

Annual Report 2017



Norwegian
Helsinki Committee



Editor's Note

“Defending human rights is everyone’s job. We achieve a lot more when we stand united against injustice”



This is the very core of our mission. We strive to engage everyone in the struggle to safeguard human rights – in their local community, their country and globally. We act as a constant reminder to governments and international organisations – to all those in a position to influence other people’s lives. We endeavour to ensure that the individual’s human rights are never compromised.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) has been fighting against injustice for 40 years. We work with human rights defenders from over 20 countries, including Norway. We work to release political prisoners, expose human rights abuses and to strengthen existing democracies.

This Annual Report is filled with stories about brave people. It is about people working to improve the lives of others and people who have sacrificed their own lives in pursuit of that aim. You will meet a woman who fights for the right to love whomever she chooses, a journalist released after 18 years of imprisonment by one of the world’s most brutal regimes, award-winning activists set on ending torture and ill-treatment in their country, and young people trying to stop a war.

You will also meet dedicated experts from our staff who tirelessly document and report human rights violations and raise awareness of human rights, in Europe and North America, in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Read about what we have achieved and about the great tasks that still lie ahead for the NHC. Read about our extensive network of friends and colleagues who devote their lives to human rights and the principles of democracy.

Øystein Solvang,
Head of Communications

Highlights in 2017



11 female parliamentarians gathered in New York to strengthen freedom of religion and belief (Sept).



Young people from Finmark and Murmansk attend our Human Rights School (Dec).



Anniversary visitors HRH Crown Prince Haakon of Norway (right), activist Olga Sadovskaya (left) and host Bjørn Engesland (center) at the NHC headquarters (Nov).



"Drawing for Freedom" exhibition in Berlin, featuring portraits of political prisoners in Azerbaijan (June).

Reflections from Secretary General

40th anniversary: Back to square one?

A major event for the Norwegian Helsinki Committee in 2017 was the celebration of our 40th anniversary.



Over the course of a week, some 40 of our international partners gathered in Oslo for a string of events, together with colleagues and friends from Norway.

In 1977, a group of activists from across the political spectrum established the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. Their aim was to support persecuted human rights defenders in Europe. While the names of people, states and leaders have changed, the basic situation remains the same now as it was in 1977. Human rights defenders continue to face persecution in many places throughout Europe and in the former Soviet Union. Democracy is under threat from authoritarian states. After many years of optimism, we are in some ways back to square one.

As a result, our task today remains to support those who are fighting for human rights against repressive regimes. There are, however, important differences between the situation in 1977 and today. Civil society in the former communist countries are much stronger now. There are also many new and more efficient ways of working. In the age of the Internet and social media, information is not easy to hide. Social media may be used to distort the truth, but it is also a potent tool to challenge authoritarian regimes and repression. The reach of professional media is also much larger.

The 40th anniversary of the NHC marked a way forward, as it aimed to highlight one of the most powerful human rights initiatives right now, the Magnitsky Campaign. This campaign was named after the Russian whistle-blower who was murdered in a Moscow jail in 2009. The aim is to hold the rich and powerful to account, even if they get away with serious abuses in their own countries.

Several Western countries have adopted individualized sanction regimes that freeze assets and/or deny visas of such human rights violators. Our hope is that Norway will follow suit in 2018. That would be the right thing to do, to protect human rights defenders and whistle-blowers.

I am convinced that when the next wave of democratization comes, competent civil society actors will play an important role.

Bjørn Engesland
Secretary General



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This is us



Monitoring



Information
campaigns



Human rights
education



Democracy
support



20 employees

The NHC has a staff of 20 employees representing 11 different nationalities.

NHC



partners



422 days travelling

In 2017 alone, the staff spent more than 422 days travelling to visit many of NHC's 70 different partners.

These partners are made up of over 1000 activists, lawyers, volunteers and journalists in 20 countries.

Together, we assist vulnerable groups, challenge public institutions to uphold the rule of law and hold authorities to account in 20 countries.

Together, we defend political prisoners and torture victims, support LGBTI persons and people engaged in critical journalism, and document violations against minorities.

Together, we advise, assist and influence public opinion, international organisations and governments on the protection of human rights.

Our story

Prelude:

It was an era of Cold War. A huge step towards a warmer climate was taken in 1975, when 35 countries from both sides of the Iron Curtain met and agreed to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Helsinki Final Act was a major achievement, signed by most of the countries in Europe, North America and the Soviet Union.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee:

Established in 1977 as a watchdog to ensure that the historic agreement from 1975 was respected. The NHC is a non-governmental organisation, founded on the human rights principles adopted by the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the OSCE, including the 1975 Helsinki Final Act.



Helsinki, 1 August
1975. Photo: Horst
Sturm, Bundesarchiv

1975

The Helsinki Final Act

1976

Moscow Helsinki Group

1977

Norwegian Helsinki
Committee

1989

Berlin Wall falls

1991

Soviet Union falls

1995

Srebrenica genocide

2000

Putin President

2014

Annexation of Crimea

2017

NHC 40 years

2017 in brief

● Main Focus

● Activities

We safeguard human rights in more than 20 countries, primarily in Europe and Central Asia. Have a look at some of the issues that kept us busy in 2017.

1 – Russia

Advocacy campaign for victims of the anti-LGBTI purge in Chechnya. Sakharov-award to anti-torture fighters.

2 – Georgia

Supporting the International Criminal Court's investigation of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. Campaign for justice paid off: Policemen failing to protect attacked election observers officially reprimanded.

3 – Armenia

Election observation: Documenting that voter intimidation affected the result. Successfully supporting five human rights organisations.

4 – Azerbaijan

Training 70 Azeri activists, journalist and lawyers. Fighting for release: Ilgar Mammadov's fifth year behind bars.

5 – Kazakhstan

Campaigned for the release of imprisoned peaceful activists and observed court hearings. International advocacy efforts in connection with Expo 2017.

6 – Kyrgyzstan

Election observation: Reporting the pressure applied to the opposition and media. Covered protest meetings and police repercussions.

7 – Tajikistan

Documenting brutal government crackdown and persecution of dissidents' families. Advocacy for freedom of political prisoners.

8 – Uzbekistan

Journalist Muhammad Bekjanov released after 18 years in prison.

9 – Turkmenistan

The "Prove They are Alive!" campaign attracted attention at the highest international levels. Updating the list of 113 forcibly disappeared prisoners.

10 – Norway

Oslo Magnitsky Hearing: Protecting whistleblowers and human rights defenders. Barents Pride: Historic Russian-Norwegian LGBTI parade in Kirkenes.

11 – Switzerland (Geneva)

Bringing human rights violations in Central Asia before the UN.

12 – Turkey

Followed the constitutional referendum. Campaign: Protesting against the wave of arrests of human rights defenders.

13 – Hungary

Calling on the government to stop the harassment of civil society and universities.

14 – Ukraine

Training of medical personnel after the forced sterilisation of transgender persons came to an end. Providing training to police on the investigation of hate crimes.

15 – Poland

Calling for the EU to respond to government initiatives that undermine the rule of law and judicial independence.



Activities

Media coverage

351 news reports – up 25 % from 2016

NHC's website

121,031 views – up 73 % from 2016

Facebook

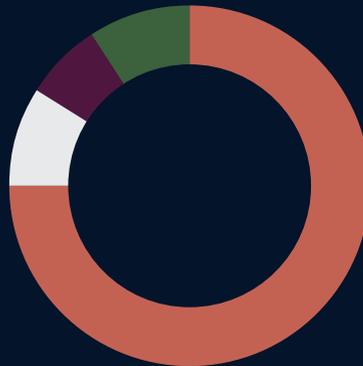
4,056 likes – up 48 % from 2016

Support

In 2017, the NHC spent almost NOK 18 million on projects and direct support to partners.

2017

- 75 %
- 9 %
- 7 %
- 9 %



● We participate in activities with partners and also give direct partner support.

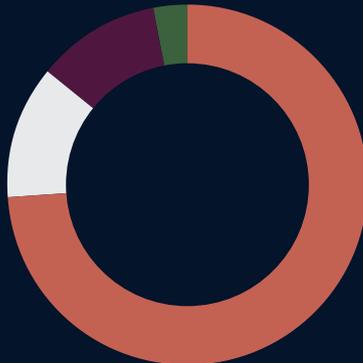
● We defend the rights of sexual, religious and ethnic minorities.

● We raise awareness on human rights issues through meetings, education and advocacy.

● We combat human rights violations by monitoring and documenting.

2016

- 74 %
- 12 %
- 11 %
- 3 %



Donors

The NHC's main donors are the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Freedom of Expression Foundation (Fritt Ord), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Open Society Foundation (OSF), OAK Foundation and the European Commission. Membership fees and private donations are important additional sources of income.

Emergency Fund

A new emergency fund provides immediate assistance to human rights defenders at risk.

The NHC Fund was launched in 2017. It will be useful in situations where people are in imminent danger of arrest – to pay for medical assistance after injury, for legal counsel or for sending observers to document abuse.

The NHC seeks to obtain financial support for the fund by reaching out to companies, organisations and private donors.



A selfie with the NHC's
Lene Wetteland and Olga
Shamshur Flydal, and 26
election observers in Oslo.



Chapter 1 — International Solidarity

“The greatest challenge to democracy in Norway is that you take it for granted”

26 international election observers

Democracy and wolves



Olga Kotsiuruba from Ukraine observed the 2017 general election in Norway.

After monitoring the 2017 general election, 26 international experts sent a clear message to Norway: Do not take democracy for granted.

“It was a great opportunity to obtain first-hand experience of an election in a mature democracy,” says election observer Viktoria Tyuleneva from Kazakhstan.

Invited by the NHC, 26 international experts visited polling stations all over the country. Civil society election experts contributed their expertise in election monitoring. Olga Kotsiuruba from Ukraine was grateful for the experience:

“Observing in Norway enabled me to compare the experience with Ukraine, where election standards should be improved,” she says.

Kotsiuruba and other observers were surprised to learn that one of the most hotly debated issues in the election campaign was the number of wolves living in Norwegian forests. However, they quickly moved on to analysing and discussing the characteristics of Norwegian elections.

“Such joint events are a priority for us. They provide valuable platforms for experts and activists from different countries to share and exchange impressions, and gain practical knowledge,” says Lene Wetteland, Senior Adviser at the NHC.

The international team was impressed with the high standards of the Norwegian election. They observed some potential ambiguities which, although not currently being exploited, could cause problems in the future.



Observer Marina Chufarina visiting a polling station in Oslo.

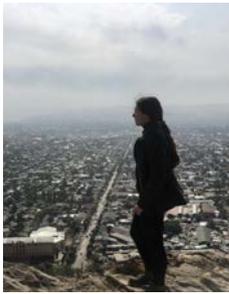
The greatest challenge to democracy in Norway is that you take it for granted.

The greatest challenge to democracy in Norway is that you take it for granted, the experts said.

For Viktoria Tyuleneva, experiencing a Norwegian general election in person was valuable:

“It is better to see something once, than to hear about it a thousand times. I still share my experience from Norway, explaining to people what fair elections mean and why they are so important for every one of us.”

The trouble with elections



The NHC's Valentina Kazachevskaya gets an overview of Osh before the presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan.

If you make the effort to go out and vote, you deserve a free and fair election. The NHC monitors polling stations in many countries to see if people get what they were promised.

The election in Kyrgyzstan was held almost to the day ten years after Shoruh Saipov's brother was murdered. On 15 October 2017, Shoruh cast his vote in Osh, the second largest city in Kyrgyzstan. The NHC monitored numerous polling stations in Osh Province, capturing the picture (left) of a brave journalist.

Shoruh's older brother Alisher was shot dead in Osh in 2007. While the murderer has still not been brought to justice, the authorities agree that the shooting may have been carried out on the orders of Uzbek security forces. Before his death, Alisher had covered grave human rights violations in neighbouring Uzbekistan, through his own newspaper and his work for outlets such as Ferghana News. Although his brother was killed for reporting on human rights violations, Shoruh continues his work as a journalist, despite the risk. He recently helped open a museum dedicated to the memory of his older brother.

The Kyrgyz elections in 2017 were markedly different from those held in other Central Asian republics, where presidents-for-life are unwilling to relinquish their positions. The NHC's election observers Valentina Kazachevskaya, Marius Fossum and Ivar Dale visited polling stations in the Osh Province in southern Kyrgyzstan.

"The election brought on an orderly transfer of power. However, it took place in an atmosphere of considerable pressure against the leading opposition candidates and media," says Ivar Dale.

Monitoring

The NHC monitors elections in order to assess whether an election process has been conducted in compliance with national legislation and international standards.

Elections are monitored together with local partners and the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE). The presence of the NHC and its conclusions attract international attention.

Armenia: Severe intimidation of voters influenced the result of the national election in April 2017.

Turkmenistan and Turkey: The NHC closely monitored the events surrounding the not-so-democratic confirmation of the incumbent president of Turkmenistan and the constitutional referendum in Turkey.



Lene Wetteland is the head of the NHC's Russia department and an expert on Armenia.

Lifesaving networks

An informal network of international solidarity is crucial for survival and successful advocacy.



Russian human rights activist Vitaliy Ponomarev.

Vitaliy Ponomarev belongs to a powerful network of human rights defenders. In July 2017, the respected Russian human rights activist was denied entry to Kyrgyzstan for the second time. The NHC called for action and the Civic Solidarity Platform responded quickly. Within a few hours, 37 organisations from 18 countries had signed a statement calling for the Kyrgyz authorities to repeal the decision.

The message was widely shared on social media. Letters were sent to relevant governments, urging them to demand that Kyrgyzstan reverse the ban.

“Sometimes it’s about showing solidarity even when you know there’s little chance you’ll be heard, and sometimes our networks literally save lives. Human rights organisations work together, reminding the international community not to sit quietly while grave injustice takes place,” says Ivar Dale, Senior Adviser at the NHC.

The power of networks was also tested after the arrest of Oyub Titiev, head of Memorial’s office in Chechnya. 50 international organisations decried the false charges that had been brought against him, and demanded Titiev’s release.

Within hours, the situation was known all over the world, reducing the risk of Titiev simply disappearing into a North Caucasian detention cell. Broadly publicising human rights violations in the most challenging parts of the world is vital.

Rapid reaction in support of activists like Vitaliy Ponomarev and Oyub Titiev also serves as a constant reminder to authoritarian states, making the use of fear and oppression to quash criticism a less viable option.

“Coordinated efforts are often more effective when we want to relay our messages to both government decision-makers and major international organisations such as the United Nations, the EU or the OSCE,” Dale says.

Speaking up within a network of human rights activists makes our voice stronger.

The NHC cooperates with a broad range of international partners, including the FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights/Fédération Internationale des ligues des droits de l’homme), the International Coalition for the International Criminal Court, the Magnitsky Campaign and many others. We are also a member of the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP), a network of over 80 human rights organisations from across the OSCE region.

In Norway, the NHC acts as the secretariat for the Forum for Human Rights, an NGO consisting of 42 member organisations. The NHC is also an active participant and co-organiser of the Human Rights Human Wrongs Documentary Film Festival and the Oslo Freedom Forum.



The NHC’s Ivar Dale is based in Geneva, and is an expert on Central Asia and UN-related issues.

Valuable partnerships



Csilla Czibalmos coordinates bilateral relations via the EEA Grants Active Citizens Fund, and is an expert on Romania.

A Norwegian NGO looked into domestic violence in Bulgaria and brought home a valuable lesson.

“We have learned so much about the challenges in Bulgaria, which is directly relevant for other projects we have in Norway,” says Lillian Hjort.

The director of the Human Rights Academy in Oslo teamed up with two non-governmental organisations in Bulgaria. Together, they managed to map gender-based and domestic violence in Bulgaria for the first time.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee contributes to the strengthening of civil society in Europe. Through designated NGO programmes, supported by grants financed both by the European Economic Area (EEA) and by Norway alone, we facilitate contact and cooperation between matching organisations in Norway and the EU. The NGO programmes aim to strengthen civil society and active citizenship, and empower vulnerable groups.

Although the project on domestic violence in Bulgaria has been concluded, cooperation between the three organisations continues to bear fruit.

“The good contact we established with our Bulgarian partners will continue,” says Lillian Hjort.

In this context, the NHC acts as a bridge, establishing contacts and fostering bilateral cooperation between organisations with common areas of interest in Norway and the recipient countries.

“We bring together like-minded people and organisations. The NHC has been instrumental in contributing to the establishment of many valuable partnerships,” says NHC Senior Adviser Csilla Czibalmos.

Support to NGOs

The NHC facilitates contacts and fosters bilateral cooperation between organisations working on common areas of interest in Norway and the EU.

Between 2009 and 2014, 238 projects were implemented in cooperation with Norwegian partners. The funding period 2014-2021 represents the most ambitious effort so far by the EEA and Norway Grants scheme, resulting in a total budget of EUR 2.8 billion.

Support for civil society falls within the scope of the prioritised area encompassing culture, civil society, good governance and fundamental rights and freedoms.



Valentina Likhoshva fights for the right to love whoever she chooses. Photo: Lene Christensen, Amnesty



Chapter 2 — Fighting for minorities

“The experience of being able to be yourself together with someone else, even if it was just for a few days, gave us strength and motivation to continue to live, to act, to dream.”

Valentina Likhoshva, after the historic Barents Pride event

What freedom feels like

“We are proud of who we are,” said Valentina Likhoshva from Russia, after a unique Pride parade in Norway.

Pride parades may seem like isolated events, but they make an important statement: You are free to choose who you are and to love whoever you want.

It was a historical moment when, in September 2017, 200 Russians and Norwegians gathered for the first ever Barents Pride in Kirkenes, just half an hour’s drive from the Russian border.



Russians and Norwegians joined Barents Pride. Photo: Lene Christensen, Amnesty

“We are concerned about the increasingly brutal attacks on LGBTI persons and activists in Russia. Still, it was amazing to witness the many brave activists marching in the streets of Kirkenes,” says Mina Skouen, Senior Adviser at the NHC. She coordinated Barents Pride together with FRI (the Norwegian Organisation for Sexual and Gender Diversity), Amnesty International Norway and Queer World.

Russians and Norwegians went out into the streets to celebrate diversity, while also drawing attention to the difficulties faced by LGBTI persons in Russia. After the parade, Valentina Likhoshva was repeatedly asked how she felt now. “I don’t know what I feel because it’s a new kind of feeling. We have never experienced this before,” she replied.

Likhoshva represents Maksimum, an LGBTI group in Murmansk, which has been attacked with gas grenades, and whose members have been arrested and fined. Being part of the LGBTI community puts you at risk all over Russia. ▶

We have never experienced this before.

In 2017, an unprecedented wave of persecution targeted people believed to be gay in Chechnya. Hundreds have been detained, many of them tortured and an unknown number killed.

Barents Pride was one example of solidarity with a marginalised group of people under attack in Russia.

In recognition of their efforts, the NHC and the other organisers of Barents Pride were awarded the Keep Going Award at the Norwegian GayGalla 2018.

“Barents Pride was an example of genuine solidarity, of what acceptance and freedom feels like,” says Valentina Likhoshva, who was deeply moved as a recipient of the award.

A wave of persecution

An unprecedented wave of persecution targeted people believed to be gay or lesbian in Chechnya in 2017.

Hundreds of people have been detained, many of them tortured and an unknown number killed.

Maxim Lapunov was held for 12 days in a cell, humiliated, threatened and tortured by the police. He subsequently managed to flee Chechnya. Zelim Bakaev, one of Chechnya’s most famous singers and celebrities, simply disappeared. Detained and taken away by armed men in August last year, he has not been seen since.

“People have not only died during detention. Chechen authorities have put pressure on families to ‘deal with’ people suspected of being gay. What this means in practice is that families are coerced into killing their relatives,” NHC’s Mina Skouen, says.

Civil society in Russia, and in the Chechen Republic in particular, has responded vigorously. Numerous people have been forced to flee Chechnya, assisted by human rights organisations and private individuals.

The NHC has expressed its deep concern for the victims of persecution in Chechnya to the Norwegian authorities, and have raised the matter to the international level by picketing the Russian embassy in Oslo. We continue to closely monitor the situation for LGBTI activists at risk in Russia.



Maxim Lapunov was tortured by the police.



Zelim Bakaev disappeared after being detained.

Diversity under attack



Zizi Shekeladze was killed for being a trans woman.

Zizi Shekeladze from Georgia was killed because she was a trans woman.

Bludgeoned with a concrete bar, slashed with a knife, Shekeladze died in hospital. She was the victim of a transphobic attack by individuals, but also the victim of an election campaign that played on society's fears of people who are different. Several trans women were attacked after the 2016 election in Georgia, which was monitored by the NHC.

Georgia stands out as one, among very few, post-Soviet states to make progress on the legislative level. Still, more than a year after the murder of Shekeladze, the NHC is receiving reports of new transphobic attacks.

Because transgender persons are among the most vulnerable groups in most countries, tangible legislative steps can make a groundbreaking difference.

Several trans women were attacked after the 2016 election in Georgia

Bringing back dignity



Mina Wikshåland Skouen is an expert on LGBTIQI-related issues.

Until quite recently, psychiatric hospitalisation was required before access to gender affirmative treatment was given in Ukraine.

To change your legal documents, you would have to undergo compulsory sterilisation. After tireless advocacy from our partner organisations, including Insight, the law was amended to bring this harrowing practice to an end.

In cooperation with the NHC, Insight offers Ukrainian psychiatrists and doctors the chance to learn from Norwegian experts how to treat transgender patients in a way that preserves their dignity, integrity and human rights.

“We are not just another talking shop - We do stuff”



Thai Parliamentarian Rachada Dhnadirek (left) with Nazila Ghanea, professor of Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford, attending an IPPFoRB seminar in New York.

Parliamentarian Rachada Dhnadirek is helping to improve the lives of religious minorities in Thailand.

A leading figure in one of Thailand’s political parties, and a strong advocate of human rights, she is part of an NHC-supported network whose aim is to promote freedom of religion and belief.

“Millions of people all over the world are being discriminated against and persecuted because of their religion or beliefs,” Dhnadirek says.

A meeting in East Timor in July 2016 was a wake-up call for the young Parliamentarian. Rachada Dhnadirek met with the NHC’s Ed Brown, coordinator of the secretariat for a unique global network committed to combatting religious persecution and advancing freedom of religion or belief. At the time, she was new to the issue. A few months later, she joined the network called IPPFoRB on a mission to Myanmar.

IPPFoRB stands for the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion and Belief. It was founded two years earlier, when 30 members of parliament from all over the world met in Oslo.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

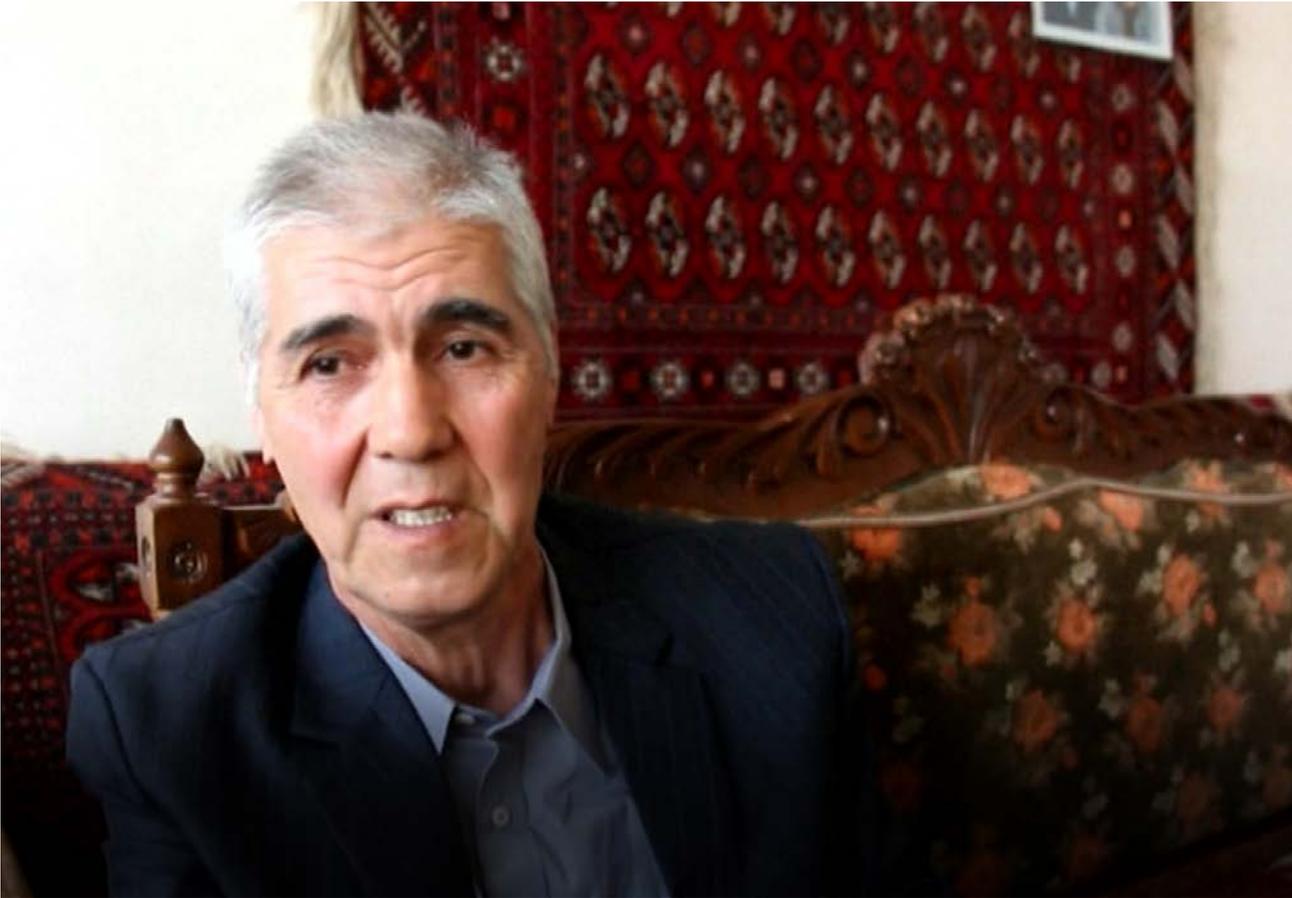
This right includes freedom to change one’s religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest one’s religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee hosts the secretariat of IPPFoRB, and Ed Brown is the network’s coordinator.

“We are not just another gathering of people who talk about how difficult things are; a mere talking shop. We do stuff,” he says.

The persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority in Myanmar was a turning point for Rachada Dhnadirek. She began to take a more active role, helping to link women’s rights with FoRB. In Bangkok, she works to secure female participation in politics and provides education and training for politically active young people in her own party. She also attended IPPFoRB workshops in both New York and Bangkok in 2017.

“IPPFoRB changed my perspective towards religious discrimination and raised my global awareness. Together, we promote the notion that all people are free to believe, convert, and practise their religion and beliefs peacefully,” she says.



Muhammad Bekjon.
Photo: RFE/RL

Chapter 3 — Threats to democracy

“I am fine. Just tired. My hair has become completely white in these 18 years.”

Muhammad Bekjon, immediately after his release

Free at last

Muhammad Bekjon was one of the world's longest-jailed journalists.

He was finally released after 18 years behind bars in Uzbekistan, and after years of pressure from the NHC and other international human rights organisations.



Marius Fossum is based in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and is an expert on Central Asia.

“We are grateful whenever our efforts achieve a positive outcome. Still, the overall picture remains bleak. The regime must implement institutional changes,” Marius Fossum, the NHC’s Representative in Central Asia says.

In February 2017, Muhammad Bekjon was finally released, after almost 18 years in prison in Uzbekistan.

“How are you?” a journalist asked half an hour after he walked free.

“I am fine, just tired. My hair has become completely white in these 18 years,” Bekjon replied.

Some see the release as indication of a thaw, following the death of the previous president. However, it is far too early to conclude that this will lead to lasting improvements for human rights.

“Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian state, where political dissent is highly dangerous,” Fossum says.

“We are grateful whenever our efforts achieve a positive outcome”

Muhammad Bekjon’s family did not see him during the entire time he spent in prison. His daughter Inna Begzhanova posted on Facebook after her father’s release: “Today we heard his voice for the first time. It definitely feels unreal.”

Authoritarianism is the norm rather than the exception in Central Asia.

Heavy-handed oppression of journalists, activists and opposition groups has been evident in all five republics for decades.

The NHC meets regularly with UN bodies and individual UN missions to relay findings and concerns on human rights violations in Central Asia. This is intended to put additional pressure on authorities who disrespect their own populations and deny them their human rights. ▶



The logo of the 'Prove They Are Alive!' campaign

Tajikistan

Lawyer Buzurgmehr Yorov was sentenced to 25 years in prison. His 'crime' was defending opposition party members who were imprisoned during the recent crackdown on the country's main opposition party. The human rights crisis in Tajikistan is severe, and the NHC has repeatedly demanded the release of political prisoners.

Turkmenistan

The goal of the 'Prove They Are Alive!' campaign is to find and document the truth about the fate of at least 112 people who have disappeared in Turkmen prisons. The NHC is a key member of the campaign, raising individual cases in the UN and providing information to the families of those who have disappeared.

Kazakhstan

The NHC has worked closely with UN representatives with regard to freedom of assembly in Kazakhstan, which is a major issue in the country. Max Bokayev and Talgat Ayanov are serving sentences merely for practising their constitutional rights. We demand their release.

Kyrgyzstan

While Kyrgyzstan is relatively liberal compared to neighbouring countries, the current Kyrgyz authorities are repeating the mistakes of their predecessors. Journalists and news agencies have been fined, while activists such as Mihra Rittmann (HRW) and Vitaliy Ponomarev (Memorial) have been deported. The case of prisoner of conscience Azimzhan Askarov remains a major cause for concern.

The Russian wall

Even when it's cold, civil society shows warmth.

Trump wants to build a physical wall against Mexico, while Putin is raising ideological walls against Europe. Yet civil society continues to work across borders and show solidarity in difficult times.

In 2017, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee gave the Andrei Sakharov Freedom Award to the well-known Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta and the staff of the Committee against Torture.

"Novaya Gazeta correspondent Elena Milashina exposed the systematic torture of gay men in Chechnya, a horrific news story that soon broke around the world," explains Inna Sangadzhieva, Senior Adviser at the NHC.

"In parallel with the disturbing stories uncovered by Novaya Gazeta, Olga Sadovskaya, a member of the Russia-based Committee against Torture, has brought numerous grave cases to the European Court of Human Rights. ▶



Inna Sangadzhieva is an expert on Russia, North Caucasus and Belarus.



Elena Milashina (left) and Olga Sadovskaya receive the Sakharov Freedom Award. Photo: Trond Isaksen/NHC

Novaya Gazeta correspondent Elena Milashina exposed the systematic torture of gay men in Chechnya.

The problems facing civil society across Russia are particularly evident in the republics of the North Caucasus, such as in Chechnya, which remains one of the most difficult and dangerous places in Europe for human rights work. Furthermore, Russian legislation and practices affecting human rights are sometimes copied by neighbouring countries.

“In Russia, news outlets and civil society organisations have gradually found their place within the rigid legal framework intended to restrain them,” says Sangadzhieva.

Although walls may be raised, they always crumble in the end. In the meantime, the international human rights community is a place where people continue to exchange ideas, even when governments are unable to find the right words.

“Cooperation between journalists, human rights activists and lawyers on various human rights issues, also across borders, has strengthened solidarity and made them less vulnerable,” says Sangadzhieva.

Partial democracies are trending

Non-democratic values are once again gaining a foothold in Europe.



Demonstration in Hungary in 2017.

Basic human rights are being violated across the globe, and Europe is no exception. The rights of refugees who fled the horrors of war are among our most complex challenges.

“The Polish government makes courts hugely dependent on political will, and limits the space for independent civil society organisations. We are afraid that this is not the end, and that the democratic backsliding will continue,” says Lenur Kerymov of the Polish Helsinki Committee.



Lenur Kerymov of the Polish Helsinki Committee.

The NHC has worked closely with the Polish Helsinki Committee on projects in Central Asia, including trial monitoring and work against torture in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

The Central European University in Budapest, where many activists from Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus have received their degrees, has recently become one of the main targets for attack by the Hungarian government. Recipients of civil society funding, for which NHC is the contact point, have also been attacked. The committee has backed Hungarian organisations in their efforts to counter the government's crackdown on civil society.

In Poland, the rule of law has been forced into the back seat as authoritarian ideas reassert themselves, to the extent that the European Commission has rebuked the Polish government for initiatives that are undermining the independence of the judiciary.

Talk to one another!

The NHC facilitates dialogue between ordinary Russians and Ukrainians as an alternative to war.

Four years ago, Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula. This was immediately followed by the outbreak of fighting in Eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed separatist militias and Ukrainian government forces.



Olga Shamshur Flydal is an expert on Ukraine and Azerbaijan.

The conflict has no military solution, only a political one. Dialogue is being pursued through the Minsk-negotiations, through bilateral and multilateral talks, in the UN and other international bodies.

“The need for interpersonal dialogue while the conflict is on-going is just as acute. Massive numbers of internally displaced people from the eastern part of the country have created social tensions within Ukraine. In addition, families and friends in the two neighbouring countries have been split and become alienated,” says Olga Shamshur Flydal, Senior Adviser at the NHC.

The conflict remains deadlocked, and has so far resulted in the loss of 10,000 lives, while almost two million people have been internally displaced.

“It is never too early to start talks about peace and reconciliation”

“It is never too early to start talks about peace and reconciliation,” says Enver Djuliman, Senior Adviser at the NHC.



Enver Djuliman is an expert on human rights education and the Western Balkans.

He coordinates dialogue sessions between 30 young people from Russia and Ukraine. They have become a network of young peacekeepers, who are focused on reconciliation. In 2017, the NHC also facilitated a Russian-Ukrainian roundtable dialogue for NGOs, with the same goal: dialogue and peace.

“Young people want to show that there is another Russia and another Ukraine which do not want war,” says Djuliman, who has extensive experience from peace-building efforts in the Western Balkans.

His colleague, Olga Shamshur Flydal adds that dialogue alone is not enough, and has a word of encouragement to her Ukrainian colleagues:

“Keep documenting serious crimes and violations to ensure accountability, demand that your government plays by the rules and upholds democratic standards, even in times of war. Your work is invaluable.”



Aleksandra Sidorenko
documents crimes against
the people in North
Caucasus.

Chapter 4 — Confronting impunity

“To make progress on human rights, we have to document abuses and make documentation available”

Aleksandra Sidorenko, NHC

Finding the facts

Aleksandra Sidorenko documents crimes against the people in Russia's turbulent North Caucasus region.

"Finding the facts is the only way to see justice done," she says.

It started with a tragedy in 2009. Prominent activist Natalia Estemirova, from the Memorial Human Rights Centre, was investigating human rights violations in Chechnya. On 15 July, she was abducted by unknown men and brutally murdered.



Natalia Estemirova did not die in vain. Photo: Reuters

"Natalia gave her life in the struggle for truth and justice. We decided to continue her important work," says Aleksandra Sidorenko, an adviser at the Norwegian Helsinki Committee.

Two years after the murder, the Natalia Estemirova Documentation Centre (NEDC) was born. Sidorenko coordinates the Centre from Oslo. It is a joint project with eight renowned human rights organisations, all of which have donated large amounts of reports, pictures, videos and other materials.

For decades, there has been little accountability for forced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial execution and inhumane treatment of prisoners in the North Caucasus. There is a sense of impunity, and local communities have lost faith in the rule of law.

"To improve respect for human rights and accountability for violations, it is paramount that we have high-quality documentation from many sources," Sidorenko adds.

The project is an important addition to broader efforts in the fight against impunity, the promotion of the rule of law and accountability mechanisms. These include international courts and national prosecutorial services exercising universal jurisdiction for international crimes.

"The main idea is that high-quality documentation should be made available to fight impunity, promote the rule of law and provide accurate narratives," Sidorenko points out.

Universal jurisdiction allows states to claim criminal jurisdiction over an accused person regardless of where the alleged crime was committed, and regardless of the accused's nationality, country of residence or any other relation with the prosecuting entity. Crimes that can be prosecuted under universal jurisdiction include crimes against humanity, genocide and torture.

"The database provides analytical reports, statistical data on killed and missing persons, and contributes to the overall understanding of the conflicts and their consequences," she explains.

In 2017, work started on the creation of a website for the NEDC, which will make parts of the database publicly available. The NHC is also developing plans to create a similar database for parts of Ukraine.

520,000
documents collected

66,766
victim profiles
activated

5,549
incidents described
and registered

Protecting whistleblowers

“Corrupt officials, who fear that their crimes will be exposed, may arrest, torture and kill those who stand in their way.”

Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal coordinates the NHC’s efforts to offer better protection to those who dare to speak up for the truth.

In 2017, the NHC invited international campaigners to the Oslo Magnitsky Hearing, to discuss how we can strengthen support for whistleblowers and human rights defenders.



Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal is Deputy Secretary General and an expert on international criminal justice and human rights. He monitors human rights developments in Norway, Turkey and several other countries.

Sergei Magnitsky was killed in a Moscow prison on 16 November 2009, after investigating fraud involving Russian tax officials, the police and organised crime. At the time, he was investigating on behalf of the financier Bill Browder, who responded to the tragedy by starting a campaign to obtain justice for him and other whistleblowers.

“My hope is that Sergei Magnitsky did not die in vain,” said Bill Browder at the Hearing in Oslo on 22 November.

Magnitsky’s death sparked international outrage, and led to punitive actions from the USA and other countries, in the form of targeted sanctions and investigations into money laundering.

The Hearing was one of the events staged to mark the Norwegian Helsinki Committee’s 40th anniversary. Expert panels presented both the Magnitsky case and similar cases, in order to highlight the current situation for whistleblowers in authoritarian states.

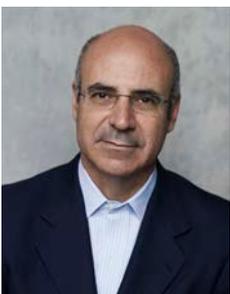
“Too often, corrupt officials are not held accountable for their crimes,” says Ekeløve-Slydal, Deputy Secretary General at the NHC.

After the initial Magnitsky legislation was adopted in 2012, the USA imposed global human rights sanctions in 2016. Canada, the UK, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia have imposed similar sanctions, which deny visas and/or freeze the assets of human rights violators.

“Democratic countries need to step up their efforts to protect whistleblowers and human rights defenders,” Ekeløve-Slydal says.

Norway has taken the lead to negotiate UN resolutions on the protection of human rights defenders. However, many authoritarian states are not willing to provide such protection. New tools are therefore needed to deal with this situation.

“Corrupt money is laundered on a massive scale in Western countries. Targeted sanctions, freezing ill-gotten proceeds and making visits to Western cities and holiday resorts impossible, can be effective tools to stop officials from violating human rights.”



Bill Browder.
Photo: Lindberg /
The Magnitsky Campaign

Investigating War Crimes

The NHC supports the investigation of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war.



Simon Papuashvili documented grave abuses by both sides during the war.

“In 2008, my village in Georgia was occupied by Russian military forces,” says Simon Papuashvili.

The NHC and our Georgian partners have documented that war crimes and crimes against humanity were committed during the conflict, and that neither Georgia nor Russia has genuinely investigated the crimes.

Papuashvili not only experienced a war, he started uncovering facts about the accompanying tragedies.

“I documented grave abuses by both sides during the war. And later, working as a consultant to the NHC, I argued for the involvement of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to end the reign of impunity,” he says.

I documented grave abuses by both sides during the war.

In 2016, the Court decided to investigate crimes allegedly committed during the war. “Hopefully, this could be a game-changer in a region that has seen many crimes and little justice,” says Aage Borchgrevink, Senior Adviser at the NHC.

Although the Georgian government signalled its willingness to cooperate with the Court, both Russia and the South Ossetia de facto government said that they will not. The NHC and Georgian organisations sent a letter to the Court’s Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, in August 2017, underlining the importance of outreach and public information activities.



Aage Borchgrevink is an expert on Russia/Chechnya and Georgia.

The NHC also visited the Court, offering information and presenting its work on establishing documentation databases, which might be of use for the investigation. Its success depends both on the ICC’s ability to conduct effective investigations and on the support provided by its member states.

“They should provide whatever evidence of crimes they may have, as well as strong political support, as Russia is likely to do what it can to discredit the investigation,” Borchgrevink points out.

Simon Papuashvili, who works as a programme director at the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), a close partner of the NHC, is hopeful for the future:

“It is my great hope that the investigation may restore a measure of justice to the communities that suffered, and contribute to ending the cycle of violence in the Caucasus.”

Meet our partners

This annual report would have contained many blank pages without the work of more than 70 partner organisations from Vladivostok to Budapest.

The around 70 organisations consist of more than a thousand activists, experts, lawyers, volunteers and independent journalists, who often put their own life on the line to improve the situation for citizens in their home countries.

The NHC provides support for and participates in activities along with our partners. This enables civil society organisations to keep their focus on providing assistance to vulnerable groups, challenging public institutions to uphold the rule of law and holding authorities to account.

In this chapter, you will meet three of our partner organisations located in respectively Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.



Ofelya Zalyan reaches out to the next generation of human rights defenders. Photo: Vardine Grigoryan/HCAV

An Armenian success story

Ofelya Zalyan is part of a dedicated team, which is achieving big results with small resources in Armenia.

Ofelya Zalyan's office is a bumpy drive from Yerevan over the mountains.

"We empower citizens to claim their rights," she says. Their results in the last three years speaks for themselves: Legal advice given to over 90 people, 34 citizens defended in Armenian courts, criminal proceedings obtained in 13 cases of police torture and seven complaints filed with the European Court of Human Rights.

The Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor (HCAV) in Armenia is run by Artur Sakunts and his 22 colleagues.

"Our long-term cooperation with the NHC is invaluable," Zalyan says.

A joint project conducted over the past three years is reaching out to the next generation of human rights defenders.

200 young people, who have completed their education but are still struggling to find work, have observed elections and developed legal defences for victims. Many of them have subsequently continued to work with the HCAV.

An annual survey organised by the HCAV and its young collaborators, indicates a clear response: People want political change. The work and results of the survey inspire the activists to continue their work.



Many of Lukpan Akhmediarov's students found permanent jobs after the summer school

Training for aspiring journalists

A school for journalists in a far-flung region of Kazakhstan is a great idea, thought Lukpan Akhmediarov. He became one of several recipients of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee Small Grants Fund for Central Asia in 2017.

The well-known journalist and editor decided that a summer school for journalists was what the city of Oral, in the far western corner of Kazakhstan, needed.

“I noticed immediately that there was great interest in the project among young people in Oral,” he says.

Some 20 participants were eventually selected for his summer school. They learnt about everything from legal issues that journalists should be aware of to photography and working with online news channels.

“Many of them found permanent jobs with local news outlets after the course,” he says proudly.

Lukpan Akhmediarov's own career as a journalist in authoritarian Kazakhstan has not been easy. He has been arrested and imprisoned for his efforts to uncover corruption in his native country.

After Lukpan announced the summer school and the grant from the NHC, attempts were made to confiscate the funds from his bank account.

“Nonetheless, we carried out the project and hope to establish a more permanent journalism school in Oral in the future,” he says.



Aziza Abdirasulova has provided legal aid to more than 1,000 victims of torture

Protecting victims of torture

A long-time NHC partner in Kyrgyzstan, the organisation Kylym Shamy, combats torture. This organisation has provided legal aid to more than 1,000 victims of torture since 2003.

“Torture will never be eradicated in Kyrgyzstan as long as there is no genuine political will among the country's leadership to tackle the problem,” says Aziza Abdirasulova, the founder of Kylym Shamy. She underscores the necessity of continuing the organisation's important work. In recent years, Kylym Shamy has submitted six individual torture cases to the United Nations Committee on Human Rights.

“We have worked with the Norwegian Helsinki Committee since 2011 in a range of fields, including ethnic discrimination, the rule of law and torture, as well as human rights in the struggle against extremism and terrorism.

In the fight against terrorism, protecting fundamental human rights is becoming ever more important in Kyrgyzstan, where the rights of suspected terrorists are routinely violated and court hearings take place behind closed doors. Kyrgyzstani law enforcement operates a shoot-to-kill policy towards suspected terrorists, circumventing legal procedures, the presumption of innocence and, in effect, carrying out extra-judicial liquidations.

40 years of fighting injustice



40 år
DEN NORSKE
HELSINGFORSKOMITE

We honor Anna
Politkovskaya's
memory by supporting
brave journalists in
Russia.

“The NHC is a
marathon runner for
human rights.”

Ine Eriksen Søreide, Norwegian
Minister of Foreign Affairs



“You make us
all safer.”

Jonas Gahr Støre, Leader of
the Norwegian Labour Party

“We need a common
set of rules to avoid
conflicts. Human rights
should be just that.”

Ragnhild Astrup Tschudi,
NHC Chair



The staff



Bjørn Engesland,
Secretary General



Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal,
Deputy Secretary General



**Fernanda Zubillaga
Nilsen,** Head of admin-
istration, office manage-
ment and finance



Øystein Solvang,
Head of
Communications



Lene Wetteland,
Senior Adviser, Head of
Russia section, Armenia



Inna Sangadzhiyeva,
Senior Adviser, Russia
and Belarus



Enver Djuliman, Senior
Adviser, Human rights
education programme



Mina Skouen, Senior
Adviser, LGBTI-related
activities



Ed Brown, Senior
Adviser, Head of
Secretariat of IPPFoRB



Aage Borchgrevink,
Senior Adviser, Georgia,
North Caucasus, and
International Justice



Hilde Sandvær,
Communications
Adviser



Astrid Lello Hald,
Adviser, Administration



Csilla Czibalmos,
Senior Adviser, EEA
grants project, Central
and Eastern Europe and
Roma-related issues



Olga Shamshur Flydal,
Senior Adviser, Ukraine
and Azerbaijan



Ana Pashalishvili,
Adviser



Mar'yana Haydanka,
Adviser to IPPFoRB



Usam Baysaev, Project
Coordinator, Senior
Adviser to the Natalia
Estemirova Documenta-
tion Centre



Aleksandra Sidorenko,
Adviser to the Natalia
Estemirova
Documentation Centre



Berit Nising Lindeman,
Senior Adviser, Belarus
and Azerbaijan, election
observation (on leave
from August)

Staff abroad:



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



Marius Fossum, Regional Representative in Central Asia (Almaty)



Valentina Kazachevskaya, Project Adviser in Central Asia (Almaty)

Organisation

The annual meeting is NHC's highest decision-making body, and consists of members of the council and the board. The board holds monthly meetings, where decisions relating to NHC's strategy, principles and financial matters are made. The Secretary General heads the secretariat and is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the NHC.

Board

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

Eirik Moen
Secretary General of the International Democrat Union

Inger Skjelsbæk
Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Vice-Chair: Julie Wilhelmsen
Research fellow, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

Kari Schage
Management Consultant, Resources Global Professionals

Inna Sangadzhieva
Staff representative

Hauk Lund
Executive Director, Hauk Lund Consulting A/S

Kjetil Mujezinovic Larsen
Professor, Faculty of Law, the University of Oslo

Council

President: Nora Sveaass

Vice-President: Anne Marit Bjørnflaten

Members: Marit Arnstad, Geir Jørgen Bekkevold, Helge Blakkisrud, Bernt Bull, Nils Butenschøn, Kristin Clemet, Juni Dahr, Ole Drolsum, Frode Elgesem, Grethe Fossum, Geir Flikke, Dankert Freilem, Siri Frigaard, Bjørn Cato Funnemark, Steinar Gil, Jacub M. Godzimirski, Trine Skei Grande, Bernt Hagtvet, Hans Morten Haugen, Åsne Julsrud, Prableen Kaur, Knut Kloster Jr, Idar Kreutzer, Gry Larsen, Ragnhild Lied, Arne Liljedahl Lynggård, Elisabeth Løland, Mette Newth, Manuela Ramin Osmundsen, Viktor Roddvik, Jan Tore Sanner, Per Saxegaard, Anne Julie Semb, Anne Sender, Marianne B. Skou, Guro Slettemark, Bård Vegar Solhjell, Lars Petter Soltvedt, Atle Sommerfeldt, Michael Tetzschner, Annette Trettebergstuen, Magne Ove Warsinski-Varsi, Maria Warsinska-Varsi, Vigdis Vevstad, Åshild Vige, Kåre Vollen, Stein-Ivar Aarsæther

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