

The Role of the Council of Europe in Human Security

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Abstract

The concept of human security shifts the focus from state-centred military defence to a people-centred approach that includes human rights and human development, while also providing a new way of thinking about the various challenges facing the world in this century and how the international community should respond to them through various actions and normative acts, etc. In this regard, international and regional organisations promote human security using various frameworks and initiatives. Among the international and regional organisations, the Council of Europe stands out, comprising 46 member states, which since its establishment has sought to be a guarantor of human rights. Based on these arguments, in this article we intend to highlight the important role of the Council of Europe in ensuring and maintaining human security, with an emphasis on the promotion of human rights, highlighting the activities carried out by this organisation and some of its normative acts. Based on a critical analysis of bibliographic resources, through its content and conclusions, the article can become a relevant bibliographic source for the field of human security.

Keywords: human security, Council of Europe, human rights, activities, threats.

JEL Classification: K33, K38

"Freedom with courage can defeat even the darkest tyranny"²

Maria Corina Machado,

Winner of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize 2024 and the Nobel Peace Prize 2025

1. Introduction

The world we live in faces a diverse range of threats to individuals and their communities. Human security does not replace the traditional term of national security, whose objective is to defend the state against external threats; the two concepts often complement each other.

A number of state and non-state actors are involved in ensuring and maintaining human security. This highlights the "global dimension of human security"³, which is reflected in the joint actions of state and non-state actors, in internationally recognised actions undertaken and substantiated within international organisations, in particular within the United Nations.

Among these actors, the article aims to highlight the role of the Council of Europe in human security, highlighting the activities carried out by this organisation and some of its normative acts. Since its establishment (1944), this international organisation, based in Strasbourg, has had the mission of promoting human rights,

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² <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/10096>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

³ Mihaela Istrate, „Securitatea concept multidimensional” („Security: a multidimensional concept”), *Revista Drepturile Omului (Human Rights Magazine)* no. 2/2013, pp. 31-38, p. 37.

democracy and the rule of law.

Such scientific research is not only necessary, but is also reinforced by the fact that human security, a relatively new concept, requires various approaches that contribute to its theoretical development and present practical aspects materialised in the activities of various actors for the promotion of human security.

The scientific research will cover three areas: a brief history of the concept of human security, aspects of the implementation of the concept of human security, and the Council of Europe's support for human security.

The novelty of this scientific research lies not only in its research directions, but also in the fact that it highlights some of the Council of Europe's efforts to promote human security.

2. Brief history of the concept of human security

The concept of *human security* was initially defined in the *Human Development Report* prepared by the United Nations Development Programme in 1994, and its analysis focuses on four essential characteristics⁴: human security is a universal concern; the interdependence of the components of human security (economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, political security, personal security, community security); prevention, i.e. human security is easier to ensure through early prevention than through subsequent intervention; human security is people-centred.

Unlike territorial security or military security, the concept of human security "*is not a defensive concept (...) it is an integrative concept that recognises the universalism of life-related claims*"; it is rooted in solidarity between people and cannot be ensured and maintained by force with armies opposing other armies⁵.

The concept of human security, still widely debated, is closely linked to *human rights* and *human development*, in the sense that the three concepts – human security, human rights and human development – refer to human lives and impose minimum standards on how all people and communities should relate to human lives.

One of the remarkable developments of this concept is the shift from protection against permanent threats, such as famine, disease, violence, etc., and from protection against sudden and damaging disruptions to daily life to its development in relation to fundamental human rights, freedoms, capabilities or needs that together determine *the core idea of human lives*⁶.

Analysing the concept of human security, Professor Sabina Alkire⁷ argues that human security is included in the scope, i.e. human security identifies and protects a limited core of human activities and abilities, which are fundamental human rights, basic

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1994*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 22-23, available online at <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-1994>, accessed on 5 November 2025.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶ Horațiu-Traian Crișan, *Securitatea umană. O analiză din perspectiva drepturilor individuale (Human Security. An Analysis from the Perspective of Individual Rights)*, in Cătălina-Daniela Răducu, Bogdan Ștefanachi (eds), *Securitatea umană: provocări contemporane (Human Security. Contemporary Challenges)*, Pro Universitaria Publishing House, Bucharest, 2015, pp. 71-86, p.71.

⁷ Details about his work can be found on the website <https://ophi.org.uk/people/professor-sabina-alkire>, accessed on 5 November 2025.

capabilities or absolute needs⁸. She also highlights the valuable contribution of this concept, resulting from the distinctive emphasis it brings to the current security context represented by its objective, which is *"to protect the vital essence of all human lives from critical threats that are omnipresent, in a manner compatible with long-term human fulfilment"*⁹.

For Professor Mary Kaldor, human security refers to the security of the individual (i.e. the physical and material security of the individual) and the community in which they live, rather than the security of the state (national security), i.e. human security corresponds to *"the freedom from fear"* and *"the freedom from want"*¹⁰. According to Professor Mary Kaldor, human security, together with other concepts such as global civil society, human development and human rights, are a response to security challenges¹¹.

The 2005 UN Summit explicitly adopted the concept of human security.

The resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2005 states in paragraph 143: *"Human security: We emphasise the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair. We recognise that all persons, especially the vulnerable, have the right to live free from fear and want, with equal opportunities to enjoy all their rights and develop their full human potential."*¹²

Referring to this document, Professor Mary Kaldor recalls the contribution of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who introduces this concept as a combination of freedom from want (freedom from want) and freedom from fear (freedom from fear). This combination is appreciated by Professor Mary Kaldor as deliberate echoes of the four freedoms in President Franklin Roosevelt's 1941 speech, known as the "Four Freedoms Speech" - freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear, which later became part of the preamble to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The concept of human security seems in itself to be an unachievable project, similar to that of international security, but its introduction into debates on security policies promotes collective responsibility to intervene and protect.

According to the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, the human security approach is *"a crucial objective for achieving sustainable development"*¹³.

Proponents of human security theory have analysed the direct and indirect sources of threats¹⁴:

⁸ Sabina Alkire, *A Conceptual Framework for Human Security*, Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, CRISE Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, 2003 p. 3.

⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁰ Mary Kaldor, „Human Security: Practical Possibilities”, *LSE Public Policy Review*, vol. 1, issue 2, 2020: art. 7, pp. 1–8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.15>.

¹¹ For more details, see Mary Kaldor, *Securitatea umană (Human Security)*, CA Publishing, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, pp. 19-23.

¹² *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2005*, 8th plenary meeting 16 September 2005, available online at <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/60/1>, accessed on 07.11.2025.

¹³ United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, *Human Security Handbook. An integrated approach for the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the priority areas of the international community and the United Nations system*, Human Security Unit, United Nations, January 2016, p. 8, <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/h2.pdf>, accessed on 07.11.2025.

¹⁴ Alexandra Sarcinchi, *Operațiile de stabilitate și securitatea umană (Stability Operations and Human Security)*, Carol I National Defence University Press, Bucharest, 2008, pp.10-11, <https://cssas.unap.ro/ro/pdf>

- *direct threats*: violent death/disability (victims of violent crime, killing of women and children, terrorism, riots, pogroms, genocide, torture and killing of dissidents, war victims, etc.); dehumanisation (slavery, kidnapping, arrest of political opponents, etc.); drugs (drug addiction, illegal trafficking); discrimination (discriminatory legislation, practices against minorities, undermining of political institutions, etc.); international disputes (tensions and crises between states); weapons of destruction (proliferation of weapons of mass destruction);

- *indirect threats*: deprivation of basic human needs (food, water, basic medical care, primary education); diseases (incidence of life-threatening diseases and conditions); natural and/or man-made disasters and environmental degradation at national, zonal, regional and global levels; underdevelopment (low GDP per capita, slow GDP growth, inflation, unemployment, inequality, poverty, economic instability, stagnation and demographic change at national, zonal, regional and global levels, etc.); population displacement (refugees and migration at national, zonal, regional and global levels).

Threats to human security come from various areas (social, political, economic, health and environmental).

Reducing and stopping threats to human security requires the development of a comprehensive and logically coherent understanding of human security.

3. Aspects of implementing the concept of human security

A number of actors are involved in promoting the concept of human security.

The United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security¹⁵, established in 1999, finances activities carried out by the United Nations system that translate the human security approach into practical action and deliver concrete and sustainable benefits to vulnerable individuals and communities whose survival, livelihoods and dignity are threatened.

The Human Security Unit¹⁶, established in 2004, aims to integrate the human security approach into the work of the United Nations system and strengthen the organisation's response to the multiple and complex challenges of today's world.

The United Nations Development Programme¹⁷, established in 1966, supports human development, improves people's living standards and protects the planet through all its activities.

The Human Security Network¹⁸ is an association of 12 countries (Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Greece, Ireland, Jordan, Mali, Norway, Panama, Slovenia, Switzerland and Thailand) and South Africa as an observer, which was established in 1999 with the aim of promoting the concept of human security as an element of national and international policies, particularly within the United Nations and in cooperation with

f_studii/operatiile_de_stabilitate_si_securitatea_umana.pdf, accessed on 07.11. 2025.

¹⁵ More details on the website <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/trustfund/>, accessed on 07.11. 2025.

¹⁶ More details on the website <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/human-security-unit/>, accessed on 07.11. 2025.

¹⁷ More details on the website <https://www.undp.org/>, accessed on 07.11. 2025.

¹⁸ More details on the website <https://www.austria.org/the-human-security-network>, accessed on 07.11. 2025.

academia and civil society.

The Human Security Collective¹⁹ is a foundation based in The Hague, whose objective is to address issues related to development, security and citizen engagement in their communities, fostering dialogue between civil society, policy makers and other actors to promote alternative approaches to current human security practices.

In addition to these, other actors also make an important contribution to promoting human security in theory and practice.

The academic community has made a remarkable contribution to the understanding and development of the concept of human security. Articles, books (e.g. Dorothy Estrada-Tanck, *Human Security and Human Rights Under International Law. The Protections Offered to Persons Confronting Structural Vulnerability*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019; *Social Inequality and Human Security. Case Studies from Asia*, Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Incorporated, 2025), statistics, journals (such as *the Journal of Human Security*²⁰, *the Journal of Human Security and Global Law*²¹ or *the Journal on Migration and Human Security*²², which include various interdisciplinary scientific research, are just some of the academic efforts aimed at contributing to the theoretical development of this concept.

International and regional organisations contribute to putting human security theory into practice through various actions, supporting the assurance and maintenance of human security.

For **the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation**, the concept of human security refers to the risks and threats to the population in the areas where it conducts operations, missions or activities, but also to ways of mitigating and responding to them; at the same time, it recognises the importance of reducing the impact of its actions on civilian populations in conflict areas and in any other area where it carries out activities²³. To this end, it has a series of policies and guidance documents on human security, including on the protection of civilians (2016), preventing and combating sexual violence in conflict (2021), combating trafficking in human beings (updated in 2023) and children and armed conflict (2023).

In **the European Union**, the document "A Human Security Doctrine for Europe. The Barcelona Report of the Study Group on Europe's Security Capabilities" is one of the key documents in establishing the European Union's approach to human security. According to this document, "*the European Union's security policy should be based on human security rather than state security*"²⁴. The 2008 report of the European Council on the implementation of the European Security Strategy, five years after its adoption, is the first explicit and official reference to human security as a guiding theme of the European Union's thinking on security²⁵. In practice, the European Union promotes

¹⁹ More details on the website <https://www.hscollective.org/>, accessed on 07.11. 2025.

²⁰ <https://jhumansecurity.com/>, accessed on 07.11. 2025.

²¹ <https://revistes.uab.cat/jhsgl/about>, accessed on 07.11. 2025.

²² <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mhs>, accessed on 07.11. 2025.

²³ *Human security*, available online at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_181779.htm, accessed on 10.11.2025.

²⁴ This document is available online at <https://humansecuritycourse.info/module-1-the-concept-of-human-security/eu-approach/>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

²⁵ Mary Martin, Mary Kaldor, *The European Union and Human Security External interventions and missions*, Routledge Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009, p.1.

human security through internal actions, such as combating organised crime, combating terrorism, etc., and external actions, such as civilian and military missions abroad to support peace and stability.

Of course, the list of actors involved in promoting and implementing the concept of human security is much longer. Below, we will present the role of the Council of Europe and some of the activities carried out to put this concept into practice.

4. The Council of Europe in support of human security

The Council of Europe has a threefold mission: to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Europe and beyond.

Based on the assertion that human security is closely linked to human rights and human development, it is recognised that the Council of Europe is a guardian of human rights. Therefore, its role in ensuring and maintaining human security is very important and is reflected in both its documents and its activities. Among its many achievements²⁶, we recall:

- ***the abolition of the death penalty***: the adoption of Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights abolishing the death penalty, followed in May 2002 by Protocol No. 13 on its abolition in all circumstances. In this regard, the Council of Europe has established that the abolition of the death penalty is a precondition for membership. Since 1997, no executions have been carried out in any of the 46 member states of this organisation;

- ***the establishment of 10 October as the European and World Day against the Death Penalty***: both the Council of Europe and the European Union promote the fundamental right to life and combat discourse promoting the reintroduction of the death penalty;

- ***strengthening human rights***, i.e. any state wishing to become a member state of the Council of Europe must be subject to independent monitoring mechanisms that assess compliance with human rights and democratic practices. Among the monitoring mechanisms, we mention: The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture regularly conducts unannounced visits to places of detention in the 46 member states (prisons, police stations, detention centres for foreigners) in order to assess how persons deprived of their liberty are treated; The European Committee of Social Rights verifies the implementation by the countries concerned of the rights to housing, health, education, employment and freedom of movement, as guaranteed by the European Social Charter;

- ***gender equality***: the Strategy for Gender Equality 2024-2029 and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (2011) aim to combat all forms of discrimination against women and promote the role of women in society;

- ***quality of medicines and healthcare***: access to quality medicines and healthcare and the promotion and protection of human and animal health is the mission of the Council of Europe's European Directorate for the Quality of Medicines & Healthcare.

²⁶ Presented in detail on the website <https://www.coe.int/ro/web/about-us/achievements>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

We can see from these achievements that they cover parts of human security, like personal safety and health security.

The Council of Europe's work reflects its comprehensive approach to human rights, democracy and the rule of law. There are numerous examples; we will present a few.

Cross-cutting themes²⁷, such as public health, environmental protection, migration, European partnerships or the evolving legacy of the European Convention on Human Rights, reflect the Council of Europe's work in the field of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

In addition to the European Convention on Human Rights²⁸, more than 200 other international treaties have been adopted within the Council of Europe, covering a wide range of topics such as economic and social rights, physical abuse, legal cooperation, culture and education. In the content of this important document, the term human security has a specific reference in Article 5, "the right to liberty and security".

According to this article, everyone has the right to liberty and security of person, and no one shall be deprived of their liberty except in the cases mentioned in Article 5(1) and in accordance with the procedure prescribed by law. However, there are also cases where people are detained by governments without adequate justification, accused of a crime without adequate evidence or imprisoned for political reasons.

In this regard, we will present a few of the cases²⁹:

- The European Court of Human Rights ruled that the detention of Ilgar Mammadov, after he published a blog post criticising the government, was politically motivated; for the first time in history, the Council of Europe launched a special procedure against a member state in connection with Azerbaijan's response to the ruling, which ultimately led Azerbaijan to release Ilgar Mammadov and overturn his conviction;

- Legislation in Bulgaria and Poland was amended to protect the right to liberty of individuals, following rulings by the European Court of Human Rights (individuals who were imprisoned for crimes they did not commit, and the authorities of the two states did not provide valid reasons).

- legal safeguards for the placement and detention in psychiatric institutions of vulnerable persons who cannot make legal decisions for themselves introduced by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, after the European Court of Human Rights ruled that keeping H.L., who suffered from autism, in hospital as an "informal patient" after he suffered a mental health crisis was equivalent to detention and that British law did not protect him sufficiently.

In the field of environmental protection, the Council of Europe's work focuses on the link with human rights. Through its conventions, recommendations, resolutions and reports,³⁰ seeks to ensure that disaster resilience, biodiversity conservation and environmental protection are linked to human dignity and well-being, the latter being

²⁷ More on these topics at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/files>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

²⁸ Available online at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/impact-convention-human-rights/#/>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

²⁹ Mentioned on the website <https://www.coe.int/en/web/impact-convention-human-rights/right-to-liberty-and-security>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

³⁰ Can be accessed on the website https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/environment#portlet_com_liferay_journal_content_web_portlet_JournalContentPortlet_INSTANCE_XXOQKogxtZZw, accessed on 10.11.2025.

aspects of human security.

Another example of the application of human security is the establishment of *the Human Rights Trust Fund* in March 2008, with the mission of financing states in compliance with their commitments under the European Convention on Human Rights and other Council of Europe human rights standards.

Fundamental values – human rights, democracy and the rule of law are common values of the Council of Europe and the European Union, the relations between them being established in the following documents: Compendium of texts governing relations between the Council of Europe and the European Union; Memorandum of Understanding between the Council of Europe and the European Union³¹.

Excellence, innovation and commitment to human rights and democratic values are promoted through a series of prestigious awards and competitions, which highlight the efforts of individuals and institutions, as well as initiatives that make a significant contribution in the field of justice, human dignity and cultural cooperation³²: *Council of Europe North-South Prize, Raoul Wallenberg Prize, Crystal Scales of Justice, Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, European Drug Prevention Prize, The Museum Prize, Europe Prize, Vigdís Prize for Women's Empowerment, René Cassin European Human Rights Competition, European human rights moot court competition.*

Through all its undertakings, the Council of Europe inspires and mobilises through its mission. Without exhausting the examples, its role in human security is edifying. Recognition of this role can also be inferred from the speech given by María Corina Machado at the 2025 World Forum for Democracy, from which we quote: "*The Council of Europe is a moral compass for free nations. You are friends of human rights, pluralism and the rule of law, inspiring those of us who continue to fight in the darkest circumstances*"³³.

5. Conclusions

Human security is still a widely debated topic; it serves as an analytical lens and programming framework that complements and enriches the mechanisms for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Dignity, tolerance and respect for human rights are some of the key words in the efforts of state and non-state actors to ensure and maintain human security.

Through its mission, the Council of Europe approaches human security from a sustainable development perspective, integrating human rights, environmental protection and social welfare into its policies and contributing to the development of the theoretical approach to human security, inspiring and stimulating other actors.

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³¹ These documents are available online at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/european-union>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

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³³ <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/10096>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

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