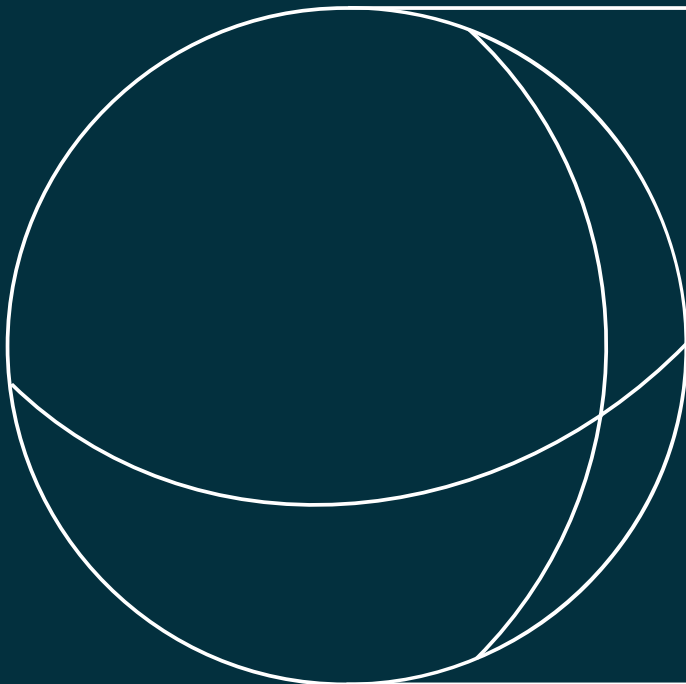


research report

The UN Human Rights Council: Challenges and Opportunities for Reform

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Abstract

This report examines the United Nations Human Rights Council at a critical juncture. Through stakeholder interviews, a literature review, and analysis of recent developments, it identifies four interconnected challenges facing the Human Rights Council: the non-enforceability of human rights norms, rights-violating member states, shrinking civil society access, and severe resource constraints. These challenges are exacerbated by growing polarisation between Western and non-Western countries, which is readily exploited by states seeking to reshape the global human rights order, such as China and Russia. The United States' inconsistent engagement has created additional instability, highlighting the increasing need for principled leadership from the European Union. While comprehensive reform appears unlikely given current geopolitical tensions, this report identifies targeted improvements to enhance the Human Rights Council's robustness, effectiveness, and democratic character, including stronger membership criteria, protected civil society participation, and adequate funding for Special Procedures.

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Introduction

This report examines the United Nations (UN) human rights system: particularly the Human Rights Council (HRC), the UN's primary body for promoting and protecting human rights globally (Freedman 2011), and secondarily the Special Procedures (SPs) – independent experts with mandates to report and advise on human rights from thematic or country-specific perspectives – that support the HRC's work.

The HRC stands at a critical juncture, facing significant challenges that threaten to undermine its effectiveness and legitimacy. Through stakeholder interviews, a literature review, and analysis of recent developments, this report identifies four interconnected challenges: the non-enforceability of human rights norms, the presence of rights-violating member states on the HRC, shrinking civil society access, and severe resource constraints. These challenges are exacerbated by growing polarisation between Western and non-Western states – a context that is readily exploited by countries seeking to reshape the global human rights order, such as China and Russia. Inconsistent engagement on the part of the United States (US) has created additional instability, highlighting the increasing need for principled leadership from the European Union (EU).

This report addresses a central research question: How can the HRC be reformed to enhance its institutional robustness, effectiveness, and democratic character? Robustness is defined as the institution's capacity to withstand existential challenges and persist over time while maintaining core functions (Choi et al. 2024). This depends primarily on institutional stability, including financial and human resources. Effectiveness refers to the institution's ability to achieve its established goals, notably responding to human rights challenges (Choi et al. 2024). This encompasses three distinct dimensions: policy outputs, outcomes (or state compliance), and

impact. Democracy in turn refers to the accountability and transparency with which the HRC and its SPs conduct their work, as well as the extent and quality of participation by state and non-state actors.

The EU has significant potential to provide leadership in strengthening the global human rights architecture.

Our findings indicate that comprehensive reform appears unlikely given current geopolitical tensions. However, the report identifies targeted improvements to strengthen the HRC, including more rigorous

membership criteria, protected civil society participation, and adequate funding for the SPs. Among the three dimensions we analyse, institutional robustness faces the most severe challenges due to chronic underfunding and increasing political polarisation, making it an area where very little progress can be expected in the short term. Effectiveness remains deeply compromised by both structural limitations and contested priorities among member states. And while the HRC maintains reasonable levels of democracy through transparency and consultative processes, the growing restrictions on civil society participation also threaten this dimension. Our mapping of key stakeholders' positions on HRC reform allows us to

conclude that the EU, despite some inconsistencies in its approach, has significant potential to provide leadership in strengthening the global human rights architecture, particularly as the US reduces its engagement.

Following this introduction, the report proceeds in four stages. First, we identify critical challenges facing the HRC and its mechanisms. Second, we map major international actors' positions on reform, revealing states' divergent priorities. Third, we assess past reform efforts and unexploited potential for improvement. Finally, we analyse the EU's role and propose steps it can take to strengthen the international human rights system.

What's at Stake: Four Critical Challenges

The HRC was established in 2006 by UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 60/251 (UN General Assembly 2006) to examine thematic human rights issues and country situations and to respond to human rights violations. It holds at least three regular sessions annually at the UN Office in Geneva. The SPs are unpaid experts elected for three-year, renewable terms. They have been referred to as the “crown jewels” of the UN human rights system (UN 2006; Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.-d).

When the HRC was established, observers maintained “measured optimism” about its prospects (Lebovic and Voeten 2006). But the early years were marked by a persistent Global North-South divide and tensions between states – notably around the Israel-Palestine conflict. The tendency to praise allies and criticise adversaries regardless of their human rights records undermined the principle that decision-making should be driven by human rights considerations rather than political interests or foreign policy goals. Votes in the HRC were frequently traded between allies, with states supporting each other’s positions on contentious or politically sensitive issues. This widespread tit-for-tat behaviour resulted in the politicisation of human rights. By the early 2010s, disappointment had started to set in (Freedman 2011; Ramcharan 2015). Today, the HRC faces four critical challenges: the non-enforceability of human rights norms, the presence of rights-violating member states on the HRC, shrinking civil society access, and severe resource constraints.

Non-Enforceability and Compliance

A fundamental challenge that has hampered the HRC since its inception is its reliance on norms that are not directly enforceable (Dukalskis 2023).

Unlike the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), it lacks leverage over non-compliant states – other than public shaming – and is thus highly dependent on voluntary compliance.

The UN Human Rights Council’s

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In terms of outputs, the HRC has been quite productive: since its creation, it has adopted 1,481 resolutions and established 60 SP mandates (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.-d). As of June 2023, the SPs had made 3,915 total communications and visited 172 member states (UN General Assembly

2024). Nevertheless, the HRC’s ability to make decisions and to produce them in a responsive and timely manner depends heavily on political support from major states. Their opposition can prevent discussion on crucial issues (as was the case with China’s human rights violations in Xinjiang) or lead to the premature termination of SPs (as occurred with the mandate on Ethiopia; see Amnesty International 2023).

The outlook is less positive when it comes to outcomes. Evidence indicates that even when the HRC responds to human rights crises with ambitious resolutions, state compliance is uneven. Further, recommendations are sometimes entirely ignored by states that increasingly reject what they perceive as intervention in their internal affairs (Ullmann and von Staden 2024). The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism – essentially a peer-review process based on recommendations that the state under review can choose to accept or merely note – is weakened by states repeating these recommendations year after year with little improvement. This process often devolves into a ‘self-congratulatory exercise’ as repressive states claim non-existent human rights successes and receive uncritical support from their allies (Smith 2010; Charlesworth and Larking 2015; Interview 3).

The non-enforceability of human rights norms ultimately emboldens violators and undermines the credibility of human rights bodies.

The SPs also largely depend on voluntary state cooperation, and states frequently ignore their recommendations (UN 2006). One SP mandate-holder described their capacity – both in terms of time and financial and human resources – as too limited to adequately address the problems they face. They also pointed out that the HRC “forgets about us” and lets SP mandate-holders “write reports that nobody reads” (Interview 14). The non-enforceability of human rights norms ultimately emboldens violators and undermines the credibility of human rights bodies.

Rights-Violating States and HRC Membership

States with poor rights records that have held HRC seats include China, Cuba, Eritrea, and the United Arab Emirates. These members use their positions to block scrutiny of their violations and to protect allies, weakening the HRC’s credibility (Freedman 2011; Tiwana and Lipott 2024). They also prevent HRC action in order to avoid accountability, as seen in 2021, when the Group of Eminent Experts’ mandate on Yemen was terminated (Interview 5). Saudi Arabia employed incentives and threats to win the vote that ended the mandate, resulting in the loss of war-crime documentation (Kirchgaessner, 2021). When the HRC pays insufficient attention to human rights and humanitarian situations (Interview 4), both its effectiveness and its robustness suffer.

This situation is exacerbated by the common practice of ‘closed slates’, or non-competitive elections. Although all UN member states participate in electing HRC members, each of the five UN regional blocs receives a fixed number of seats. Most elections are not competitive, with blocs nominating only as many candidates as there are available seats. Consequently, HRC members are often elected unopposed, without scrutiny of their human rights records (Interview 2). This happens despite Resolution 60/251’s stipulation that states responsible for widespread human rights violations and attacks on civil society are not qualified for membership (Interview 15; UN General Assembly 2006). Political opportunism is also rife, with some states using the HRC to castigate their adversaries (Tiwana 2014).

When competition does occur, powerful and influential states can sometimes lose, as demonstrated by Saudi Arabia's defeat in October 2024 (Interview 4). Striving for a fit-for-purpose HRC, the International Service for Human Rights uses scorecards to assess candidates based on their cooperation with human rights mechanisms and engagement with civil society, UN treaty bodies, and SPs. It also holds an annual pledging event with Amnesty International at which states present their candidacies, make public commitments as potential HRC members, and receive direct feedback from civil society (CIVICUS Lens 2024; International Service for Human Rights 2024).

Civil Society Access

The HRC fares quite well with regard to certain indicators of democracy: for instance, it maintains relative transparency by means of accessible information and numerous public communications. Yet it presents deficits in terms of inclusiveness. We see this in the under-representation of certain categories of states, notably smaller countries and island nations, and particularly in the limited access enjoyed by non-state actors – especially civil society organisations (CSOs) – despite the fact that they are heavily invested in the HRC's work.

Despite being the “guardian of the entire system” of human rights and crucial for the system's robustness and effectiveness (Interview 7), civil society faces numerous restrictions when it comes to participating in HRC processes (Interview 3). CSO participation enhances the HRC's democratic character and plays a vital role in spreading human rights norms, strengthening implementation, and ensuring impact. The UN's human rights machinery would not function without the information gathered and offered by civil society (Nicolini and Pyneendy 2023).

Civil society faces numerous restrictions to participating in UN Human Rights Council processes.

Accredited CSOs can attend and observe most HRC proceedings, submit written statements, make oral interventions, participate in debates and discussions, and organise parallel events on UN premises. However,

obtaining accreditation requires consultative status from the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and repressive states may block such accreditation for organisations working on sensitive issues. One notable example is the International Dalit Solidarity Network, which combats caste-based discrimination. India blocked its ECOSOC application for 15 years before it was finally approved in December 2022, requiring the network to provide 105 responses to questions intended to delay approval. UN officials and others criticised this as illegitimate obstruction and potential reprisal against a human rights organisation (International Dalit Solidarity Network 2022). More recently, China has stalled ECOSOC accreditation for two CSOs due to their association with CIVICUS (Interview 15).

Repressive states also employ more direct intimidation tactics, using reprisals against their own nationals who cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms in order to discourage others from doing so (Interview 8). In a single session in 2024, 150 human rights defenders were reportedly affected by reprisals (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2024b).

Participating organisations face strict time constraints: 90 seconds for General Debates and Interactive Dialogues, and two minutes for Panel Discussions and UPR Outcomes (International Service for Human Rights 2025). Only a limited number of CSOs can speak, and human rights organisations increasingly find their allocated time consumed by state-funded entities known as ‘government-organised NGOs’ (GONGOs), which routinely praise their government sponsors and repeat official talking points (Interview 3).

The COVID-19 pandemic enabled some progress through virtual participation but revealed significant disparities in access. Technical barriers proved substantial, particularly for those who had unreliable internet access or were facing state-imposed restrictions. CSOs struggled with video statements and timely information access, while the shift to online platforms raised concerns about platform control and engagement quality. Webcasts limited to original languages disadvantaged non-English speakers, in contrast to standard UN translation services at physical meetings. While Geneva-based CSOs retained advantages, they faced difficulties in engaging partners in the Global South. GONGOs exploited the fact that the online format offered reduced scrutiny, while civil society’s influence diminished through limited access to draft resolutions and lost opportunities for informal lobbying. The absence of casual networking – which is vital for advocacy – highlighted the fact that larger CSOs still heavily depend on in-person interactions (CIVICUS 2021).

The post-pandemic return to physical meetings brought new challenges. Access in Geneva is hindered by new security restrictions, while CSO speaking time has been reduced under new efficiency measures that some view as attempts to silence dissent (Interview 3). CSOs increasingly struggle to obtain visas for non-Geneva based activists, particularly young human rights defenders (Interviews 3 and 15). The lack of a visa agreement between Switzerland and UN-Geneva mechanisms also restricts CSO access (Interview 15). These accumulated restrictions severely limit the space for civil society, creating what one observer calls “death by a thousand cuts” (Interview 4).

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Limited Resources

The HRC faces a severe liquidity crisis – one that affects the entire UN system and stems from member states’ growing scepticism with regard to multilateralism and their failure to pay UN dues (Interview 3). This crisis disproportionately impacts UN human rights mechanisms, which receive less than 5 percent of UN funding – despite human rights being one of the organisation’s three pillars (Interview 5). Underfunding particularly affects SP mandates by limiting their operational capacity – as seen in the delayed implementation of the Sudan mandate (Interview 3) – and reducing their engagement with victims and domestic authorities (International Service for Human Rights 2024a).

The UN Human Rights Council
faces a severe liquidity crisis.

In 2023, the UN Human Rights Office – i.e, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which serves as the HRC’s permanent secretariat – received 38 percent of its funding from the UN budget, as determined by the UNGA, while the remainder came from donations by 71 member states and 25 non-state donors (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.-b). Such donations fluctuate from year to year and are often directed to specific SPs, which creates imbalances.

Selective state financial support for certain mandates – often combined with contestation of or objection to others – undermines rule stability. The significant increase in SP mandates over time also poses a challenge, given that funds have not increased proportionally. However, the UN Human Rights Office has approximately 1,300 permanent employees (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.-a), and thus human resources are more stable than financial resources.

Funding for capacity-building remains insufficient to enable states to take voluntary action on UPR or SP recommendations (Interview 1). Financial restrictions severely reduce the HRC’s institutional stability and autonomy, allowing powerful states greater influence over its actions. This affects both the ambition of HRC recommendations and its ability to respond to human rights crises.

While states’ refusal to pay their UN dues constitutes a serious challenge to multilateral bodies as a whole, when it comes to the HRC specifically, this reflects the view that human rights compliance is optional rather than obligatory (International Service for Human Rights 2024a). Limited resources reduce the HRC’s effectiveness, its institutional robustness, and its ability to include non-state voices.

Many member states use voluntary and earmarked contributions to exert influence over the UN agenda. In 2024, most voluntary contributions came from UN member states, with earmarking levels reaching 70 percent (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.-b). This reduces flexibility, increases transaction costs, and constrains the organisation’s ability to respond effectively to emerging crises. Limited governance autonomy – the ability to manage resources independently of powerful states’ influence – has a negative impact on robustness.

HRC Reform: Major Actors' Positions

State actors remain the primary shapers of the HRC agenda. As members, they propose and vote on resolutions that may lead to investigations, engage in dialogue with stakeholders, establish SP mandates, and provide financial and technical support.

Despite the HRC membership's equitable geographic distribution, significant power differentials exist, with states such as China and Russia exercising disproportionate influence. China strategically cultivates support from developing countries by positioning itself as their champion. When these countries face scrutiny, China supports them in the HRC, thus reinforcing solidarity (Pauselli, Urdínez, and Merke 2023).

The HRC's mandate requires arrangements to enable CSOs to make "the most effective contribution" (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2024a). CSOs provide expert knowledge, advice, and perspectives from underrepresented constituencies. Their contributions enhance decision-making and implementation while catalysing negotiations for higher human rights standards (Interview 15).

Table 1 maps major actors' positions on HRC reform in the areas of institutional robustness, effectiveness, and democracy, following the conceptual framework of the ENSURED project (Choi et al. 2024). This mapping exercise seeks to systematically assess different stakeholders' priorities and identify patterns in how they conceptualise reform. By examining their positions through the lens of these three dimensions, we can better understand the underlying tensions and trade-offs in reform proposals, as well as the potential for building consensus around specific improvements to the HRC's functionality.

The analysis includes major states and organisations that represent multiple states. While the member states in these organisations do not always act cohesively, they demonstrate consistent voting patterns and regional affiliations within the HRC. The civil society sample includes major CSOs that interact with the HRC in Geneva, such as Amnesty International, CIVICUS, Human Rights Watch, and the International Service for Human Rights.

Table 1: Actor Mapping on Effectiveness, Robustness, and Democracy Concerning HRC Reform

Continued on the next page.

	Robustness	Effectiveness	Democracy
United States	Institutional stability: Generally maintains financial contributions, although support fluctuates among administrations. Rule stability: Undermined this by withdrawing from the HRC in 2018 and 2025. Governance autonomy: One of the largest contributors to the UN system, but also the largest debtor (UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination 2024).	Policy output: Reform proposals include the elimination of Agenda Item 7 targeting Israel, public assessments of state human rights records, and participation in public forums as prerequisites for candidacy (US Mission to the United Nations 2020). Introduces caveats to resolutions in order to protect its own interests, such as concerning migrant rights and spyware. Outcome, impact: No proposal.	Participation: 2020 reform proposals included stricter membership criteria and “improved” elections (US Mission to the United Nations 2020). Transparency: Has pushed for more transparency in HRC elections.
China	Institutional stability: Advocates for ‘efficiency measures’ – potentially reducing financial burden but also effectiveness. Rule stability: Challenges this by subverting core rules and diverting attention from violations. Governance autonomy: “Increasingly important contributor” to the UN, but still a major debtor (Guterres 2021; UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination 2024).	Policy output: Reform proposals include the removal of country-specific resolutions, “constructive dialogue” rather than criticism, and enshrining economic development as a fundamental right (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2022). Outcome, impact: Cooperates selectively with the UN human rights system and seeks to prevent interference in its internal affairs.	Participation: Advocates for a greater proportion of Global South staff in UN human rights mechanisms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2022). Transparency: No proposal.
Russia	Institutional stability: Systematically attempts to reduce funding for UN human rights mechanisms. Rule stability: Seeks to subvert global norms that affect it or its allies; undermines human rights advocacy and defenders. Governance autonomy: Important contributor to the UN, but nearly all funds are earmarked (UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination 2024).	Policy output: Does not recognise the Special Rapporteur’s mandate on Russia and refuses to cooperate with it (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2024). Seeks to diminish member-state accountability and values bilateralism over multilateralism. Outcome, impact: Opposes all actions of human rights bodies concerning Russia and its allies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2018).	Participation: Advocates for greater participation by non-Western states; criticises European states and the US for “aggressive anti-Russian policy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023). Transparency: No proposal.
European Union*	Institutional stability: The EU and its member states contribute around one-quarter of the UN’s regular budget (UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination 2024). Rule stability: Supports core rules; advocates for effective SPs and greater attention to human rights violations (European External Action Service 2024a). Governance autonomy: Advocates for more funding, but not all EU states have paid their UN dues (UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination 2024).	Policy output: Supports multilateralism and human rights protection – but also efficiency measures, thus reducing effectiveness and democracy (Interviews 3, 4, and 5). EU states often oppose resolutions on the right to development and migrant rights. Outcome, impact: Calls for quick responses to emerging crises and accountability for perpetrators (European External Action Service 2024b).	Participation: Supports strengthening membership criteria by prioritising human rights commitments; consistently supports meaningful civil society participation (European External Action Service 2024b). Transparency: Advocates transparency in connection with civil society participation.

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	Robustness	Effectiveness	Democracy
Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)**	Institutional stability: OIC member states have mixed views, and many do not fulfil their financial obligations. Rule stability: Argues that appointments of country mandates should require the consent of the state involved; rejects interference in domestic affairs. Governance autonomy: OIC member states prefer earmarked contributions (UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination 2024).	Policy output: Advocates for closer monitoring of violations by Global North states, particularly on racism, Islamophobia, and right to development. Calls for more state accountability in certain situations, notably regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict (Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission 2024). Outcome, impact: Prefers to maintain the present agenda, thus avoiding resolution proliferation.	Participation: Demands “equitable geographical representation” among SP mandate holders; supports the current system of HRC elections. Transparency: No proposal.
African Group***	Institutional stability: Many of its members are committed to the UN system and call for higher contributions by major states (UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination 2024). Rule stability: Rejects interference in domestic affairs; argues that appointments of country mandates should require the consent of the state involved. Governance autonomy: Shows a preference for earmarked funding.	Policy output: Calls for action against racism and for the right to development. Members tend to support the Palestinian cause and oppose the UN mandate on sexual orientation and gender identity. Often defends African states and abstains on votes concerning others (Defend Defenders 2022). Outcome, impact: Prefers to maintain the present agenda, thus avoiding resolution proliferation.	Participation: Demands “equitable geographical representation” among SP mandate holders; supports the current system of HRC elections. Transparency: No clear proposal.
CSO sample	Institutional stability: Call for more states to pay UN dues and for a greater proportion of UN funding dedicated to human rights. Rule stability: Support consistent enforcement of international human rights law and the strengthening of existing mechanisms. Governance autonomy: Call for an increase in un-earmarked funds and allocation based on need.	Policy output: Advocate stricter and swifter crisis action; prioritise racial justice and equality for discriminated groups (International Service for Human Rights 2023; CIVICUS 2024). Call for attention to HRC member states’ human rights records. Outcome, impact: Call for effective links between resolutions and effects on the ground; some push to make HRC a main UN body.	Participation: Support stronger action against reprisals; identify a need for remote and hybrid CSO participation; campaign for competitive elections; reject vote swapping; reject reforms that could disadvantage civil society or limit its effective participation. Transparency: Call for transparency regarding elections and funding allocation.

* Composed of 27 European states

**Composed of 57 mostly Muslim-majority states

***Composed of 54 African states

An ideological divide has emerged between Western and non-Western states in their approach to human rights and HRC reform. While the EU and the US focus on making membership conditional on human rights criteria – thereby restricting it – and prioritise political and civil rights, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the African Group prioritise geographical representation and economic rights. Both sides emphasise their opponents' violations while downplaying their own.

These distinct positions suggest a more fundamental disagreement about the HRC's primary purpose. Western states appear to view the HRC primarily as a mechanism for enforcing established human rights standards, while many non-Western states see it as a forum for addressing historical inequities and rebalancing global power. This is evident in the OIC's and the African Group's consistent emphasis on the right to development and their opposition to certain civil and political rights mandates that they perceive as Western-centric. China and Russia have exploited this divergence in

ways that risk reducing the HRC's ability to address rights violations while suppressing civil society voices and depriving human rights bodies of vital resources. This deepening schism presents a fundamental obstacle to meaningful reform, as substantive changes would require consensus.

Civil society stands apart in advocating for reforms that would enhance both effectiveness and democracy.

Our analysis also suggests a correlation between states' domestic governance models and their positions on HRC reform. Democratic states generally advocate for stronger membership criteria and transparency, while authoritarian states tend to emphasise sovereignty and non-interference. The data also reveal that financial contributions are used as tools of influence, with most major powers using earmarked funding to advance their priorities. The US and the EU contribute substantially but conditionally, while China and Russia increasingly leverage their financial support to reshape norms.

Civil society stands apart in advocating for reforms that would enhance both effectiveness and democracy. Unlike state actors, whose positions often reflect geopolitical interests, CSOs consistently prioritise strengthening accountability mechanisms, protecting participation spaces, and increasing transparency – focusing on the HRC's original mandate rather than national interests.

HRC Reform: Past and Future Changes

The HRC emerged from decades of institutional evolution and reform. Its predecessor, the UN Commission on Human Rights (referred to subsequently as the 'Commission'), was the first global intergovernmental body specifically dedicated to human rights protection and promotion (Lebovic and Voeten 2006). The Commission's early achievements included the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which remains the basis of the universal human rights system (UN General Assembly 1948). All nine core international human rights treaties – on racial discrimination; civil and political rights; economic, social, and cultural rights; discrimination against women; torture; rights of the child; rights of migrants; rights of persons with disabilities; and enforced disappearances – were agreed upon, and their respective treaty bodies established, during the Commission's lifespan (UN 2012).

The Commission evolved significantly over time, and initially it did not consider itself empowered to act on human rights complaints. A crucial shift occurred in 1970, when ECOSOC authorised the Commission to examine communications about patterns of gross human rights violations, marking a transition from purely symbolic work to practical engagement (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 1970).

By the early 2000s, calls for reform had intensified. In April 2005, then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan suggested that creating the HRC would offer "a fresh start" (Annan 2005). The UNGA established the HRC to replace the Commission in 2006, enabling it to receive direct complaints from victims of human rights violations and to hold special sessions on imminent and serious crises. Since it operates as a subsidiary organ under ECOSOC, however, its authority remains relatively limited compared to the main UN bodies.

The resolution creating the HRC introduced one groundbreaking innovation: the UPR, which subjects each of the 193 UN member states to regular examination of its human rights record (UN General Assembly 2006). The review draws on three sources: the state's own national report; UN information, including from SPs and treaty bodies; and input from other stakeholders, including CSOs. Reviews occur through interactive dialogue in the UPR Working Group, where any UN member state can raise issues or make recommendations. The mechanism's universal nature ensures equal treatment, thus enhancing its legitimacy, while its cooperative approach aims to support and expand human rights protection on the ground (Matiya 2010; Charlesworth and Larking 2015). Such an innovation requiring the examination of all member states' human rights records had been unthinkable just a few years earlier (Interview 4).

Unlike the UPR, the SPs developed gradually in response to specific events, emerging in what has been described as an almost "accidental"

The UN Human Rights Council serves as a public forum where states name-and-shame one another for human rights violations and abuses.

manner (Limon and Power 2014) and steadily increasing in number. As of November 2024, there were 46 thematic and 14 country-specific mandates (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.-d) playing crucial roles in highlighting emerging and chronic human rights issues, and urging accountability (Piccone 2011; Inboden 2024).

Overall, these early reforms shaped the HRC to serve as a high-profile public forum where states publicly name-and-shame one another for human rights violations and abuses (Lebovic and Voeten 2006). When the HRC adopts a resolution against a repressive regime, it provides authoritative, legitimate, and internationally visible shaming, advancing ‘soft law’ and offering courts worldwide precedent for further action (Interview 1). Major milestones in the UN human rights system’s development are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of the Milestones

Year(s)	Milestones in the Development of the UN Human Rights System
1945	The UN Charter, the UN’s founding document, establishes human rights as one of the organisation’s four pillars, alongside peace and security, the rule of law, and development.
1946	The UN Commission on Human Rights (i.e., the Commission) is established as a subsidiary body of the UNGA.
1948	UNGA Resolution 217 A (III) adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
1947–1967	The Commission focuses on promoting human rights and helping states elaborate treaties, but strictly observes the sovereignty principle and does not investigate or condemn human rights violators.
1967	ECOSOC authorises the Commission to deal with violations of human rights.
1965–2006	Nine core human rights instruments and their monitoring bodies are developed: International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (1965); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966); Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1979); Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984); Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990); Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006); Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).
2006	UNGA Resolution 60/251 establishes the HRC to replace the Commission.
2007	HRC Resolution 5/1 adopts the ‘Institution-Building’ package that establishes its mechanisms and subsidiary bodies (UPR, SPs, Advisory Committee, complaint procedure). It also establishes criteria for the selection of SP mandate holders, including expertise, experience in the field of the mandate, independence, impartiality, personal integrity, and objectivity.
	HRC Resolution 5/2 establishes the code of conduct for SP mandates, including ethical guidelines.
2008	The first UPR session begins.
2011	HRC Resolution 16/21 reaffirms the importance of the UPR and SPs, and maintains the HRC’s ECOSOC subsidiary status. It also encourages states to provide voluntary midterm reports on the implementation of UPR recommendations. As of February 2025, 89 states have submitted these.
2020	The HRC temporarily adopts remote engagement tools for its sessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2025–2026	A UNGA review of the HRC is expected to take place, including a decision on whether it should remain a subsidiary body or become a main UN body.

Recent Reform Efforts

Several attempts to reform the HRC have been made since its establishment almost two decades ago. The first major opportunity was a UNGA-initiated review process to assess the HRC's performance five years after its establishment (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.-c). CSOs expected the review to lead to reforms improving civil society access and HRC effectiveness, but the 2011 review produced only two resolutions – HRC Resolution 16/21 and UNGA Resolution 65/281 – which reaffirmed the UPR's and the SPs' importance and maintained the HRC's subsidiary status. Major challenges – including the fact that rights-violating states are members of the HRC – were ignored, and no real reform took place. Several stakeholders dismissed the review outcome document as “minimalistic” (US Mission to International Organizations in Geneva 2011).

A second wave of reform attempts emerged around 2015, driven by the HRC's expanding workload and increasingly pressing funding challenges. As the number of SPs increased amid UN budgetary stagnation, various states and UN officials promoted efficiency measures to streamline operations, reduce costs, and help the HRC “focus on its core work” and improve its real-world impact (Splinter 2017). However, this focus on efficiency proved counterproductive. Rather than improving effectiveness, it established precedents for restricting HRC activities at a time when deteriorating global human rights conditions demanded more engagement, not less (Interview 2). CSOs feared that efficiency measures would lead to merged SPs as well as limited debates and civil society participation (Interview 4), despite official recognition that civil society participation remained “central to the work of the HRC and its mechanisms” (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2016). As critics noted, increased efficiency could actually result in diminished effectiveness (International Service for Human Rights 2023). Nevertheless, key stakeholders – including successive HRC presidents – have continued to promote efficiency and rationalisation measures (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2024b).

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted more positive reforms through necessity. The HRC adopted innovative remote engagement tools that significantly benefited human rights defenders who were previously unable to participate in Geneva-based activities (Interviews 3 and 6). This adaptability demonstrated institutional robustness, and virtual and hybrid working methods offered potential permanent solutions for more inclusive and cost-effective engagement. These tools could have helped civil society overcome persistent barriers, including visa denials, prohibitive travel costs, negative environmental impacts, and accessibility challenges (International Service for Human Rights 2023). Yet these innovations were discontinued post-pandemic, largely due to pressure from China and India – countries with track records of restricting CSO activities (Interview 7; CIVICUS Monitor 2024a, 2024b). Civil society continues to advocate for hybrid modalities to enhance HRC accessibility and inclusiveness.

Other reform initiatives have met similar resistance. Efforts to strengthen the HRC's preventive capacity by means of an early warning system for swifter crisis response stalled due to lack of political support, despite its potential to boost the HRC's effectiveness (Interview 2). Another attempt at institutional reform came in 2017–2018, when the Trump administration proposed substantial changes to membership criteria and election processes. The US proposals included 'ineligibility lists' to exclude potential members who are under UNSC or HRC investigation or sanction; mandatory review of candidates by the OHCHR and public forums; higher election thresholds for membership, but lower thresholds for removing rights abusers; a 'none of the above' voting option; and elimination of the permanent agenda item on Israel-Palestine. While these changes might have improved the HRC's effectiveness and robustness by excluding rights-violating states, they faced strong opposition, particularly from the OIC and from states concerned about Western dominance (US Mission to the United Nations 2020).

The US response to this opposition – unilateral withdrawal – ultimately weakened the HRC's legitimacy, reduced support for human rights norms, and created a power vacuum that benefited human rights violators. The accompanying reduction in US funding further destabilised the HRC and diminished its institutional robustness. Under the second Trump administration, the US – currently not an HRC member – has already announced its withdrawal. Israel and Nicaragua have followed suit (AP News 2025).

UN Human Rights Council
reforms have typically been
evolutionary rather than
revolutionary in nature.

Given the consensus-based nature of the HRC decision-making process, the reforms introduced have typically been evolutionary rather than revolutionary in nature (McMahon 2012). Changes have reflected the HRC's gradual evolution in response to practical challenges, emphasising operational improvements rather than structural overhauls. These have included adjustments to the UPR process, such as extending the duration of reviews and refining implementation processes in successive cycles. The HRC has increasingly used special sessions to respond promptly to urgent human rights crises and has expanded the scope and number of SPs, appointing more rapporteurs and working groups to address thematic and country-specific issues. Additionally, it has increasingly emphasised collaboration with CSOs, national human rights institutions, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, a Presidential Statement adopted in 2018 resulted in a transition to a three-year work programme to improve transparency and predictability, and a restructuring of annual programmes to reduce repetitive debates (Universal Rights Group n.d.). Unilateral attempts to reform the HRC have been largely ineffective. Experience suggests that gradual, practical improvements are more feasible than comprehensive formal reforms, which would likely yield limited results despite extensive resource investment (Splinter 2017).

Pending Reforms and Unexploited Potential

A belated UNGA review scheduled for 2026 is expected to reconsider the HRC's institutional architecture, particularly the critical question of whether it should remain a subsidiary body or be elevated to the status of a principal UN organ (Interview 6). While this structural constraint significantly impacts the HRC's effectiveness and ability to enforce human rights standards, any change in status would not necessarily enhance opportunities for civil society participation.

The upcoming review elicits diverse reactions, predominantly from CSOs that work closely with the HRC. One human rights expert from an international CSO described it as a key “moment for reflection” and an opportunity to identify potential “small fixes” (Interview 12). Civil society representatives in Geneva, however, generally express scepticism about meaningful outcomes, with one pessimistically predicting continued “so-called efficiency measures that result in less speaking time” for CSOs and reduced General Debates (Interview 4).

Civil society experts hold varied views on structural reform. Some CSO leaders argue that elevating the HRC to principal organ status would symbolically demonstrate support for human rights as one of the UN's pillars and potentially improve the HRC's ability to act on its resolutions and enforce human rights norms, thereby enhancing robustness and effectiveness (Interview 6). However, other civil society representatives fear that any reform at a time when multilateralism and global norms are regressing could ultimately weaken the HRC, and they consider the risk “not worth it” (Interview 3). In any case, institutional barriers – particularly the need to revise the UN Charter amid increased polarisation – make such an elevation unlikely (Interview 6).

Beyond such substantial institutional reform, major stakeholders have proposed various measures to address the HRC's key challenges. These proposals target four main areas: compliance mechanisms, membership criteria, civil society participation, and resource allocation.

Proposals to address key challenges target compliance mechanisms, membership criteria, civil society participation, and resource allocation.

Compliance Mechanisms

The HRC has already adopted a complaint procedure that allows individuals and organisations to bring confidential complaints concerning human rights violations to the HRC's attention. Despite a high rate of state responses to complaints (Tistounet 2020), there have been frequent calls for the abolition of the complaint procedure. Some interviewees, both state and civil society representatives, consider it “byzantine and intransparent” (Interview 3) as well as “a complete failure” (Interview 1). This is because the procedure is confidential: none of its materials or its proceedings, including its outcomes, are made public unless the HRC

decides otherwise. The mechanism lacks meaningful engagement with victims and offers no follow-up after a state has submitted its response (Interview 1).

When the HRC was created, it was proposed that the complaint procedure should act as an early warning system, alerting the HRC to emerging instances of gross human rights violations (Abraham 2007; Matiya 2010). Yet this proposal was not implemented, and it represents a missed opportunity to strengthen the HRC's effectiveness. A reformed complaint procedure could serve two vital functions: alerting the HRC to emerging human rights violations and connecting it to grassroots organisations,

A reformed complaint

procedure could alert the UN

Human Rights Council to emerging

human rights violations.

especially from the Global South, whose voices are rarely heard in Geneva. Such a reform would need to include the public identification of rights-violating states and robust follow-up mechanisms to encourage behavioural change.

At a CSO-organised dialogue on strengthening the HRC, one anonymous participant suggested that "UPR screenings" could be implemented (Amnesty

International, Human Rights Watch, and International Service for Human Rights 2018). These screenings would feature live webcasts with media commentary to enhance the visibility and public awareness of the process and to promote voluntary state compliance with human rights norms. Enhanced visibility – not to be confused with enforcement power – could generate public pressure on governments to implement recommendations. Similarly, the HRC could improve the communication of its outcomes at both regional and national levels in order to increase local engagement.

A standardised monitoring system for tracking the implementation of UPR and SP recommendations could provide greater transparency on state compliance patterns, while increased emphasis on prevention rather than reaction could strengthen the HRC's effectiveness (Splinter 2017). While the HRC lacks enforcement powers comparable to those of the UNSC, it could strengthen accountability by formally evaluating states' cooperation records during membership elections and considering measures such as suspension for members that consistently refuse to cooperate with mandates or threaten SP mandate holders.

Membership Criteria

To address the issue of rights-violating states, some have advocated for the creation of a parallel institution modelled on a consortium, with governments and CSOs as equal partners. One academic expert suggests that such a model could feature selective membership criteria, weighted votes, strict funding guidelines, and financial transparency (Rose 2022). While this might increase democratic representation, it could also lead to minilateralism and could weaken human rights governance in the long term.

Instead, many interviewees favour more modest reforms within the existing framework. These include more rigorous scrutiny of both candidates and

sitting members by the entire HRC, rather than “regional negotiations” (Interview 7); the public presentation of election pledges with subsequent accountability (Interview 13); and human rights-based criteria for elections (Interview 6). The logic underlying these reforms is that competitive elections would exclude the most egregious violators while serving as an incentive for others to improve their human rights records.

Another crucial issue is the complete absence of many small states from the HRC. According to the Office of the High Commissioner’s website, as of February 2025, 67 UN member states have never been members of the HRC. Most of these countries are Small Island Developing States (SIDS), many of which have never even stood for election. In past elections where SIDS did stand, they tended to do well, and then often became highly effective, principled HRC members (Universal Rights Group 2018). Propositions to widen state inclusion include an obligation for each regional slate to include at least one SIDS, and for SIDS to have the option to split membership terms (with two states taking three years each), thus reducing the administrative burden. These changes could encourage more SIDS to become HRC members at a time when their contribution is most needed.

Civil Society Participation

Civil society’s vital role in HRC operations extends from UPR processes to SPs, with one interviewee noting that the HRC “basically lives from the input [and] fact-checking by civil society” (Interview 12). Although increasing numbers of organisations are receiving ECOSOC accreditation to take part in HRC processes, at the same time, civil society is finding less space. The obscure accreditation process, which regularly blocks CSOs while approving GONGOs, has been described by interviewees as just another way to silence dissenting voices (Interview 7) and as “a complete mess” that no state seems willing to reform (Interview 3). Politically motivated denials of CSO accreditation undermine the HRC by excluding vital perspectives, particularly from the Global South, depriving global human rights initiatives of crucial knowledge and diverse experiences (Pai and Pérez 2024). The accreditation process must be reformed and made more transparent in order to prevent states from using it to limit civil society access.

Proposed reforms to safeguard civil society participation include implementing a zero-tolerance policy on reprisals, with standardised procedures and reporting requirements (Interview 9; Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and International Service for Human Rights 2019); establishing dedicated funding for Global South CSO participation; and reinstating hybrid participation formats. To maintain both effectiveness and democratic legitimacy, the HRC must prioritise civil society access when considering efficiency measures (Interview 2).

Politically motivated denials of CSO accreditation undermine the UN Human Rights Council by excluding vital perspectives.

Resource Allocation

Resource constraints that leave the HRC “hamstrung on a number of different fronts” (Interview 2) could be addressed with targeted measures, despite the UNGA Fifth Committee’s control over funding decisions.

Regular payment of UN dues would strengthen institutional stability, while a dedicated fund for technical assistance could support the implementation of recommendations where the political will to do so exists (Human Rights Watch 2018).

Resource constraints leave
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hamstrung on a number
of different fronts.

SPs require adequate funding to continue their “heroic effort” to document human rights abuses by means of fact-finding missions (Interview 8). Expanded resources for the OHCHR would enable more country-situation monitoring and field presence, though such improvements will ultimately depend on states taking action to address the chronic lack of “funding, resources, [and] capacity” (Interview 3).

Some experts advocate a “Marshall Plan for human rights” (Universal Rights Group 2018), which would require both concerted state action and the reorientation of UN budgetary priorities towards on-the-ground capacity-building and technical assistance to help states fulfil their international human rights obligations.

The Political Feasibility of Reform

While the reform proposals outlined above address critical challenges facing the HRC, given the current international political landscape it is uncertain whether they will be implemented. Nevertheless, the likelihood of progress varies significantly across the four areas of reform.

Regarding compliance mechanisms, the prospects for reform appear limited. Major powers with poor human rights records, including China and Russia, have consistently opposed strengthening the HRC’s monitoring and enforcement capabilities. Even democratic states often resist enhanced compliance mechanisms when these might affect their allies or expose their own inconsistencies on issues such as migration or counter-terrorism. The current polarisation between the Global North and the Global South further complicates consensus-building on this issue.

Membership criteria reforms face similar obstacles. While Western states generally support more stringent requirements, countries in the Global South frequently view such proposals as attempts to exclude them and maintain Western dominance of international institutions. China and Russia have strategically positioned themselves as champions of developing countries’ interests against what they characterise as Western ‘politicisation’ of human rights. The persistence of closed slates in regional blocs suggests limited political will for competitive elections that would strengthen the quality of membership.

Reforms to civil society participation may offer more promise, as they require less formal consensus. Practical improvements such as hybrid meeting

formats or streamlined accreditation procedures could be implemented with less resistance. However, the trend towards restricting space for civil society globally – as led by authoritarian states but increasingly embraced by many democracies – suggests that any meaningful expansion of civil society access may also be unlikely in the short term.

Resource allocation reforms face particularly severe constraints. The chronic underfunding of UN human rights mechanisms reflects a deliberate political choice by member states rather than mere budgetary limitations. The call for regular payment of UN dues overlooks persistent political obstacles, while the proposed technical assistance fund and expanded OHCHR resources face the reality of contracting international organisation budgets. With the US reducing its multilateral commitments and many European states facing domestic fiscal pressures, the prospect of substantially increased resources seems remote. Moreover, China's growing financial contributions come with conditions that may ultimately undermine rather than strengthen the HRC's independence. Without addressing these fundamental funding challenges, however, any other proposed reform risks remaining purely aspirational.

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Europe and HRC Reform

The EU's contribution to protecting and promoting human rights in the context of the HRC has drawn significant scholarly attention since the body's establishment (Smith 2010; De Búrca 2011). The EU expresses a strong normative belief in human rights and a commitment to fulfilling the HRC's mandate (Tuominen 2023), as formalised in its Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2027. This plan prioritises human rights in both external relations and internal policy (European External Action Service 2024a), positioning the EU as a human rights actor and identifying HRC as a key venue for advancing its goals.

Beyond human rights protection, the EU actively supports the HRC's democratic character by promoting civil society participation and opposing reprisals (European External Action Service 2024a). However, the EU sometimes conflates effectiveness with efficiency when it comes to the HRC, potentially compromising important aspects of its work. For instance, while the EU's Action Plan emphasises the importance of both “efficiency and effectiveness,” a January 2025 statement supported efficiency measures to reduce the HRC's workload and avoid the “unnecessary duplication” of efforts (European External Action Service 2025).

Interviewees describe the presence of the EU's Geneva-based delegation as influential. One non-European state representative characterises it as “very active,” with “a very good team” engaging across regions and supporting smaller missions with crucial input: “if I need to know about something, I usually first approach my colleague from the EU delegation” (Interview 1). The delegation proactively engages with HRC members on resolutions, “particularly with those that hold a different view than the EU” (Interview 3). One Geneva-based civil society representative considers the EU delegation “one of the most active stakeholders” (Interview 4), noting its leadership on resolutions concerning Afghanistan, Belarus, Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Myanmar, North Korea, and Russia. This engagement enhances participation by facilitating dialogue between opposing viewpoints and creating space for civil society input in the process of drafting resolutions, which strengthens the HRC's democratic character and effectiveness.

The EU faces criticism, however, for its inconsistent approaches. While taking strong positions on Russia and various Asian and African countries, its stance weakens on issues including migration, racism, and the Israel-Palestine conflict, where its actions lack comparable strength (Interview 3). Some interviewees question the EU's self-image as a “human rights defender,” noting its status as a “mega state” with its own human rights deficits (Interview 9). Others highlighted its use of double standards or “cherry picking,” as seen during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when “the doors were completely open for Ukrainians,” while for non-European migrants “there is not even a door” (Interview 1). Such inconsistencies undermine the EU's credibility with non-European states and limit its ability to drive HRC reform. Overall the EU's impact is “conditioned by the political context” of the HRC, where member states maintain independent voices (Tuominen 2023).

The Role of EU Member States

Scholarly assessments of EU influence are mixed: Karen E. Smith (2010) characterises UN human rights fora as examples of “arrested Europeanisation,” with EU member states prioritising national prestige over common objectives.

The charge of inconsistency directed at the EU also applies to its member states, which have consistently voted against certain resolutions and mandates. In April 2024, they mostly opposed (with two abstentions) HRC Resolution 55/6 on the “effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights” (HRC 2024; Interview 11). This resolution, proposed by Cuba and widely supported by Global South states, called for reform of the “unjust and undemocratic international financial architecture” and addressed the human rights impact of foreign debt (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Cuba 2024). EU member states have similarly opposed resolutions establishing SP mandates on the Right to Development and on the Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023; HRC 2023).

Scholarly assessments of EU influence are mixed.

Yet the EU is not monolithic, and some member states have cast divergent votes on issues that the EU generally supports. Hungary notably did not support the establishment of the mandate for a Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Russian Federation when it was established in 2022, or when it was renewed in 2023 and 2024. Facing criticism for its domestic violations of LGBTQI+ rights, Hungary also abstained when the SOGI mandate was renewed in 2019, as did Poland in 2022. Such positions can shift rapidly with changes of government, as demonstrated by Poland’s recent retreat from establishing ‘LGBT-free zones’ (Interview 7).

Participation levels also vary significantly among EU member states, reflecting differing national priorities and governmental interest in UN human rights mechanisms. Nordic and Benelux states, and occasionally Germany, constitute the core of active participants – the ‘usual suspects’ (Interview 5). As one Geneva-based civil society representative notes, “it would be great” to see France, Italy, and Spain contribute “a little bit more” (Interview 5).

When EU member states disagree, the resulting bar for the EU position risks “being set too low” (Interview 1). While such constraints affect the EU’s influence, they reflect the reality of a HRC in which Asian and African states hold a built-in majority, which makes cross-regional coalition-building essential.

EU Perspectives on Reform

While major reform appears unlikely in the short term given increasing polarisation and the requirement for both internal consensus and UNGA approval, the EU could help to enhance the HRC's robustness, effectiveness, and democratic character by means of several targeted improvements.

The EU has advocated reforming HRC election processes to restrict membership for rights-violating states and has correctly pointed out that closed slates undermine scrutiny of potential members' human rights records. Here, the EU could lead by example, pushing for competitive elections within both the Western European and Others Group and the Eastern European Group. By positioning itself as a standard bearer in human rights, it could strengthen both its own influence and the HRC's effectiveness.

However, the EU's credibility is damaged when it is accused of double standards. Its selective approach to human rights violations on political grounds undermines its moral authority. The EU could build stronger relationships with Global South states by adopting more consistent human rights policies and increasing the scrutiny of abuses perpetrated by Global North states, particularly regarding Islamophobia, migrants' rights, and racism. This could help to counter what one interviewee describes as "ongoing efforts to undermine standards" by states such as China and Russia (Interview 3), thus strengthening the HRC's effectiveness and robustness.

The HRC's effectiveness relies heavily on the work of civil society and grassroots activists. While the EU maintains good civil society consultation practices, it could expand its engagement, particularly with grassroots organisations from the Global South (Interview 3). The EU should reconsider the ways in which its emphasis on efficiency and cost reduction might compromise the HRC's inclusivity and legitimacy (Choi et al. 2024). Many interviewees note that civil society inclusion makes the HRC more effective than other UN bodies.

Financial support represents another crucial area for EU engagement. One Geneva-based civil society representative urges stronger EU advocacy for fully funded SP mandates in the UNGA Fifth Committee (Interview 3). Another non-European state representative argues that the EU "should play a much bigger role" in funding, noting that the issue of whether to put money into warfare or human rights is a choice (Interview 1). Enhanced financial support would strengthen institutional robustness and counter attempts by rights-violating states to undermine the HRC with funding cuts.

Looking ahead, the EU must prepare to lead more ambitious human rights reforms. The Trump administration's unilateral approach – reducing external aid and announcing US withdrawal from the HRC (AP News 2025) – threatens the HRC's effectiveness and robustness (Interview 3) and could once again create a power vacuum which authoritarian states – notably China – are eager to fill (Interview 4). These challenges require intentional EU action to support the HRC's effectiveness, robustness, and democratic character.

Conclusion: The HRC's Future

The HRC faces mounting challenges in an increasingly polarised global environment. Created during a period of relative geopolitical stability and consensus around human rights norms, it now operates in a markedly different context. Most of the stakeholders we interviewed for this report express pessimism about its future, suggesting that maintaining the current standards and mechanisms would itself be a significant achievement (Interview 13).

The HRC's fundamental challenges stem from both structural and political factors. Structurally, its core weakness lies in the fact that it is a state-dominated body that relies on public shaming rather than enforcement – which is a limitation of international law generally. This challenge is compounded by a situation in which rights-violating states serve as HRC members, which allows them to shield themselves and their allies from scrutiny (Tiwana and Lipott 2024).

These longstanding issues have intensified with the emergence of state governments actively seeking to challenge and reshape established human rights norms. While the UN has historically navigated political tensions with overall success, recent trends of democratic decline and rising right-wing populism have deepened divisions (Jordaan 2024), with polarisation particularly evident on issues such as gender rights and sexual and reproductive health (Interview 3). According to one interviewee who is privy to informal HRC negotiations, the current push against human rights is unprecedented (Interview 1).

Despite clear room for improvement, much of the UN Human Rights Council's work remains inclusive, productive, and effective.

The greatest risk facing the HRC is a potential cascade of state disengagement, which would create space for authoritarian states to further reshape the institution. This dynamic is already visible in the funding crisis affecting UN human rights mechanisms, which receive less than 5 percent of UN funding despite the fact that human rights is one of the organisation's three pillars. The US announcement that it will review its UN funding due to "wild disparities in levels of funding among different countries" (AP News 2025) threatens to further destabilise this situation.

Yet the HRC retains significant value, particularly in its unique ability to amplify civil society voices – a feature now under systematic attack due to both deliberate obstruction and practical access barriers. The sponsorship of SP mandates increases the visibility of human rights issues while ensuring independent expert monitoring of violations. This monitoring function provides systematic documentation of violations that might otherwise go unreported or become subject to competing political narratives. Evidence gathered through these mechanisms can provide the basis for soft law developments in both local and international courts, with tangible impacts on the ground.

The HRC is not a failing institution. The UPR process, despite its limitations, remains the only mechanism that requires all states to undergo periodic scrutiny of their human rights records. This universality principle maintains pressure on governments to engage with human rights issues, even if implementation remains uneven. Despite clear room for improvement, much of the HRC's work remains inclusive, productive, and effective (Universal Rights Group 2018).

The HRC's legitimacy also persists: authoritarian states remain "afraid" of it, and attempts to restrict civil society participation paradoxically demonstrate its continued influence. Despite mounting challenges, "human rights matter and having a bad human rights record matters" (Interview 7). The HRC's ability to confer or withhold legitimacy by means of its resolutions continues to influence state behaviour, even when compliance is imperfect.

Current humanitarian crises illustrate certain dynamics that complicate HRC reform. The human rights situations in Gaza and Ukraine highlight contradictions between Western states' positions on Israel and on Russia, which was expelled from the HRC in 2022. While Western states largely supported Russia's expulsion, the vote received mixed reactions from the OIC and the African Group (UN Affairs 2022). These cases demonstrate how geopolitical considerations consistently influence human rights positions across all regional blocs, which complicates reform efforts.

While state actors almost unanimously affirm the value of UN human rights mechanisms, they differ markedly in their criticisms and priorities. Global South countries typically emphasise development rights, racism, migrant rights, and the Israel-Palestine conflict, while Global North states tend to prioritise civil and political rights, free speech, gender-based violence, and LGBTQI+ rights (Interviews 6 and 7). This divergence creates varying

priorities for HRC reform. States – especially powerful ones – align their human rights priorities with their foreign policy objectives (Johnson and Mack 2014).

The UN Human Rights Council is the international community's most developed mechanism for promoting universal human rights.

Reforming the HRC in a rights-friendly direction requires allies. Civil society representatives bring critical expertise and first-hand knowledge from affected communities, while serving as independent watchdogs advocating for compliance with universal

human rights norms. Building stronger partnerships between reform-minded states and CSOs offers the most promising path towards meaningful improvements in the HRC's functionality.

Looking ahead, maintaining the HRC's effectiveness, robustness, and democratic character will require active defence and strategic reform. While comprehensive restructuring appears unlikely given current geopolitical tensions, targeted improvements remain possible. These must be carefully timed and designed to avoid creating "opportunities for those who would weaken" the HRC (Interview 5). The immediate priority should be protecting and fully utilising existing capacities (Interview 10) while building political will for more substantive reforms when conditions allow (Interview 4).

The HRC remains a vital international institution, and its challenges reflect broader contestation of the post-World War II liberal order. Despite its imperfections, it represents the international community's most developed mechanism for promoting universal human rights. Preserving and strengthening the HRC through incremental reforms offers the most promising path forward in an era of increasing geopolitical competition and human rights challenges.

List of Interviews

Number	Date	Interviewee	Location
1	12/02/2024	Non-EU state representative at UN	Geneva
2	12/02/2024	CSO representative	Geneva
3	12/02/2024	CSO representative	Geneva
4	12/03/2024	CSO representative at UN	Geneva
5	12/03/2024	CSO representative at UN	Geneva
6	12/04/2024	CSO programme manager	Online
7	12/05/2024	Senior human rights lawyer	Online
8	12/11/2024	Human rights activist	Online
9	12/18/2024	Anonymous	Online
10	01/03/2025	Former UN SP mandate holder	Online
11	01/09/2025	EU state representative at UN	Geneva
12	01/09/2025	Senior human rights lawyer	Geneva
13	01/10/2025	Anonymous	Geneva
14	01/24/2025	UN SP mandate holder	Online
15	01/30/2025	CSO representative at UN	Online

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