conflicts of interests was revised to align it with European standards and EU *acquis*.

Meanwhile, shortcomings remain in some Member States as rules on conflicts of interest are incomplete or reforms have been stalled. In Czechia, after the Constitutional Court declared amendments to the legislation on conflicts of interests unconstitutional for procedural reasons, no steps were taken to reinitiate the revision of this legislation. In Malta, measures are in place to prevent and manage conflicts of interest in the public administration, but stakeholders consider that they lack sufficient verification mechanisms. In Ireland, the ‘Ethics Reform Bill’ is still under preparation. In Italy, a draft law on conflicts of interest remains pending.

- *Lobbying and revolving doors*

Lobbying can play a legitimate role in policy development by contributing with expertise and perspectives to public decision-making. To ensure accountability, support inclusive decision-making, and prevent undue or covert influence, this must be accompanied with strong transparency and integrity safeguards[65].

Developments in these areas continued, as some Member States revised their lobbying transparency rules, established or extended transparency registries and are preparing new

[64] See Council of Europe, Recommendation Rec (2000)10 on codes of conduct for public officials.

[65] In December 2023, the Commission proposed a Directive on interest representation carried out on behalf of third countries to establish high transparency and accountability standards in the internal market for interest representation activities, including lobbying, when coming from third country governments and to facilitate the provision of such activities across Member States (C/2023/8626).

legislation. In Czechia, implementation of the legislation on lobbying, which entered into force in July 2025 and includes a transparency register, is on track. In Luxembourg, the rules on lobbying extending the obligation to register a meeting to the Members of Parliament became applicable in September 2025. In Portugal, a new law on lobbying was adopted, while a lobbying registry still needs to be set up. In Sweden, legislation providing for an obligation for lobbyists to register and disclose their contacts with political decision-makers was adopted. In Romania, new rules on lobbying for Members of Parliament have been introduced.

In some Member States, the absence of comprehensive lobbying rules, or weaknesses in enforcing existing rules, is considered a key area for improvement. In France, disclosure requirements continue to apply to lobbyists only and not to officials at top-executive level. In Poland, Austria, Belgium, Denmark and Malta, there were no further steps to strengthen lobbying rules. In Spain, the draft law to regulate lobbying is still pending parliamentary adoption. In Croatia, the resources for lobbying oversight have been increased, but challenges remain, including on lobbying register information. In Greece, while implementation measures and awareness-raising activities are ongoing, no legislative changes have been introduced regarding the definition of lobbyists and the number of registered lobbyists remains low. In Cyprus, the monitoring of the law on lobbying is being strengthened. While initial steps in preparing a draft law have been taken, lobbying remains unregulated in Slovakia.

Rules governing 'revolving doors' between public and private sector roles remain a key area of focus. Several Member States are considering stricter post-employment restrictions and longer cooling-off periods to strengthen enforcement and reduce risks of conflicts of interest. In the Netherlands, revised rules on revolving doors for ministers and state secretaries entered into force and are being applied. In Cyprus, initiatives are underway to expand the categories of persons subject to oversight after employment. In Romania, new legislation on revolving doors was adopted, including pre- and post-employment restrictions on a wide range of public officials, and a new Code of Ethics for the government is being implemented. In other Member States, discussions have not advanced. In Czechia, technical work on a possible future revision of rules on revolving doors continues. In Sweden, there has been no proposal to change the rules on revolving doors, and there are no plans to introduce rules on 'revolving doors' for ministers in Denmark.

- *Asset and interest disclosure*

Asset and interest declarations by public officials enhance transparency and accountability and help promote integrity and prevent corruption. Effective disclosure and verification systems can facilitate the detection of conflicts of interests, incompatibilities and corruption. However, Member States vary in the scope, transparency, accessibility, verification and enforcement of such disclosures.

Positive developments are taking place in some Member States. The Netherlands issued updated guidance on the asset and interest declaration regime of ministers and state secretaries. In Croatia and Greece, steps have been taken to digitalise the asset declaration systems.

In other Member States, challenges remain. In Spain, the reform of the Parliament's Rules of Procedure to strengthen penalties for the failure to submit asset declarations or for providing false or incomplete information has not been carried out yet. In Poland, most asset declarations of Government officials and members of Parliament are still filled out by hand and in a variety of formats, which the Government announced it would address now as a priority, including the creation of a standardised online system. In Malta, a reform of the asset and interest declaration system for Members of Parliament and Ministers remains outstanding. While the Transparency Entity is fully operational and has been reinforced in Portugal, it is facing a backlog in verifying asset declarations following a surge of submissions after recent elections. In Romania, a broad legislative proposal on asset declarations submitted by the National Integrity Agency is currently under discussion. In Serbia**,** weaknesses persist regarding the verification and enforcement of asset declarations and conflicts of interest.

- *Whistleblower protection and reporting of corruption*

Whistleblowers play a vital role in helping uncover corruption and other wrongdoing that might otherwise remain hidden. Ensuring that they can report safely and without fear of retaliation is therefore important. All Member States have transposed the core provisions of the EU Directive on whistleblower protection, and most have extended protection beyond EU law to cover additional areas. However, gaps remain in some Members States regarding the scope, conditions for protection and protection against retaliation[66]. The Anti-Corruption Directive requires that whistleblower protection applies to persons reporting corruption offences.

Whistleblowers make increasing use of the available reporting channels in several Member States, showing that an effective protection system can encourage reporting. Many Member States are also taking measures to increase awareness and amend rules to strengthen the framework where needed. In Denmark, Lithuania, and Slovenia, the number of whistleblowing reports continues to rise, and the authorities report that the implementation of whistleblowing rules is on the right track. In Romania, an IT system is being developed to receive and manage whistleblower reports, with the aim of increasing efficiency and the communication workflow. In Spain, an independent authority tasked with the protection of whistleblowers started operating. In Ireland, the statutory review of the Protected Disclosures Act is starting in 2026, with a public consultation to gather evidence on whistleblower experience.

Nonetheless, obstacles remain in practice with regard to reporting corruption cases. According to the Special Eurobarometer on citizens' attitudes towards corruption, 31% of Europeans think that those reporting a case of corruption are not protected from retaliation and 29% of Europeans believe that cases of corruption are not reported because reporting would not be followed up and punished. To overcome reluctance, Member States are introducing awareness-raising and guidance tools. For example, in Romania, training sessions were held for public and private entities covering both internal and external reporting channels.

- *Political party and political campaign financing*

Transparency in political party financing is essential to protecting the integrity of democratic processes, preventing undue influence and ensuring democratic accountability[67].

Several Member States have adopted or are considering reforms to increase transparency and oversight. In Estonia, a reform of the political party financing framework entered into force. In Sweden, recently adopted legislation strengthens the rules on political party financing, aligning them to international standards and recommendations. The new competence of the Court of Audit in auditing political party financial statements have increased transparency and accountability of party financing in Austria. While a broader reform of the rules on private funding of political parties remains to be completed in Denmark, new rules have been adopted to ban donations from abroad to political parties. In Luxembourg, new rules have been adopted to strengthen the control over the use of financial resources by the political groups and independent Members at the Parliament.

[66] See Commission's Report on the implementation and application of Directive (EU) 2019/1937 of 3rd July 2024.

[67] See also the Recommendation (EU) of 12 December 2023 on inclusive and resilient electoral processes in the Union and enhancing the European nature and efficient conduct of the elections to the European Parliament.

In Albania, a Special Parliamentary Committee has been established to work on electoral reform, including the revisions to the legal framework on political party financing. In Montenegro, the legal framework regulating political parties' funding remains to be aligned with OSCE/ODIHR and GRECO recommendations to increase transparency and control of political parties' spending. In North Macedonia, the effective oversight of campaigns and political party financing continues to be affected by inadequate legislation and a lack of resources.

Countering corruption in high-risk areas

While corruption can affect all areas of public life, certain sectors are particularly exposed due to the scale of public spending, the complexity of decision-making or the discretionary powers involved. Public procurement, healthcare, energy, environment, urban planning, and construction remain among the areas most vulnerable to corruption risks. Enhanced vigilance is also needed in areas with rapidly increasing public expenditure or fast-track procedures, such as defence procurement. The Commission has published a study on high-risk areas for corruption.

Member States are taking steps to reduce corruption risks in high-risk areas, including in public procurement. In Italy, the national anti-corruption authority launched a digital portal increasing the transparency of public procurement procedures, which remains a high-risk area. In Bulgaria, to increase transparency of public procurement, the Ministry of Finance launched a database covering nearly 7 000 active tenders for a total amount of over EUR 30 billion. In Finland, amendments to the Act on Public Procurement were submitted to Parliament in February 2026, establishing new grounds for exclusion and improving supervision and transparency. Member States have also introduced mitigating measures in other risk areas, such as Croatia with its new Law on Foreign Investments, mandating integrity and corruption conviction checks of investors of sectors deemed critical.

In Montenegro, measures addressing risk areas in public procurement have been enhanced through the introduction of e-procurement tools, while the monitoring of measures addressing corruption in high-risk areas is hampered by lack of relevant data. In Serbia, exemptions to the Law on public procurement continue to be widely used, circumventing anti-corruption safeguards, and oversight remains weak.

3.3 Media pluralism and media freedom

Media freedom and pluralism are fundamental aspects of the rule of law, as independent media help hold power to account and ensure the free flow of information and opinions. Political or state pressure can weaken this freedom and limit access to information. Attacks on journalists and impunity for such crimes often coincide with a broader decline in rule of law standards. The entry into force of the EMFA and implementation of anti-SLAPP legislation are important milestones in this regard, as they provide enhanced safeguards for media independence and protection against abusive litigation. Media freedom organisations have expressed growing concerns about the state of media freedom, although the overall situation in the EU remains broadly positive[68].

Monitoring risks to media freedom and pluralism

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[68] While Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index registered its lowest average global score since its inception, the European Union-Balkans region retains first place globally, and eight EU Member States occupy eight of the top ten positions in the Index. See also Europe Press Freedom Report - On the Tipping Point: Press Freedom 2025.

The 2026 Media Pluralism Monitor[69] highlights persistent as well as relatively new risks to media pluralism across the EU, especially due to concentration of media ownership, the growing market share of digital intermediaries, and the evolving disruption of editorial media in the AI era. The Monitor finds that editorial independence remains fragile in some countries, while the media sector continues to struggle economically, with declining numbers of journalists, poor working conditions in some countries, and weak business models despite attempts at innovation. In several countries, public service media continue to face political interference in management appointments and financing.

Strengthening the independent functioning of media regulators

Independent national media regulators are essential for protecting media pluralism and must act impartially and transparently. All Member States have legislation setting out their powers and safeguards for independence. The Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) and the EMFA require regulators to be independent from the government, impartial, transparent and accountable, with adequate resources, clear procedures for appointment and dismissal, and effective appeal mechanisms.

The tasks, competences and resources of several national media regulators have been or are being expanded and increased, also in view of complying with the EMFA and the EU Digital Services Act (DSA). Since the publication of the 2025 Rule of Law report, in Cyprus, Denmark, Italy, Sweden and Portugal, the regulators' financial resources have increased, their financial situation has stabilised, or their financial autonomy has been reinforced. In Ireland, Latvia and Greece, there have been staff increases. Regulators have been given new monitoring or oversight tasks in Denmark, Croatia, Ireland, Lithuania, Germany, Greece, Finland, France, Sweden, Belgium, Austria and Malta. In June, Hungary introduced a reform impacting various aspects of the regulator's governance, financing and supervisory role. Reforms are ongoing in Spain, Luxembourg, Poland and Czechia. In Slovakia, while the adopted amendments to the Act on Media Services have expanded the competences of the national media regulator, concerns have been raised about the impact of some new pending amendments on the regulator's independence.

In North Macedonia, appointments of the new members of the Council of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services were made, while concerns regarding the financial independence of the Agency persist.

Increasing the transparency of media ownership

The public availability of information concerning the media ownership structure enables users to make informed judgements about the information they consume, especially when ownership entails control of, or significant influence over, editorial lines and decision-making.

In France, a preliminary national media ownership database set up by the regulator awaits the adoption of implementing rules. In Malta, newly adopted legislation has tasked the regulator with the development and maintenance of a media ownership database. In Slovenia, recent legislation provides for creating a new ownership database. Reforms are in the pipeline or are awaiting adoption in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Lithuania, Spain and Portugal. Pending the adoption of draft legislation, significant challenges regarding transparency of media ownership persist in Czechia.

In Montenegro, transparency of media ownership has improved alongside increasing concerns about the influence of media outlets owned by companies based in Serbia. In Serbia, against a

[69] Implemented by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.

backdrop of further media market concentration, political and economic influence on the media, including on editorial policy, is a cause of serious concern.

Safeguarding media from political pressure and undue influence

Media independence can be undermined in several ways, including by undue political influence and pressure. Such situations are covered by the EMFA, which provides a framework to safeguard the editorial independence, to limit the excesses of political interference and to create a transparent framework for the allocation of state resources to the media. Safeguards against politicisation of the public service media and transparent rules on the allocation of state advertising are two fundamental elements of this framework.

Ensuring transparent and fair state advertising

State advertising includes any use of the state budget, by public authorities or entities at all levels, for advertising and campaigns. If such resources are allocated non-transparently or unfairly, they can be used as levers for political influence. The EMFA addresses this issue by setting out requirements for allocation criteria and procedures and mandates that public authorities disclose the amounts paid annually to media service providers[70].

Since the publication of the 2025 Report, legislation to specifically address the issue of state advertising has been adopted in Croatia, Slovakia, Greece, Malta, Latvia and Slovenia. Draft legislation to regulate the matter is in preparation in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Spain, Czechia and Portugal. Transparency and fairness in the distribution of state advertising to media outlets has not yet been addressed in Hungary. In Romania, certain practices related to the financing of private media by political parties and state authorities remains an issue.

Efforts are ongoing in North Macedonia to modernise the Public Service Broadcaster, although challenges persist due to limited administrative autonomy and irregular funding. In Albania, shortcomings in terms of fair allocation of state advertising and other state resources remain.

Safeguarding the independent functioning of public service media

Each Member State is responsible for funding its public service media in full respect of EU trade and competition rules[71]. When functioning optimally, public service media providers ensure that citizens and businesses have access to diverse content offering, including quality information. Consequently, the EMFA establishes a set of safeguards for the independent functioning of public service media providers, namely adequate, sustainable and predictable financial resources and transparency in the appointing and dismissal of management.

Various and diverse reforms aimed at strengthening the independence of national public service broadcasters have been adopted or put in place in many countries. This is the case in Sweden and Finland. Denmark has introduced a new model for the appointment of the board of public radio. Germany and Greece have adopted reforms aimed at modernising the structure of public service broadcasters. Malta has introduced new safeguards in relation to appointment of the CEO of the public broadcaster.

Reforms on the governance of public service broadcasters are ongoing or are in various stages of preparation in Bulgaria, Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Slovenia, Estonia, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Portugal and Cyprus. In June, Hungary adopted a wide-ranging reform. Concerns by stakeholders persist in Slovakia with regard to the law of July 2024 dissolving the public

[70] The EMFA and the Political Advertising Regulation 2024/900 operate in parallel. The Political Advertising Regulation increases the transparency of political advertising and strengthens data protection rights when political advertising within its scope is targeted or delivered, including by state authorities.

[71] Protocol No 29 of the Treaties on the system of public broadcasting in the Member States.

broadcaster and establishing a new entity, while proposals to re-open the governance and financing of public service media has raised concerns in Czechia and Lithuania. Initial steps have been taken on the reform to enhance the independent governance and editorial independence of public service media in Romania.

Among enlargement countries, concerns regarding the independence or editorial autonomy of the public broadcaster have persisted in Serbia and in Albania.

Ensuring access to information

The right to access information from public authorities enables journalists to carry out their investigative work. It is also an important transparency and accountability tool for civil society and citizens. Legislative reforms have been adopted in Lithuania and entered into force in Austria and Estonia, while reforms establishing new requirements for access to document requests have raised stakeholders concerns in Greece. The access to documents regime is under review in Finland, Denmark, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

In Montenegro, new amendments to the Law on Free Access to Information were adopted in December 2025, however challenges persist in its enforcement.

Improving the safety and protection of journalists and addressing legal threats and abusive court proceedings against public participation

Intimidation and pressure undermine the environment in which journalists work, and ensuring their protection and safety is essential to safeguarding media freedom and a free and pluralistic media environment. With a view to improve the safety of journalists, several Member States and enlargement countries have adopted dedicated Action Plans and have taken steps to set up dedicated support structures[72]. For example, Denmark, Croatia, and Latvia have adopted Action Plans, while Luxembourg and Portugal have taken measures under previously adopted action plans.

Germany and Greece have increased the capacity of or have set up training programmes for law enforcement. Bulgaria has adopted guidelines for the handling of online harassment cases targeting journalists. Draft amendments have been tabled in Italy to introduce specific aggravating circumstances for crimes against professional journalists. Reforms to improve the protection of journalists remain pending in Malta and Slovakia.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) are a particular form of harassment which aim at creating a chilling effect on media freedom and freedom of expression. Since the publication of the 2025 Report, the requirements set in EU legislation and the dedicated Recommendation issued by the Commission on SLAPP have helped stimulate further steps in national legislation, as anti-SLAPP legislation has been adopted in Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, France, Poland, Sweden and Slovenia. Several other Member States have legislation is in various stages of preparation.

In Albania, cases of verbal and physical threats, smear campaign and the use of SLAPPs targeting journalists continued. In Montenegro, the authorities continue efforts to apply a zero-tolerance policy to violence against journalists, while isolated incidents of attacks occur. In Serbia, the safety of journalists has further deteriorated, with an increase in cases of physical attacks, threats, intimidation and hate speech.

3.4 Other institutional issues linked to checks and balances

[72] In line with the Commission Recommendation of 16 September 2021 on the safety of journalists and other media professionals.

A robust system of checks and balances is a cornerstone of the rule of law. By ensuring that public authorities remain subject to effective oversight and accountability, it helps prevent the concentration of power, safeguards fundamental rights and strengthens democratic resilience.

Constitutional reforms and debates impacting on institutional checks and balances

In some Member States, steps to reinforce the constitutional system of checks and balances are ongoing. In the Netherlands the Government has announced proposals to make it possible for judges to review laws against "classic" fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution. In Sweden, work is progressing on legislative amendments to the Constitution, which is aimed at providing a framework to better deal with serious crises.

Even when a Member State exercises its national competence to amend its constitution, it cannot circumvent the need to comply with fundamental principles of Union law. In Slovakia, certain amendments to the Constitution adopted in September 2025 are raising concerns related to the principle of primacy of EU law[73].

The inclusiveness, quality and transparency of the law-making process

The rule of law requires laws to be enacted through a transparent, accountable, democratic, and pluralistic process that supports legal certainty and legislative quality[74]. Several Member States are taking steps to improve the consultation of stakeholders in the legislative process. In Cyprus, substantial steps have been taken to enhance public participation in decision-making, including with the adoption of the bill on Citizens' Legislative Initiative, empowering citizens to propose policies through a formal mechanism. In Portugal, steps are being taken to improve the transparency of law-making, as new measures are being implemented by Parliament and the Government's work on a 'legislative footprint' system continues. In Romania, some further progress has been made to address the frequent use of government emergency ordinances and effective public consultations, while a number of shortcomings remain in practice. In Greece, the quality of the legislative process shows improvements, yet challenges persist, including frequent legislative changes.

However, in other Member States, shortcomings remain about the involvement of stakeholders in the legislative process and have shown deterioration in certain instances. This includes concerns over the excessive use of emergency procedures. In Bulgaria, problems over the practical implementation of rules for law-making continue, and concerns regarding the quality of the legislative process persist. In Czechia, accelerated legislative procedures, circumvention of public engagement and inter-department review continue to impact the quality of the legislative process, with stakeholders raising concerns with regard to the circumvention of public participation in acts of significant importance. In Slovakia, the lawmaking process continues to raise concerns due to insufficient public consultation and stakeholder involvement and frequent use of fast-track procedures, including for high impact legislation.

In Albania, concerns remain regarding the quality of the legislative process, including the consistent application of evidence-based policymaking and the effectiveness of public consultations. In North Macedonia, the Parliament continued implementing its Rules of Procedure and improved its efficiency, while a significant number of laws were adopted under a shortened legislative procedure. Efforts were made to address shortcomings concerning

[73] On 21 November 2025, the Commission opened an infringement procedure by sending a letter of formal notice to Slovakia for breaching fundamental principles of EU law, particularly the principles of primacy, autonomy, effectiveness and uniform application of EU law.

[74] The updated Rule of Law Checklist of the Venice Commission defines standards related to law-making procedures, emphasising for example that expedited legislative procedures should be confined to exceptional situations or circumstances.

evidence-based policy planning. In Serbia, the legal framework for public consultations and its enforcement has deteriorated, with lowered standards and a decrease in the number of consultations.

Significant developments on Supreme and Constitutional Courts in the checks and balances

As key actors within systems of checks and balances, constitutional jurisdictions contribute significantly to the effective application of EU law and the integrity of the EU legal order. While Member States retain competence over the establishment, composition, and functioning of these bodies, they must exercise that competence in accordance with EU law and European values. Constitutional Courts also often deliver rulings that have important implications for the overall system of checks and balances.

In Latvia, considerations are ongoing regarding possible amendments to the Law on the Constitutional Court, including measures to further safeguard the independence of judges of the Constitutional Court.

As regards enlargement countries, in Montenegro, two judges were appointed to the Constitutional Court, improving its functioning and efficiency, while full composition remains to be achieved.

Ombudspersons, National Human Rights Institutions and other independent authorities

By providing independent oversight and accountability, national human rights institutions (NHRIs)[75], Ombudspersons[76], equality bodies[77] and other independent authorities play a crucial role in upholding the rule of law and strengthening the system of checks and balances. In some Member States, efforts are ongoing to strengthen these institutions. In Czechia**,** implementation of the amendments to the Ombudsman Act establishing a National Human Rights Institution is ongoing. In Croatia, Governmental authorities further improved the implementation of recommendations by the Ombudsperson.

In other Member States, NHRIs, Ombudspersons and other independent institutions continued to face challenges, including as regards resources. In Portugal, a new Ombudsperson was appointed in July 2026, following delays in the appointment procedure in the Parliament. In Estonia, some independent authorities have received more tasks, while additional resources have not been allocated.

In Albania, a new Ombudsperson and a new Commissioner for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) were appointed, with both institutions facing persisting shortages in human and financial resources. In North Macedonia, the Parliament made several appointments to independent institutions, although concerns remain about merit-based selection procedures. In Serbia, most independent bodies working in the area of fundamental rights continued to face resource constraints and the follow-up to their recommendations remained inconsistent.

Three Member States have not yet established a national human rights institution accredited according to the UN Paris Principles. In Romania, a final decision is pending regarding the accreditation of National Human Rights Institutions. In Italy and Malta, only initial preparatory steps were made towards the establishment of a National Human Rights Institution.

Implementation of judgments by the European Court of Human Rights and national courts

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[75] The UN Paris Principles, endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 1993 (Resolution A/RES/48/134), set out the main criteria that NHRIs are required to meet. NHRIs are periodically accredited before the Subcommittee on Accreditation of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions.

[76] See the Venice Commission Principles for Ombudspersons.

[77] Directive 2024/1500 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Directive 2024/1499.

Since 2022, the country chapters have included information on the implementation of leading judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), an important indicator of the functioning of the rule of law. Results vary between Member States. Across the EU, around 43.9% of leading judgments of the ECtHR relating to the Member States from the last ten years are yet to be implemented, a slight improvement compared to last year[78].

In Belgium, compliance by public authorities with final rulings of national courts and the European Court of Human Rights remains an issue. In Greece, reforms seek to target the administration's delays in enforcing final judgments. In Cyprus, efforts to remove legal obstacles in enforcing court judgments have not advanced.

Enabling framework for civil society

Civil society organisations and human rights defenders are essential to the protection and promotion of EU values. They act as watchdogs, drawing attention to threats to the rule of law, fostering democratic principles, and helping to ensure accountability of those exercising public power. The Commission is supporting Member State efforts to promote a thriving civic space as part of the implementation of the EU Strategy for Civil Society and the 2023 Recommendation on civic participation.

An enabling and supportive framework for civil society exists in many Member States. Efforts to further strengthen the environment for civil society organisations continue in several Member States, though the degree of progress varies. In Estonia, the Strategic partnership funding programme for civil society organisations entered into force, which will allow the important source of funding for civil society organisations to continue and support the open civic space. Public authorities in France continue to support civil society organisations, including through substantial public funding, although some organisations continue to face challenges to their operations.

In certain Member States, measures affecting civil society organisations have been withdrawn or repealed. In the Netherlands, the Senate rejected the Law on transparency of CSOs, which had been criticised by CSOs, charitable organisations and the NIHR. In Hungary, a constitutional amendment and a law abolishing Sovereignty Protection Office have been adopted and the draft law 'on transparency in public life', tabled on 13 May 2025, is no longer pending before the National Assembly.

A thriving civic space requires an enabling legal, administrative, and regulatory environment, where CSOs are supported and empowered, and where they are protected and can operate freely. Restrictions on civil society actors, including obstacles to funding, peaceful assembly, and burdensome reporting requirements were noted by civil society organisations in a number of Member States[79]. In Czechia, public funding for this sector has been considerably reduced. In Germany, no steps were taken to adapt the tax-exempt status of non-profit organisations, and civil society organisations continue to face challenges as regards their operation and access to funding. In Italy, as regards new legislation aimed at strengthening internal security, stakeholders raised concerns about developments related to restrictions to the right to protest and their possible impact on civic space and the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms.

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78 In 2025, the figure was 45.7%. European Implementation Network (2026), written input.

79 Joint Civil Society Contribution on Civic Space to the 2026 Annual Rule of Law Report, p. 2. In 2025, the Civicus monitor downgraded three EU Member States from 'narrowed' to 'obstructed' and one of the enlargement countries covered in the Report from 'obstructed' to 'repressed'. Civicus scores the state of civic freedoms on a scale of 0 to 100 and rates countries based on their score according to a five-category scale defined as: open (81-100), narrowed (61-80), obstructed (40-60), repressed (21-39) and closed (0-20).

While the Sovereignty Protection Office has been abolished in Hungary, some obstacles hindering the work of independent civil society organisations have yet to be removed.

Negative narratives, physical and verbal attacks and political pressure have continued to be reported as a particular challenge in some Member States. In Romania, CSOs report increasing restrictions to their work. In Slovakia, while amendments to the NGO law which were deemed to create additional administrative burden on civil society organisations were declared unconstitutional, the civil society environment continues to face pressure.

In Albania, civil society organisations operate freely but continue to face challenges, such as discreditation, limited transparency in policymaking and financial sustainability constraints. In Montenegro, the authorities have committed to align national legislation with the EU acquis within the established framework for inclusive legislative processes, while challenges persist in legislative planning and effectiveness of public consultations. In North Macedonia, the Government continued its efforts to strengthen cooperation with civil society organisations, while challenges related to funding for CSOs remain. In Serbia**,** civil society organisations have been subject to increasing pressure, attacks and intimidation, including by high-level officials, and reported cases of excessive use of force by the police against protesters have not led to convictions so far.

National checks and balances in the use of intrusive surveillance software (“spyware”)

Any attempt to illegally access the data of citizens, including journalists, civil society representatives and political opponents is unacceptable and it is the responsibility of national authorities to carry out the necessary investigations. However, even where the use of spyware is legally carried out in accordance with national security requirements and falls outside the scope of EU law, robust national safeguards remain essential to prevent abuse and ensure accountability. Fundamental rights, including data protection, freedom of expression, the freedom to receive and impart information, and the rights to an effective remedy and a fair trial need to be respected. Where spyware is deployed for law enforcement purposes, or deployed by private entities for national security purposes, EU data protection legislation provides a comprehensive framework of safeguards and oversight[80]. When EU data protection law is not applicable, the European Convention on Human Rights remains applicable.

The 2026 Rule of Law Report continues to report on developments in this area, with allegations of illegal spyware use placing national checks and balances in the spotlight. In Greece, judicial scrutiny of certain aspects of the use of spyware continues. In Italy, investigations continue on the Paragon spyware case, including to identify those responsible for the use of the spyware against Italian journalists, after the prosecutors' offices found no evidence of operations by the Italian intelligence services targeting journalists through the spyware. In Hungary, the absence of procedural safeguards and effective oversight in the event of secret surveillance measures remains a concern.

4.5 Single Market aspects across the four pillars

Effective justice systems, strong safeguards against corruption, legal certainty, and inclusive, evidence-based legislation are essential foundations for a thriving economy. They influence the business environment and investment choices, underpin the smooth operation of the Single Market, and support sustainable economic growth and job creation. The 2026 Rule of Law Report continues the assessment of developments regarding the Single Market dimension initiated in the 2025 Rule of Law Report, drawing further on the inputs from business

[80] Venice Commission’s 2024 Report on a rule of law and human rights compliant regulation of spyware.

stakeholders and examining in more depth issues such as the work of independent regulatory authorities.

Drawing on Eurobarometer data also presented in the 2026 EU Justice Scoreboard, each country chapter reports on companies' perceptions of the independence of public procurement and national competition authorities. The independence of these authorities is crucial to the functioning of the Single Market. As regards first-instance public procurement review bodies, the level of perceived independence is highest for Finland, Sweden and Luxembourg, and lowest for Bulgaria**,** Greece and Hungary. For national competition authorities, the level of perceived independence is highest for Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Ireland, and lowest for Bulgaria, Greece and Hungary.

As for the perceived effectiveness of investment protection, over two thirds of the surveyed companies expressed confidence in Denmark, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden, while less than a third expressed confidence in Greece and Poland. More than two thirds of companies in Albania express confidence in investment protection, more than half in Montenegro and Serbia, and less than half in North Macedonia.

As regards the ***functioning of the justice system***, an important consideration from a Single Market perspective is the availability of specialised courts and judges to deal with commercial disputes, including high-value cross-border cases. As the 2026 EU Justice Scoreboard shows[81], in four Member States there are only specialised commercial courts, in nine Member States there are only specialised commercial chambers within the ordinary courts, and in other four Member States there are only specialised judges within ordinary courts. In the remaining 10 Member States there are combinations of the previous three categories, and in one of them all three possibilities exist, although on different levels and for different cases. In Germany, specialised commercial courts and chambers have become operational in over half of the *Länder*. In Cyprus, the prolonged delay in making the Commercial Court operational continues to raise serious concerns among the business community.

Businesses benefit from the availability of alternative dispute resolution, not least because costs of litigation can present an obstacle to them. In Italy, business stakeholders highlight the potential of mediation to contribute effectively to reducing litigation and call for further measures to promote its uptake. The court fee system at ordinary courts in Austria continues to present challenges for access to justice, including for businesses, notably due to the absence of a cap on court fees.

Finally, shortcomings in the efficiency of justice systems can undermine the business environment, as investors and companies require timely dispute resolution to make informed investment decisions. In Malta, delays and inadequate efficiency of courts are a concern for business confidence. While the number of court employees has increased, stakeholders acknowledge shortages of judicial and administrative staff as a factor of delays in courts, potentially also affecting legal certainty and economic activities. In Italy, stakeholders, including business representatives, acknowledge progress made with recruiting magistrates and administrative court staff e.g. through the launch of competitions to permanently recruit court clerks, but concur that continued efforts to fill vacancies are needed to improve the efficiency of justice. In Portugal, stakeholders continue to flag efficiency shortcomings in the justice system, especially the deteriorating efficiency of Administrative and Tax Courts, as a long-term obstacle to investment and the business environment.

Corruption distorts competition and undermines trust in public authorities, thereby affecting the proper functioning of the Single Market and conditions to do business. This is particularly

[81] Figure 65, 2026 EU Justice Scoreboard.

relevant in public procurement, where several Member States are strengthening transparency and integrity measures. Greece introduced a system of training and certification for civil servants handling public procurement, hired additional staff for the public procurement supervisory authority and established a register of public procurement professionals, aiming to strengthen the professionalisation, integrity and accountability of officials involved in public procurement. In Cyprus, a new e-procurement platform became operational and provides end-to-end visibility and supports audit authorities in their work, while significantly strengthening transparency and accountability. In Slovenia, the Ministry of Public Administration continued to implement two multi-year action plans on public procurement, which aim to increase transparency, professionalisation and analytics and upgrade e-procurement capabilities. In Austria, Ministries responsible for public procurement introduced organisational measures as well as internal audits to address corruption risks.

Clear and transparent rules governing the ***media*** landscape are crucial both for protecting the integrity of our democratic space and for supporting the Single Market through fair competition for media service providers. The media sector faces economic challenges that reflect a wider global trend. In that regard, transparency of media ownership, the fair and transparent allocation of state advertising to media entities, and transparent funding schemes to support the media industry all play an important role. The EMFA is anchored in the fact that independent media services play a unique role in the Single Market, representing a fast-changing and economically important sector while simultaneously acting as public watchdogs. In this context, several new developments have further intensified these challenges. Over recent years, structural challenges have emerged in the media sector that may impact media freedom and pluralism globally. These include reliance on digital platforms, algorithm-driven distribution, declining and uneven advertising revenues, foreign information manipulation and interference, and the impact of AI. The EMFA introduces annual monitoring of risks and developments in the media market, including several of these challenges. Member States' alignment with the EMFA is fundamental for ensuring the growth and sustainability of this crucial sector. In Greece, financial support measures notably for local and regional media were launched by the Government and a long-term State aid plan is being implemented to support the sector's digital transition. In Austria, detailed guidelines regarding the interpretation and application of the public procurement requirements for the fair distribution of state advertising were adopted. In Ireland, a new bill will provide the Media Fund – which has supported three journalism schemes and a digital transformation scheme – with a legislative framework.

Effective **checks and balances** promote legal certainty and regulatory predictability, enabling businesses to operate in a stable and foreseeable environment. In France, a law was adopted to simplify the life of businesses following a broad consultation. In Italy, business stakeholders welcomed a law adopted in November 2025 which aimed to achieve regulatory simplification. In Romania, legislative unpredictability, driven by frequent amendments to legislation and a large number of draft laws pending in Parliament, remain primary concerns for businesses and CSOs. In Malta, frequent legislative changes and ad hoc executive measures continue to challenge legal stability and predictability, which can affect the business environment. In Cyprus, businesses continue to see challenges in the quality of law-making and the need to streamline legislation.

4. CONCLUSION

This year's Rule of Law Report confirms that the annual rule of law cycle continues to provide an important stimulus for reform across Member States, to the benefit of citizens and businesses alike. Overall, developments point to a broadly positive trajectory, with marked improvements and important reforms completed or underway in all the four areas monitored, even if the picture remains uneven across Member States and policy areas, with some challenges persisting. Engagement with the process remains strong, as reflected in the substantial number of 2025 recommendations where there is progress.

Looking ahead, the Commission believes that the Report and its recommendations should play an important role under the next long-term EU budget, helping ensure that strong safeguards are in place for the protection of the Union's financial interests and underpin investments and reforms that help promote and strengthen the rule of law. Equal and fair treatment of Member States, a clear and consistent application of EU standards, and a dialogue-based process are the underlying principles of the Rule of Law Report that will continue to guide the Commission's work with Member States.

The Commission will continue to stay closely engaged with the European Parliament and the Council in the annual cycle. It invites the Council and the European Parliament to continue general and country-specific debates based on the Report. The Commission remains committed to supporting Member States in the implementation of this year's recommendations and to working together with all relevant stakeholders to safeguard and strengthen the Union's core values.