

Human Rights Commissioner: 2020 Activity Report



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News

On 21 April 2021, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, *Dunja Mijatović*, published her [2020 annual activity report](#), which covers the main problems, challenges, and opportunities European countries are facing in the field of human rights. In the current global context, the Commissioner especially cautions that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating long-standing problems. The activity report addresses issues that are illustrative of the negative trends currently being experienced in Europe, in particular. These issues concern public health systems, mental health care, women's rights, and the increasing pressure on human rights defenders.

The report stresses that the health crisis has aggravated long-neglected problems and inequalities in the public health system. The Commissioner therefore recommends building more inclusive and resilient health systems and making vaccines, testing, and treatment accessible to all. Mental health care also urgently needs to be reformed by accelerating the shift from institutional and coercive systems to community-based and recovery-oriented models.

In terms of women's rights, the pandemic has highlighted the persistence of violence against women and the negative impact of ultra-conservative movements on gender equality and on women's access to sexual and reproductive health care. The Commissioner therefore calls on the Member States to ratify and implement the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence ("the Istanbul Convention"). They also need to address growing online violence against women, including sexist online hate speech, which has become increasingly prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Commissioner also voiced concern over increasing pressure on human rights defenders, in particular those working to combat Afrophobia, to protect the environment or to defend the rights of LGBTI persons. The activity report specifically highlights the serious forms of racism and racial discrimination experienced by people of African descent.

Disregard for the human rights of migrants and refugees, particularly in Italy, Greece, and the Western Balkans, is another issue of concern - one which causes thousands of avoidable deaths every year. *Mijatović* emphasised that the crisis should not justify the cessation of rescue activities and pointed to Portugal as a positive example of a country that has taken steps to ensure that all migrants have access to social, health, and other rights during an epidemic.

As regards media freedom and the safety of journalists, the Commissioner paid particular attention to freedom of expression during COVID-19 and to so-called SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation), which aim to intimidate and silence critics.

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ISSN: 1862-6947

<https://eucriM.eu>



The protection and promotion of children's rights remained high on the Commissioner's agenda. The report voices serious concerns about the potential long-term adverse effects of the pandemic on children's health, safety, education, living conditions, and on the widening of existing inequalities. *Mijatović* therefore calls on Member States to ensure that the best interests of the child are paramount in all measures taken related to COVID-19.

The report also covers the Commissioner's additional activities in areas such as artificial intelligence, the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law, data protection, and the protection of the environment.

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