

NORWEGIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE



Annual Report
2015



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Cover photo:
Political prisoners Leyla and Arif Yunus.
Artwork by Suzannah Rehell Øistad, a student
at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts

Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Established in 1977

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) is a non-governmental organisation that works to promote respect for human rights, nationally and internationally. Its work is based on the conviction that documentation and active promotion of human rights by civil society is needed for states to secure human rights, at home and in other countries.

NHC bases its work on international human rights instruments adopted by the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), including the 1975 Helsinki Final Act.

The main areas of focus for the NHC are the countries of Europe, North America and Central Asia. The NHC works irrespective of ideology or political system in these countries and maintains political neutrality.

How we work

Human rights monitoring and reporting

Through monitoring and reporting on problematic human rights situations in specific countries, the NHC sheds light on violations of human rights. The NHC places particular emphasis on civil and political rights, including the fundamental freedoms of expression, belief, association and assembly. On-site research and close co-operation with key civil society actors are our main working methods. The NHC has expertise in election observation and has sent numerous observer missions to elections over the last two decades.

Support for democratic processes

By sharing knowledge and with financial assistance, the NHC supports local initiatives for the promotion of an independent civil society and public institutions as well as a free media. A civil society that functions well is a precondition for the development of democracy.

Education and information

Through education and information about democracy and human rights, international law and multicultural understanding, we work to increase the focus on human rights. Our aim is to influence both public opinion and governments in human rights matters.

International processes

As with our educational work, the NHC seeks to influence governments and international organisations through participation in international processes, meetings and conferences to make human rights a priority.

Perspectives

Human rights against the current

In November 2015 I was at Storskog, the arctic border crossing between Norway and Russia. The days were getting shorter and the wind was freezing. In the previous weeks, thousands of asylum seekers had crossed into Norway. All of them were wheeling bicycles; the only means available to them, as passing this border on foot is prohibited.

Together with Svetlana Gannushkina – our colleague from the Russian organisations Memorial and Civic Assistance Committee, recipient of numerous international awards and one of Europe's most respected authorities on the rights of migrants and refugees – I visited the Vestleiren centre for asylum seekers by Høybuktmoen airport.

We met some people who were waiting to have their claims reviewed. Others awaited deportation back to Russia. We were impressed by the organisational skills and humanity of the people of Finnmark county who were hosting the asylum seekers. "In Norway, migrants are treated as human beings," Gannushkina said.

While some of the refugees spoke Russian and had spent a long time in Russia (Gannushkina encountered a few of her Moscow clients), many of the asylum seekers who had taken the "Northern route" into the Schengen area had recently departed from their home countries. A number of them had escaped from the battlegrounds in Syria.

In the fall of 2015, Norway felt for the first time a mass influx of asylum seekers at its own borders, and the experience had a tremendous impact, as it has had all over Europe. It was an extraordinary situation and the government understandably scrambled to put up a system to deal with the migrants. However, among the measures taken were amendments to the Immigration Act aimed at returning most of the asylum seekers to Russia, based on the dubious assumption that they would be protected there.

The events took place in the middle of a media blitz which vacillated between portraying migrants as refugees in need of protection and as a tsunami of economic "adventurers" heading to Europe in order to devour our welfare states and commit terrorism. Barbarians at the gates, as it were.

While the Norwegian government had underlined human rights as a major strategic concern for Norway, and Russian violations of international law as a major threat, their rhetoric suddenly changed: the 1951 Refugee Convention seemed less important, and Russia was portrayed as a safe country for asylum seekers.

Norway and Europe were facing one of the periodic tests of liberal societies. Should we abandon some principles in order to fortify our borders? Human rights are entwined with democracy to such a degree that they often appear as twin concepts, yet in this case human rights did not appear to enjoy popular support.

Human rights defenders do not in general have a difficult time in Norway, but during the autumn of 2015 it would perhaps have been easier not to stand up for the right to seek asylum as a universal human right. On the other hand, it is perhaps exactly in such moments that human rights defenders are needed.

The amendments and fast-track procedures were criticised not only by us and other Norwegian human rights groups, but also by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Human Rights Watch issued for the first time a statement that criticised Norway.

We are worried that Norway's fast-track procedures have resulted in violations of the international principle of non-refoulement: asylum seekers were returned to Yemen and Syria without having their asylum claims processed. Norway needs to look into these cases and remedy them if human rights have been violated.



Bjørn Engeland

The 1951 Refugee Convention rests on two basic premises: you could become a refugee, and helping refugees means helping yourself. Høybuktmoen Airport is a reminder that Norway itself once produced refugees: it was built by the Nazi occupiers during the Second World War, when tens of thousands of Norwegians sought protection in Sweden and overseas.

The historical memory of occupation and flight is fading, but we should not therefore abandon the 1951 Convention. That would be temporarily convenient, but also fundamentally short-sighted, divisive and dangerous thing to do.

Activities in 2015

During 2015 many new challenges were posed to human rights. As refugees flooded into Europe, we witnessed an increasing hostility against immigrants all over Europe. The very foundation of human rights – their universality and the obligation of states to respect them – was challenged, including by members of the Norwegian Parliament. The authoritarian tendencies we have seen in many of the countries we are following have simply continued, and conflicts between “Western” and “Eastern” values and interests have resurfaced with greater force. This means that human rights activism is just as needed as ever, and we have been reminded that even when a battle is won, the war is not over. The NHC has had a very active year with widespread activities in many countries. Our main focus is on the human rights challenges in Eastern Europe, but we also aim to be active human rights defenders in our own country, Norway. Through our expertise and the wide-ranging networks of our staff, we follow developments closely, take action on urgent matters and have an extensive range of project activities.



The Russian Federation

At the beginning of the year, the murder of the opposition politician Boris Nemtsov prompted a new focus on the situation for the opposition and critical voices in Russia. The NHC participated in the discourse in the media and drew attention to several challenges facing civil society in the Russian Federation, providing information about the situation and underlining the need to fight impunity and for continued sanctions against perpetrators.

Most of the NHC's long-term partners have been put on the list of so-called "foreign agents" by the authorities and are struggling with the consequences. Many have had to shut down their organisation in its formal shape. However, Russian activists continue their work as best as they are able, and the NHC continues its efforts to support Russian civil society, drawing upon its international network and experience. The NHC has aimed to contribute to the increasingly polarised discourse on Russia by highlighting those individuals who courageously share knowledge with us and who fight passionately for democracy and rule of law.



Svetlana Gannushkina visiting Storskog

In response to the arrests of independent activists and court cases against NGOs, the NHC is regularly updating a list of political prisoners in the Russian Federation within the framework of the NHC special focus on political prisoners in Europe. Although the list put together by the Memorial Human Rights Centre is not exhaustive, it includes around 50 names.

In October, we organised a seminar dedicated to the forty-year anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act and in memory of the journalist and human rights activist Anna Politkovskaya. To a full auditorium at the House of Literature, Nils August Andresen of Minerva moderated a discussion on civil society in Russia today. The panellists included Novaya Gazeta investigative journalist Roman Anin; chair of the lawyer network Agora Pavel Chikov; Svetlana Gannushkina, head of the Civic Assistance Committee; and the NHC's Russia advisor, Lene Wetteland. Gannushkina and Chikov also met with various Norwegian stakeholders, including Prime Minister Erna Solberg.



Advertisement for bikes in Nikel



Svetlana Gannushkina, Bjørn Engesland and Berit Lindeman visiting the reception centre at Vestleiren

Bjørn Engesland gives welcome speech
at the Anna Politkovskaya seminar



» Educational activities in the Russian Federation

The main goal of the educational activities is to contribute to the democratisation of society, preparation of the population for participation in democratic processes and the formation of civil society. Project themes have included human rights education, inter-cultural understanding and peaceful conflict resolution. We have targeted youth, teachers, law enforcement officials and prison officials, as well as people with special needs and those working with them. We have also introduced basic human rights law for groups of activists from Murmansk. We aim to increase co-operation between the partners who engage in human rights in the different regions of Russia.

In our human rights educational activities we work with human rights organisations, humanitarian organisations, journalists and officials. These groups have different expectations and needs, but our partners emphasise the importance of co-operation between different professions to achieve the best results. That is why we sometimes educate them together, giving them a chance to get to know each other and see opportunities for future co-operation.

To counter the lack of knowledge about one's own rights and the protection of and respect for the rights of others in the North Caucasus, we have supported initiatives to disseminate relevant information in journals and by providing training.

As part of our educational activities, we provide access to educational materials for partners so that they can continue and develop trainings independently in the future.



Activists from Murmansk



Bjørn Engesland and Pavel Chikov



Lene Wetteland and Roman Anin



Roman Anin

Throughout the year, the NHC has reacted to intensifying verbal and physical attacks by the Chechen authorities against lawyers, journalists, activists and others in the North Caucasus. In a very flagrant example, the Joint Mobile Group of the Committee against Torture was attacked by a mob and their property in Grozny destroyed.

Many Chechens have applied for asylum in Norway, and we continue to assist lawyers, immigration authorities and other non-governmental organisations in providing up-to-date information and resource persons. A Ny Tid article on two Chechen asylum seekers who were returned to Russia despite our warnings and later found tortured and dead in Chechnya opened up public discourse in Norway on the forced return of rejected asylum seekers from the North Caucasus and the Norwegian use of the so-called "internal flight" option.

In response to the unprecedented influx of asylum seekers across the border between Northern Russia and Norway at Storskog, restrictive amendments to the Norwegian immigration act were approved by the parliament at an astonishing speed. The NHC expressed serious concerns about the weak legal safeguards in the process, and in particular with regard to Norway's assumption that Russia is a safe country for asylum seekers, as asylum seekers were returned there.

Together with our long-term partner the Civic Assistance Committee (CAC), we warned about the corrupt and defunct asylum system in Russia. At the end of November, the NHC and CAC visited the asylum reception centre in Kirkenes near the Storskog border on the Norwegian side, speaking to asylum seekers and various Norwegian stakeholders. On the Russian side, the NHC and CAC visited Nikel and Murmansk and met with representatives there.

As in previous years we have also nominated candidates for the Fritt Ord/Die Zeit Press Prize for Russia and Eastern Europe, and the weekly newspaper Pskovskaya Guberniya in North-West Russia received the prize in June of this year. We also funded the participation of Andrei Soldatov at the SKUP investigative journalist conference at Lillehammer, where he launched his book on surveillance systems in Russia.



Pavel Chikov



NHC staff mark the Stop Torture campaign



Bjørn Engesland and Svetlana Gannushkina



A heart that never dies

Belarus

The human rights situation in Belarus seems to be slightly improved in 2015, at least from an outsider point of view. President Alexander Lukashenko released all remaining political prisoners in the country after Minsk hosted the East and West negotiations between Russia and the EU; the presidential elections, although grossly undemocratic, were carried out without any mass crackdown on oppositional activists. We see this development as linked to Belarus' international policy and Lukashenko's ability to manoeuvre and bargain between Russia and the EU. Fundamentally, Belarus remains an authoritarian regime with very limited civil and political rights for its citizens.

During the documentary film festival *Human Rights Human Wrongs*, Belarus was highlighted in the screening of a documentary film about Natalia Pinchuk, the wife of Ales Bialiatsky, a former political prisoner and the head of the Human Rights Centre Viasna. Pinchuk shares her daily life of waiting, a life put on hold while existing on the little contact she can have with her incarcerated husband during the three years. Later in the spring we co-organised the screening of another documentary film featuring Ales Bialiatsky, a chapter from the series *A heart that never dies*, created by the renowned Norwegian documentary film-maker Erling Borgen. This time Ales himself visited Oslo to introduce – together

with the filmmaker – the first film in a series dedicated to several human rights defenders worldwide. Berit Lindeman is one of Ales' friends who is interviewed in the documentary. The NHC has also arranged several meetings between Ales Bialiatsky and interested parties in Oslo.

Prior to the presidential elections in Belarus, the NHC received the opposition presidential candidate Tatyana Korotkevich, who was on a short visit and sharing information on the pre-electoral situation in Belarus.

The NHC continued to share information about the human rights situation in the country, and gave several lectures about Belarus to various Norwegian actors, such as political parties and participants in the mission of the election observers to Belarus. The NHC has also participated in international events such as, for example, the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in September 2015, where the situation in Belarus was discussed.

Secretary General Bjørn Engesland participated in the 10-year anniversary of the Belarus Free Theatre in London. The independent theatre group – a long-term partner of the NHC – has visited Oslo several times.



Alexander Lukashenko with his son Nikolai

Ukraine

Promotion of the documentation of war crimes and grave human rights abuses in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, LGBTI work and election observation remain essential areas of the committee's involvement in Ukraine.

As a partner in the European Platform for Democratic Elections, the NHC closely followed the process of the adoption of new election legislation. The committee's senior advisor, Berit Lindeman, delivered a lecture on legal reform at a conference organised by the local partner the Committee of Voters in February 2015. On 25 October 2015, NHC representatives Mina Skouen and Olga Shamshur Flydal observed the parliamentary elections together with teams of EPDE observers from Georgia, Russia, Poland, Armenia and Moldova.



» Addressing propaganda

In May, we organised a debate at the Nobel Peace Center addressing the propaganda, myths and facts connected to Eastern Ukraine. It was a very popular event, where former correspondent Christian Borch moderated a panel consisting of human rights activists Ella Polyakova of Soldiers' Mothers St Petersburg and Krassimir Yankov of Amnesty International Ukraine, freelance war correspondent Arkadiy Babchenko of Russia and Anastasia Stanko of Hromadske TV in Ukraine. The panellists shared their knowledge and experience of collecting documentation in the field and providing truthful information within a polarised environment dangerous for independent voices. The NHC is very grateful for the good co-operation it has with the Nobel Peace Center, which makes such events possible.



Remembering Boris Nemtsov in Kiev

Krassimir Yankov and Anastasia Stanko



Ella Polyakova and Arkadiy Babchenko



Olga Shamshur Flydal at the seminar on war crimes from Mariupol to Maidan



The military conflict in Eastern Ukraine continues to take the lives of soldiers and civilians alike, the number of casualties now reaching 9,000 people. The NHC works on documenting human rights violations and war crimes in order to truthfully reflect the scale of transgressions, as well as to lay the groundwork for future accountability. Through the Fritt Ord-sponsored project "Documentation and information about the war in Ukraine", senior advisor and writer Aage Borchgrevink travelled to Eastern Ukraine in spring of 2015, producing a series of reportage from the war zone for *Dagbladet* newspaper. Co-operation and contact with the Coalition for Justice and Peace in Donbass seek ways to consolidate the efforts of Ukrainian civil society in documenting abuses and establishing a robust system of online record keeping.



Siri Frigaard and Aage Borchgrevink



Solomiya Bobrovskaya and Pavlo Dykan at the investigating war crimes seminar

» Insight: Equality festival

While the NHC's LGBTI project has mostly focused on fighting *against* homophobia, transphobia and hate crimes, it also aims to show what kind of society the LGBTI movement is fighting for. An example is the Equality Festival held by Insight in co-operation with other minority and women's groups in December 2015. The idea was to use culture to draw attention to the challenges and diversity within minority communities. During four days of concerts, performances, exhibitions and debates, the festival attendants – straight as well as queer – got a chance to have joint positive experiences instead of meeting only on the street at public actions or not meeting at all. But they also saw at first hand some of the most pressing issues for the LGBTI community by being under constant threat of attack by hate groups.

The first night of the festival, assailants tried to interrupt the opening with gas grenades. The second day religious activists came as well, throwing stones. But the festival continued as planned, proving to the audience that with so many groups standing together, the hate groups would not be able to set the agenda.



Gas grenade attack on the Equality Festival in Kiev on its opening night

LGBTI is another pertinent area of the NHC's involvement in Ukraine, with a comprehensive project running there since 2012. Our partners are the local Ukrainian organisations Insight, NASH MIR and No Borders. No Borders co-operates with the local law enforcement institutions and public administration in identifying and dealing with hate crimes in the same regions where the NHC project has its most active regional initiatives. Nash Mir, for its part, trains monitors of hate crimes, and provides legal aid to victims as well as legal education to the community. Its comprehensive annual reports on hate crimes are widely quoted by national and international human rights organisations.

In co-operation with Oslo Fusion International Film Festival and the Norwegian LGBT organisation, the NHC invited LGBTI activists from Ukraine, Turkey, Lithuania and Russia to celebrate the festival's 25th anniversary, drawing attention to their challenges and inspiring co-operation in cultural activism. The NHC also took part in Arctic Pride 2015 in Tromsø during 16-22 November, discussing how Norwegian activists can support the Russian LGBTI community through cross-border co-operation in the Barents region.



Participants at the Equality Festival in Kiev



Exhibition at the Equality Festival in Kiev



Equality Festival in Kiev



The NHC's Olga Shamshur Flydal and Mina Skouen at the Equality Festival



Art exhibition at the Equality Festival



Man casts vote during the parliamentary election in October



South Caucasus

Project Coalition for Trust in the South Caucasus

The Coalition for Trust is a project designed by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and six partners from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The project also involves partners from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. It aims to address problems caused by past wars in the troubled region of the South Caucasus. The objectives of the project are to contribute to the development of democracy, the promotion of human rights and the rebuilding of trust and reconciliation in the region.

The project has four pillars: education, engagement of target groups, networking and advocacy, which provide members of civil society with knowledge and tools to use in linking human rights and building trust.

The Coalition for Trust in the South Caucasus International Conference was held in Istanbul over 8-10 June 2015. The conference brought together over 55 participants from the entire South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the "de facto" entities of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia. The participants included actors interested in joining the coalition in either an organisational or personal capacity: journalists, scholars, human rights activists and

civil society representatives. The participants from the South Caucasus were joined by representatives of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and experts from the Balkans and the event's host country, Turkey.

The conference established the Coalition as an international non-governmental organisation, as a body bringing together partner organisations from the South Caucasus and as a strategy. According to the strategy, the Coalition for Trust will define a practical and strategical human rights approach to the building of trust. It is expected that its implementation, together with changes in attitudes and enhanced public participation, will contribute to the development of democracy, the promotion of human rights, intercultural understanding and reconciliation in the region by:

- Helping members of civil society to achieve a social position that enables them to effectively promote the project's goals;
- Continuously transferring know-how relating to the non-governmental sector relating to new methods and theories, especially in the field of transitional justice as an innovative approach to the establishment of peace; and
- Opening and widening new channels of co-operation among non-governmental organisations, media and a wide range of actors who will take part in the action.



Man casts vote during the referendum in Armenia in December



NHC's Enver Djuliman and Vugar Gajayev at the Coalition for Trust conference in Istanbul in May 2015



Polling station

Armenia

In 2015 we started our new activities with our five local partner organisations, focusing on the lack of trust in the various actors in civil society and the state – the police, human rights defenders, the army, elections and the media. These partners carry out research into conditions for conscripts in the army, police-citizen relations and the perception of civil society activists within the population. The local partners organise awareness-raising seminars and workshops on the rights of sexual, national and religious minorities in co-operation with media participants. Together we submitted letters to various international institutions, criticising in particular the attitude towards LGBTI persons and their defenders, as well as the proposed amendments to the constitution. Civil society activists in Armenia and abroad feared that the proposed constitutional amendments would strengthen the role of the ruling Republican Party and secure continued powers for the incumbent president. Also, the amendments entailed a weakening of several human rights provisions in the legislation.

Together with the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) and the local Citizen Observer Initiative, the NHC observed an unprecedented level of outright fraud and pressure against observers and journalists during the 6 December referendum, and concluded in reports and press conferences that the result was illegitimate.

Several large protests against the Government took place in 2015, with a significant peak during the June demonstrations being dubbed Electric Yerevan. The first demonstration was

Bjørn Engesland and Enver Djuliman at a seminar in Yerevan



dispersed with mass arrests and water cannons, but protesters kept taking to the streets in Yerevan and other cities.

The authorities have responded to public activism and criticism with increased pressure, violence and illegal criminal prosecution. As a result, Armenia had 13 political prisoners in 2015, who suffered discriminatory procedural treatment due to their political views. The NHC is following the situation together with local partner Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor, within the framework of the "No political prisoners in Europe" campaign and website.

For Armenians all over the world, 2015 first and foremost symbolised 100 years since the start of the Armenian Genocide. A range of activities were aimed at the recognition of this atrocity, and the NHC also contributed to the debate with statements in the media. Our focus was on how the hundred-year-old trauma is being used by the authorities in Armenia and Turkey to limit fundamental human rights in the two countries today.



Bjørn Engesland gives an interview to the Armenian media during the Coalition for Trust seminar in Yerevan



Enver Djuliman speaks at the Coalition for Trust seminar in Yerevan



Lene Wetteland at the European Platform for Democratic Elections press conference in Yerevan



Election observers from the European Platform for Democratic Elections team during the referendum in Armenia



Mokhtar Trifi next to the portrait of Leyla Yunus painted by art student Love Terins



Portrait of the political prisoner Rasul Jafarov at the exhibition in Paris



Portrait of the political prisoner Intigam Aliyev at the exhibition in Paris

Azerbaijan

After the massive crackdown on human rights in Azerbaijan in 2014, which sent key human rights defenders and lawyers, journalists and activists to jail, the NHC focused on international advocacy and on providing support to the imprisoned activists and the lawyers helping them. The number of political prisoners in the country rose to over 90 by the end of the year. Co-ordination with other human rights organisations is important for the efficiency of advocacy efforts, and the NHC co-operates closely both within advocacy networks like Sports for Rights and in bilateral contacts and actions with organisations like FIDH, International Partnership for Human Rights and Human Rights Watch.

A focal point for our advocacy in 2015 was the Council of Europe, and the NHC was present at all four Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) sessions, holding a host of meetings with MPs, rapporteurs, Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland and other interlocutors. With international partner FIDH we organised a side event on Azerbaijan in April. In June, we were among many human rights organisations that jointly and successfully made recommendations for a strengthened monitoring report on Azerbaijan.

In the autumn parliamentary elections were held in Azerbaijan with such a lack of transparency that the OSCE/ODIHR made the decision not to observe them. Despite the OSCE decision, PACE went ahead with its observation mission, and the NHC co-operated closely with the local partners observing the election process to ensure that relevant and objective information was shared with mission members. Another of our interesting and important exercises was "Observing the Observers" with the European Platform for Democratic Elections: international observer groups were mapped and analysed for compliance with the

international standards requiring objectivity and impartiality. Sadly, many observers, most notably members from European parliaments, did not pass this test.

Azerbaijan's blatant violations of the European Convention of Human Rights and its commitments to the Council of Europe made us lobby the Council of Europe to sanction Azerbaijan's membership, either by rescinding the voting rights of the Azerbaijani parliamentary delegation or by other less severe options as a minimum. Moreover, we expressed our belief that Norway and other European countries should introduce targeted sanctions against the main perpetrators of Azerbaijan's main human rights violations, in much the same pattern as those in force against a number of Belarusian and Russian perpetrators.

Spreading information about the political prisoners is very important for encouraging action by decision makers, and we have created a specially designed website for the purpose, www.nopoliticalprisoners.org, featuring information, updates and analysis of the situations in Russia, Armenia and, in particular, Azerbaijan. The site has been supported by Fritt Ord, the Freedom of Expression Foundation in Oslo.

In June, Azerbaijan hosted the new Olympic sports event the European Games, another large-scale event hosted by the corrupt and authoritarian regime. In order to counter the whitewashing effect of hosting the games, we participated through the Sports for Rights coalition in the "Real Baku" campaign, in which the Olympic Committee, European leaders, journalists and athletes were challenged to engage with human rights questions. We firmly believe the campaign was successful: the press coverage of Azerbaijan during the period depicted the Government's awful human rights record just as much as the sports results.



Photo from the left:

1. Anne Marit Austbø at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts
2. Dinara Yunus presenting her parents' case at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts
3. Berit Lindeman at a journalism seminar
4. Gulnara Akhundova and Dinara Yunus at a journalism seminar



From the exhibition in Paris



From the exhibition in Paris



Members of the Human Rights House Oslo supporting the Sports for Rights campaign

» Drawing for Freedom

The Drawing for Freedom art project is a co-operative endeavour between the NHC and the Academy of Fine Art of the Oslo National Academy of the Arts (KHIO). Art students signed up to a course during which they would make artistic presentations of political prisoners in Azerbaijan. The driving force behind the project at KHIO is Professor Jeanette Christensen. The project was initialised by and is co-ordinated by artist and former NHC employee Anne Marit Austbø.

During the course, the students met with a former political prisoner, an activist in exile and the daughter of the imprisoned couple Leyla and Arif Yunus in order to get an insight into the situation for political prisoners and get a more personal account of who some of those prisoners are. The twenty or so students have produced amazing pieces of art, and the first exhibition of works took place on Tuesday, 8 December 2015 at the main town hall (Hôtel de Ville) in Paris, France. More than 30 works of art produced by Norwegian artists thematically related to political prisoners in Azerbaijan were displayed.

The event, hosted by Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo, celebrated the FIDH – the worldwide movement for human rights and a partner of NHC. Present among the almost 300 guests at the event were Mokhtar Trifi, honorary president of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize-winning Tunisian NGO the Tunisian league for human rights, the famous singer from Benin Angélique Kidjo and many distinguished friends and supporters of the FIDH.

One of the political prisoners depicted in the exhibition, the famous human rights defender Leyla Yunus, was conditionally released on 9 December, the day after the event. Anne Marit Austbø, artist Terje Nicolaisen and Berit Lindeman (NHC) were in Paris to mount the exhibition.



Workshop at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts

Georgia

Senior advisor Aage Borchgrevink has served on the International Advisory Board of the Public Defender in Georgia, Mr Ucha Nanuashvili, together with three international human rights experts. In that capacity, Borchgrevink held a public lecture at the University of Tbilisi in April 2015 and participated in the Board's annual meeting and press conference. Borchgrevink's statement on the need for an effective investigation of the so-called Lopota incident (where a number of foreign militants and Georgian soldiers were killed under unclear circumstances in 2012) was widely reported in the Georgian media. The Office of the Public Defender is a national human rights institution and reports to the Georgian Parliament.

The NHC has taken part in efforts to document war crimes committed during and after the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. Georgia is a member of the ICC, and the ICC investigation remained for many victims and civil society organisations the only realistic hope for justice. Together with its local partners, the NHC has documented in four reports presented to the ICC that domestic investigations were not effective.

When Fatou Bensouda, the Prosecutor of the ICC, on 8 October 2015 submitted a request to open an investigation into the Georgian situation, it was an important breakthrough in these efforts to fight impunity.



Eyewitness in Mingrelia, close to the Abkhazian border, telling NHC representatives what she saw during the Russo-Georgian war in 2008.



Nursultan Nazarbayev



Lene Wetteland and Marius Fossum meeting project partners in Dushanbe



Umarali Kuvatov



Marius Fossum, the NHC representative in Central Asia

Central Asia

In mid-2015, Marius Fossum became our new regional representative in Central Asia. Marius runs the Almaty office together with Botakoz Ilyas, while the former regional representative Ivar Dale, who has relocated to Geneva, continues the NHC's work from there.

The NHC has expanded its project-based activities across **Kazakhstan**, providing support to NGOs working on issues such as torture in detention facilities, the monitoring of human rights and prisons, and political prisoners. Other NHC-supported projects have included youth empowerment, civic education and a freedom of religion or belief regional network. We have continued our support to and co-operation with the local community of civil society organisations.

At the same time, we have closely followed developments in Kazakhstan and raised concerns about key human rights issues. The NHC report *The Right to Public Protest: A Freedom of Assembly and Association Issue in Kazakhstan* coincided with the country visit to Kazakhstan and subsequent report by Maina Kiai, the UN Special Rapporteur on FoAA. The NHC is honoured to have worked closely with Kiai's team in this process, both locally in Kazakhstan and in Geneva. We have also focused on issues such as the new NGO law that was signed into law in late 2015 and which followed the presidential elections in April, which Nazarbayev, president since independence, won without genuine competition.

The year has seen a dramatic escalation of the human rights crisis in **Tajikistan**, as the Government have continued their crackdown on the opposition and on freedom of expression. In response to the situation, the NHC has monitored developments through visits, close contact with activists and partner organisations and frequent contributions in the local media. We have repeatedly raised concerns regarding Dushanbe's human rights violations, such as the assassination of opposition leader Umarali Kuvatov in Istanbul, the forced return of opposition activists from abroad, mass arrests of Islamic Renaissance Party members and the



Tajik President Emomali Rahmon



Visiting project partner in Qurgontheppa



Lene Wetteland in Dushanbe



Botakoz Ilyas and Marius Fossum in Dushanbe



persecution of lawyers seeking to represent opposition activists. Through a series of statements, the NHC has called on the Tajik authorities to comply with international human rights standards, and on Dushanbe's international partners to press Tajikistan on human rights matters.

In March, the NHC was present in Dushanbe and other cities when Tajikistan held parliamentary elections which rendered the country's leading opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), without representation for the first time since the 1997 peace agreement.

Although **Kyrgyzstan** held democratic elections in 2015, we have unfortunately observed a decline in the general human rights situation, with a shrinking space for civil society and pressure on local and international NGOs and activists. The

NHC was present during the parliamentary elections in September and on several other occasions throughout the year. The NHC has continued supporting the projects of NGOs working in the field of rule of law, including cases related to the aftermath of the June 2010 violence in the south, which was documented by the NHC at the time. In co-operation with local organisations, we have continued to monitor and respond to the situation of freedom of religion or belief in the country, and drawing upon the experience of civil society in Kyrgyzstan, a regional network is under development. Twice we have organised workshops where members of the working group tasked with developing a new curriculum on religion in the Kyrgyz Republic participated in co-operation with the State Commission on Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education.

1. Poster to promote Female voting

2. Voting in the election in October

3. Anne Sender and Einar Steensnæs at a workshop in Bishkek

4. Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal at a workshop in Bishkek



Workshop on freedom of religion in education



Project partners in Bishkek

In **Uzbekistan** and **Turkmenistan**, the human rights situation remains abysmal. In Uzbekistan, torture is endemic, corruption systematic and the use of forced labour continues unabated in the country's numerous cotton fields. Dissent is not tolerated and little to no space is allowed for civil society in general and human rights defenders in particular. In the spring, President Karimov won a race for the presidency that lacked any meaningful traits of a democratic election. As to not lend credibility to the elections, the NHC chose to not observe or comment on the process. The NHC has continued

to raise its concern about the dire situation in Uzbekistan. Advocacy for the establishment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Uzbekistan has remained a priority for the NHC, and we raised the issue in various fora throughout the year, including through op-eds in the Norwegian media and through advocacy meetings with UN delegations in Geneva. On the home front, we served as country experts as the corruption scandal of Telenor-owned Vimpelcom unfolded in Uzbekistan.

From the town of Khiva





Western Balkans

Role of Universities in Peacebuilding

Since 2011 we have been forming a large regional network where universities in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia (Mostar, Tuzla, Novi Sad, Novi Pazar and Pristina) co-operate with civil society to promote human rights and intercultural understanding within their general education programmes. The main goal of the project is to contribute to the universities in Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina assuming their own role in peacebuilding. Dialogue between students of different cultural and religious backgrounds has been established through student exchanges, webinars and conferences debating the role of the universities in peacebuilding. The dialogue has similarly allowed for teachers from different universities to meet and exchange materials,

combine curricula and share best practices and lessons learned. The teaching capacities are both from theoretical university backgrounds and from more practical with these same subjects, mainly the NGO sector.

2015 was the last year of the project, and the last student exchange between the partner universities in Novi Pazar, Serbia and Pristina, Kosovo was organised. A result of the project is that an informal network of universities in the involved countries has been created. The co-operation between them is still fragile and needs to be formalized and strengthened. The Sarajevo Declaration, adopted in 2014, will serve as a valuable framework for the network and its future activities.



Graffiti on a wall in Staro Gradsko/Grackë



Blocked bridge in Mitrovica

Romania

Roma minorities

In recent years we have been following the situation of the Roma minorities in Romania, first through a field mission in 2014 and then at a separate event in Oslo in 2015.

The 2015 event was a follow-up of the 2014 field mission, when the NHC had established good relations with a number of organisations from Romania. The NHC invited representatives of these organisations to Oslo with the aim of discussing the challenges the Roma minorities are facing in Romania and in Norway. Ciprian Necula and Mihaela Zatreanu from Romano Butiq, Florin Botonogu from the Centre Policy for Roma and Minorities and Oana Mihalache from Romani Criss spent three busy days in Oslo in January 2015.

The guests had meetings with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where they gave valuable input on the situation of the Roma minorities in Romania and suggestions for priorities and approaches that may yield positive results, provided that continuous, long-term efforts are sustained. A meeting with Knut Vollebæk, head of the Tater commission, shed light on a positive and empowering process whereby representatives of the Tater and Romani minorities in Norway took active part in the work of the commission.

The highlight of the visit was an open seminar at Litteraturhuset entitled *Time for a New Norwegian Roma Policy. A meeting with Romanian Roma rights activists and Norwegian decision-makers*. The seminar sought to answer the question of what characterises a good Norwegian policy that balances respect for basic human rights with measures that have a real, positive impact on the situation many Roma people are in.

The visit of the four Romanian Roma activists coincided with the visit to Oslo of Nils Muiznieks, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, and his criticism of the Norwegian authorities for considering the introduction of a national ban on begging. A week after the visit by the NHC's four guests, the Norwegian authorities decided to drop the proposal for a national ban on begging. The visit and event were organised with support from the Fritt Ord Foundation.



Mihaela Zatreanu, Ciprian Necula and Rune Berglund Steen



Attendees at the seminar at the House of Literature



Bjørn Engesland at the seminar



Round-table discussion at the Human Rights House in Oslo



Visit to the Church City Mission shelter in Oslo



Ciprian Necula

Turkey

Monitoring the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey

During 2015, religion continued to be an important subject widely referred to in public policy and discourse in Turkey. However, little progress was made on either long-standing or new legal problems which undermine the protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief for all. The general decline in respect for the rule of law and restrictions on freedom of expression have not led to a conducive environment for solving the problems. International protection of this fundamental right has also suffered, as none of the European Court of Human Rights judgments that have found a violation to have occurred of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion has been enforced effectively.

Building on our previous work on the issue of legal personality of religious or belief communities, the Initiative has overseen the translation and publication of the Turkish-language version of the OSCE and Venice Commission Joint Guidelines on Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities. The Guidelines were launched in co-operation with the OSCE Office on Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Istanbul Bilgi University Human Rights Law Research Center and the Brigham Young University International Center for Law and Religion in November 2015.

The Freedom of Belief Initiative was launched in 2011 and joined forces with the NHC in 2013. A three-year NHC project was established, with core funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The initiative soon established itself as a serious, objective, human rights-based contributor to the field of human rights in Turkey. The initiative's core monitoring and reporting activities have produced credible reports with concrete recommendations. Its advocacy work has led to discussions with the national authorities and actors involved in the international protection of human rights, as well as making significant contributions towards enabling inclusive dialogue between various stakeholders.

The project is headed by Mine Yildirim, an expert on freedom of religion or belief, and is based in Istanbul. Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal has oversight responsibilities for the Initiative at NHC and is involved in some of its activities. The Initiative has its own website in Turkish and English: <http://inancozgurlugugirisimi.org/>

Mine Yildirim





Panel on freedom of religion or belief in education with Alevi, Armenian, Sunni Muslim and atheist representatives at Ankara University's Center for Human Rights



Mine Yildirim at a OSCE Meeting 2015 in Warsaw

A round-table meeting of experts, members of religious or belief communities and public authorities was organised following the launch of the Guidelines in order to facilitate discussion on how Turkey can move forward with the protection of the right to acquire legal personality.

The Initiative has continued its efforts to contribute to dialogue between various stakeholders on complex issues such as the right to freedom of religion or belief in education. The compulsory Religious Culture and Ethics courses, which have already led to two judgments against Turkey at the European Court of Human Rights, and the recently introduced optional religion courses as well as other practices were discussed at a conference organised in co-operation with the Ankara University Center for Human Rights in March 2015. The event brought together representatives from diverse public institutions, including the Ministry of National Education, as well as academic experts and representatives from human rights organisations.

The annual monitoring report on the right to freedom of religion or belief in Turkey was published in both Turkish and English. The report systematically examines the legal and administrative developments related to freedom of religion or belief, as well as inter-connected rights. The findings of the report were shared with a diverse group of actors,

including the national human rights institutions and other relevant public institutions.

The Initiative has continued to make interventions, including the submission of reports and amicus brief to international human rights compliance control mechanisms. Among others, it has issued reports to UN treaty bodies, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, the European Court of Human Rights, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) and the OSCE Human Dimension Meetings.

The annual round-table meeting was held with members of various religious or belief communities in Turkey as well as non-believers. The third of the annual meetings to discuss the state of religious freedom in Turkey and to determine priority areas of work aimed to serve as a starting point for developing a network for monitoring freedom of religion or belief for all in Turkey.

The NHC has published several statements and articles on broader human rights issues in Turkey, including on freedom of expression, rule of law and political rights. Additionally, it has arranged a seminar in Oslo in co-operation with Amnesty International, featuring the renowned critic of Turkey's policies towards the Kurds, Ismail Besikçi.

Natalya Estemirova Documentation Centre

Keeping record of crimes and human rights violations in the North Caucasus

The Natalya Estemirova Documentation Centre (NEDC) is an organisation established by the NHC in co-operation with Russian and international human rights organisations to ensure the documentation of grave abuses in the Russian North Caucasus. The NEDC was established in 2010 with a vision of:

- becoming a leading depository for documentation of international crimes and serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law in the North Caucasus;
- making the documentation available in a well-structured and searchable digital format;
- contributing to eliminating impunity, and promoting the rule of law;
- contributing to establishing justice and a lasting peace in the North Caucasus;

– preserving historical memory and assisting victims of the conflict in their search for truth and justice, including by assisting with the search for missing persons in the region.

The work of the NEDC acquired a qualitatively new dimension in 2015. In addition to the registration and systematisation of primary materials by way of a database, the NEDC has identified and researched a number of incidents which were not widely known before. By analysing the materials collected and matching these with videos available on the Internet, it was possible to restore to a great extent the chronology of events during the initial period of the second Chechen-Russian conflict.



The human rights defender Natalya Estemirova was murdered on 15 July 2009.

» Filling a gap in history

From autumn 1999 to March 2000 there were no large human rights organisations working in Chechnya. Disparate groups of local activists and social workers were unable to describe or even keep record of the violations that took place during that period of front-line combat, when massive air and artillery strikes were directed both at mountainous areas and plains, and the roads were shelled day and night. Under such conditions it was hardly possible even to visit the scenes of the attacks or to interview the victims. The first systematic descriptions of the offences started when the Memorial Human Rights Centre first opened its branches in Ingushetia and Chechnya. By that time, however, the events of the first months of the war were already history. Only a few had been recollected and described. Even when described, the picture of the

conflict was drawn in broad strokes, without giving details of the victims and often without precise dating.

In 2015, the NEDC downloaded a number of photos and videos that had been made available online and which allowed us to clarify some of these materials. For example, we restored the chronology of the bombing of villages in the district of Vedeno in the winter of 1999-2000. All in all, we have uncovered information of varying degrees of detail about 202 previously unknown incidents. Each incident description specifies the names of the dead and wounded and lists the civilian targets that were subjected to indiscriminate shelling.

Human Rights in Norway

NGO Forum for Human Rights

The NHC is the secretariat of the Norwegian NGO Forum for Human Rights. The forum has 41 member organisations and strengthens the visibility, coherence and impact of Norwegian civil society organisations. It is active in respect of issues to be discussed in international human rights fora – in particular the UN Human Rights Council – as well as domestic human rights issues.

In 2015, the forum had meetings with Norwegian authorities to follow up on Norway's universal periodic review (UPR), on the Government's White Paper on human rights and on Norway's sponsorship of a resolution on human rights defenders in the UN General Assembly.

The NHC has helped to strengthen the participation of civil society in the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly by co-ordinating travel support from the Norwegian MFA for Norwegian NGOs.

Human Rights Human Wrongs documentary film festival

The NHC is proud to be a partner of the Human Rights Human Wrongs film festival. Scandinavia's only film festival dedicated to human rights, was held for the seventh time in Oslo in February 2015. This year all films were screened at Cinemateket, the festival's main hub. In addition, there were concerts, debates, workshops and performances at Parkteatret, the House of Literature and Kunstplass [10].

The goal of HRHW is to raise awareness about and generate debate on human rights issues that are not given the attention they deserve in the mainstream media. This goal was achieved in 2015, with an audience of 5,000 people visiting the festival's films, debates, performances and concerts. Forty-four screenings of 26 documentary films took place at



Berit Lindeman at HRHW 2015

Cinemateket over the course of six days. Twenty international and 60 national guests participated in the festival. The media coverage was also extensive.

The NHC contribution to the festival this year was an event focusing on the political prisoners of Europe. We screened the film *Amazing Azerbaijan*, followed by a Q&A with NHC project co-ordinator Vugar Gajayev and NHC's Berit Lindeman on the grave situation in Azerbaijan, with its human rights defenders in exile. At the event we also screened excerpts from *1050 Days of Solitude* and *Turkmenistan: Life behind bars*, two films showing the grim realities of the dictatorships in Belarus and Turkmenistan. The NHC contributed to both films. Joining the discussion about political prisoners in Europe were Natalia Pinchuk, wife of former Belarusian political prisoner Ales Bialiatski, and Ruslan Myatiev, a Turkmen human rights defender living in exile.



1. Ruslan Myatiev



2. Natalia Pinchuk, Berit Lindeman, Ruslan Myatiev and Vugar Gajayev at HRHW 2015

Norway's National Institution for Human Rights

The NHC has remained active with regard to issues related to the establishment of a new National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) in Norway, commenting on the draft legislation and taking part in public debates about the set-up of the institution.

The law on Norway's NHRI entered into force on 1 July 2015, stating that the primary goal of the institution is to promote and protect human rights in Norway as stipulated by the Constitution, the Human Rights Act and international law. It shall monitor, report and recommend measures in order to improve the situation of human rights. It will not handle individual complaints but provide guidance on where and how



individuals might complain. The NHRI shall provide education and promote research and co-operation among relevant institutions.

The board of the NHRI shall appoint an advisory board that includes representatives of civil society. In recruiting staff members, the NHRI shall take into account the need for broad competence, including competence in the areas of indigenous populations and minority rights.

The NHC has commented positively on the new law and underlined the importance of a transparent recruitment process for the new institution. The NHC will be represented on the NHRI advisory board.



The NHC visiting Storskog together with Svetlana Gannushkina



The NHC and the Human Rights House in Oslo marking the opening of the European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan on 12 June 2015



Bill Browder



Aage Borchgrevink, Siri Frigaard and Trine Skei Grande



Lene Wetteland, Bjørn Engesland, Bill Browder, Ragnhild Astrup Tschudi and Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal at the Magnitsky Awards in London

Government Committee on Romani Policies

The Committee launched its report (Assimilation and Resistance) on 1 June 2015. Its main conclusion is that Norwegian policies up until the mid-1980s not only failed but were destructive. The Tater/Romani people had been subject to heavy-handed assimilation policies by the Norwegian authorities. These policies were expressed in laws and legislative decrees that had partly discriminatory purposes and a clear discriminatory effect. The policies created negative prejudices towards this minority group, which have led to fear and distrust between the minority and mainstream society. This has had, and still has, major consequences for the Tater/Romani people.

The Committee has confirmed the viewpoints and arguments presented in the 2009 NHC report on Norway's Tater/Romani policies. In particular, it has confirmed that the widespread practice of separating children from their families is incompatible with the right to privacy as this is understood today. The same applies to several aspects of treatment at the Svanviken labour colony up to the 1970s.

The report provides recommendations to the Government on measures that should be taken in order to promote reconciliation and improve the situation of the Romani people.

The NHC was represented by Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal in the resource group of the Committee.

Global Magnitsky mechanisms

During 2015, the NHC co-operated with the Justice for Sergei Magnitsky campaign on a range of activities. NHC was a partner of the 16 November Magnitsky Awards Ceremony in London, as well as a partner of the Bazar publishing company in the 10 March launch in Norway of Bill Browder's book on his experiences in Russia and with the Magnitsky case (the title of the Norwegian edition translates as *My War with Putin*).

The main contribution of the NHC, however, was to issue policy papers and develop arguments for democratic countries to establish global Magnitsky mechanisms. These are mechanisms that freeze the assets of and deny entry into a state's territory by officials that have committed gross violations of human rights against whistle-blowers or human rights defenders.

The NHC has argued that such mechanisms could resemble the current US Magnitsky legislation, without, however, being limited to Russian citizens. They should include strong safeguards in order to ensure fair treatment of suspects. Norway should seek to influence other democratic countries to establish similar mechanisms. If a large number of democratic states were to establish such mechanisms, it would represent an important breakthrough in the fight against impunity in gross human rights violations, the NHC stated.



Bjørn Engesland at the Sergei Magnitsky Awards

Co-Operation and International Processes

The NHC is a member of several national and international networks of human rights organisations. Each year our representatives participate in a range of international meetings and conferences. We strive to be a key player among organisations and fora dealing with human rights issues, our goal being to influence international organisations and states to protect human rights and promote human rights issues.

National Preventive Mechanism against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Norway's National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) was established and started operating in the spring of 2014, at long last. The NPM is a department within the Ombudsman's Office. The NHC participated in its Advisory Council in 2015.



Panel at an HDIM side event in Warsaw

Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)/Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM)

The NHC was present at the OSCE/ODIHR Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw and held several interventions covering a wide range of the issues in which the NHC is engaged. At a side event held jointly with the FIDH and human rights defenders at risk, we presented the organisers' joint recommendations to participating states on what they can do to protect human rights defenders at risk in the OSCE region, and put forward two concrete



Lene Wetteland at an HDIM side event



Laureates of Freedom of Expression Foundation and the Zeit Foundation press prizes for Russia and Eastern Europe 2015

examples the NHC is involved in: the Natalya Estemirova Documentation Centre and the campaign for a global Magnitsky Mechanism.

Human rights dialogue

Since 1999 the NHC has participated in the official human rights dialogues held by the Norwegian government with Indonesia and Vietnam.

International justice

The NHC is active in respect of international justice issues, providing comments and viewpoints to the media and taking part in seminars and discussions related to the operation and set-up of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the two UN ad hoc tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, as well as other international legal bodies and universal jurisdiction issues under Norwegian law.

The NHC has taken part in efforts to document war crimes committed during and after the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. Georgia is a member of the ICC, and ICC investigation remained for many victims and civil society organisations the only realistic hope for justice. Together with local partners, the NHC has documented that domestic



Ivar Dale at a Civic Solidarity Platform meeting in Belgrade

investigations were not effective in four reports presented to the ICC.

An important breakthrough in these efforts to fight impunity occurred when Fatou Bensouda, the Prosecutor of the ICC, submitted a request on 8 October 2015 to open an investigation into the Georgian situation. The Pre-Trial Chamber authorised the request in late January 2016.

This is the ICC's first investigation to take place outside of Africa. The decision represents a victory for a number of Georgian, Russian and international human rights groups that documented crimes in 2008 and called for accountability. Both the request of Bensouda and the decision of the Pre-Trial Chamber refer to documentation provided by civil society.



Marius Fossum at HDIM in Warsaw



The NHC's Mine Yildirim reads an intervention



Bjørn Engesland participating in a panel debate in Kirkenes

Oslo Freedom Forum

The NHC is a partner in organising the Oslo Freedom Forum (OFF), an international conference first organised in 2009 to gather activists from across the world to speak about fundamental freedoms and democracy issues. The main organiser is the New York-based Human Rights Foundation.

International networks

The NHC is a member of several international networks of human rights organisations. We are a founding and active member of Civic Solidarity Platform, which includes 35 leading civil society organisations and is an international platform

for co-operation on advocacy in the OSCE area. We are also a close partner of the Brussels-based International Partnership for Human Rights. In 2012 the NHC was among the founders of the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE), uniting 14 leading NGOs with a focus on election observation, and is a member of the EPDE steering committee. In 2015 the NHC represented the EPDE at a Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM) annual meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa. In addition, we are members of the International Coalition for the ICC, the Forum for International Criminal and Humanitarian Law (FICHL), the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network and Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe (DARE).

EEA Grants

Strengthening ties in the civil society of Europe

Civil society plays an important role in building democracy and promoting respect for human rights. For this reason, building the capacity of civil society has been a key element in our work. Through the EEA and Norway Grants, the NHC has been contributing to the strengthening of civil society in the EU countries of Central and Southern Europe.

The EEA and Norway Grants are Iceland's, Liechtenstein's and Norway's contribution to reducing social and economic disparities in the countries of the EU. Ten per cent of the total EEA Grants for the 2009-14 period (€1.79 billion) are dedicated to the support of civil society through NGO programmes. The role of the NHC is to assist in establishing contact and co-operation between civil society organisations in the beneficiary countries and Norway, and to give advice to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in matters related to Norwegian civil society. There are two events that we would like to highlight.



Csilla Czibalmos at the 17 May celebration at the Norwegian embassy in Sofia



Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal at the Roma integration conference in Oslo



Anders Nielsen and Csilla Czibalmos with Bjørn Engesland at Riga NGO Forum in March



Anders Nielsen and Csilla Czibalmos at the NGO Forum in Riga



Riga NGO Forum



One of the panelists at the Roma integration conference in Oslo

2015 has been a year of great significance for the civil society sectors of most recipient countries. Under the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, major efforts have been made towards developing a Roadmap to strengthen the participation of civil society in the decision-making processes at both the local/national and the EU levels. The NHC actively participated in the international NGO Forum in Riga aimed at closing the gap between civil society and decision-makers, and provided input into the draft Roadmap. About 250 participants from various EU countries attended the Forum, among them several representatives of Norwegian organisations.



Roma integration conference in Oslo

Increasing the role of civil society in grant-making and programming processes was also discussed during the SOS Children's Villages conference organised in partnership with the NHC. The NHC moderated workshop discussions centred on the role of NGOs in challenging policies, maintaining democratic channels of communication and building bridges between different groups in society, as well as on recommendations for how authorities can involve NGOs more effectively and capitalise on their knowledge and expertise to devise and implement programmes. More than 60 participants from 18 countries attended the conference, several of them representing Norwegian organisations.

Bridges for democracy and citizen participation

The Citizen Participation University (CPU), a summer university, is designed to provide more space for social professionals to extend and share their knowledge about building democracy and strengthening the participation of and training and working with groups and communities.

The 2015 CPU was held 6-10 July at Kunszentmiklós-Kunbábony, Hungary. The underlying theme for the summer was the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain, approached through an attempt to address the challenges of the future and through grasping the present by looking into and learning from the past.

CPU is part of a project entitled Local Power - Local Sources in Hungary, funded by the EEA Grants for NGO Programmes. The objective of the project is to provide long-term support for local resource development and community organising practices in Hungary and it is implemented by the Civil College Foundation, Hungary together with the Center for Community Organizing, Slovakia and the Ideas Bank Foundation, Norway.



Participants at the Citizen Participation University

Communication

Media Contact

As an independent human rights organisation, we consider it imperative to maintain a high level of visibility and communicate our points of view to the general public, the media and directly to the Norwegian authorities. A significant aspect of the activities of our information department is therefore to communicate the work of the NHC and its views to the media and the general public.

The NHC set the agenda for several important human rights questions in 2015. We are continuing to be one of the most visible human rights organisations in Norway, and this visibility is increasing by the year. Additionally, NHC representatives are frequently used as commentators and experts and in debates on radio and TV programmes. The NHC has also made a substantial number of appearances in the international media.

Web pages

The communication department communicates the work of the NHC through its own website: www.nhc.no. The NHC is also active on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and actively uses these channels of communication to promote and communicate its work.

Publications

The NHC published the following reports in 2015:

- *In Need of a Principled Approach: Monitoring Report on the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey, July 2013-June 2014*
- *Azerbaijan: Behind the Tolerance Façade. Freedom of Religion or Belief Restricted*
- *The Right to Public Protest: A Freedom of Assembly and Association Issue in Kazakhstan*
- *Strengthening the Role of Universities in Peacebuilding in the Western Balkans: Experiences and Recommendations for Action*
- *The Right to Freedom of Belief in Turkey: Monitoring Report July 2014-June 2015*

The NHC published two policy papers in 2015:

- *Norge bør etablere en global Magnitskij-mekanisme*
- *Norway and Other Democratic Countries Should Establish Global Magnitsky Mechanisms*

All publications can be downloaded from the web page www.nhc.no, or ordered from the NHC information department.

Membership

As of the end of 2015, the NHC had 267 individual members.

Finances

The total spending in 2015 was NOK 51 million out of which project support for partners constituted NOK 36,7 million. Total income balance was 49,5 million.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committees donors are primarily the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Freedom of Expression Foundation (Fritt Ord), Open Society Institute, National Endowment for Democracy, OAK Foundation and the European Commission. Gifts, members contribution etc. provided an income of NOK 120,000.



The NHC Secretariat



Bjørn Engesland
Secretary General



Aage Borchgrevink
Senior Advisor, Georgia,
North Caucasus,
International justice



Mina Skouen
Advisor, Western Balkan
and LGBTI-related
activities



Marius Fossum
Regional Representative in
Central Asia (Almaty)



**Gunnar M.
Ekeløve-Slydal**
Deputy Secretary General.
General NHC policies,
Turkey, international
criminal courts and justice
Co-ordinator for NGO
forum for Human Rights



Enver Djuliman
Senior Advisor, Human
rights education
programme



Veronika Vimberg
Senior Advisor, Project
Administration



Lillian Solheim
Project Manager
(until February).



**Fernanda Zubillaga
Nilsen**
Head of administration,
office management and
finance



Lene Wetteland
Senior Advisor. Head of
Russia section; Armenia



Csilla Czimbalmos
Advisor, EEA grants
project, Hungary and
Roma-related issues



Ilya Udmelidze
Project co-ordinator,
Natalya Estemirova
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Berit Nising Lindeman
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Senior Advisor, Belarus
and Azerbaijan, election
observation



Inna Sangadzhieva
Senior Advisor, Russia
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Olga Shamshur Flydal
Advisor, Ukraine and
Azerbaijan



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Anders Nielsen
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Ole B. Lilleås
Senior Advisor
(until June 2015).



Ivar Dale
Senior Advisor, based in
Geneva. UN-related issues
and Central Asia



Aleksandra Sidorenko
Advisor, Natalya
Estemirova Documentation
Centre

Organisation

Staff abroad:



Elena Saenkova
Project co-ordinator,
Murmansk office



Adela Galešić
Project Co-ordinator for
Peace Education on
Location in Bosnia and
Herzegovina



Botakoz Iliyas
Project Adviser at the
NHC representative office
in Central Asia (Almaty).



Mine Yildirim
Head of Project, The NHC
Freedom of Religion or
Belief in Turkey, based in
Istanbul, Turkey



Vugar Gojayev
Project Co-ordinator,
based in Berlin

The organisational components of the NHC are the annual meeting, the board and the council.
The annual meeting is our highest decision-making body and consists of members of the council and the board. The board holds monthly meetings, where decisions related to NHC strategy, principles and financial matters are made. The Secretary General heads the secretariat and is responsible for the daily operations of the NHC.

Board

Chairperson:

Ragnhild Astrup Tschudi
Human rights advocate with
a special focus on Russia and Eastern Europe

Vice chairperson:

Julie Wilhelmsen
Research fellow, Norwegian Institute of
International Affairs

Hauk Lund

Executive director, Hauk Lund Consulting A/S

Eirik Moen

Secretary General of the International
Democrat Union

Kari Schage

Management consultant, Resources Global
Professionals

Ragni Ramberg

Lawyer at Østgård Wikasteen
(until September 2015)

Inger Skjelsbæk

Senior Researcher and Deputy Director at the
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Lene Wetteland

Staff representative

Council

President:

Kristin Clemet

Vice president:

Anne Marit Bjørnflaten

Peter Batta
Helge Blakkisrud
Kjell Magne Bondevik
Bernt Bull
Nils Butenschøn
Juni Dahr
Ole Drolsum
Bente Erichsen
Grethe Fossum
Geir Flikke
Dankert Freilem
Siri Frigaard
Bjørn Cato Funnemark
Steinar Gil
Jacub M. Godzimirski
Trine Skei Grande
Bernt Hagtvet
Hans Morten Haugen
Anne Holt
Morten Høglund
Prableen Kaur
Knut Kloster Jr
Idar Kreutzer

Gry Larsen
Ragnhild Lied
Anne Liljedahl Lynngård
Elisabeth Løland
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Myths and Facts about
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with the Nobel Peace
Center

