

A joint letter to the UK and Irish Governments on the future of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) from civil society organisations on the island of Ireland.

11th May 2026

Dear Prime Minister and Taoiseach,

We, the undersigned civil society organisations, academics and activists working across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, are writing in advance of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers meeting in Chişinău, Moldova, on 14-15 May 2026, to ask you to ensure that the upcoming Political Declaration on Migration respects and affirms the human rights of all individuals in Europe. At the same time, it must protect the integrity of the European Court of Human Rights (the Court) and the European Convention on Human Rights (the Convention) system. We are asking you to reaffirm the essential role of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in sustaining peace, democratic governance and the rule of law on this island, and to urge both Governments to take active and principled steps to ensure there is no undermining, weakening or withdrawing from the protections provided by the ECHR and to maintain the integrity of this shared human rights framework.

The ECHR is not an abstract or remote legal instrument. It is a practical framework that protects people in their everyday interactions with the state, in schools, hospitals, care settings, workplaces, courts and places of detention, regardless of background, identity, legal status or belief. Its protections belong to everyone, precisely because they are universal, indivisible and inalienable.

A cornerstone of the peace settlement

In Northern Ireland, the ECHR has a unique constitutional significance. Its incorporation through the Human Rights Act 1998, and its central role within the Belfast Good Friday Agreement, gives a foundational commitment to embed the Convention as a minimum baseline of enforceable rights for everyone in the community. Principles of universality and non-regression are key to that commitment. It provides deliberate safeguards designed to prevent the abuse of power, address the legacy of conflict, and build confidence in democratic institutions.

Any weakening of the Convention's application, whether through legislative change, reinterpretation or selective disapplication, would place the United Kingdom in direct conflict with its binding commitments under the peace agreement. As the UK's National Human Rights Institutions have warned, such actions would not only erode rights

protections, but would also risk destabilising a settlement in which enforceable human rights guarantees are foundational rather than optional.

Ireland and the Convention

In the Republic of Ireland, the ECHR plays a vital role in shaping legislation, guiding public administration, strengthening decision making, public administration, accountability and confidence in the rule of law.

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has consistently emphasised Ireland's responsibility, and international standing, as a defender of the Convention system and the independence of the European Court of Human Rights. This includes explicit recognition that the strength of ECHR protections in Northern Ireland is inseparable from the integrity of the wider European human rights framework, and from Ireland's own obligations as a co-guarantor of peace on this island.

Universality matters

Human rights depend on universality. When exceptions are normalised for particular groups, the Convention framework itself is weakened, and protection becomes uncertain for everyone. The introduction of differentiated standards, whether by legal interpretation, political declaration or administrative practice, undermines the universality on which the Convention system depends, and opens the door to further erosion of protections over time.

We are therefore deeply concerned by political narratives, particularly in the context of migration, that seek to frame human rights as conditional, negotiable, or capable of being selectively applied to different groups.

The Chişinău Declaration is unprecedented in that it is the first time, in the history of the Council of Europe, that states have come together with regressive intent - To minimise their obligations, rather than to reinforce and strengthen human rights protections.

The current Council of Europe Political Declaration process

We are particularly concerned by the current Council of Europe Political Declaration process relating to migration and the European Convention on Human Rights. The whole process has been rushed, lacking in transparency and deliberately exclusionary. Individually, and in combination, the proposals under discussion risk weakening the Convention system by signalling a political willingness to reinterpret or limit core rights obligations.

Provisions that seek to rebalance individual rights and state responsibilities risk introducing an explicit hierarchy of rights or rights holders, undermining the principle

that Convention protections apply equally to everyone. Proposals that suggest narrowing the scope or application of certain Convention rights, risk normalising exceptions to absolute protections like Article 3 (Prohibition of torture) which cannot be suspended or violated under any circumstances, and ignores the Court's well established jurisprudence and the existing margin of appreciation already afforded to states for protections like Article 8 (Right to respect for private and family life).

There is also a serious strategic risk. Opening up the Convention system in this way is unlikely to appease those who are hostile to human rights protections. Instead, it risks emboldening and legitimising actors who seek to undermine or dismantle the Convention architecture altogether. Concessions framed as pragmatism may therefore weaken collective resistance to further erosion, rather than securing the long-term stability and credibility of the system. It may lead to further attacks on the Convention system that build on this precedent, incrementally narrowing the scope of who benefits from its protections.

Cumulatively, these approaches threaten the independence of the European Court of Human Rights, the protection of fundamental rights and the integrity of the Convention. For Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland in particular, any dilution of the Convention's authority carries acute risks, given its role as a cornerstone of the peace settlement, and a shared guarantee across jurisdictional boundaries.

Effective governance and human rights

The ECHR already provides states with significant flexibility to pursue legitimate aims, including public safety, immigration control and national security. It does not prevent governments from acting. It ensures that action is lawful, proportionate and grounded in respect for human dignity.

Experience across these islands shows that the Convention improves the quality of decision making, strengthens democratic accountability, and reduces conflict by providing peaceful, legal means of resolving disputes with the state.

Our call to both Governments

We therefore call on the UK and Irish Governments to:

- (1) Publicly and unequivocally reaffirm their commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights, and to the independence and authority of the European Court of Human Rights.
- (2) Reject proposals or political declarations that would narrow, reinterpret or hierarchise Convention rights or rights holders, whether directly or indirectly.

- (3) Recognise and protect the ECHR as a peace building framework, particularly in Northern Ireland, where Convention rights are integral to constitutional stability and public confidence.
- (4) Engage meaningfully with civil society and National Human Rights Institutions to strengthen rights protections, access to justice and rights-based governance.
- (5) Sign and ratify, without delay, Protocol No 16 to the ECHR to allow for Advisory Opinions to be requested in areas where the governments feel there is a lack of jurisprudential clarity from the European Court of Human Rights.

A shared responsibility

Defending the European Convention on Human Rights is not about preserving institutions for their own sake. It is about safeguarding peace, protecting people in their everyday lives, and affirming a shared commitment to dignity, equality and justice.

On this island, the Convention forms part of the architecture of peace.

Weakening it poses a profound and unnecessary risk.

Strengthening it is a shared responsibility.

Yours Sincerely,

Organisations - Northern Ireland	Organisations - Republic of Ireland
Human Rights Consortium	FLAC (Free Legal Advice Centres)
Social Change Initiative (SCI)	Irish Council for Civil Liberties
Horn of Africa People's Aid Northern Ireland (HAPANI)	Immigrant Council of Ireland
Disability Action	Irish Refugee Council
Children's Law Centre	Irish Network Against Racism (INAR)
Women's Platform	Inclusion Ireland
Migrant Centre NI	Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre
Irish Congress of Trade Unions	Community Law & Mediation
Participation and the Practice of Rights	Mercy Law Resource Centre
Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland	National Women's Council of Ireland
Rural Community Network	GLAN Global Legal Action Network
Women's Resource & Development Agency	Irish Penal Reform Trust
NIRWN (NI Rural Women's Network)	Donegal Travellers Project
North West Migrants Forum	Africa Solidarity Centre Ireland (ASCI)
Northern Ireland Youth Forum	Spirasi (National Centre for Survivors of Torture in Ireland)

The Rainbow Project	AKIDWA - Network of Migrant Women
Unite the Union (Ireland)	New Horizon Refugee Support
HERe NI	Donegal Intercultural Platform
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP)	Dublin City Community Co-operative
Law Centre NI	Galway City Partnership
North West Forum of People with Disabilities (NWFPD)	Waterways Migrant Support Group
United Against Racism Belfast	
NUS-USI	
Academics & Individuals - Northern Ireland	
Prf Colin Murray	Lecturer in Law, University of Newcastle
Dr Gillian Kane	Lecturer in Law, Ulster University School of Law
Dr Anne Smith	Senior Lecturer, Ulster University
Juliana Poveda Clavijo	PhD Researcher, Ulster University
Dr Claire Lougarre	Lecturer in Law, Ulster University
Hannah Newburn	Solicitor, Children's Law Centre
Laura Hyde	Lecturer in Law, Ulster University
Michael Oghenetega Abu	Doctoral Researcher
Prf Brandon Hamnber	John Hume & Thomas P. O'Neill Chair in Peace, Ulster University
Dr Sarah Craig	Lecturer, School of Law Ulster University
Dr Conall Mallory	Senior Lecturer in Law, Queen's University Belfast
Dr Marisa McVey	Lecturer in Law, Queen's University Belfast
Prf Fionnuala Ni Aolain	Professor of Law, Queen's University of Belfast
Ciara j McHugh	Academic, educator, Queen's University of Belfast
Professor Louise Mallinder	Professor of Law, Queen's University of Belfast
Academics & Individuals - Republic of Ireland	
Dr Andrew Forde	Assistant professor in International Law, Dublin City University
Michael Farrell	Former Member of ECRI, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
Emily Williams	Policing and Justice Policy Officer, Irish Council for Civil Liberties
Prf Colm O'Cinneide	Professor of Constitutional and Human Rights Law, UCL
Damien Peelo	Community Worker

Prf Donncha O'Connell	School of Law, University of Galway
Dr Edel Hughes	Lecturer in Law, Irish Centre for Human Rights, School of Law, University of Galway
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Prf Ray Murphy	School of Law, University of Galway
Cillian Bracken	Barrister
Janos Fiala-Butora	Senior Lecturer, University of Galway, School of Law
Colin Smith SC	Barrister
Garry O'Halloran BL	Barrister
Aoife McMahan	Barrister
Noeline Blackwell	Human rights lawyer and campaigner
Calum MacLaren	Researcher
Dr Maeve O'Rourke	Senior Lecturer in Human Rights Law, Irish Centre for Human Rights, University of Galway
Gerry Liston	Solicitor
Clare Crowley Collier	Volunteer with a support group for International Protection Applicants
Prf Roja Fazaeli	Professor of Law and Islamic Studies, University of Galway
Noeleen Healy	Barrister
Úna Chambers	Activist on behalf of the Afghan community
Alan Greene	Reader in Constitutional Law and Human Rights, Birmingham Law School
Jane Fraher	Chairperson, The Three Sisters Women's Shed
Sarah Clancy	Community Worker and Poet
Aoife Butler	Social care worker
Patricia Jimenez	Integration support worker
Prf Shane Darcy	Professor, Irish Centre for Human Rights, School of Law, University of Galway
Ololade Olawale-Adeniyi	Integration Officer
Frank O'Boyle	Manager, Irish Refugee Council
Nick Henderson	Chief Executive, Irish Refugee Council
Mary Henderson	Solicitor, Immigrant Council of Ireland
Prf Tarlach McGonagle	Law Professor
Zahraa Fakhri	Psychosocial Officer, Spirasi
Jaime Hutton	Youth Worker