

Candidature of Belgium to the Human Rights Council, 2023-2025

Voluntary pledges and commitments pursuant to General Assembly resolution 60/251

The Kingdom of Belgium has the pleasure to hereby present its candidacy for a seat in the Human Rights Council for the period from 2023 to 2025.

Belgium is strongly committed to multilateralism and to all three pillars of the UN Charter. It is a fervent proponent of international co-operation, an international order based on the rule of law, and of promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction.

Our foreign policy aims to enhance the positive correlation between peace and security, development, and human rights, which are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. We are committed to the promotion and protection of human rights as essential conditions to achieve peace, security, and development, as illustrated by our efforts in advancing human rights during our 2019-2020 Security Council mandate.

Having served on the Human Rights Council in previous terms, most recently from 2016 to 2018, Belgium has demonstrated its strong commitment to the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms, in particular by assuming the vice presidency in 2016 and membership of the working group on situations in 2018. As an observer State, Belgium has also consistently and actively participated in the Council's activities in a constructive manner. It wishes to contribute further to a dynamic and effective Council.

Therefore, Belgium is applying for membership of the Human Rights Council for the period 2023-2025.

I. In the context of its candidacy for the Human Rights Council, Belgium will focus on four thematic areas:

1. Strengthening accountability and the rule of law

Belgium is a strong supporter of the International Criminal Court and its independence, and is one of the main initiators of a proposal for a multilateral treaty for mutual legal assistance and extradition for domestic prosecution of the most serious international crimes.

Together with its partners, Belgium will continue to put the question of the death penalty on the agenda of the Council in order to generate a substantive debate on the issue from a human rights perspective and to move forward the goal of universal abolition.

As a founding member of the Council of Europe, Belgium has consistently advocated for a strong role of regional organizations and arrangements in the promotion and protection of human rights. Convinced of the importance and added value of well-developed regional human rights systems in reinforcing universal human rights standards, Belgium will continue to advocate within the Council in favor of regional organizations or arrangements for the promotion and protection of human rights and of advancing cooperation between international and regional human rights mechanisms.

As founder and co-president of the Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict in Geneva, Belgium will continue to call attention for the plight of children affected by armed conflict.

2. Promoting civic space and protecting human rights defenders

Without the participation of civil society and human rights defenders in the work of the Human Rights Council, the Council is not able to fulfill its mandate. Therefore, Belgium will promote their active and meaningful participation in the work of the Human Rights Council.

Together with its partners, Belgium will also continue its efforts to prevent and combat all forms of intimidation and reprisals against civil society actors who engage with United Nations representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights.

There can be no realization of rights without the space to defend those rights. In standing up for civic space, Belgium will promote the right to freedom of expression and opinion, which is essential for the fulfillment and enjoyment of a wide range of other human rights.

3. Enhancing equality and countering discrimination, with particular attention to women and girls

Since gender equality and the human rights of women and girls are a longstanding priority, Belgium will promote the implementation of the rights of women and girls in all their diversity. Particular attention will be paid to strengthening participation, combating gender-based violence and realizing sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.

As member of the Equal Rights Coalition, Belgium will continue to engage against violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons and to support the mandate of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

In the steadfast resolve to address the scourge of racism, Belgium will continue to draw attention to the plight of all victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

4. Promoting all human rights, civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights in their indivisibility and interdependence

Together with its partners, Belgium will continue to put the issue of extreme poverty and human rights on the agenda of the Human Rights Council.

As co-president of the Group of Friends on Decent work, Belgium will continue to promote decent work and social protection for all and respect for international labor standards.

Guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, its SDGs and the central principle of Leave no one Behind, Belgium will promote the link between human rights and development as well as the human rights based approach to development, encompassing all human rights.

II. Promoting and protecting human rights in the Human Rights Council and across the United Nations

We pledge to:

- remain strongly committed to the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide, a basic condition for peace and development;
- remain committed to the universality, inalienability, indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights for all;
- cooperate with all States to promote and protect human rights for all;
- support the Human Rights Council in its tasks of addressing situations of violations of human rights, serving as a forum for dialogue on thematic issues, and contributing towards the prevention of human rights violations and respond promptly to human rights emergencies;
- uphold our standing invitation to all special procedures of the Human Rights Council and facilitate country visit requests as effectively as possible, respond in a timely manner to special procedures communications and urgent appeals and endeavor to ensure the integrity and independence of the system of special procedures;
- continue its full engagement with the universal periodic review mechanism by ensuring an effective follow-up to recommendations accepted during our review, by formulating thoughtful recommendations to other States, and by supporting projects, through international cooperation, that contribute to the implementation of recommendations and the participation of stakeholders in the universal periodic review process ;
- continue to cooperate fully with the treaty bodies, continue its strong support for the treaty body system, which is at the heart of the global human rights framework and plays a fundamental role in promoting and protecting human rights at the national level, continue to protect and promote its independence, while reviewing ways to improve its efficiency and effectiveness;
- continue to provide political and financial support to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, while respecting and preserving its independence;
- continue to provide contributions to activities aimed at the promotion and protection of human rights, including contributions to relevant funds of the United Nations;
- continue our support to the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict and the UN Team of Experts on the Rule of Law and Sexual Violence;

- continue our support to the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Children and Armed Conflict and to the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict;
- strive to create a safe and enabling environment for civil society and support, through its diplomatic work and development cooperation, an independent civil society working to advance human rights;
- protect and promote the rights of the child, in particular children affected by armed conflict;
- continue our endeavors to ensure that international efforts to combat terrorism will be undertaken in full respect for human rights;
- advocate for the right to freedom of religion or belief, including the freedom to change or abandon one's religion and the right not to profess any religion;
- continue to promote the effective implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and to advocate for an EU framework on business and human rights based on those principles;
- work to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and to further a rights-based approach to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- maintain our efforts to put human rights at the heart of the COVID-19 recovery and promote international solidarity and cooperation.

III. Strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights at the national level

While recognizing that no State has a perfect human rights record, Belgium acknowledges the responsibility of members elected to the Human Rights Council to meet the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights and to cooperate with the Council and its mechanisms.

The promotion and protection of human rights is not only an integral part of the foreign policy of Belgium, but also of its domestic policy, and this within all its governments. In this respect, it must be recalled that Belgium is a unique federal State and that its federalism is based on cooperation. There is no hierarchical distinction between federal laws and the laws of federated entities. Federated entities may cooperate with one another in certain spheres and, where appropriate, with the federal authorities. Such cooperation may be arranged through formal agreements.

Belgium disposes over several sectoral bodies with specialized mandates for the protection and promotion of human rights, at both the federal level and the level of the federated entities, such as the Federal Institute for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, Unia, i.e. the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Action against Racism, the National Commission for the Rights of the Child, and the Data Protection Authority.

Since its previous voluntary pledges and commitments, Belgium ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) (2016), ILO Convention 128 concerning Invalidity, Old-Age and Survivors' Benefits (2017), ILO Convention 130 concerning Medical Care and Sickness Benefits (2017), ILO 167 concerning Safety and Health in Construction (2016), ILO Convention 170 concerning Safety in the use of Chemicals at Work (2017), ILO Convention 172 concerning Working Conditions in Hotels, Restaurants and similar Establishments (2017), ILO Convention 175 concerning Part-Time Work (2016), ILO Convention 187 concerning the promotional framework for occupational safety and health (2018), and Protocol 29 to the ILO Forced Labour Convention (2019).

Belgium also ratified or acceded to eight United Nations human rights instruments and accepted the right of individual complaint under these instruments. At present, Belgium is one of the States having no overdue reports to the Treaty Bodies. In addition, Belgium accepted, as pledged previously, the amendment to article 8 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the amendment to article 20, paragraph 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the amendments to articles 17 (7) and 18 (5) of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2016).

Belgium pledges to do its utmost to ratify as soon as possible: the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, ILO Convention 190 concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work, the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Convention 205), and the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (Protocol 207).

To fulfill its commitment to promoting and protecting human rights, Belgium has adopted or is developing a number of national action plans, such as:

- (a) The sixth national action plan to combat gender-based violence (2021-2025), developed in line with the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the *Istanbul Convention*;
- (b) The fourth national action plan on women, peace, and security (2022-2026);
- (c) The fourth national action plan to combat trafficking in human beings (2021-2025);
- (d) An action plan for a LGBTQI+ Friendly Belgium (2021-2024);
- (e) A second national action plan to implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights;
- (f) A national action plan against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

