



Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

Protecting Civic Space:

the Role of Human Rights Defenders and Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Vienna, 5-6 May 2025

ANNOTATED AGENDA

BACKGROUND

Since the Helsinki Final Act (1975), participating States have consistently reaffirmed that human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law and democratic institutions are the foundations of peace and security. Based on multiple commitments recalling the importance of non-governmental organizations and pluralistic civil society (Copenhagen 1990, Paris 1990, Moscow 1991, Helsinki 1992 and 2008), participating States acknowledged in Astana 2010 again the important role played by civil society in helping them ensure full respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law.

Freedom of peaceful assembly is a cornerstone of democratic societies and a fundamental human freedom, which OSCE participating States have committed to guarantee to every individual without discrimination (e.g., Copenhagen 1990, Paris 1990). The right to defend human rights is also firmly established in OSCE commitments. The Helsinki Final Act (1975), recognized the right of everyone to know and act upon their rights. The Copenhagen Document (1990) affirmed the right of the individual to seek and receive assistance from others in defending human rights and to assist others in defending human rights. The Budapest Document (1994) emphasized the need for protection of human rights defenders.

Thus, the important and legitimate work of human rights defenders and full enjoyment of freedom of peaceful assembly are widely recognized as essential in a democratic society. Yet, in practice, civic space is shrinking in several countries across the OSCE region. Restrictions to freedom of peaceful assembly are increasing and authorities fail to facilitate the exercise of this important right. Similarly, human rights defenders face numerous obstacles and serious challenges in exercising their right to defend human rights.

Against this background, the second SHDM of 2025 will focus on protecting civic space and the role of human rights defenders and freedom of peaceful assembly. The meeting will provide a platform for representatives of participating States, OSCE institutions and other executive structures, international organizations, civil society, and human rights defenders, in all their plurality, to examine current trends and challenges as well as good practices and lessons learnt in ensuring freedom of peaceful assembly and the protection of human rights defenders.

With panellists and participants representing a wide range of experts and civil society, the meeting will offer an opportunity to take stock where the OSCE region stands 50 years after the adoption of the Helsinki Final Act. It will also examine measures needed to promote and

protect the vital work of those advocating for freedom of peaceful assembly and other human rights and fundamental freedoms, which is essential to ensuring justice, lasting peace and security across the region.

Day 1

9.30 – 10.30

OPENING SESSION

Opening remarks

Keynote address

Technical information

10.30 – 12.30

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

OSCE participating States have committed to **respect** the right to freedom of peaceful assembly without discrimination (Copenhagen 1990, Paris 1990). This freedom is also enshrined in a number of key international human rights treaties and it is a foundation of every democratic society. In recent years, however, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly has faced growing threats, including the use of excessive force by law enforcement in policing assemblies, undue restrictions, increased sanctions and stigmatization targeting organizers and participants, and the use of new technologies to curtail the free exercise of this right.

These worrying trends make the work of human rights defenders, including national human rights institutions (NHRIs), engaged in independent monitoring of assemblies even more essential to ensure the respect for and protection of freedom of peaceful assembly, as well as the transparency and accountability of law enforcement agents and other state authorities. As such, assembly monitors should be able to carry out their important work freely. The right to monitor assemblies is part of the general human right to receive and impart information (a corollary of the right to freedom of expression), as enshrined in OSCE commitments (e.g., Vienna 1989, Copenhagen 1990), and other human rights instruments.

In this context, this session will take stock of the growing threats to freedom of peaceful assembly, and underline the importance of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly for civic space and democracy and the central role played by independent assembly monitors in ensuring respect for this right.

Questions for discussion can include:

- How is respect of freedom of peaceful assembly interlinked with strong civic space and democracy?
- What are the current challenges faced by assembly organizers and participants in exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly?
- What are the challenges for authorities of participating States in facilitating freedom of peaceful assembly?
- What accountability mechanisms exist across the OSCE region to investigate instances of misuse of force by law enforcement authorities?
- What opportunities and challenges do new technologies pose in relation to the exercise of freedom of assembly?
- What are the main threats and challenges faced by independent assembly monitors in the OSCE region and what steps should participating States take to protect, promote and facilitate their work?

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

Whereas OSCE participating States recognize everyone's right to know and act upon their rights and emphasized the need for protection of human rights defenders (Helsinki 1975, Budapest 1994), **effective responses** to challenges faced by human rights defenders are often lacking and the erosion of civic space continues in various parts of the OSCE region. Among others, women and LGBTIQ human rights defenders, environmental defenders, and those defending the rights of persons in vulnerable situations or people placed at higher risk of discrimination such as Roma are facing severe challenges in performing their human rights work at home, across borders and in exile, both online and offline.

Too often, the important and legitimate role of human rights defenders for a pluralistic and democratic society is not recognized. For some, threats and intimidation, including technology-facilitated, are an everyday reality, sometimes even leading to physical violence. Others face criminalization, politically motivated arrest and detention. The proliferation of so-called "foreign agent" laws has a massive impact on human rights defenders and their work, and it further exacerbates the stigmatization and discreditation they are already exposed to. Many human rights defenders, as well as investigative journalists, are targeted with judicial harassment, including through vexatious lawsuits, to deter their work. Surveillance and online censorship, undue restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association as well as access to funding make it difficult for many to continue their human rights work. In the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, many human rights defenders continue their crucial work in documenting human rights violations and providing support while risking their lives and personal safety.

The session will offer an opportunity not only to outline some of the main challenges, but also to discuss effective responses that would improve the situation of human rights defenders across the OSCE region.

Questions for discussion can include:

- Considering the diversity and plurality of human rights defenders, what specific threats and challenges do they face across the OSCE region?
- What challenges do human rights defenders face in carrying out their work within and across borders? What tools and effective responses are in place in order to counter challenges related to new technologies, safety, surveillance and use of repressive tactics such as restrictive legislation and judicial harassment?
- What factors drive human rights defenders out of their countries and what challenges do they face in exile?
- How should participating States respond to threats and challenges to the physical integrity, liberty, security and dignity of human rights defenders? How can host countries support human rights defenders in exile?
- What obligations do participating States have towards ensuring a safe and enabling environment for human rights work in light of current trends of shrinking civic space?

Day 2

10.15 – 12.15

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

Participating States affirmed that the active involvement of persons, groups, organizations and institutions will be essential to ensure continuing progress towards the OSCE's shared objectives (Copenhagen 1990). Thus, going beyond a response to ongoing challenges, there is a need **to prepare** for the future of civic space, ensuring that human rights defenders across the board can work safely and effectively.

Recognizing the important and legitimate role of human rights defenders in a democratic society, it is essential to learn from the experiences of their networks and coalitions. This includes those documenting human rights abuses, working to prevent and counter them and seeking accountability. Support for human rights defenders at risk, whether at home or in exile, is crucial –both through efforts led by human rights defenders and non-governmental organizations, and through initiatives by OSCE participating States and international actors. There is also a need for governments, organizations and institutions to co-operate internationally in countering transnational repression targeting, among others, human rights defenders. New technologies and tools also offer ample space to support and benefit human rights defenders, to strengthen their capacity to conduct human rights work safely and securely and to enhance the collaboration of human rights defenders, across borders and in all their diversity.

The session will provide an opportunity to reflect on how to strengthen and expand civic space to enable active involvement of human rights defenders. It will allow participants to consider new developments that should inform national policies and the upcoming review of ODIHR's Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. It seeks to provide a platform for exchange on lessons learned and good practices to improve the situation of human rights defenders in the years to come and the future of civic space.

Questions for discussion can include:

- What kind of support for human rights defenders can help to ensure a safe and enabling environment for the full and effective exercise of the right to defend human rights?
- What measures should participating States take to increase the protection of human rights defenders at risk? What can they do to counter increasing transnational repression human rights defenders are facing across the region?
- How can new technological tools be used to support human rights defenders and increase their capacity to carry out their vital functions in a democratic society? What can international actors and participating States do to increase their support to human rights defenders in this regard?
- What can civil society actors and human rights defenders do themselves to support each other through their networks and coalitions to increase the protection of human rights defenders?

12.15 – 13.15

CLOSING SESSION

Reports from the working sessions

Statements by participating States

Closing remarks