

Background and guidance for Workshop Session

Better addressing HRDs' protection needs on the ground: from gaps to action

9:30 am – 1:00 pm

Taking action to better document and act on cases of arbitrary detention

Altiero Spinelli, Room 5.G.2, 5th floor

Facilitator

Emma Achilli, Chair of HRDN European Parliament Working Group and EU Adviser of the International Dalit Solidarity Network

Objectives

In this workshop, participants will discuss ideas and recommendations on how to better monitor, prevent and address cases of arbitrary detention of HRDs, exploring best practices and ways of working in synergy between HRDs, civil society, the EU and international institutions, and looking at the issue from a multifactorial perspective.

Background

Every year, hundreds of HRDs are unlawfully incarcerated.

Arbitrary imprisonment raises the possibility of other violations, such as extrajudicial execution, involuntary and enforced disappearance, and torture or other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.

One of the major difficulties with arbitrary detention is that it is often carried out in secret. While HRDs themselves engage in monitoring and bringing cases to the attention of protection mechanisms and policy makers, this is very challenging and responses remain unsatisfactory.

The engagement of political actors including the EU and international institutions on cases of arbitrary detention can prove a major asset, with political dialogue and negotiation often helping in emergencies and resulting in the release of HRDs. Yet, there is a lack of consistency and impact is limited to very few emblematic cases, while the situation of most HRDs subject to arbitrary detention, including for long periods, remains unaddressed

Guiding questions

- How can arbitrary arrest of defenders be more effectively prevented?
- What measures could defenders, and stakeholders supporting them, take to minimize any risk of arbitrary detention?
- How can different actors better cooperate in order to monitor and raise awareness about cases of arbitrary detention of HRDs?
- How could the EU, its Member States and international institutions best respond to emergency situations of arbitrary detention and/or imminent risk of arbitrary detention when communication with the authorities has stopped?
- Which are the areas where financial and programmatic support would be most needed to prevent and respond to cases of arbitrary detention?

Useful resources

UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, [“Report on the long term detention of human rights defenders”](#) (2021)

Promoting public support for, recognition of and positive narratives on HRDs

Altiero Spinelli, Room 5.G.375, 5th floor

Facilitator

Myriam Goinard, Head of Unit of the Secretariat of the Subcommittee on Human Rights/Human Rights Unit, European Parliament

Objectives

In this workshop, participants will exchange experiences and ideas with a view to identify actionable recommendations for policy makers to promote public support for, recognition of and positive narratives on HRDs, and building a more enabling environment for HRDs to carry out their work.

Background

A growing tendency can be observed of public and political actors in many parts of the world using narratives that stigmatize HRDs and civil society. HRDs are increasingly labeled in the public and political discourse, including in established democracies, as a threat to public order, security and stability, and labelled as anti-patriotic, “foreign agents”, “terrorists” or “violent extremists”, “spreading immorality” and other derogatory terms, aimed to vilify and smear them.

Such narratives are often used as a justification for, and compounded with, the adoption of restrictive laws or policies targeting HRDs and civil society, for example as actors of disinformation or malicious foreign interference. These negative and stigmatising discourses fuel negative perceptions about HRDs, their work and their legitimacy and can expose HRDs to attacks and serious human rights violations by both State and non-State actors.

In the current context of global instability and increased threats to peace, security and people’s wellbeing, there is an indication that these narratives have significantly increased and spread, creating a hostile environment and chilling effect affecting HRDs and civil society, and more broadly the exercise of rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, expression and association as well as the right to public participation.

To ensure an enabling environment where HRDs can feel safe and empowered to carry out their work, it is essential to prevent and counter the emergence and spread of these narratives.

Guiding questions

- How can communication strategies and public campaigns more effectively highlight the essential role of HRDs in advancing democracy and human rights?
- What steps can institutions at EU and international level take to actively promote public recognition of HRDs and counter stigmatizing or hostile narratives?
- What funding or programmatic actions can be implemented, including at EU level, to support HRDs in developing their own positive narratives and increasing their visibility?
- What concrete recommendations should the EU prioritize in the upcoming institutional term to institutionalize public support and recognition for HRDs at the EU and national levels?
- How can the EU, its Member States and international institutions ensure that HRDs' voices are amplified and integrated into public dialogues, including through collaborations with media, civil society, and grassroots movements?

Useful resources

UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, “[Protecting the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association from stigmatization](#)” (2024)

Civil Liberties Union for Europe, “[How to talk about civic space: a guide for progressive civil society facing smear campaigns](#)” (2021)

Facilitating HRDs' access to and presence in the EU during emergencies, temporary relocation, or for effective advocacy

Altiero Spinelli, Room 5.G.305, 5th floor

Facilitator

Javier Roura, Head of Programmes and Partnerships, [ProtectDefenders.eu](https://www.protectdefenders.eu)

Objectives

This workshop aims to gather ideas and recommendations from participants on how to concretely improve human rights defenders' access to the EU during emergencies, for temporary relocation, long-term stays, and advocacy efforts, by enhancing and streamlining EU mobility schemes, improving visa processes and long-term support options.

Background

Visas and multiple-entry visas are widely regarded by the international human rights defenders community as a vital element of a comprehensive security strategy, one that enables HRDs to consider the possibility to move in and out of their country in a way that allows them to manage the level of risk that they face as a result of their work, and to continue to work in their communities without forcing them to resort to permanent asylum paths when facing aggravated threats.

Yet, the community in support of human rights defenders have systematically noted and documented with great concern the numerous, diverse, and blatant obstacles for defenders to access visas, including to the EU territory.

The lack of consistent procedures for HRDs to effectively and predictably access visas for the EU territory hinders them from accessing safe haven when necessary, from engaging in existing opportunities for rest and respite and benefitting from temporary relocation programmes, and carrying out essential international advocacy, mobilisation, or networking activities in the EU territory.

While guidance has been developed by civil society experts and EU institutions, including recommendations outlined in the latest updates to EU visa policies – in particular the updated Visa Code Handbook, to address the hurdles HRDs encounter in securing both short-term and long-term stays in the EU, it is crucial to operationalise such guidance in processes and solutions at national level that are flexible, accessible, and responsive to the diverse and urgent mobility, protection and support needs of HRDs, with particular attention to the complexities of emergency situations, long-term exile and the difficulties in obtaining sustained assistance.

Guiding questions

- What specific changes to EU and Member State visa and mobility policies and options would most improve HRDs' access to short- and long-term stays for emergencies, relocation, or advocacy, and how can these policies be streamlined for rapid response and sustainability?
- How could EU institutions and Member States develop a dedicated support framework for HRDs' mobility and protection, ensuring flexibility for various types of relocation and advocacy needs?
- What mechanisms could the EU and EUMS establish to ensure fair and swift processing of entry and residency permits for HRDs at risk, especially in urgent, high-stakes situations?
- In cases of temporary relocation, what forms of support (financial, logistical, psychological) are most essential for HRDs to maintain their well-being and advocacy work, and how could EU programs enhance this support?

Useful resources

[ProtectDefenders.eu](https://protectdefenders.eu) | [Visa for Defenders Initiative](#)

EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, "[Protecting human rights defenders at risk: EU entry, stay and support](#)" (2023)

European Parliament, [DROI Study: "Enhancing the protection of human rights defenders \(HRDs\): Facilitating access to the EU and supporting HRDs from third countries"](#) (2024)

[ProtectDefenders.eu](https://protectdefenders.eu). [Navigating the updated EU Visa Code Handbook: Guidance Notes for HRDs, CSOs, and Member States](#)

Countering criminal prosecutions and legal harassment of HRDs

Altiero Spinelli, Room 5.G.2, 5th floor

Facilitator

Jade Vignial, Advocacy Officer at Protection International

Objectives

In this workshop, participants will discuss and exchange experiences, practices and ideas on how policy makers, in particular from EU and international institutions, can help counter criminal prosecutions and legal harassment - including addressing the proliferation of disproportionate criminal laws, promoting anti-SLAPPs laws and ensuring fair trials.

Background

HRDs face increasing challenges linked to the misuse of the legal and judicial systems with the intent to discredit, sabotage or impede their work.

Such misuse can take different and compounded forms – from the introduction of vague criminal offences and disproportionate penalties, to unjust or malicious prosecutions and other abusive legal claims by State or non-State actors, many of which may qualify as SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation).

Different civil and criminal laws may be instrumentalised to that effect, with many reported cases relating for example to defamation and blasphemy, counter-terrorism, threats to public order, organised crime, smuggling, breach of privacy and copyright, or violation of property rights. Due to their legitimate facade, criminalisation and legal harassment instances threaten the security and work of targeted HRDs and have a broader impact on human rights, especially freedoms of expression, assembly and association, as well as the right to public participation.

Guiding questions

- Given the impact of criminalisation and legal harassment on HRDs, their collectives and families, what are the most urgent protection needs for HRDs facing such challenges?
- What are some good practices that have successfully helped HRDs facing criminalisation and legal harassment and that could be replicated?
- How can the EU, its Member States and international institutions, including at the level of their field presences, engage more effectively and politically with governments and private actors to prevent and counter criminal prosecutions and legal harassment of HRDs?
- Which are the areas where financial and programmatic support would be most needed to support civil society efforts to protect HRDs from criminalisation and legal harassment?

Useful resources

[OHCHR, Briefer “The impact of SLAPPs on human rights and how to respond” \(2024\)](#)

[Protection International, “Criminalisation of Human Rights Defenders: Categorisation of the problem and measures in response” \(2015\)](#)

Addressing transnational repression, including digital threats and surveillance

Altiero Spinelli, Room 5.G.365, 5th floor

Facilitator

Antoine Bernard, Director, Advocacy & Assistance, Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Objectives

In this workshop, participants will exchange ideas with the aim of gathering key recommendations and proposals for policy makers in the EU, its Member States and international institutions on how to better protect and support HRDs against transnational repression, including when perpetrated through digital means of repression, such as cyber harassment, hacking and surveillance.

Background

HRDs in exile increasingly report to be in grave danger because of the alarming rise of transnational repression from their home governments and inadequate protection and support in their host countries.

At time when borders are becoming increasingly permeable to authoritarian regimes, including due to the proliferation of digital means of repression, many HRDs who have fled their countries face physical, digital and legal threats from their home governments.

Host States often lack the political will, or the capacity and resources to protect and support HRDs in such situations. Sometimes, the authorities in the host country may even collude with the home State and become a conscious enabler of transnational repression. The limited engagement of, and with, private actors, and in particular digital platforms, also adds a layer of complexity to the challenge of ensuring effective responses to transnational repression.

Guiding questions

- Which measures are most needed to better protect HRDs in exile or diaspora community from transnational repression? Have you identified good practices in this regard?
- What are key measures to promote systematic investigations into transnational threats and attacks, including online repression, to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable?
- What is needed to establish effective mechanisms to ensure access to justice, remedy and reparation for victims, with the due attention being paid to the particular needs of specific categories of HRDs, such as women, LGBTI defenders or Indigenous leaders?
- What regulatory, funding or programmatic measures could be implemented to support efforts to address transnational repression?
- Which role and responsibilities do private actors, including digital platforms, have, in terms of ensuring due diligence and accountability, and how can the EU, its Member States and international institutions better leverage them?

Useful resources

[Freedom House, Transnational Repression](#)

[UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, “Journalists in exile” \(2024\)](#)

[OHCHR, “Civic Space & Tech Brief - Hacking and Spyware \(2024\)](#)

Leveraging synergies in protection works for coherent but tailored responses to the needs of specific categories of HRDs

Altiero Spinelli, Room 5.G.315, 5th floor

Facilitator

Chian Yew Lim, Human Rights Officer, Civic Space Unit, OHCHR

Objectives

This workshop will explore how human rights and protection actors can break silos and fill the gaps in the protection of HRDs and civil society actors while tailoring their responses to the particular challenges and needs faced by specific groups of people.

Background

'Siloization' in human rights work has become a trend that has certain impacts on resource mobilization and common human rights vision or goals.

Whether someone is fighting against corruption or the climate change; strengthening rule of law, justice and accountability, protecting the rights of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, minorities, refugees, or promoting media freedom and labour rights, these are crosscutting human rights issues, and whoever is promoting and defending a human right is a human rights defender, no matter how s/he is labelled or from what background s/he is from.

Against the background of common challenges, it becomes key to mainstream equality and non-discrimination and apply an intersectional perspective and approach to protection work. Enhanced synergies and bridging collaboration gaps across different actors and sectors is also crucial with a view to strengthening the reach, effectiveness and impact of protection efforts.

Guiding questions

- Which are the main obstacles hindering synergies and collaboration between human rights and protection actors working in different areas and at different levels, and what is their impact on HRDs?
- How could these gaps be overcome, and are there any good practices in this respect, which could be replicated?
- What are key strategies to ensure that specific needs of different HRDs are safeguarded and not overlooked in the process of desilo'ing?
- How can international and regional institutions, including the EU, ensure that their policies and initiatives, including funding, help to break siloes in human rights and protection work, while enhancing targeted and tailored support for HRDs and civil society actors?
- How can international and regional institutions, including the EU, promote better cooperation among civil society actors working in different areas and at different levels, and help enhance synergies in their efforts?

Useful resources

[UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space \(2020\)](#)