

# ODIHR and the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

“The participating States recognize the universal significance of human rights and fundamental freedoms (...) They confirm the right of the individual to know and act upon his rights and duties in this field.”  
(Helsinki, 1975)

“Human rights defenders play a crucial role in addressing some of today’s greatest challenges in the human dimension of security. ODIHR will continue to bring attention to the situation of human rights defenders across the OSCE region, so that participating States can better support these individuals and the rights they defend.” *Michael Georg Link, ODIHR Director*

## Who is a human rights defender?

Anyone promoting and striving for the realization of human rights is a human rights defender – regardless

of profession, age or other status, or whether they are carrying out their human rights activities individually or jointly with others, as part of an informal group or a non-governmental organization,

or whether they act in a voluntary capacity or professionally. The key characteristic that defines human rights defenders is not who they are, but what they do and the principles they stand for.

(ODIHR Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, 2014)

## Why is ODIHR involved?

OSCE participating States have committed themselves to ensuring special protection of human rights defenders (Budapest, 1994). They have recognized the right of every individual to know and act upon her or his rights and duties and to seek and receive assistance or assist others

in defending human rights and fundamental freedoms (Copenhagen, 1990). More recently, they also reaffirmed the important role played by civil society and free media in safeguarding human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy, including free and fair elections and the rule of law (Astana, 2010).

ODIHR’s mandate is to assist participating States to “ensure full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, to abide by the rule of law, to promote principles of democracy and [...] to build, strengthen and protect democratic institutions, as well as promote tolerance throughout society.” (Helsinki 1992).



Participants collaborate at an ODIHR workshop for human rights defenders, 21 October 2016 in Budva, Montenegro. (OSCE/Elton Kërçiku)

## How does ODIHR support human rights defenders?

The office supports human rights defenders by:

- Building their capacity to conduct human rights monitoring and reporting, safely and securely, including through digital security and self-care;
- Monitoring and reporting on the situation of human rights defenders, to support states in the implementation of their OSCE commitments and the standards outlined in the Guidelines;
- Raising government representatives' awareness about their obligations to protect human rights defenders;
- Supporting and facilitating a direct dialogue between participating States and civil society on issues related to human rights defenders' work;
- Promoting the need to protect human rights defenders internationally by showcasing the importance of human rights work;
- Connecting national human rights institutions (NHRIs) and human rights defenders during ODIHR's annual NHRI Academy and through other means;
- Organizing meetings to provide networking opportunities for human rights defenders from the entire OSCE area, providing them with an opportunity to discuss key issues and develop common strategies; and
- Promoting co-operation and synergies with international actors and OSCE Field Operations working with and for human rights defenders.



## Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Following appeals by civil society in the OSCE region, and building on its longstanding engagement with human rights defenders, in 2014 ODIHR published its *Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders* to offer guidance to OSCE participating States in the implementation of their commitments related to the protection of human rights defenders.

The Guidelines do not set any new standards or create special rights for human rights defenders, but simply spell out OSCE commitments and universally recognized human rights standards, including:

- Protection from threats, attacks and other abuses;
- Protection from judicial harassment, criminalization, arbitrary arrest and detention;
- Confronting stigmatization and marginalization;
- Freedom of opinion, expression and information;
- Freedom of peaceful assembly;
- Freedom of association and the right to form, join and participate effectively in non-governmental organizations;
- The right to participate in public affairs;
- Freedom of movement and human rights work within and across borders;
- The right to private life; and
- The right to access and communicate with international bodies.

“Being a human rights defender is a mission; it’s not so much a profession, it is a mission. I think that people whose rights have been violated, understand what human rights are. Many of my clients, who come to me with various problems, gradually become human rights defenders themselves.”  
*Aziza Abdirasulova, Head of the Public Foundation ‘Kylym Shamy’*

“The 5-day workshop on Human Rights Monitoring and Safety and Security for Human Rights Defenders organized by ODIHR deepened my knowledge of human rights reporting, honed my professional skills, and inspired me to fight for the rights and freedoms of those who have been deprived of fundamental liberties.” *Alex Guzenko, Ukraine Crisis Media Center*

For more information about ODIHR’s work with and about human rights defenders, please visit: [www.osce.org/odihhr/human-rights-defenders](http://www.osce.org/odihhr/human-rights-defenders)

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