



Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

Protecting civic space - the role of human rights defenders and freedom of peaceful assembly

**5-6 May 2025
Vienna**

FINAL REPORT



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The second Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting (SHDM) of 2025, organized by the Finnish OSCE Chairpersonship with the support of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), was dedicated to protecting civic space – the role of human rights defenders and freedom of peaceful assembly. It provided a platform for OSCE participating States (pSs), OSCE institutions and executive structures, international organizations, civil society and other stakeholders to exchange views and develop recommendations on that matter.

The sessions and ensuing discussions reflected, first, on the rising threats to freedom of peaceful assembly, which have become a visible trend across the OSCE area: including increasing restrictions and a failure of authorities to facilitate the exercise of freedom of peaceful assembly in accordance with international human rights standards as well as policing practices involving excessive and otherwise unlawful use of force as well as arrests and dispersal of peaceful protesters. In this context the discussion highlighted, in particular, the crucial importance of freedom of peaceful assembly for civic space and a democratic society as well as the significant contribution of human rights defenders and independent assembly monitors towards ensuring recognition and stronger respect of this fundamental right.

The following sessions focussed on the growing challenges faced by the plurality of human rights defenders at home, in exile and across borders and how to strengthen support and protection for human rights defenders across the OSCE area. While the discussion noted that threats and intimidation, including online, are an everyday reality for many human rights defenders, it drew attention to particularly disturbing cases of arbitrary arrests, detention and physical violence. Furthermore, it found disturbing trends of criminalization, legal and other harassment – for example through so-called “foreign agent” laws – which undermine human rights work, stigmatize human rights defenders and expose them to grave personal risks.



Ms. Mary Lawlor, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, delivering her keynote address at the opening session on 5 May 2025

While faced by a global funding crisis, the discussion noted that the work of human rights defenders and their organizations has become even more important in light of increasing democratic backsliding and anti-human rights discourse across the region.

Thus, the meeting stressed that better protection of human rights defenders – including by scaling up temporary relocation programmes, issuance of emergency visas and more effective responses to reprisals – is essential.

315 individuals registered to participate in the meeting. The event brought together 248 attendees (101 men, 145 women), including 122 representatives of 49 pSs, 9 representatives of 5 international organizations, 79 representatives of 67 CSOs, as well as 37 participants from OSCE institutions and field missions, National Human Rights Institutions and other participants.

2. SYNOPSIS OF THE SESSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OPENING SESSION

Opening remarks:

Ms. Maria Telalian, Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

H.E. Amb. Vesa Häkkinen, Chairperson of the OSCE Permanent Council

Introductory addresses:

Ms. Anu Juvonen, Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Civil Society

Keynote address:

Ms. Mary Lawlor, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

In his opening remarks, H.E. Amb. Vesa Häkkinen gave an overview of the upcoming sessions on the respect of freedom of peaceful assembly and its links with civic space, democracy and comprehensive security, on responding to challenges that human rights defenders (HRDs) in all their diversity face, and on best practices in preparing for the future of human rights work. He highlighted numerous challenges that HRDs face at home, across borders, and in exile. Amid shrinking civic space, it is even more important that the OSCE provides a space for civil society to speak up, considering also that many HRDs attend such meetings at a personal risk. Ambassador Häkkinen reaffirmed that active and vibrant civil society is a precondition for a democratic society. Many HRDs do their work while in exile or while at great risk for their personal safety and lives, such as those who are documenting violations and providing assistance in the context of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Ms. Maria Telalian, recalled key OSCE commitments, including on the right to know and act upon one's rights, the right to seek assistance and assist others in defending human rights, and the need to protect human rights defenders, which all firmly enshrined the right to defend human rights in OSCE commitments. She noted that the backlash against human rights, shrinking civic space and today's global challenges cannot be addressed by States alone, and that freedom of peaceful assembly, vibrant civic space and efforts of those who defend human rights are instrumental for the realization of human rights. She highlighted that this meeting is

held against the backdrop of alarming levels of intimidation of HRDs, also beyond borders and in exile, through transnational repression. Judicial harassment, restrictive laws, dissolution of associations, were among the issues she flagged, while recalling that ODIHR publicly expressed concerns about the recent proliferation of so-called “foreign agent laws”, for example, in Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Republika Srpska. Among concerning cases of targeting, she highlighted gender-based harassment and sexual and gender-based violence against women HRDs, discreditation of HRDs who work with refugees and migrants, shrinking space and lack of funding for Roma and Sinti defenders, as well as excessive force and undue restrictions on peaceful assemblies organized by young HRDs. Ms. Telalian also recalled the work of ODIHR in monitoring assemblies and the situation of human rights defenders, capacity building supporting HRDs to do their vital work safely and effectively, including in monitoring freedom of peaceful assembly, and provision of expert advice. She concluded with highlighting that the meeting is an opportunity to provide a platform for dialogue among various stakeholders and reaffirmed ODIHR’s readiness to continue working with and supporting participating States, civil society and HRDs on the matters discussed at SHDM II.



Ms. Maria Telalian, Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), chaired the opening session and delivered the opening remarks on 5 May 2025

Ms. Anu Juvonen underlined that Finland prioritizes free civic space and an enabling environment for HRDs and civil society actors. However, she noted the shrinking civic space, growing challenges and risks that HRDs face in their work, and restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly. There is an increasing number of reprisals, as well as increasing violence and threats against HRDs, some of whom put their own lives at risk. Environmental HRDs are particularly threatened. In Finland’s view, a stable and resilient society recognizes plurality and extensive rights to participation as well as freedom of peaceful assembly, where civil society has a key role in building and maintaining a resilient state. A stable and resilient society is a democracy where HRDs are essential partners, since they work tirelessly to advance the rule of law and democracy. Finland consults and meaningfully co-operates with HRDs, like in the preparation of this meeting, as well as other past and upcoming events.

Ms. Mary Lawlor, keynote speaker, pointed out the importance of the UN Declaration on human rights defenders, adopted in 1998, and the OSCE commitments, such as the Copenhagen Document of 1990 and the Budapest Document of 1994. However, she noted that the problem with exercising the right to defend rights now lies in the State practices, with states lacking political will and failing to implement standards to which they themselves agreed. Ms. Lawlor spoke about numerous communications of her mandate to the governments of OSCE participating States, and about hearing from human rights defenders who reported on a host of issues they faced. Among them, she highlighted threats, intimidation, judicial harassment, surveillance, restrictions on registration and funding, physical attacks, criminalization, stigmatization, imprisonment and torture, transnational repression, targeting of family members. The examples spanned the entire region, and affected the plurality of HRDs, including those defending the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, those protesting, monitoring assemblies or reporting from them as journalists, those at home and those in exile. She recalled the case of Azimjan Askarov, who died in a Kyrgyz prison in 2010 and pleaded for release of Daler Bobiev and Avazmad Ghurbatov, HRDs from Tajikistan, both punished with long prison sentences after, what Ms. Lawlor called, unfair trials.

SESSION I: Respect: The right to freedom of peaceful assembly and its role in protecting civic space and democracy

Introducers:

Mr. Phil Lynch, Executive Director, International Service for Human Rights

Dr. Michael Hamilton, Legal Adviser, Amnesty International, and Acting Chair of the OSCE-ODIHR Panel of Experts on Freedom of Assembly and Association

Ms. Tetiana Pechonchyk, Head of the Board of the Human Rights Centre ZMINA

Moderator: **Mr. Andrew Gardner**, Acting Head of Department, Human Rights Department, ODIHR

The first session discussed the growing threats that limit the freedom of peaceful assembly and impose significant challenges to the work of HRDs, including national human rights institutions, defending this freedom. Participating States, the international community and civil society reflected on the importance of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly towards fostering a vibrant civic space and upholding democracy. This session also looked at the vital role played by independent assembly monitors in documenting the conduct of the police and other authorities with regards to public gatherings and providing impartial evidence, and generally promoting respect for the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

The **first panellist**, Mr. Phil Lynch, set the tone by drawing attention to the emerging challenges to international human rights law and respective institutional frameworks. The speaker emphasized that more awareness should be invested towards the work of human rights defenders. Their efforts are an integral dimension of the promotion and protection of all human rights, particularly the rights of people and groups facing intersecting forms of discrimination. The panellist expressed concerns over the deteriorating condition of HRDs who experience harassment, threats, and sanctions for their legitimate work. Mr. Lynch further underscored that the realization of the right to peaceful assembly is closely connected with other enabling rights such as freedom of expression and association, public participation and the right to non-discrimination. The protection of these rights is paramount for a thriving civic environment. Despite this, an increasing number of states are restricting and even criminalizing the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly, through legislative amendments and other severe restrictions;

they use excessive force in policing assemblies, arbitrary detention and imprisonment as well as other forms of repressions against peaceful protesters. On a final note, the speaker called upon states to protect, join and support human rights defenders in their vital efforts.

The **second panellist**, Mr. Michael Hamilton, stressed the significant role played by HRDs in protecting and promoting human rights. More specifically, they are instrumental in calling for an end of armed conflicts, resisting corruption and misgovernance, protesting against gender-based violence and for the rights of women, campaigning for the rights of LGBTIQ people, and seeking accountability for human rights abuses. The speaker saluted the wins of human rights defenders that have safeguarded the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in some states. Further, Mr. Hamilton highlighted the key findings of a comprehensive Amnesty International report on the state of the right to protest in 21 European countries¹. Those who organized and participated in peaceful protests, including human rights defenders, were subject to stigmatization and criminalization of their activity, surveillance and facial recognition technologies, excessive use of force and misuse of so-called “less lethal weapons”, undue authorization requirements, overregulation and low levels of tolerance to disruption caused by assemblies, as well as unjustified dispersal. The panellist urged participating States to uphold their obligations to respect, protect and ensure the right of peaceful assembly, to facilitate peaceful assemblies and protect those who organize and participate in them.

The **third panellist**, Ms. Tetiana Pechonchyk, emphasized that freedom of peaceful assembly has been exercised in the context of various historical events defending the democracy in Ukraine, and it is safeguarded even under martial law. The speaker then flagged concerns related to the treatment of HRDs and protesters engaged in public assemblies, demonstrations and protests in areas occupied by the Russian Federation, paying particular attention to the wave of peaceful demonstrations and massive non-violent civilian resistance in the newly occupied territories in the first months of the war. Ms. Pechonchyk reported about systematic violations of the rights of peaceful protestors such as unlawful arrests and detention, abduction, torture and other ill-treatment, enforced disappearance, and extrajudicial killing. Others were subjected to criminal proceedings and accused of terrorism, “extremism” and sabotage. On a final note, the speaker expressed concerns over the situation of people living in the occupied territories of Ukraine and to what extent they will be provided with redress, particularly in the context of peace negotiations.

Participants from civil society flagged violations of the freedom of peaceful assembly in several OSCE participating States. They reported facing threats and intimidation, campaigns of stigmatization, instances of physical violence, politically-motivated arrests, detention, and disproportionate use of force by law enforcement. The deteriorating situation of HRDs and protesters speaking up against the human rights violations in the occupied territories of Ukraine was stressed in particular. The conditions faced by human rights defenders in exile, those operating across borders and by political prisoners was described as a continued concern. The use of sonic and other weapons and technologies for crowd control, which may cause excessive harm and injury and undermine the exercise of freedom of peaceful assembly, was also brought to the attention of states and the international community. Advocates defending the rights of minority groups and displaced groups flagged specific obstacles obstructing their efforts. Civil society underlined the growing challenges in the digital age and the impact of digital technology on the activity of human rights defenders. Several participants emphasized the importance of ODIHR’s tools that guide the work towards better protection of freedom of peaceful assembly.

¹ Accessible at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur01/8199/2024/en/>.

Participating States underscored that freedom of peaceful assembly is a fundamental human right with a firm basis in international human rights law and was reaffirmed by participating States in numerous OSCE commitments. Some delegations shared the experiences of their countries in promoting, protecting and facilitating freedom of peaceful assembly.

Recommendations for the OSCE pSs:

- Recognize the vital role of human rights defenders and peaceful protesters, and promote their work and their contribution brought to freedom, justice, equality and accountability.
- Recognize in their laws, policies and practices the important contribution of independent assembly monitors towards the full realization of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.
- Acknowledge and address the intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression that many defenders face while ensuring their meaningful participation in policy and decision-making processes.
- Develop and implement national laws, policies and mechanisms for better protection of human rights defenders and their work, including the rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly and participation.
- Repeal or amend laws and policies which restrict and criminalize the work of human rights defenders, including those engaged in peaceful assembly and protest.
- Ensure that threats and attacks against human rights defenders and protesters as well as limitations on the exercise of the fundamental right to defend rights are subject to prompt, impartial and independent investigations.
- Hold accountable the perpetrators, whether state or non-state actors, that threaten or attack human rights defenders and ensure effective remedies to victims.
- Benefit from ODIHR's expertise and respective tools – such as the *Guidelines on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly*², the *Handbook on Monitoring Freedom of Peaceful Assembly*³, its assembly monitoring reports⁴ and other publications e.g. on the right to monitor assemblies⁵ – aimed to provide support and guidance in this area.

Recommendations for the OSCE institutions and field operations:

- Take an active stand in condemning violations and undue restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly in participating States and the OSCE region in general.
- Urge participating States to prohibit use of sonic weapons or similar devices for crowd control which cause harm to protestors or undermine the exercise of freedom of peaceful assembly.
- Continue its efforts directed to providing support and expertise to states and civil society on better protection of the right to assemble, demonstrate, picket, rally, march and protest.

² Accessible at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2019\)017rev-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2019)017rev-e)

³ Accessible in English and Russian at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/monitoring-peaceful-assembly>

⁴ For example, ODIHR's 6th Report on Monitoring of Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in Selected OSCE Participating States, accessible at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/585436>

⁵ For example, on the The Right to Monitor Assemblies in the OSCE Region: Experiences from the Field, accessible at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/576672>.

SESSION II: Respond: Overcoming challenges facing human rights defenders at home, in exile and across borders

Introducers:

Ms. Kaari Mattila, Secretary-General and Member of International and Executive Board, International Federation for Human Rights

Mr. Mustafa Jakupov, Deputy Chairman of Antigypsyism Reporting and Information Centre (MIA Bund)

Mr. Javier Roura Blanco, Senior Coordinator, ProtectDefenders.EU

Moderator:

Mr. Johannes Heiler, Acting Deputy Head of Department, Human Rights Department, ODIHR

Ms. Kaari Mattila, the first introducer, praised the achievements of HRDs, from their work on data collection on human rights violations, to advocacy for international human rights treaties. She stressed, however, the heavy price of this work and serious consequences that the globally shrinking civic space and erosion of democracy and rule of law have had on HRDs. Among others, Ms. Mattila highlighted the so-called “foreign agent laws” aimed to stigmatize and criminalize HRDs, like in Georgia, arbitrary arrests and detentions of HRDs in Azerbaijan, systematic persecution in Türkiye, as well as imprisonment of HRDs in Belarus. She underlined the difficult situation of HRDs working for the rights of persons belonging to sexual and gender minorities, HRDs in exile as well as environmental and land rights defenders, but noted that exposure of diverse groups of HRDs depends on the context. While she noted some positive measures to recognize and protect HRDs, she highlighted the need to strengthen and support them and offered recommendations in that regard.

In his introductory remarks, Mr. Mustafa Jakupov focused on the situation of Roma HRDs and, in particular, Roma women HRDs in more detail. He shared his concern about how Roma HRDs face multiple, intersecting layers of risk across the OSCE region, through antigypsyism, racism, poverty, digital exclusion, political marginalization, lack of formal protection or stable funding or even recognition that they are HRDs at all. He pointed out that, according to his research, a deep digital divide exists between Roma and non-Roma populations, blocking Roma from access to human rights as well as services, and effectively silencing Roma HRDs. This was particularly concerning as digital disconnection, as Jakupov flagged, isolates HRDs from support networks and opportunities to mobilize. He reflected on the situation of Roma women HRDs who, despite their leadership roles, remain unseen, underfunded, overexposed to risk and excluded from access to policy-making. Mr. Jakupov called for action to improve the condition of Roma HRDs.

Mr. Javier Roura Blanco, the final introducer, shared concerns about the situation of human rights defenders in their home countries, and in exile, who lack the sustained and strategic support they urgently need. Among various alarming patterns of targeting, he pointed to the labeling of NGOs as criminal, undesirable or foreign agents, judicial harassment, dissolution of organizations, funding cuts, digital attacks and repressive laws. Mr. Roura Blanco called for consistency in support to HRDs in foreign and development policies. He also underscored the need for direct support and protection mechanisms that should be scaled up, as the demand is outpacing the support available to HRDs. While highlighting that the protection of HRDs should begin in their home countries, he provided numerous recommendations on how to improve the difficult situation of HRDs in exile.

A rich debate ensued, with civil society representatives largely highlighting a host of challenges, restrictions and obstacles placed before HRDs across the OSCE region. Among others, participants spoke about stigmatization and severe sanctions associated with restrictive laws, such as the ones on so-called “foreign agents” and freedom of peaceful assembly, lack of funding and transparency in funding opportunities, difficulties for HRDs forced into exile, judicial harassment, etc. Participants also spoke about some of the most severe cases, including that of a Ukrainian journalist who was detained and killed in Russian captivity.



As per practice, ODIHR's senior experts moderate SHDM sessions and serve as rapporteurs for the closing session, Mr Johannes Heiler, Acting Deputy Head of the Human Rights Department, moderates Session II and presents its report during the closing session on 6 May 2025

Recommendations for the OSCE pSs:

- Put in place co-ordinated systems to report attacks on HRDs, to be followed up by investigation and appropriate action.
- Strengthen existing rapid response measures and ensure that they are better coordinated between governments and international organizations.
- Ensure that protection systems for HRDs are holistic and anchored in national laws.
- Explicitly recognize Roma HRDs in national and international protection networks, including for access to legal support, emergency response, digital security and political backing in cases of attacks against Roma HRDs.
- Close the digital divide between Roma and non-Roma, including by ensuring that access to the internet, digital devices and safe digital environment are understood as a human rights obligation and a precondition for human rights work of Roma.
- Recognize the importance of leadership by Roma women HRDs, including through sustainable direct funding of their organizations and their integration in policy-making at all levels.
- Adopt and implement fast, clear and flexible national emergency visa procedures, and consular staff training, which is required to ensure the mobility of human rights defenders.

- Invest in robust temporary relocation programmes, prioritizing inclusion, and offering human rights defenders an opportunity to work, engage politically and belong during their resettlement.
- Confront transnational repression as a collective threat.
- Adapt mandates to make protection mechanisms proactive — anticipating harm — rather than reactive.
- Call on Türkiye to meet its international obligations and not deport activists to Turkmenistan.
- Apply political pressure on countries that politically persecute HRDs and call for release of those deprived of liberty.
- Ensure public funding for operational programmes of civil society organizations and HRDs.
- Establish, develop and support politically independent platforms for participation of HRDs in public policy development and human rights monitoring.

Recommendations for the OSCE institutions and field operations:

- Put closing civil society space and persecution of HRDs higher on the OSCE agenda and acknowledge HRDs as natural allies, which implies the necessity to protect them beyond words and create favourable environments for their work.
- Treat reprisals against HRDs for their co-operation with the OSCE as attacks on the OSCE and comprehensive security.
- Establish a more effective system of reaction to repressive laws and policies restricting civic space and cases of attacks on and harassment of HRDs and activists, with a clear division of labour among institutions and field operations applying different tools.
- The Chairpersonship-in-Office should extend mandate of the Representative on Civil Society and consider tasking the mandate holder as a focal point for civil society participation in the OSCE work and on protection of the civic space across the OSCE region.

SESSION III: Prepare: Strengthening support and protection for human rights defenders

Introducers:

Ms. Veronica Lapina, Protection Coordinator for Europe and Central Asia, Frontline Defenders

Mr. Andreas Accardo, Head of Institutional Cooperation, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

Ms. Tytti Matsinen, European Union of Blind People

Moderator: **Mr. Andrew Gardner**, Acting Head of Department, Human Rights Department, ODIHR

The third session focused on preparing for the future of civic space in the OSCE region, with a particular emphasis on strengthening the support and protection of HRDs. It underscored their essential role in democratic societies and the need for inclusive protection strategies that are informed by the defenders themselves. The session explored how meaningful participation of HRDs in decision-making, and recognition of their work, particularly of those from marginalized groups, can reinforce their safety and security. Additionally, the session

emphasized the importance of safeguarding an enabling legal framework that protects freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.

The first introducer, Ms. Veronica Lapina highlighted the increasing risks faced by HRDs, noting that in the OSCE region, national security laws are often misused to target them. She began by honoring some of the defenders in the OSCE region who lost their lives in the course of their peaceful and legitimate human rights work: Viktoria Roshchina, Viktoria Amelina, Azimjan Askarov, and Natalia Estemirova. Ms. Lapina emphasized the importance of sustainable protection strategies for HRDs, stressing that protection must be context-based, dynamic, and driven by the defenders themselves. She called for listening to HRDs and safeguarding their agency, rather than restricting it, and underscored the importance of visibility and celebrating their work. She also highlighted the solidarity shown by Kazakhstani HRDs who united to oppose an anti-LGBTI law, urging OSCE participating States to demonstrate similar unity and commitment in protecting defenders under pressure.

The second introducer, Mr. Andreas Accardo, emphasized the growing need for civil society to defend human rights and democracy, both within the European Union, the region covered by the mandate of the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), and across the entire OSCE region. He shared that FRA is working on a new initiative called the European Democracy Shield, focusing on protecting civic space. Mr. Accardo highlighted five key areas requiring attention to strengthen and protect civic space: First, an enabling legal framework is needed to safeguard fundamental freedoms such as the right to peaceful assembly, expression, association, and access to information. Second, HRDs must be protected from third-party attacks, including online threats. Third, civil society must have meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Fourth, access to funding is critical, as several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have experienced sudden financial cuts in recent months. Finally, he stressed the need to build resilience within civil society by strengthening networks, fostering transnational solidarity, and addressing the psychological impact of HRDs' work. Mr. Accardo called on both States and civil society to act together to strengthen democratic resilience.

The third introducer, Ms. Tytti Matsinen, presenting perspectives of persons with disabilities, emphasized that true participation in civil society requires inclusivity – not only in physical spaces but also in digital environments. She highlighted the importance of access to information, noting that while digitalization once improved access, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence now create new barriers for people with disabilities. She stressed the need for greater representation of people with disabilities in events to voice their concerns, especially of those facing intersecting forms of discrimination such as women and migrants. Ms. Matsinen also highlighted the challenges posed by unstable financing and recent funding cuts affecting organizations of persons with disabilities. In addition to financial challenges, they encounter increasing hate speech, discrimination, and daily obstacles in accessing services and social protection. She concluded by urging States to ratify and fully implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as the most effective way to address these systemic issues.

During the discussion, participants reflected on additional widespread challenges faced by HRDs across the OSCE region. Concerns were raised about the misuse of laws and institutions to silence HRDs, including judicial harassment, arbitrary detention, and the abuse of administrative and financial mechanisms. Several interventions highlighted the shrinking of civic space and the need for stronger legal protections, independent institutions, and meaningful access to justice. Participants also addressed the particular risks faced by HRDs working with migrants, who are increasingly criminalized for providing humanitarian assistance. Emphasis was placed on the urgent need for accessible and sustained funding, and legal aid for HRDs, as well as protection against hate speech, discrimination, and increasing

digital threats. Participants stressed the importance of reinforced international monitoring mechanisms and a stronger response to reprisals against HRDs, especially when related to their engagement with the OSCE.

Recommendations for the OSCE pSs:

- Ensure meaningful and inclusive participation of HRDs in decision-making processes.
- Recognize and celebrate the work of HRDs. States must commit to unity in acknowledging the vital contributions of HRDs, especially those representing marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities, and those working with migrants and refugees.
- Ensure prompt investigation and prosecution, as well as public condemnation of any attack against HRDs.
- Further reinforce national mechanisms for monitoring of the situation of HRDs and enhancing their protection.
- Strengthen the resilience of civil society, including through the development of robust support networks and transnational solidarity.
- Address funding concerns by prioritizing core funding over project-based funding to support the sustainability and continuous work of NGOs. Work towards establishing accessible and inclusive funding mechanisms for civil society.

Recommendations for the OSCE institutions and field operations:

- Ensure that HRDs are not left vulnerable in the digital age.
- Further reinforce OSCE mechanisms for monitoring the situation of HRDs and ensuring their protection.
- Establish a formal OSCE mechanism to monitor reprisals against HRDs, particularly those related to their engagement with the OSCE.
- Establish OSCE emergency funding for civil society.

CLOSING SESSION

Closing remarks:

Dr. Tea Jaliashvili, First Deputy Director, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

H.E. Amb. Katja Pehrman, Human Rights Ambassador, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

In the closing statements by participating States, the fundamental role of freedom of peaceful assembly in democratic societies was highlighted, emphasizing its interconnectedness with other rights such as freedom of religion or belief. Concerns were repeatedly raised about the shrinking civic space and increasing restrictions and obstacles faced by HRDs, including digital threats and legal measures undermining their work. Several delegations called for the protection of marginalized groups and stressed the importance of creating safe and enabling environments for human rights work, referring to international frameworks, such as the Helsinki Final Act, underscoring their continued relevance. While some delegations shared national initiatives aimed at safeguarding civic space, others expressed concern over the so-called foreign agent laws and the misuse of legal and political instruments to restrict civic space. Delegations called on the OSCE and its institutions to uphold the organization's commitments and provide support to those defending human rights.

Tea Jaliashvili, First Deputy Director, ODIHR, expressed appreciation to the OSCE Chairpersonship, participating States, experts, and especially the HRDs who contributed to

discussions. She emphasized that the meeting provided a valuable opportunity to reaffirm the right to peaceful assembly and the indispensable role of independent assembly monitoring. States, she noted, must not only recognize this role but actively engage monitors as part of their obligation to uphold international human rights standards. Dr. Jaliashvili acknowledged the serious and often dangerous challenges faced by HRDs in the OSCE region. Their work remains vital to ensuring accountability and protecting fundamental freedoms. Particular attention was drawn to the contributions of Roma civil society, with a call for stronger support to Roma women advocates who face intersecting forms of discrimination. She further highlighted concerns over shrinking civic space and the decline in funding, which are leaving defenders increasingly exposed and under-resourced. Protecting them, she stressed, is a shared responsibility that demands political will, cross-sector collaboration, and sustained investment. In closing, she reiterated ODIHR's commitment to support participating States in meeting their obligations towards HRDs and to continue close cooperation with civil society actors.

Katja Pehrman, Human Rights Ambassador, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, welcomed the SHDM platform as a valuable space for dialogue. She noted that the topic was especially relevant given the current challenges faced by civil society, as reflected in the record number of registered participants. However, she also expressed concern that many interventions pointed to the increasingly restricted civic space. Participants drew attention to so-called foreign agent laws, stigmatization, and the risk of reprisals for engaging with governments or raising concerns in multilateral settings. Despite these threats, Ambassador Pehrman noted, HRDs continue their tireless work to advance rights and freedoms. She emphasized the shared responsibility of all actors to protect HRDs as a means of safeguarding human rights more broadly. She called for both immediate measures and long-term strategies to support defenders and reaffirmed that protecting those who protect human rights remains a high priority for Finland.



Ambassador Jenni Pehrman, Human Rights Ambassador of Finland, delivers closing remarks on 6 May 2025 on behalf of the Finnish Chairpersonship; to her left is Dr Tea Jaliashvili, ODIHR First Deputy Director and moderator of the session.



Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

Protecting Civic Space:

the Role of Human Rights Defenders and Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Vienna, 5-6 May 2025

AGENDA

Day 1

9.30 – 10.30

OPENING SESSION

Opening remarks:

H.E. Amb. Vesa Häkkinen, Chairperson of the OSCE
Permanent Council

Ms. Maria Telalian, Director of the Office for Democratic
Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

Introductory address:

Ms. Anu Juvonen, Special Representative of the OSCE
Chairperson-in-Office on Civil Society

Keynote address:

Ms. Mary Lawlor, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the
situation of human rights defenders

Technical information:

Dr. Tea Jaliashvili, First Deputy Director, OSCE Office for
Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

10.30 – 12.30

**SESSION I: Respect: The right to freedom of peaceful assembly
and its role in protecting civic space and democracy**

Introducers:

Mr. Phil Lynch, Executive Director, International Service for
Human Rights

Dr. Michael Hamilton, Legal Adviser, Amnesty International,
and Acting Chair of the OSCE-ODIHR Panel of Experts on
Freedom of Assembly and Association

Ms. Tetiana Pechonchyk Head of the Board of the Human
Rights Centre ZMINA

Moderator: Mr. Andrew Gardner, Acting Head of Department, Human
Rights Department, ODIHR

[13.00 – 14.00 – side events]

14.30 – 16.30 SESSION II: Respond: Overcoming challenges facing human rights defenders at home, in exile and across borders

Introducers:

Ms. Kaari Mattila, Secretary-General and Member of International and Executive Board, International Federation for Human Rights

Mr. Mustafa Jakupov, Deputy Chairman of Antigypsyism Reporting and Information Centre (MIA Bund)

Mr. Javier Roura Blanco, Senior Coordinator, ProtectDefenders.EU

Moderator: Mr. Johannes Heiler, Acting Deputy Head of Department, Human Rights Department, ODIHR

[16.45 – 17.45 – side events]

Day 2

[9.00 – 10.00 – side events]

10.15 – 12.15 SESSION III: Prepare: Strengthening support and protection for human rights defenders

Introducers:

Ms. Veronika Lapina, Protection Coordinator for Europe and Central Asia, Frontline Defenders

Mr. Andreas Accardo, Head of Institutional Cooperation, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

Ms. Tytti Matsinen, European Union of Blind People

Moderator: Mr. Andrew Gardner, Acting Head of Department, Human Rights Department, ODIHR

12.15 – 13.15 CLOSING SESSION

Reports from the working sessions

Statements by participating States

Closing remarks:

Dr. Tea Jaliashvili, First Deputy Director, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

H.E. Amb. Katja Pehrman, Human Rights Ambassador, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

ANNEX: LIST OF SIDE EVENTS: Topics and Conveners

Participants of Human Dimension Meetings have the opportunity to organize side events.

The OSCE Chairpersonship and the ODIHR as SHDM organizers ensure availability of meeting rooms for side events, while responsibility for all other aspects, including the content, rests with the side event organizers.

Voices in the Darkness: Civil Society Resistance and Losses during Russia's War against Ukraine
Convened by: Human Rights Centre ZMINA

The state of freedom of peaceful assembly in the OSCE region
Convened by: OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

Human Rights Defenders — Foreign Agents or Agents for Democracy?
Convened by: International Federation for Human Rights

How the absence of human rights defenders affects the judiciary in Azerbaijan?
Convened by: ICLaw-Armenia

Responding to Georgia's Human Rights Crisis
Convened by: Netherlands Helsinki Committee; Human Rights House Foundation

Launch event of ODIHR's e-learning course on Risk Management for Human Rights Defenders
Convened by: OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

Shrinking Civic Space in the Western Balkans
Convened by: Human Rights House Foundation

Civil society in captivity: Enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions by Russia as a tool to erase civic space in occupied territories of Ukraine
Convened by: Media Initiative for Human Rights

ANNEX III: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: Speakers, Introducers and Moderators

Opening remarks:

H.E. Amb. Vesa Häkkinen is the Permanent Representative of Finland to the OSCE and Chairperson of the OSCE Permanent Council. Before his current position he served as Ambassador of Finland to Iraq, in Baghdad (2019–2021). He has served also in Poland, Sweden and Russia. He was the Director for Current Affairs Communications in the MFA 2014–2019. Mr. Häkkinen has worked for the Finnish Foreign Ministry since 1999. Before joining the Foreign Service, he worked as Secretary General in Finnish Alliance of Estonian Friendship NGOs and as freelance journalist. Mr. Häkkinen was born in Lohja, Finland, in 1969. He graduated from the University of Helsinki in 1996 with a Master's in Political Science (Political History). His military rank is sergeant. Mr. Häkkinen is married. In his free time, he is an active reader.

Ms. Maria Telalian is the ninth Director of ODIHR, appointed in December 2024.

Prior to her appointment, Telalian was a Legal Adviser of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Head of the Legal Department. She was also Head of the Public International Law Section of the Legal Department, and was appointed as Deputy Permanent Representative of Greece to the United Nations (UN) from 2005 to 2007.

She has also served as an agent before the International Court of Justice, a counsellor before the European Court of Human Rights, a member of the Panel of Arbitrators of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, and a representative to the Sixth Committee of the UN General Assembly.

She is a former member of the Appeals Board of the Western European Union for the settlement of disputes arising out of the WEU Staff Rules. She also has several years of teaching experience at the Diplomatic Academy of the Greek Foreign Service and at the Rhodes Academy of Oceans Law and Policy.

Introductory Addresses:

Introductory address:

Ms. Anu Juvonen Anu Juvonen is the Executive Director of Demo Finland – Political Parties of Finland for Democracy, an impartial multiparty democracy support organization involving all of Finland's nine parliamentary parties. She was seconded by Finland to the Council of Europe as a Policy Advisor (2021–2024) on democracy, specifically on civil society matters. Anu Juvonen is also the President of the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) and a member of the Human Rights Delegation of the Finnish National Human Rights Institute (NHRI). She has worked for over 20 years in the field of democracy support, development policy, and international affairs mainly in CSOs, working and living in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Ethiopia among other countries, and holds both MA and BA (Hons) degrees from the University of Sussex, UK.

Keynote address:

Ms. Mary Lawlor, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. Mary Lawlor, from Dublin, Ireland, has worked with human rights defenders for over twenty years, and has been engaged in human rights work for double that. She became a Board member of the Irish Section of Amnesty International in 1975, was elected Chair from 1983 -1987 and became its Director in 1988. She founded Front Line Defenders in 2001 to focus specifically on the protection of human rights defenders at risk. As Executive Director from 2001-2016, Mary had a key role in the development of Front Line Defenders into the prominent international organisation it is today. On 1 May 2020, she took up the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, where she has adopted a people-centred approach to the mandate. Mary is also currently an Adjunct Professor of Business and Human Rights in the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI), School of Business, Trinity College Dublin and has been awarded Honorary Doctorates in Law from University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin. She is a member of the Advisory Board of both the School of Business of Trinity and the Centre for Ethics in Public Life, School of Philosophy, University College Dublin. Among her awards are the French insignia of Chevalier de l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur, the Franco-German Award for Human Rights and the Rule of Law, and the 2023 Irish Red Cross Lifetime Achievement Award.

Session I

Mr. Michael Hamilton is a legal adviser on the right to protest and civic space in the Law & Policy Programme of Amnesty International's International Secretariat. He has worked on the right of peaceful assembly for more than 20 years – both as a founding member of the OSCE Panel of Experts on Freedom of Assembly, and as an academic. He is a co-editor of the forthcoming Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Assembly.

Mr. Phil Lynch is the Executive Director of the International Service for Human Rights in Geneva. ISHR provides solidarity and support to human rights defenders and strengthens laws and policies for their recognition and protection. Before joining ISHR in 2013, Phil founded and led the award-winning Human Rights Law Centre and Homeless Law in Australia. He is a member of the Global Board of the International Gender Champions and the Swiss Committee of World Bicycle Relief, and a former member of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency Advisory Board and the Australian Government Human Rights Grants Scheme Expert Panel. He has been conferred with numerous human rights and leadership awards. Phil holds an LLB (Hons) and an MPPM from the University of Melbourne.

Ms. Tetiana Pechonchyk is a head of the Human Rights Centre ZMINA (Ukraine) established in 2012 and engaged in informational, educational, monitoring, analytical and advocacy activities in the field of human rights. In particular, ZMINA deals with protection of freedom of speech, assembly and associations, combating discrimination, torture, protecting human rights defenders and civic activists in Ukraine, including in the occupied Crimea. Tetiana Pechonchyk received a PhD in Kyiv National Taras Shevchenko University (2010) focusing on freedom of speech research in Ukrainian mass media, accomplished courses and programs by Harvard University (2006), Ukrainian School of Political Studies (2008), and Kyiv Mohyla School of Journalism (2011). In 2020 Tetiana Pechonchyk received a Human Rights Tulip award from the Embassy of the Netherlands in Ukraine. After the beginning of the large-scale

Russian aggression against Ukraine ZMINA together with 37 other NGOs launched the Ukraine 5AM Coalition dealing with the documentation of war crimes and aiming at protecting victims of armed Russian aggression in Ukraine and bringing to justice top leadership of the Russian Federation and direct perpetrators of war crimes. ZMINA documents cases of murders, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture and illtreatment, deportations, violations of the right for a fair trial as well as other attacks on civil society in Ukraine and provides emergency support to human rights defenders, civil society activists and journalists in Ukraine. In 2022, ZMINA received the OSCE Democracy Defender Award “for outstanding contribution to promoting and protecting fundamental freedoms and human rights in both non-government and government-controlled territories in Ukraine” and the Ukraine 5AM Coalition was awarded the Open Society Prize “in recognition of their courageous work to document atrocities committed during the Russian war on Ukraine.” In 2023 Tetiana Pechonchyk received the Anna Dahlbäck’s Award in Sweden. In 2024 ZMINA was recognised as an "undesirable" foreign organization in the Russian Federation.

Session II

Mr. Javier Roura-**Blanco** is currently serving as Head of Programmes and Partnerships at ProtectDefenders.eu, the global EU Human Rights Defenders protection mechanism. He has extensive experience working at the intersection of protection, coordination, and support for civil society in high-risk contexts. His work focuses on strengthening practical responses to repression and enabling human rights defenders to continue their work safely, both inside and outside the EU.

Mr. Mustafa Jakupov is a Roma human rights advocate and policy expert specializing in digital inclusion, minority rights, and combating antigypsyism. He currently serves as Deputy Director of the Reporting and Information Centre on Antigypsyism (MIA) in Berlin, the first institution in Germany dedicated to addressing antigypsyism through research and advocacy. He authored the report “Digital Inclusion of Roma: Current Patterns, Trends, and Barriers,” one of the first cross-country analyses exploring how digital exclusion affects Roma communities in Europe. Mr. Jakupov’s work focuses on strengthening the protection of Roma human rights defenders, highlighting the intersectional barriers faced by marginalized groups within Roma communities, and building strategic links between grassroots realities and policy-making. With more than a decade of experience across civil society and European institutions, he remains committed to promoting structural change and ensuring that Roma voices are represented in national and international decision-making processes.

Dr. Kaari Mattila is a member of the International Board of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), and one of its Secretary-Generals. FIDH has 188 member human rights organisations across the globe. Dr. Mattila has over 25 years of experience on human rights as a fierce civil society advocate and leader, in academic communities and also within the government. She currently works as a Professor of Practice in Human Rights and Democracy at the University of Eastern Finland. She has initiated internationally awarded human rights education programmes, especially within youth work, and within sports. As a founder of many human rights networks, including on women’s rights, Dr. Mattila looks for opportunities for coalition building among the plurality of the human rights defenders.

Session III

Ms. Veronika Lapina is a Protection Coordinator for Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia at Front Line Defenders. In this capacity, she researches the situation of human rights defenders in the region, and, together with the regional team of experts at Front Line, leads on supporting human rights defenders in building protection strategies. Front Line Defenders is an Irish organization, set up by UN SR HRDs Mary Lawlor with a goal to protect human rights defenders globally. Veronika's background is in LGBTI rights, she has a Ph.D. in Social Theory.

Ms. Tytti Matsinen is the President of the European Blind Union which is an umbrella organization of organizations of blind and partially sighted people in 42 countries across Europe. Tytti has more than 10 years of experience in defending the rights of persons with disabilities. She has worked as a human rights adviser focusing on the rights of persons with disabilities and is currently also a board member of the Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired and a board member of Abilis Foundation.

Mr. Andreas Accardo is the Head of Unit for Institutional Cooperation at the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. The independent EU agency based in Vienna provides advice to the EU and its Member States on fundamental rights issues. Since 2018, it produces an annual monitoring report on civic space in the EU. Andreas leads the Agency's cooperation with EU institutions, Member State governments, international organisations and also civil society. He has over 25 years of work experience in human rights organisations, including in OSCE field missions in the Western Balkans.

Closing Session:

H.E. Amb. Katja Pehrman is Ambassador for Human Rights of Finland. Previously, she worked as Senior Advisor at UN Women (2017-2024), responsible for issues related to enhancing gender parity and equality. She was actively involved in implementing and promoting the measures of the UN Secretary-General's System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity in the UN System. She was also the Focal Point for Women in the UN System, responsible for leading and coordinating the work of 650 Gender Focal Points across the globe.

Ms. Pehrman has served as Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Finland to the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) in Vienna (2013-2017). In that capacity, she chaired the Human Dimension Committee of the Organization. Moreover, she was one of the initiators of the OSCE Wide Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and Co-founder of the OSCE Group of Friends of Mediation. She was also Coordinator of the Helsinki +40 process related to the protracted conflicts. Ambassador Pehrman has previously served as the Chief of Cabinet of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland. Furthermore, she has discharged various tasks at the Political Department of the Ministry, including as the Adviser to the General Director and the Under-Secretary of State, working predominantly with security policy and related issues. Ambassador Pehrman has served at diplomatic missions abroad, such as at the Permanent Mission of Finland to the UN in New York (2003-2007), handling, amongst others, EU Presidency tasks. Moreover, she worked at Finland's Permanent Mission to the OSCE in Vienna during Finland's Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2008 (2007-2010). Ms. Pehrman has more than 20 years of experience in multilateral diplomacy, negotiations and leadership, throughout which enhancing human rights have been constantly at the forefront of her work.

Dr. Tea Jaliashvili, is ODIHR First Deputy Director. She has extensive experience in strategic policy development, management and administration of technical co-operation programmes in

the fields of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, within international, national and non-governmental organizations. Before joining ODIHR, she was acting Head of the OSCE Programme Office in Dushanbe. She previously served as Deputy Director at the Women's Information Center in Georgia and was deeply engaged in strengthening the capacity of civil society to protect women's rights and advance gender equality. She has also worked for the UN, Council of Europe and EU joint initiatives in a number of regions. Dr. Jaliashvili has worked towards achieving peace and a just society based on principles of good governance and rule of law through her contribution to legislative changes as well as policy and institutional development, including strengthening and harmonising the work of the judiciary and National Human Rights Institutions. She has Master Degree in International Human Rights Law, she holds doctorates in medicine and philosophy (MD-PhD) and is fluent in Georgian (native), English, Russian and French.