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Türkiye vs. human rights, democracy and the rule of law: a race to the bottom

Alexander Seger, 14 July 2026

Ten years after the attempted coup of 15 July 2016, and following the exclusion of Russia from the Council of Europe in 2022, Türkiye is competing with Azerbaijan for the last place among the 46 members of the organization.

Türkiye's shift from a flawed democracy ("partly free" in 2015) to an authoritarian regime is reflected in the systematic dismantling of an independent judiciary, the suppression of press freedoms and the targeting of political opponents.

Following the failed coup of 2016, hundreds of thousands of people were subjected to criminal proceedings (and over 125,000 convicted) for their alleged link to the "Gülen movement" or "FETÖ/PDY" ("Fetullahist Terror Organisation/Parallel State Structure") as it is termed by the Turkish authorities. More than 4,100 judges and prosecutors have been dismissed or arrested. (See my note regarding "[Bylock](#)".)

The case of [Osman Kavala](#) – a philanthropist incarcerated since October 2017 – is representative of arbitrary detention, politically motivated imprisonment, the targeting of human rights defenders and the refusal of Türkiye's regime to comply with decisions of the European Court of Human Rights. Türkiye is only the second State ever – after [Azerbaijan](#) – to be subjected to [infringement proceedings under Article 46.4 of the European Convention on Human Rights](#) for refusing to implement a final judgment of the Court that had ordered his release.

The mayor of Istanbul, [Ekrem İmamoğlu](#) – widely regarded as President Erdoğan's main political rival – was arrested on 19 March 2025, the very day his party nominated him as its candidate for the presidency. He has been in pre-trial detention ever since. His trial, together with more than 400 co-defendants, opened in March 2026, with prosecutors reportedly seeking a prison term of up to 2,430 years. The European Court of Human Rights is dealing with Ekrem İmamoğlu's application concerning the lawfulness of his detention as a matter of priority and [notified the parties in March 2026](#).

The degradation of Türkiye's standards of human rights, democracy and the rule of law and the consolidation of its authoritarian political regime is confirmed by several surveys.

For example, Freedom House’s “[Freedom in the World](#)” reports of 2015 and 2016 (covering the years 2014 and 2015) still assessed Türkiye as “partly free”, with political rights and civil liberties scores of 55/100 and 53/100 respectively. Since the 2018 edition, it has been classified as “not free”, with scores dropping to between 31 and 33.

Freedom in the World: Türkiye 2015 - 2026

FIW Edition	Political rights/40	Civil liberties/60	Total /100	Status
2015	26	29	55	Partly Free
2016	24	29	53	Partly Free
2017	18	20	38	Partly Free
2018	16	16	32	Not Free
2019	15	16	31	Not Free
2020	16	16	32	Not Free
2021	16	16	32	Not Free
2022	16	16	32	Not Free
2023	16	16	32	Not Free
2024	17	16	33	Not Free
2025	17	16	33	Not Free
2026	16	16	32	Not Free

Source: Freedom House reports on “Freedom in the World” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>

Other surveys return similar results.

A composite indicator ranking the currently 46 members of the Council of Europe in 2025 – consisting of V-DEM’s “[liberal democracy index](#)”, the “rule of law” and “voice and accountability” data sets of the World Bank’s “[Worldwide Governance Indicators](#)” and the [Freedom House scores](#) –has Türkiye sitting at the bottom in terms of human rights, democracy and the rule of law – almost. Only Azerbaijan fares worse with scores similar to those of Russia that was expelled in 2022.

The table below is a rough snapshot for 2025 with a tentative composite indicator that would need further refinement.

Data for 2026 may show improvements in some States. But that is unlikely to be the case for Türkiye: given the experience of the past ten years and with presidential elections on the horizon in 2028, data on human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Türkiye will probably indicate a further degradation, and the country risks turning into a closed autocracy before too long.



Human rights, democracy and rule of law: a ranking of Council of Europe member States in 2025 (for discussion)

Rank	Country	V-Dem CLI	WB RoL and V&A	FH totals	FH status	Composite (0-100)	Notes
1	Norway	86.0	100.0	100.0	Free	95.33	
2	Denmark	89.0	98.5	97.0	Free	94.83	
2	Finland	85.0	99.5	100.0	Free	94.83	
4	Sweden	87.0	98.0	99.0	Free	94.67	
5	Switzerland	84.0	98.5	96.0	Free	92.83	
6	Luxembourg	79.0	96.0	97.0	Free	90.67	
7	Estonia	85.0	91.5	95.0	Free	90.50	
7	Ireland	81.0	93.5	97.0	Free	90.50	
9	Netherlands	75.0	95.0	97.0	Free	89.00	
10	Germany	79.0	93.5	93.0	Free	88.50	
11	Belgium	78.0	91.0	96.0	Free	88.33	
12	Iceland	76.0	94.0	94.0	Free	88.00	
13	Austria	74.0	93.5	93.0	Free	86.83	
14	Czechia	79.0	87.5	92.0	Free	86.17	
14	Portugal	75.0	87.5	96.0	Free	86.17	
16	United Kingdom	73.0	89.0	91.0	Free	84.33	
17	Lithuania	73.0	86.5	89.0	Free	82.83	
18	France	71.0	87.5	89.0	Free	82.50	
18	Latvia	76.0	83.5	88.0	Free	82.50	
20	Slovenia	67.0	85.0	95.0	Free	82.33	
21	Spain	72.0	83.5	90.0	Free	81.83	
	Liechtenstein		96.5	90.0	Free		V-Dem data not available
	Andorra		92.5	93.0	Free		V-Dem data not available
	San Marino		86.0	97.0	Free		V-Dem data not available
	Monaco		78.5	84.0	Free		V-Dem data not available
22	Cyprus	66.0	79.5	92.0	Free	79.17	

Rank	Country	V-Dem CLI	WB RoL and V&A	FH totals	FH status	Composite (0-100)	Notes
23	Italy	70.0	76.5	90.0	Free	78.83	
24	Slovakia	65.0	76.0	88.0	Free	76.33	
25	Malta	62.0	76.0	87.0	Free	75.00	
26	Greece	65.0	73.5	85.0	Free	74.50	
27	Croatia	66.0	71.5	84.0	Free	73.83	
28	Poland	64.0	73.5	81.0	Free	72.83	
29	Romania	55.0	67.0	82.0	Free	68.00	
30	Bulgaria	55.0	62.0	78.0	Free	65.00	
31	Montenegro	55.0	58.5	68.0	Partly Free	60.50	
32	North Macedonia	52.0	54.5	67.0	Partly Free	57.83	
33	Moldova	58.0	54.0	61.0	Partly Free	57.67	
34	Hungary	37.0	60.5	65.0	Partly Free	54.17	
35	Albania	40.0	51.0	69.0	Partly Free	53.33	
36	Armenia	44.0	50.5	54.0	Partly Free	49.50	
37	Bosnia and Herzegovina	42.0	46.0	54.0	Partly Free	47.33	
38	Georgia	30.0	50.0	49.0	Partly Free	43.00	
39	Serbia	28.0	46.0	53.0	Partly Free	42.33	
40	Ukraine	34.0	33.0	49.0	Partly Free	38.67	Data reflect martial law restrictions following Russian aggression
41	Türkiye	11.0	32.5	32.0	Not Free	25.17	
42	Azerbaijan	8.0	14.0	6.0	Not Free	9.33	
-	Russia	7.0	9.0	12.0	Not Free	9.33	Expelled from the Council of Europe in 2022