

HRDN OPEN STATEMENT

Call to Action: Establishing an EU Directive on the Protection and Mobility of Human Rights Defenders

The Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN) welcomes the European Commission's renewed commitment, as part of the EU Civil Society Strategy¹, to scale up its support to ensure an enabling environment for civil society and human rights defenders across the world². In this context we urge the European Commission to take a decisive step toward establishing a Directive on the Protection and Mobility of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), creating a coherent and predictable framework for their protection within the European Union.

Across the world, human rights defenders, including journalists, lawyers, environmental activists, women's rights leaders, and LGBTIQ+ advocates, face increasing risks as a direct consequence of their work. They expose abuses, challenge corruption, and defend communities. Their courage upholds human rights, democracy and the rule of law both within and outside Europe's borders.

While the EU and its Member States have established valuable relocation and protection mechanisms, these remain fragmented, short-term, unavailable to those most at risk and inconsistent as reports and studies have shown³ HRDs at risk are currently left with only two main pathways: temporary relocation programmes, often led by civil society or a few Member States, or the asylum system, which is designed for those unable to return home. Between these two options lies a wide and growing gap. Many defenders require temporary protection and mobility to continue their work, but face bureaucratic barriers, inflexible visa systems with indirect discriminatory impacts, and a lack of harmonised procedures.

A Directive on the Protection and Mobility of Human Rights Defenders (providing equal measures to a Temporary Protection Directive, as recommended in the study requested by the DROI Subcommittee of the European Parliament⁴ and called for by civil society⁵) would bridge this gap by creating an EU-wide framework for safe entry, residence, and participation. It would introduce fast and flexible visa procedures, temporary but renewable residence permits, and the right to work, study, and continue advocacy while in safety. Such a Directive would also ensure fair responsibility sharing among Member States and foster cooperation with civil society organisations that host and support defenders.

This initiative aligns closely with the objectives of the EU Civil Society Strategy and the European Democracy Action Plan, translating policy commitments into a tangible protection mechanism. It would also complement the Human Rights Defenders Mechanism (ProtectDefenders.eu) by ensuring that the EU provides not only emergency support but also structured mobility pathways that allow defenders to rebuild, reconnect, and continue their work in safety inside the EU.

¹[EU Civil Society Strategy, \(Brussels, 12.11.2025 COM\(2025\) 790 final\)](#)

²[Main points EU Civil Society Strategy, November 2025](#)

³[EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, Protecting human rights defenders at risk: EU entry, stay and support, 11 July 2023, 4. Initiatives facilitating entry and stay](#)

⁴[Study – Requested by the DROI Subcommittee, Authors Elspeth GUILD, Niovi VAVOULA, Vasiliki APATZIDOU, January 2024, E Study – Requested by the DROI Subcommittee, Authors Elspeth GUILD, Niovi VAVOULA, Vasiliki APATZIDOU, January 2024, Enhancing the protect](#)

⁵[Joint Statement: International Civil Society Organisations call for an effective and enabling EU Visa framework for At-Risk Human Rights Defenders;](#) iv) introduce amendments to the Temporary Protection Directive that allow temporary protection status in the EU to be granted to defenders at risk.

At a time of growing authoritarianism and shrinking civic space, the European Union has the opportunity to demonstrate leadership. Establishing a Directive on the Protection and Mobility of Human Rights Defenders would send a strong message: that Europe values and stands with those who defend rights, justice, and democracy, both within and beyond its borders.

We stand ready to contribute our collective expertise and networks to support the European Commission in developing this initiative.

Addressed to:

Ursula Von der Leyen, The President of the European Commission

Magnus Brunner, European Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration

Kaja Kallas, The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Roberta Metsola, The President of the European Parliament