

2024 OSCE WARSAW HUMAN DIMENSION CONFERENCE

STATEMENT FOR THE PLENARY SESSION 3 (2 October, 10:00 – 13:00):

Fundamental Freedoms I, including:

- Freedom of opinion and expression, media freedom
- Human rights defenders
- Safety of journalists

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Statement by Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR) on protection mechanisms for Human Rights Defenders seeking protection in Poland

With the view of the ongoing repression of civil society representatives in the Russian Federation, Belarus, as well as States in Central Asia and the Caucasus, HFHR established the Human Rights Hub which supports Human Rights Defenders seeking protection in Poland by offering them relocation assistance, access to psycho-social services, capacity building activities and space to continue human rights work. Since, 2015, we provided support to nearly 700 HRDs, which includes 72 persons in the first half of the 2024. We invite you to visit our website and read the Activity Report of the Human Rights Hub for more information.

HFHR welcomes steps taken by the Polish authorities and other OSCE participating States to ensure provision of visas and other protection mechanisms to Human Rights Defenders at risk. These efforts are often a lifeline for many HRDs in the OSCE region, where human rights work carries serious risks.

At the same time, we would like to bring to your attention the following measures that are urgently needed in Poland and elsewhere in the OSCE region to ensure that civil society actors can continue their human rights work effectively and in safety:

- **Further strengthening or establishing special procedures of issuing humanitarian visas to HRDs at risk.**
 - In this regard we recommend cooperation with specialized NGOs experienced in supporting HRDs and knowledgeable about situation in countries of origin.
 - We also encourage participating States that are members of the European Union to **fully implement the new guidance on the provision of EU visas, which includes procedures relevant for HRDs.**
- **Strengthening support programs for HRDs, including independent journalists working in exile and in the countries of origin to ensure continued reporting and awareness-raising about ongoing human rights abuses.** . Strong civil society proved to be a guarantee of resistance against authoritarian practices and better application of human rights even in countries lacking democracy.

Thank you!

Background information on the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR) work in the field of the protection of Human Rights Defenders

The Human Rights Hub (HR Hub) was established by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in September 2022 as part of its Eurasia Program. This initiative was launched in response to the growing challenges faced by human rights defenders and non-governmental organizations in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus. The HR Hub was established in response to the growing need for emergency assistance among HRDs, which has been exacerbated by the intensifying political repression in the region since 2020. It builds on HFHR's longstanding history of supporting HRDs, which began in 2015.

The HR Hub provides comprehensive support to HRDs, activists, journalists, and their families who are at risk. This includes relocation assistance, capacity-building initiatives, and long-term integration support. Additionally, the HR Hub serves as a central platform for advocacy and collaboration, enhancing the resilience and effectiveness of its beneficiaries in an increasingly hostile environment.

Moreover, HR Hub activities are supported by another HFHR's Eurasia Department programme – Human Rights Lab (HR Lab) which combines its educational endeavours. The Human Rights Lab program provides a range of both long-term and short-term educational activities. These include workshops, training sessions, and study visits aimed at learning from the best practices of other nations in the implementation of human rights and democratic reforms.

Notably in 2023 HR Lab launched a thorough, two-year Human Rights School for HRDs from Central Asia aimed at delivering specialized and deeply founded set of skills and knowledge to a new generation of promising HRDs in the region. The Human Rights School is designed as a recurring course adjusted for various regions and specializations of HRDs.

More information can be found:

- [*Handbook for the processing of visa applications and the modification of issued visas*](#)
Handbook by the European Parliament
- [*Protecting human rights defenders at risk: EU entry, stay and support*](#)
Report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
- [*Human Rights Hub Activity Report*](#)
Activity Report by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights