

CAMPAIGN LAUNCH

Brussels, 12 November 2015

The Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN) is launching a year-long campaign: [Stand 4 Human Rights Defenders](#). HRDN is an informal group of 48 NGOs operating at the EU level in the areas of human rights, democracy and peace building.

Today, many governments worldwide are investing huge effort and resources to close down, silence, restrict and discredit human rights defenders (HRDs) and independent civil society critical of government policies. Defenders at risk need a more consistent and credible political response from governments that are active in the defence of democracy and human rights. Despite commitments made in the EU Strategic Framework on human rights and democracy, we have yet to see the EU follow through on its pledges to throw its “full weight behind advocates of liberty, democracy, and human rights throughout the world”.

The EU has pledged to make the protection of human rights defenders at risk one of its key priorities. It must renew and reinvigorate this commitment with concrete actions: more high profile political leadership, a consistent strategy that prioritises the protection of human rights defenders across all policy areas, and sustained practical support to those under attack on the front line in third countries and within the EU.

The EU and its member states must give, at this crucial political moment, the highest possible priority and resources to enable space for human rights defenders and civil society even as other states work to close it down. As a community based on rule of law and shared values, the EU must stand at the forefront to act and speak out for human rights defenders who are silenced, attacked, harassed and put behind bars. The Stand 4 Human Rights Defenders campaign calls on the EU and its member states to address this issue vigorously and strategically at the highest political level, both inside and outside the EU.

The EU has adopted a range of tools that guide its work on HRDs. In July EU Foreign Ministers approved a revised Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy that included specific action points on EU support to HRDs. The EU and its 28 Member States now have to apply these pledges and commitments to real situations and take explicit measures to reinforce and step up their action in support of human rights defenders and civil society worldwide. It is also imperative that the European Parliament and EU national parliaments hold the EU institutions even more closely to account for their action on HRDs.

The Stand 4 Human Rights Defenders Campaign will promote constructive dialogue between civil society organisations and EU actors so as to jointly identify practical actions that could be implemented by the EU in order to improve the effectiveness of its work on HRDs. Moreover, the campaign will press for several key outcomes to give true impetus to EU commitments to HRDs, including:

- An annual Foreign Affairs Council meeting dedicated to discussing EU efforts to achieve the release of jailed HRDs worldwide, not only issuing conclusions on present and planned engagement on HRDs, but also issuing conclusions to highlight emblematic cases that arise throughout the year, as also requested by the European Parliament;
- The European Parliament should likewise organise an annual event on HRDs with the participation of EU national parliamentarians and human rights defenders, which would offer a unique platform for European Parliamentarians to support HRDs worldwide and to advance the space for HRDs to speak up and pursue their rights in their own countries;
- Increased centralised monitoring of individual cases at the EEAS in association with EU Member States and civil society;
- Increased capacity of the EU to react strategically to cases of HRDs at risk and/or facing arbitrary detention and harassment including through improvements in public diplomacy and through new tools such as a checklist to recognise and respond on behalf of HRDs at risk;
- A comprehensive strategy outlining a joint EU/Member State response to the closing space for civil society worldwide;
- Concrete actions on cases of individual human rights defenders shared by HRDN members.