

Promoting and Protecting a Sustainable Human Rights Environment in Europe by Strengthening the Democratic Space and the Rule of Law¹

On the occasion of its General Assembly Meeting, the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions, ENNHRI, stresses the role of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) as human rights defenders to promote and protect a sustainable human rights environment in Europe, in close cooperation with other human rights actors.

The establishment of an NHRI in compliance with the UN Paris Principles is an indicator for governments' commitment towards the effective implementation of their human rights obligations. Hence, **ENNHRI calls upon all European states to establish independent NHRIs.**

NHRIs have a unique overview of needs and challenges concerning the implementation of international, European and domestic human rights standards at the national level. Their mandate and authority enables them to pursue dialogue with governments, as well as parliaments and advise them on effective compliance with international and regional standards, including the European Convention of Human Rights.

As public institutions with a strong legal or constitutional mandate to promote and protect human rights, NHRIs' independent functioning is safeguarded through the respect for the rule of law in their countries. With their broad mandates, NHRIs can provide independent expert advice to governments, parliaments and societies at large on how to better implement international human rights obligations in their national context, and can hold governments to account when human rights violations occur.

ENNHRI calls upon the European governments to duly follow-up the recommendations made by NHRIs on how to enhance the promotion and protection of human rights in their countries.

In the current climate of shrinking democratic space in Europe, with growing inequalities, discrimination and mistrust in institutions, mechanisms and actions to protect and promote human rights, including the execution of the European Court of Human Rights judgments, the need for strong and independent NHRIs is further intensified.

According to the Paris Principles, NHRIs have the mandate to submit to state authorities their opinion on "any situation of violation of human rights which it decides to take up", and to do so in full independence. The UN Human Rights Council in its resolution 33/15 indeed recognises that NHRIs should be free from any political

¹ Adopted on 30 November 2017 at the ENNHRI General Assembly Meeting, Brussels.

pressure, physical intimidation or harassment. It is understandable and even expected that the actions and reports from an independent NHRI will contain information that is critical to government or unpopular, as it is the mandate of the NHRI to bring attention to human rights violations or to areas in which human rights may be improved in a country. In some instances, National Human Rights Institutions, their reports, their legal basis but also their heads of institutions are suffering severe criticism by State authorities, putting at risk the public confidence in both the institutions and the individuals, as is the case in Georgia and Poland and in Ukraine.

In the present challenging environment and times, solidarity and cooperation are needed. Collectively, through ENNHRI, and individually, NHRIs also build bridges and join forces with international stakeholders, such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United Nations, to facilitate international support for human rights defenders in Europe and also for themselves, as European NHRIs. This support can be crucial in strengthening the NHRIs' independence, to prevent and tackle threats that may affect their functioning.

ENNHRI encourages its members to continue cooperating with and supporting other human rights defenders, including civil society organisations (CSOs), whenever they face threats, such as legal and administrative restrictions; judicial harassment and sanctions; smear campaigns, intimidation and even physical violence. Through their functioning as bridge-builders, NHRIs can provide and facilitate support to human rights defenders, including peer support to other NHRIs.

ENNHRI remains dedicated to further strengthening its support to members under threat. ENNHRI also encourages its members to continue to support each other and all human rights defenders when facing threats, including through bilateral and collective support.

About ENNHRI

ENNHRI, the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions, brings together 41 National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) from across wider Europe. ENNHRI's mission is to promote and protect human rights across the European region. ENNHRI supports the development of European NHRIs by: advising on the establishment and accreditation of NHRIs; coordinating the exchange of information and good practice between members; organising capacity building and training on NHRI methodologies and human rights; building solidarity between European NHRIs; providing support for NHRIs under threat and facilitating NHRIs' engagement with regional and international mechanisms.