

## HRDs PROTECTION COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FOR EUROPE

### Terms of reference

#### 1. Background and purpose

Human rights defenders (HRDs), including individuals, groups and organizations, continue to face criminalization, harassment, reprisals, transnational repression, smear campaigns and shrinking civic space. Europe is no exception, as documented by international and regional bodies including the UN Office for the High-Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, the Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Commission and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), also building on the continued monitoring and reporting efforts by civil society organizations.

A number of **support and protection mechanisms** are available to HRDs in the region (see [here](#) a recent mapping by an informal coalition of civil society organizations). These include institutional mechanisms and initiatives of various nature and scope at the level of the UN, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE-ODIHR), as well as EU institutions and bodies; as well as local, national and regional networks, initiatives and projects, involving actors such as local and national authorities, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and ombudspersons; alongside various civil society-led initiatives, which play a particularly critical role in offering immediate support, monitoring threats, and ensuring the safety of at-risk HRDs, as well as capacity building initiatives for HRDs and civil society actors more broadly. Over the past years, efforts have led to various initiatives seeking to improve access to protection and support for HRDs across the region and coordinated steps to address key challenges including on facilitating mobility and relocation to the EU of HRDs at risk from third countries and on transnational repression.

Despite existing mechanism and commitments, civil society has continued to point at **persisting protection gaps and a high level of fragmentation** of the regional protection landscape – with HRDs from Europe often unable to get targeted support and protection against the background of context-specific structural and political challenges they face, and non-European HRDs relocated in the region lacking integration, legal status and long-term support. At the same time, protection efforts are also increasingly undermined by a challenging political landscape which has proved unfavorable to progressive policies and activism in a number of European States, and by severe budget cuts by States and philanthropic actors who traditionally have been funders of the work and protection of HRDs.

Against this background, civil society organizations, HRDs and stakeholders have drawn attention to the need to **strengthen the coherence and impact of protection efforts** at European level – with many [calling](#) upon institutional actors to support the establishment of a fully-fledged regional protection mechanism for HRDs and civic space actors in Europe. Protection actors, experts and policy makers working in the region, gathering at a 2025 Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue on Human Rights Defenders Mobility and Protection in the EU which OHCHR Europe co-hosted with civil society partners, [underlined](#) in this context the importance to ensure a comprehensive regional protection framework which is fit to effectively address different realities faced by HRDs from Europe and relocated in Europe, supporting them in facing common challenges while catering for their different needs. To that effect, **coordinated efforts, alliances and synergies** are seen as key also as a way to foster political commitment and increased investments to improve the protection of HRDs across the Europe region.

In response to these calls, and informed by a series of targeted consultations, OHCHR Regional Office for Europe (OHCHR Europe) is constituting an **HRDs Protection Community of Practice for Europe** (hereinafter ‘HRDs Protection CoP for Europe’), as part of its continued engagement to encourage and support efforts, in particular by EU institutions and its Member States, to promote and protect civic space and an enabling and safe environment for HRDs in Europe and beyond.

The HRDs Protection CoP for Europe is meant as a space for **engagement and collaboration** for organizations and actors invested in HRDs protection in its different forms at regional level, to regularly connect in order to better support and complement each other’s efforts, expand opportunities for collaborations and synergy, develop shared strategies and initiatives and leverage commitment, responses and support by institutional actors as well as donors.

The HRDs Protection CoP for Europe will ensure **synergy and complementarity** with existing coordination and collaboration fora and initiatives, and will ensure a multi-stakeholders approach to build trust and ensure alliances within the protection community, and secure ownership of and commitment to identified responses, in particular by seeking active membership/involvement of key institutional actors including from EU institutions and other regional organizations, international actors and national governments. As such, the HRDs Protection CoP for Europe will build on, and seek to support the implementation of, relevant policy initiatives, including those envisaged by the recently adopted [EU Civil Society Strategy](#) to achieve stronger and more coordinated protection at Member State, EU and international level.

The HRDs Protection CoP for Europe builds on the positive experience of a **Global Community of Practice on Protection** which OHCHR has co-led with civil society partners since 2023 human rights defenders (HRDs) to advance on strengthening the global protection ecosystem through enhanced exchange, cooperation and synergies, and engaging decision-makers and donors at global level against the background of challenges and protection gaps faced by HRDs worldwide. The establishment of the HRDs Protection CoP for Europe is part of a broader effort by OHCHR to replicate and tailor discussions and efforts to the specific realities and needs of HRDs on the ground in different world regions, and to be able to better engage relevant regional and local actors both in terms of membership and in terms of dialogue with policy makers and stakeholders.

## 2. Objectives

In line with the overall objectives of the Global Community of Practice on Protection, the HRDs Protection CoP for Europe aims at strengthening the regional protection ecosystem and its responsiveness to diverse and changing needs, in particular by:

- 1) providing a space for CoP members **to regularly exchange about key protection needs, trends and emerging challenges** including at sub-regional or national level, building on the existing work of CoP members and partners and on a direct engagement with affected HRDs;
- 2) promoting **joint thinking** and encouraging **collaborative actions** among CoP members to improve responses to emergency situations/specific trends/country situations/individual cases, leveraging the role of different actors and available protection/redress mechanisms and tools, including through the elaboration of **joint initiatives/proposals** piloting or testing innovative solutions based on peer learning and the replication and deepening of good practices
- 3) fostering **institutional action to better support HRDs at risk** and **promoting investments** in protection work through regular and joint engagement with policy makers and donors

### 3. Geographic scope

The geographic scope of the HRDs Protection CoP for Europe covers the wider Europe region, including **EU Member States, EU candidate and potential candidate countries**, as well as other associated European countries, and notably **European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries** and the **UK**. These countries are united by a set of shared values and a common supranational legal and/or policy framework, already benefit from various degrees of cross-border integration and cooperation initiatives and programmes which offer a fertile ground for enhanced collaborations and synergies.

It is understood that the geographic scope would simply **circumscribe the countries where** HRDs Protection CoP for Europe **members are based and/or operate in**, with the understanding that the CoP will aim at supporting protection efforts benefitting HRDs in the region irrespective of their nationality – be it HRDs from Europe, or HRDs from other countries who are in a short- or long-term relocation in Europe.

### 4. Membership

The HRDs Protection CoP for Europe brings together different actors involved or invested in the protection of HRDs across the region on the basis of their own expression of interest.

CoP members may include **entities, organizations and networks** active on the protection of HRDs, or civic space more broadly, at regional, sub-regional or national level, including:

- civil society and non-governmental organizations;
- national human rights institutions (NHRIs) and their European network (ENNHRI);
- international, multilateral and regional organizations
- donor entities.

While the CoP is not intended as a forum for individual membership, regular and meaningful engagement with individual HRDs will be ensured.

Member entities, organizations and networks are required to appoint **one main and one alternate representative** to the CoP. The appointment of such representatives shall ensure the best possible **geographic, demographic and gender balance**.

The Facilitators Group (see below, section 5 on Governance and Structure) ensures the initial **vetting** of entities, organizations and networks interested in joining the regional CoP, in order to ensure each member's full adherence to human rights standards and principles, including equality and non-discrimination, and prevent all risks for CoP members, their partners and HRDs being exposed to any form of harassment or reprisals, in line with the UN policy on to prevent and address intimidation and reprisals.

The membership list is **annually reviewed** by the Facilitators Group, or on an *ad-hoc* basis in case any alleged **misconduct** of a CoP member is disclosed or reported.

Members of the HRDs Protection CoP for Europe are **expected** to:

1. Participate in CoP meetings and activities regularly: if members are inactive for 6 months, the Facilitators Group will reach out and ask to reconfirm interest
2. Share relevant initiatives, information, tools and other resources with the CoP
3. Be open to actively contribute to thematic work or collaborative projects/actions
4. Engage as appropriate their own networks and members in the CoP's activities and efforts
5. Suggest new members from diverse background to enrich the diversity of the CoP

## 5. Governance and structure

The overall coordination of the HRDs Protection CoP for Europe will be ensured by a **Facilitators Group**, established for a 2-years period and composed by OHCHR Europe and up to 4 more entities selected on a voluntary basis and reflecting as much as possible the diversity of the CoP's membership.

Led by OHCHR Europe, the **tasks** of the Facilitators Group include:

1. Support and facilitate meetings (online/in-person), including for the purpose of agenda setting and reporting
2. Provide coordination support for activities as needed, including by sharing and disseminating information;
3. Maintain and review the membership list;
4. Act as point of contact both for members and for external stakeholders;
5. Represent the CoP in external meetings, ensuring regular engagement with other relevant fora including the Global Community of Practice, to ensure coordination and synergies.

The Facilitators Group promotes a **participatory approach**, including by organizing regular surveys and consultations to gather insights, suggestions and feedback from CoP members to inform the CoP's directions of work.

## 6. Methods of work

The work of the HRDs Protection CoP for Europe is organized as follows:

- **Quarterly plenary meetings**, including at least one annual in-person meeting;
- **Dedicated thematic work strands** on key issues of common interest to CoP members e.g. through focus discussions/seminars/briefings/webinars;
- **Permanent Working Groups** could be created to support thematic work strands if of interest

During a pilot phase of at least one year, the HRDs Protection CoP for Europe will be operated without targeted **funding**. During this period, members will be expected to cover their own participation costs, including travel and accommodation, to attend in-person meetings. OHCHR Europe, and members which are in a position to do so, would seek to channel available resources to facilitate the organization of CoP meetings and support as possible the engagement of members who may otherwise face barriers. Funding opportunities to enhance the CoP's sustainability in the longer term will be explored in subsequent phases.

## 7. Deliverables

The HRDs Protection CoP for Europe may produce **deliverables** such as:

- Knowledge products (guides, briefs, toolkits)
- Joint research or case studies
- Events such as webinars, roundtables, conferences, capacity-building sessions
- Annual summary of activities and achievements

## 8. Communication

Communication channels of the HRDs Protection CoP for Europe are meant to allow members to actively share and exchange knowledge and expertise (research, data, information, practices, tools, resources, etc.).

Communication channels may include:

- Email lists
- Newsletters
- Online collaboration platforms
- Shared document repositories

Communication will be as a rule coordinated by the Facilitators Group.

## 9. Confidentiality and Ethical Conduct

The regional CoP and its members would be expected to abide to the following **community rules**:

1. Uphold principles of respect, equity, and professionalism
2. Being inclusive and ensuring diversity of voices heard, also acknowledging power dynamics
3. Being consistent, active and creative in participation
4. Respecting Chatham House rules and confidentiality of shared information (participants can use information and learning from the CoP, but it must be without attribution – unless expressly authorized/required)
5. Declare potential conflicts of interest

## 10. Review of terms of reference

These terms of reference will be reviewed **annually, or as otherwise needed**, to ensure relevance.