

ENNHRI statement in support of the Armenian Human Rights Defender

The European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) expresses serious concern that the Human Rights Defender of Armenia (Armenian NHRI), its leadership and staff, have faced threats and attacks by political actors due to the institution's human rights work. ENNHRI reiterates our support to the Armenian NHRI in its work to promote and protect all human rights in Armenia.

Attacks faced by the Human Rights Defender herself, and the staff of the institution include verbal harassment, hate speech on gender and ethnic grounds, threats, and attempts to block citizens' engagement with and reporting to the institution. Moreover, the Human Rights Defender is targeted particularly in relation to the institution's involvement in advocating for the protection of the human rights of groups in vulnerable situations, including persons with disabilities and LGBTQ individuals.

This continued harassment and undue interference in the institution's broad mandate contributes to a deteriorating environment of the Human Rights Defender to carry out its work. In addition, these actions from political actors have raised concerns for the safety of the institution's staff and leadership. Finally, these attacks on the Armenian NHRI are concerning for public trust as well as engagement with and reporting to the NHRI, an institution that plays a crucial role in promoting and protecting the human rights of individuals in Armenia.

A strong NHRI, in full compliance with the Paris Principles, is a pillar of human rights, democracy and rule of law which plays a crucial role in the implementation of human rights at the national level. NHRIs in compliance with international standards are also a global indicator for the achievement of Goal 16 on 'peace, justice, and strong institutions' under the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The Council of Europe [recognises](#) effective and independent NHRIs as pillars of respect for human rights, rule of law, and democracy placing strategic priority on these institutions, as confirmed in the recent summit of heads of state [Reykjavik Outcome Declaration](#). Similarly, NHRIs are also recognised by the EU as fundamental actors for the exercise of checks and balances in a country and for ensuring respect for the rule of law, democracy and human rights. In addition, the EU

institutions have highlighted that attempts to restrict the operating space of NHRIs can present a threat to the rule of law.

International standards applicable to NHRIs are firmly engrained within the Constitutional Law of Armenia. Specifically, the Constitutional Law of the Republic of Armenia on the Human Rights Defender prohibits any interference with the activities of the Defender, and outlines that obstructing the exercise of the power of the Defender, as defined by the Constitution as well as threats to the Defender shall entail liability (Article 10).

Relevant regional and international standards

The [UN Paris Principles](#), adopted by the UN General Assembly Resolution [48/134](#) of 20 December 1993, are the cornerstone of the standards applicable to NHRIs. Based on them, the [international body](#) responsible for accrediting NHRIs (the GANHRI Sub-Committee on Accreditation (SCA)) provides further contemporary content and scope of the requirements to ensure NHRIs' independent and effective work.

A fundamental requirement of the Paris Principles is that an NHRI is able to operate independent of political interference. The Paris Principles require NHRIs have the power to submit opinions on any situation of violation of human rights which it decides to take up. In this context, the SCA has [highlighted](#) that it is vital to ensure protections to enhance the NHRI's ability to engage in critical analysis and commentary on human rights issues, safeguard the independence of senior leadership, and promote public confidence in the NHRI. This includes by ensuring that the staff and decision-making body of an NHRI are protected from liability for acts undertaken in their official capacity.

Further, the SCA outlines that NHRIs must be empowered to consider and determine the strategic priorities and activities of the NHRI based solely on its determination of the human rights priorities in the country, free from political interference.

The UN General Assembly has also [stressed](#) that NHRIs and their staff should not face any form of reprisal or intimidation, including political pressure, physical intimidation, or harassment, as a result of activities undertaken in accordance with their respective mandates, including when taking up individual cases or when reporting on serious or systematic violations. The UN General Assembly further calls upon States to promptly and thoroughly investigate cases of alleged reprisal or intimidation against members or staff of national human rights institutions or against individuals who cooperate or seek to cooperate with them and to bring perpetrators to justice.

At the level of the Council of Europe, the recent [Committee of Ministers Recommendation 2021/1](#) also calls for securing and expanding a safe and enabling environment for NHRIs. It highlights that states must take all measures necessary to protect and support NHRIs against threats and harassment and any other forms of intimidation. It also specifies that any cases of alleged reprisals or intimidation against NHRIs, their membership and staff, or against those who co-operate or seek to co-operate with them, should be promptly and thoroughly investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice.

Moreover, under the Council of Europe [Venice Principles](#), 'States shall refrain from taking any action aiming at or resulting in the suppression of the Ombudsman Institution or in any hurdles to its effective functioning and shall effectively protect it from any such threats'.

We express concern that the recent threats and attacks against the Armenian NHRI are in contradiction with domestic, regional and international standards. Based on the extensive recognition of the important role of NHRIs for rule of law, democracy and human rights, the Armenian Human Rights Defender, including its Head and staff, should not face any form of intimidation, harassment or attacks. When such instances occur, however, these should be promptly and effectively remedied.

Going forward

The Human Rights Defender of Armenia is a highly respected institution, both nationally and within the wider international human rights community. In 2019, it was [re-accredited](#) by the SCA with A-status, confirming its full compliance with the Paris Principles. At that time, the SCA commended the efforts undertaken by the Armenian NHRI to promote and protect human rights despite the challenging context in which it operates, including by taking public positions on sensitive issues.

This includes the institution's work on disability, LGBTQ+ rights, as well as freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, which is currently being carried out by the Armenian Human Rights Defender in line with the international human rights obligations and standards applicable to NHRIs.

We call on Armenian state authorities, as well as all national political actors to uphold international standards for the protection of the Armenian Human Rights Defender against intimidation, harassment, threats as well as any actions that may negatively impact on its independence and effectiveness.

This includes by creating and maintaining an enabling space for the institution, ensuring the NHRI is able to engage in critical analysis and commentary on all human rights issues and promoting

public confidence in the institution. Further, in line with international standards, we call on state authorities to take necessary steps to safeguard the independence and safety of the NHRI's senior leadership.