

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls

Ref.: OL LVA 1/2025

(Please use this reference in your reply)

7 November 2025

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences and Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 59/20 and 59/14.

We would like to share our observations concerning the decision of the Parliament (Saeima) on 31 October 2025 to withdraw from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (hereafter the Istanbul Convention) and the consequent refusal to sign the bill on 3 November 2025 by the President of the Republic.

According to the information received:

On 7 October 2021, the Constitutional Court of Latvia ruled that the Istanbul Convention is compatible with the Latvian Constitution, confirming that its provisions do not contradict national constitutional principles. This decision cleared the way for ratification and was cited during subsequent parliamentary debates.

On 1 May 2024 the Istanbul Convention entered into force in Latvia following its ratification and years of debate.

In September 2025, the opposition lawmakers initiated a process to withdraw Latvia from the Istanbul Convention.

On 22 October 2025, the Saeima voted to forward the withdrawal bill to the Foreign Affairs Committee for review. The initiative passed with 55 votes in favor and 33 against, signalling growing support for withdrawal despite Government opposition.

On 24 October 2025, the Saeima granted conceptual approval to the draft law on withdrawal during its first reading. The vote was 52 in favor, with none against and one abstention.

On 29 October 2025, a mass protest took place outside the Saeima building in Riga, with approximately 5,000 people demonstrating against the planned withdrawal. Civil society organizations and human rights defenders urged lawmakers to maintain Latvia's commitment to the Convention.

On 30 October 2025, the Saeima held a second and final reading of the bill during a marathon debate lasting 12-14 hours. All proposed amendments were

rejected. The bill was adopted with 56 votes in favor, 32 against, and 2 abstentions. This decision positioned Latvia to become the first EU Member State to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention.

On 31 October 2025, following the vote, the President of Latvia announced he would review the law within 10 days, as required by the Constitution. He expressed concern that withdrawal would send a “contradictory message” to Latvian society and international partners.

On 3 November 2025, the President formally refused to promulgate the law and returned it to the Saeima for reconsideration. In his letter, he stated that ratifying and denouncing the Convention within one parliamentary term would undermine Latvia’s credibility and conflict with EU principles of loyal cooperation. The President also emphasized that withdrawal without adopting comprehensive national legislation on combating violence against women would create a dangerous legal gap.

We are concerned that should the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention go forward, it would constitute a retrogressive measure in the protection of women and girls from gender-based violence. Repealing a recently accepted, legally binding framework risks creating protection gaps and legal uncertainty across prevention, protection, prosecution and coordinated policies, contrary to the State’s duty to ensure effective remedies and non-discrimination in law and in practice.

We wish to underline that such withdrawal would have serious implications, not only for the safety and rights of women and girls in Latvia, but for Latvia’s international human rights obligations and international and regional leadership and commitments and obligations under international and regional human rights law.

We also observe that, contrary to some of the points raised by Latvian Parliamentarians ahead of the vote, the Istanbul Convention does not “threaten the family” and it does not erase the consideration of “sex” as a distinct ground on which women and girls are discriminated against. The term “sex” is therefore not conflated with other terms that appear in the Convention such as “gender” and “gender identity”. We note that appearance of these terms in the Istanbul Convention reflect the same understanding of such terms covered in international agreements and relevant documents setting forth international standards on the issue. In this regard, we wish to recall the ruling by Latvia’s Constitutional Court in 2020 stating that the Istanbul Convention complies with the Constitution, finding no conflict with Latvia’s Christian values or family protections. It held that the Convention’s definition of “gender” as a social construct does not undermine the definition of sex in the Latvian Constitution or mandate changes to marriage laws in Latvia. The Court also explicitly upheld the Convention’s prohibition on discrimination based on sex as fully compatible with Latvian equality principles.¹ The explicit inclusion of ‘sex’ in article 4(3) of the Istanbul Convention obliges Latvia to ensure that all measures outlined in the Convention are applied without discrimination against women on the basis of sex (as well as other grounds).

¹ <https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/en/press-release/information-regarding-the-judgment-of-the-constitutional-court-of-the-republic-of-latvia-in-case-no-2020-39-02-on-the-compliance-of-the-istanbul-convention-with-the-constitution-of-latvia/>

Latvia acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 14 April 1992. Under articles 1, 2, 3 and 5, Latvia must take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women, to modify social and cultural patterns that sustain gender stereotypes, and to ensure women's equal enjoyment of rights. Article 16 requires equality in marriage and family relations, and general recommendations No. 35 clarifies that gender-based violence against women is a form of discrimination requiring due diligence to prevent, investigate, punish and provide redress. Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention would weaken the comprehensive, purpose-built architecture through which Latvia has been advancing the implementation of its obligations under CEDAW (e.g., specialized services, risk assessment, data collection, training and inter-agency coordination), and would therefore risk non-compliance with the obligation to ensure effective protection against gender-based violence.

Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) acceded to by Latvia at the same time as CEDAW, Latvia must guarantee equality between men and women in the enjoyment of civil and political rights (art. 3), ensure equal protection of the law and non-discrimination (arts. 2(1), 26), protect privacy and family life (art. 17), and take steps to ensure equality of rights and responsibilities of spouses in marriage (art. 23(4)). The Human Rights Committee has clarified that these obligations require effective legislative, policy and institutional measures against gender-based violence. Rolling back a specialized regional framework that underpins national implementation (including survivor-centred services and coordinated measures) would undermine the State's capacity to meet ICCPR duties in practice.

The Istanbul Convention operationalizes standards already derived from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) – notably articles 2, 3, 8 and 14, as interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights to require effective prevention, protection and investigation of gender-based violence and to prohibit discriminatory responses. Denunciation would remove a targeted compliance framework (monitoring by GREVIO, legislative alignment, victim support benchmarks) that complements ECHR obligations, increasing the risk of violations due to inadequate or uncoordinated national responses. Regional reporting has emphasized that Latvia would be the first EU Member State to step back from a major Council of Europe human rights treaty, raising systemic concerns about continuity of safeguards.

We would like to bring to your Excellency's Government attention that a withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention – to which Latvia is also bound via the EU ratification of the Convention in 2023 – would also contradict binding European Union instruments. The EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence of 14 May 2024 is explicitly built on the standards of CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention standards and principles. It is required to be transposed into national law by June 2027. To step away from the Istanbul Convention now – while the country should be aligning its legislation with the EU Directive and implementing its National Action Plan – would represent not continuity but regression. It would send a troubling message of disengagement from the shared legal framework that safeguards women's and girls' rights across.

We consider that a withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention so soon after ratification would deprive Latvia from seeing the benefits that the Istanbul Convention would have on advancing equality between men and women. We note that Latvia has introduced legal, institutional and inter-sectoral reforms since ratification of the Istanbul Convention that have been done in accordance with the Convention and its principles. For example, its plan to combat violence against women and domestic violence 2024-2029 reflects the four pillars of the Convention and underpins the coordinated work of government ministries, law enforcement, civil society and social services. Moreover, Latvia adopted new criminal law provisions addressing stalking, threats and emotional violence; enhanced sanctions; and electronic monitoring of high-risk perpetrators. Since these reforms were put in place because of the treaty framework, withdrawing from the Convention could lead to inconsistency in implementation and to weakened oversight.

A withdrawal would also remove Latvia from regular oversight by the independent body that monitors the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, GREVIO, cutting off an important source of expert guidance and comparative evaluation. That reduction in accountability would not only affect Latvia domestically, but would also set a negative precedent for other States. It would send a message that protections for women are negotiable and dependent on political shifts - a message which would undermine trust in justice and safety systems, discourage reporting of violence, and hinder access to help for survivors.

Finally, we observe that the legislative gap that would result from a withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention would risk to undermine Latvia's commitment under Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality, particularly targets 5.1, 5.2 and 5.9, which call for the elimination of discriminatory laws and of all forms of violence against women and girls, as well as the adoption of enforceable legal frameworks to promote gender equality.

We would like to recall that international and regional human rights law presumes the advancement and protection of human rights and not their retrogression. Once a State has strengthened its legal and institutional framework to address violence against women – such as by ratifying the Istanbul Convention and introducing related reforms – removing those protections without ensuring functionally equivalent safeguards is contrary to obligations under CEDAW, the ICCPR and other human rights instruments and principles.

We therefore strongly call on the Saeima to reconsider and to reaffirm its commitment to the Istanbul Convention and build on the progress achieved so far, strengthening implementation of the National Action Plan, deepening inter-institutional cooperation, expanding specialist support services, and ensuring sustained funding for prevention and women's specialist services.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the description of events and observations made in the present

letter.

2. Please explain how the Saeima intends to review the issue of the Latvia's adherence to the Istanbul Convention following the decision of the President to send the vote to withdraw back to the Latvian Parliament for reconsideration.

This communication, as a comment on pending or recently adopted legislation, regulations or policies, and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) after 48 hours. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

We remain at your disposal should you require any further clarification or assistance with the treaty's implementation. We wish to express again our strong hope that Latvia will continue to lead in promoting gender equality and the elimination of violence against women and girls, rather than retreating from these vital commitments.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Reem Alsalem

Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences

Claudia Flores

Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls