

# Annual Report 2018



Norwegian  
Helsinki Committee

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Thousands of Hungarians took part in the protest against several controversial laws that were approved by the right-wing conservative government lead by Viktor Orban.  
Foto: Zumapress.com / Mega

“Our job is to fight with all the liberal democratic means we have at our disposal.”



Reflections from the Secretary General

# Democracy under threat

Authoritarian movements in the heart of Europe threaten human rights and liberal democracy.

It was unsurprising, but sad nonetheless, that Freedom House no longer rated Hungary a free country in its Freedom in the World report 2019. The authoritarian backlash against democracy is the greatest threat to our values and our work. We see how autocrats are challenging the very basics of free societies: democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

We see how autocrats use popular opposition to immigration, xenophobia and aggressive ethno-nationalism strategically to gain support in many countries. They use the issue of national sovereignty as a ploy to gag political opposition. Those who disagree with their policies are portrayed as being akin to enemies of the people.

We also see how they misuse the concept of democracy, as if democracy were merely a synonym for ‘rule of the majority’. They tend to ‘forget’ that democracy is open debate and free discussions, boring compromises and shared power, a strong civil society and constant disagreement. Without an independent judiciary, democratic rule soon becomes brutalised, enabling powerful individuals and groups to manipulate justice. These safeguards of liberal democracy disappear step-by-step under autocratic rule.

As human rights activists, we should not bury ourselves in dystopia and pessimism. That is simply not our job. Our job is to fight with all the liberal democratic means we have at our disposal. Even though 2018 has been another challenging year for democracy and human rights, it has not been without glimpses of light. As we have seen in Armenia, ordinary people who take to the streets and express their legitimate claims are very powerful. They can impose positive change.

In 2019, we have two options: We can resign ourselves to the fact that more human rights violations will take place and that authoritarian forces will gain more ground. Or we can fight resolutely against these developments with our colleagues in the field.

I urge you to do the latter.

**Bjørn Engesland**  
Secretary General

This is us



Monitoring



Human rights education



Information campaigns



Democracy support



23 employees

The NHC has a staff of 23 employees representing 11 different nationalities.

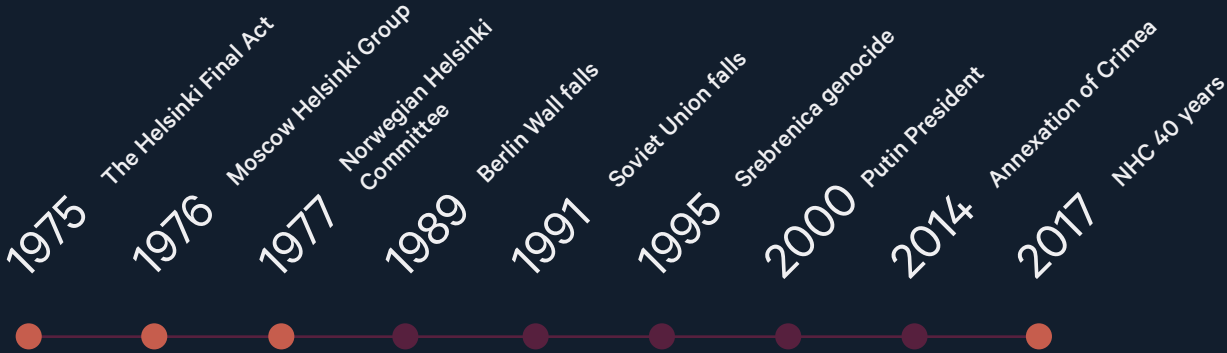
Our story

**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 almost all countries in Europe, North America and the Soviet Union.

**The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC)** was established in 1977 as a watchdog organisation 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 /  
Horst Sturm,  
Bundesarchiv



2018

in brief

● Activities



In 2018, staff members spent more than 427 days travelling to visit the NHC's 140 different partners. We are proud to partner with activists, lawyers, volunteers, parliamentarians and journalists in over 30 countries, primarily in Europe and Central Asia. Have a look at some of the issues that kept us busy in 2018.

1 – Russia

Information campaigns on presidential elections and the FIFA World Cup. Advocacy for and contribution to investigation of human rights violations against LGBT people in Chechnya, including advocacy for activation of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism.

2 – Georgia

Supporting ICC investigation of war crimes during the 2008 war with Russia. Observing the Georgian presidential elections and documenting human rights violations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Supporting visibility campaign on trans and intersex issues.

3 – Armenia

Monitoring human rights compliance during the Velvet Revolution and early elections. Supporting the rights of LGBTI people during and after the Velvet Revolution.

4 – Moldova

Supporting the training of psychologists working on sexual orientation and gender identity in penitentiary systems.

5 – Ukraine

Supporting research for and publication of a report on hate crimes committed against vulnerable groups and minorities. Documenting cases of gross violations of human rights in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea to be submitted for Magnitsky sanctions. Supporting community centres for LGBTI people.

6 – Belarus

Alternative report on torture presented at the UN Committee Against Torture. Due to extensive advocacy, Belarusian authorities reported on civil and political rights to the UN Human Rights Committee for the first time in 20 years.

7 – Bulgaria

Launching the Active Citizens Fund and matchmaking between Norwegian and Bulgarian organisations. Advocacy to prevent legislative restrictions on freedom of religion or belief.

8 – Slovakia

Launching the Active Citizens Fund.

9 – Turkey

Submission to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to strengthen enforcement of judgments by the European Court of Human Rights. Visit to religious minorities in southeast Turkey.

10 – Norway

Education project on minority rights. Reporting to UN Treaty Bodies and the third UPR cycle, in cooperation with the NGO Forum for Human Rights.

11 – Kazakhstan

Documenting intensified government crackdown on dissent. Providing grants for civil society organisations in all five Central Asian republics.

12 – Azerbaijan

Training over 50 activists, lawyers and journalists. Advocacy meetings and side-events at the Council of Europe and the EU Parliament.

13 – Turkmenistan

Advocacy work with UN delegations and other stakeholders in Geneva within the framework of the campaign 'Prove They Are Alive!'

14 – Kyrgyzstan

Project activities to protect the rights of torture victims, victims of ethnic discrimination and the media. Court hearings to overturn the ban on the NHC report due to its alleged "extremism".

15– Uzbekistan

Official visit to meet activists and government officials to discuss how to strengthen protection of human rights. Alternative reporting on human rights issues to UN Treaty Bodies.

16 – Bosnia

Herzegovina

17 – Montenegro

18 – Kosovo

19 – Macedonia

20 – Serbia

21– Albania

Establishing a three-year regional programme for movement-building and the advancement of LGBTI people's human rights in Western Balkans





The year  
2018 in  
highlights



Half an hour's drive from the border between Russia and Norway, 300 people from both countries hit the streets of Kirkenes to celebrate the second Barents Pride – 100 more than last year.

In June 2018, we gathered LGBTI activists from 17 European countries for Oslo Pride to share stories of life, love, hope, activism, football, international solidarity and political change. revolution.



“It is during moments like the Oslo Pride that you understand the whole importance of our struggle for equality and non-discrimination, and gain more strength to strive for your goals.”

Said at our Oslo Pride event.

2018 marked the launch of our new graphic profile and web page. Visit [www.nhc.no](http://www.nhc.no) to see what we do and how we make a difference.



Photojournalist Anton Naumlyuk’s powerful exhibition, telling the stories of children whose fathers are imprisoned Crimean activists and lawyers, was organised by the NHC and featured at Oslo Freedom Forum.



Senior Adviser Enver Djuliman launched his book on reconciliation in five Ukrainian cities, signing dozens of copies and giving interviews to news outlets.  
Photo: Dmytro Shantskyi



In 2018, the NHC Natalia Estemirova Documentation Centre has managed to collect 339 documents dealing with the state of law enforcement in the period of 1996-1999, the time between the first and the second military conflict in Chechnya. 5,672 people were verified as disappeared, while 6,847 were verified as having been killed. 220 people, whose images were not previously known, were also identified. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) recognised the importance of the Centre in a resolution.



23 students from 14 nationalities joined our human rights camp in Drammen, just outside Oslo, in April. For 25 years, the NHC has hosted camps where young people learn about human rights, multicultural understanding and peace.

“This is the first time I have had a close friend who uses a hijab. And I must say, you should definitely not assume that the headgear means the girl beneath it is quiet and ‘ordinary’”

Participant Natalie Woldengen (17) said to the Norwegian daily newspaper Dagsavisen



March 18, 2018, Vladimir Putin could start another term as Russia’s president. The same day we chose to celebrate the young and fearless generation emerging in the country. Our Election Night filled Kulturhuset in Oslo with over 500 youngsters engaged in political debate, music and discussions.  
Photo: @emogstad was the winner of the Instagram-competition.





North Korean slave workers  
building the Zenit Arena in  
St Petersburg for the 2018  
FIFA World Cup.  
Photo: Denis Sinyakov.

Chapter 1 – Joint efforts for change

“Strong international  
attention is crucial to  
prevent a worsening of the  
situation.”

The FIFA World Cup draws attention to Human Rights violations  
in Russia.

# Advocacy in football courts and beyond



In October 2018, The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) awarded the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize 2018 to Oyub Titiev.



Lene Wetteland, Head of the NHC's Russia Section, and Russian journalist Artem Filatov.



The NHC initiated and coordinated the publication of a handbook for journalists travelling to Russia to cover the FIFA World Cup 2018.

Joint advocacy efforts by the human rights community led to important results. We were at the forefront of these events.

In January, the head of Memorial in Chechnya, Oyub Titiev, was arrested on trumped-up drug charges. Titiev was one of very few human rights defenders who remained active in Chechnya, Russia's troubled North Caucasus region. Several of his colleagues in Memorial or in independent news outlets like Novaya Gazeta have been silenced, even murdered for their work.

“The purpose of the arrest was probably to strangle what little is left of the human rights movement in Chechnya. But what really happened was that more and more people started asking: Who is Oyub Titiev and what is really happening in Chechnya?” says Lene Wetteland, who heads the NHC's Russia Section.

An international campaign to draw attention to his groundless arrest and the consequences for human rights protection in Chechnya was born, and a coordinated human rights movement pushed, among others, the FIFA leadership and the French president into action.

The NHC and its partners published a handbook for journalists covering the FIFA World Cup, drawing attention to issues such as security, corruption, dangerous working conditions, environmental concerns and legislative restrictions. The handbook received international attention but was not warmly welcomed by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

“There is an increasing level of grassroot and other activism in Russia. Our campaigns support these initiatives. Even if they do not lead to immediate change, strong international attention is crucial to prevent a worsening of the situation,” says Wetteland.

Long-term advocacy efforts for an EU Magnitsky Law paid off. On 10 December 2018, EU Foreign Ministers accepted a Dutch proposal to develop legislation on EU human rights sanctions. The NHC took part in these advocacy efforts as a member of the global Magnitsky campaign. The campaign originally focused on sanctioning those who were implicated in the tax fraud exposed by Russian whistle-blower Sergey Magnitsky, and his subsequent arrest, torture and killing in 2009. In recent years, however, the focus has shifted to globally directed sanctions against those who, with impunity, are responsible for gross violations of human rights and corruption anywhere.

“This is bad news for officials who are committing serious human rights abuses, regardless of where they come from. Even if they are not held to account, they may still be exposed to sanctions,” says Wetteland.

Human rights sanctions are currently applied by several Western countries. In November and December, the USA, Canada, France and Lithuania introduced sanctions against Saudi Arabian citizens involved in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

# Not giving up on Azerbaijan

Together with brave human rights defenders we keep challenging the authoritarian regime.

“Azerbaijan's resilient civil society groups are an example of fighting against all odds. Despite harassment, arrests and the long-term imprisonment of independent journalists, bloggers, activists and human rights lawyers, they do not give up hope and continue to advocate for change,” says Olga Shamshur Flydal, Senior Adviser on Azerbaijan.

“Azerbaijan's resilient civil society groups are an example of fighting against all odds.”



Olga Shamshur Flydal, Senior Adviser on Azerbaijan.

Despite the ongoing crackdown on such actors, 2018 will be remembered as the year when Azerbaijan's success in silencing critical voices abroad started to crumble. Advocacy efforts, side events and briefings to parliamentarians in the Council of Europe by the NHC and its partners finally yielded results.

“The government previously faced no consequences for grave human rights abuses and other transgressions. However, calls to take exceptional steps against and impose sanctions on Azeri government were now mounting,” says Flydal.

In April, an independent review concluded that Azerbaijan had exerted undue influence and bribed members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) to whitewash its poor human rights record. The investigation caused several high-level resignations and exclusions, as well as the introduction of new lobbying rules at the institution. Three of the leading figures in the scandal went on trial in Milan.

The EU's attitude to human rights abuses in Azerbaijan has also become more stringent. In July 2018, the European Parliament passed a resolution, stating that no agreement should be reached with Azerbaijan before it improves its human rights record and releases all political prisoners.

Another positive development was the release of a leading opposition politician, Ilgar Mammadov. The NHC had campaigned for his release for five years. There are, however, still many political prisoners, such as blogger Ilkin Rustamzade, journalist Mehman Huseynov, and civic activists Afgan Mukhtarli, Giyas Ibrahimov and Bayram Mammadov.

“Despite some victories in 2018,” says Flydal, “the years ahead will likely be tumultuous for Azeri activists. Maintaining a network of local human rights defenders and empowering regional journalists to make independent voices heard inside the country and on the international stage will remain a priority.”



Mehman Huseynov. © 2017 RFERL/Azadliqradio



Letter from Geneva

# Roundtrip Dushanbe-Geneva

The road from Central Asia to the UN is long, but the road back is even longer.



Ivar Dale, Senior Adviser on Central Asia, together with Farid Tukhbatullin from Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, after a briefing on Turkmenistan for the UN Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in September 2018.

The cafeteria at Palais Wilson is continuously abuzz with chatter in a myriad of different languages. In March, the words floating around the coffee cups here were in Norwegian and Sami, as Norway prepared for its review by the UN Human Rights Committee. A month later, I’m hearing familiar voices again, but this time speaking Tajik and Russian.

At the UN, nothing’s anything without an abbreviation, hence the already shortened UN Committee Against Torture is often called UNCAT. Tajikistan is under review this week, and the NHC is joining Tajik activists in detailing cases of torture and brutality during a pre-session briefing.

While Uzbekistan eventually hit rock bottom on human rights and seems to be coming up for air fast, anyone with an eye fixed on Central Asia knows that Tajikistan just went under. The end of political pluralism came with a surge in government violence, and our allotted speaking time is not enough to cover all these testimonies of beatings, strangling and threats of rape. Committee members stay behind to talk more, they have questions.

A few days later, I sit at the back and listen as the Tajik delegation, led by the Prosecutor General, begins by citing statistics and legislative provisions, and ends by claiming the opposition is a pack of terrorists. They fool nobody. The Committee’s concerns echo ours.

As I watch the delegation members leaving, I wonder if there is any feeling of humiliation at such times. Perhaps just a sense of a job well done. These stories had a long road from prison cells in Dushanbe to that meeting room in Geneva, but I have realised the return message will have an even more arduous journey. To keep their jobs, officials in authoritarian regimes keep irritations to a minimum.

“Human rights at the UN is a fight fought slowly in the little passages between ever-growing archives.”

Human rights at the UN is a fight fought slowly in the little passages between ever-growing archives. But archives that have grown big enough turn into human rights tools. Certain regimes are beyond criticism from some far-off Palais Wilson, but the ultra-corrupt have palaces of their own to protect.

Someday soon, they’ll get the message.

# Holding Norway to account

By holding Norway to account at home, we strengthen the work for human rights abroad.



Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal,  
Deputy Secretary General

The NHC often refers to Norwegian policies and legislation as examples for other countries to follow. Norwegian institutions sometimes partner the NHC’s capacity-building efforts in other countries.

“Activists and officials from less democratic states are invited to Norway to study democracy, media independence, the rehabilitation of prisoners and how civil society organisations receive support from the government without giving up their right to criticise it,” says Deputy Secretary General Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal.

Yet the NHC also points to human rights problems in Norway that need to be resolved. In 2018, the NGO Forum for Human Rights, coordinated by the NHC, reported on human rights problems in Norway to the UN Human Rights Committee, the UN Committee against Torture, as well as to the UN Universal Periodic Review.

“Among the issues raised was the fact that those held in detention are sometimes subject to harmful isolation, healthcare services for prisoners with psychosocial disorders are inadequate and frequent use of coercive measures still takes place in psychiatric institutions,” says Ekeløve-Slydal.

Furthermore, policies to counter violence against women and girls are ineffective, while immigrants and their descendants face discrimination as well as hate speech. Better law enforcement and political actions are needed to counter these problems. In particular, Norway should strengthen the investigation of hate crimes.

The reports argued for the need to strengthen constitutional protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief. The 2014 amendments to the Constitution, which introduced a chapter on human rights, did not include this right. Religious freedom is therefore not fully protected by the Constitution, at the same time as it places the Evangelical Lutheran Church in a position of privilege vis-à-vis other religions.

The NHC also underlined that Norway should do more to ensure that asylum seekers are not extradited, deported or expelled to a country in which they risk irreparable harm. In international law, this principle is called non-refoulement. A few such cases, in which some returnees ending up being tortured and killed, were detailed in the reports.

“By holding Norway to account we can also strengthen the work for human rights abroad, because it increases our credibility and independence. Even in a well-functioning democracy, vulnerable groups may suffer from human rights violations,” says Ekeløve-Slydal.



In April 2018, Armenians took to the street in the Velvet Revolution.

Chapter 2 – Challenging authoritarianism

“This is the first time I do not have post-election depression after Armenian elections.”

Long-term support leading to change



Lene Wetteland, Senior Adviser on Armenia observed and reported from the revolution in Armenia.

# From resignation to revolution

Armenians surprised the world by toppling their corrupt regime through peaceful mass protests, called the Velvet Revolution.

“It is an incredible experience to see how grassroots activists, human rights defenders and engaged citizens came together to create significant change in their society,” says Lene Wetteland, Senior Adviser on Armenia.

Over the course of two weeks in April, Armenians, tired of endemic corruption and poverty protested the actions of the Republic Party through extensive civil disobedience, street closures and strikes.

People took to the streets in large numbers when the increasingly unpopular President Serge Sargsyan broke his promise by running for the office of prime minister after Armenia formally became a parliamentary republic in April 2018. Civil society actors played key roles in monitoring the protests and assisting participants, as well as providing legal aid.

Through civic disobedience, the Armenians toppled an authoritarian, corrupt regime and replaced it with leaders elected in fair and free elections.

The NHC has been supporting various actors in Armenian civil society over a decade, applying the same methodology as in all our democracy support programmes. We think that a country’s own citizens and civil society actors are the ones best suited to work for change, but we stand shoulder to shoulder with them.

“I observed the Norwegian parliamentary elections with the NHC in 2013, and it showed that elections are more about culture than about legal regulations,” says Vardine Grigoryan from our partner organisation the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Vanadzor. “This is the first time I do not have post-election depression after Armenian elections,” she smiles.

The changes in Armenia did not come out of the blue. Armenian grassroots activists and civil society actors have protested repeatedly since 2012, and have subsequently perfected social media strategies and protest tools.

They also realise that the work is far from over. The new regime must be held to their promises. They must ensure that the New Armenia becomes a better place for women and minorities of all kinds. Armenians must take responsibility as citizens and become active and contributing.

The NHC will definitely continue to support.



# Cautious optimism in Uzbekistan

Political prisoners have been released and the government wants to stop the use of child labour in the cotton industry.



Marius Fossum, NHC representative in Central Asia.

Since the 2016 death of long-time president Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan’s new leadership has initiated reforms to improve the country’s human rights record. They have released more than 35 political prisoners since current president Shavkhat Mirziyoev came to power, and taken steps to combat forced labour, while some government officials have been prosecuted for committing gross violations of human rights, including torture.

“At the moment, human rights groups have a bit more room for manoeuvre, and international rights organisations have recently visited Uzbekistan for the first time in many years,” says Marius Fossum, NHC representative in Central Asia.

As a result of these changes, the NHC stepped up its involvement, conducting two trips to the country to discuss ongoing reforms with high-level officials and participate in the Asian Forum on Human Rights.

“We continuously monitor developments in the country, carry out advocacy, highlight and draw international attention to rights violations and provide direct support to civil society groups and human rights activists,” says Fossum.

“It is great to see that years of work to document and spotlight grave violations in Uzbekistan, in conjunction with our local and international partners, have borne fruit,” says NHC Secretary General Bjørn Engesland.

Strikingly, in 2018 ten government officials were sentenced to between 14 and 18 years in prison for their complicity in the torture and death of whistle-blower Ilkhom Ibodov back in 2015.

As one of the NHC’s partners pointed out: “None of these cases would have found themselves on the desk of the current political leadership without the human rights community endlessly bringing them up. Were it not for the untiring work of human rights groups, these political prisoners would still be languishing in prison.”

Progress in Uzbekistan in 2018 showed that steadfast human rights work brings results. Uzbekistan, although still authoritarian and with a long way yet to go, is making small steps in the right direction.

“It is now important that the government continues the reforms. We want to contribute to that happening,” concludes Engesland.



NHC made its first official visit to Uzbekistan in years.

# Building a stronger European Civil Society

Looking for a European partner? We’ll match you!

The NHC acts as a contact point for Norwegian organisations seeking cooperation under the EEA Grants’ Active Citizens Fund. 15 countries have been recipients of EEA grants, with EUR 200 million earmarked for the development of independent civil societies.

“These grants are a recognition of the civil sector’s role as a necessary building block of democratic governance, human rights and social cohesion in Europe,” says Senior Adviser Csilla Czibalmos.

The grants have resulted in over 200 projects in cooperation with Norwegian partners. One such is Changemaker, which successfully carried out a project with a Polish partner.

“For Changemaker, such bilateral partnerships give us new perspectives on our work and at the same time spread our areas of work and expertise to other organisations. It was therefore an exciting opportunity for us to cooperate with the Polish organisation Centrum CSR,” says Changemaker’s leader Embla Regine Mathisen.

Emphasis is given to building the capacity of the civil society sector to promote inclusion, democracy and active participation. To facilitate contact with Norwegian organisations in 2018, we redesigned the Active Citizens Fund’s website and created a new database for organisations to register and find partners.

The grants are important, because human rights and democratic values are increasingly being held in contempt throughout the world. We observe such negative tendencies among countries in the EU as well.

“We still have a fresh memory of the government-initiated attacks that the previous Active Citizens Fund operator in Hungary was subjected to in 2014. It was followed by smear campaigns and the delegitimisation of all human rights organisations, which is still ongoing,” Czibalmos says.

In 2018, we witnessed the introduction of a law criminalising organisations and members of organisations that provide support for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in Hungary.

“Human rights defenders and defenders of liberal democratic values run an increasingly high risk for the work that they carry out. That is why support for civil society organisations is more important than ever before,” says Czibalmos.



Csilla Czibalmos, Senior Adviser on Active Citizens Fund.



Embla Regine Mathisen, Leader of Changemaker.

## Our role

The NHC has been commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be a contact point for the Active Citizens Fund.





19 students from Drammen Upper Secondary School visiting Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. They went with the NHC to Bosnia and Serbia to learn about war, peace and reconciliation.

Chapter 3 – Education for democracy

“Regardless of their future profession, these young people will contribute positively to peace and reconciliation.”

Building bridges between Norway and the Balkans



# Inspiring young human rights defenders

19 young people searching for peace and reconciliation in the war-torn Balkans.



Enver Djuliman,  
Senior Adviser on Education.

“I have family from Yugoslavia, who are Bosniaks, and I have heard their story of the war. Now I want to hear the Serbs’ side and find out how religion is influencing these countries,” says Ilma Hodizic (17).

She is one of 19 students from Drammen Upper Secondary School who are traveling with the NHC on a study trip to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, to learn about a war that took place ten years before they were born.

The crowded bus full of teenagers is moving between mountains, rivers and fields in the picturesque Bosnian countryside. They are leaving Sarajevo behind, and are now headed for the place known for the only genocide in Europe’s post-war history, Srebrenica.

20 years after the massacre, some Bosniaks are still waiting to properly bury their loved ones. The woman who is greeting us in Srebrenica is one of them.

Around 8,000 Bosniaks lost their lives around this area in July 1995. Most of the victims were men and boys.

“I personally didn’t know much about this war. It’s not something we’ve been talking about in school. Something I think is a bit strange, because these are countries that are so close to us,” says Ingeborg Bjerknes (18).

She is surprised by the cruelty that took place during the war and thinks the trip is important for meeting people who were involved in the conflict.

The NHC has been working with human rights education for more than 20 years. Enver Djuliman heads the work; focusing on peace and reconciliation.

“The goal is that, regardless of their future profession, these young people will contribute positively to peace and reconciliation. Either in the Western Balkans or in other conflict regions,” he says.

Djuliman had to flee his home in Mostar when the war in Bosnia broke out. He thinks it is important that the students experience the Western Balkans with their own eyes.

“In this way we build bridges between Norway and the region, and between the people who had to flee and those living in the Balkans today.”

**The Srebrenica genocide**  
In July 1995, more than 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were killed in and around the town of Srebrenica. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) concluded that the killings amounted to genocide.

# Russian Election Night

Celebrating a new young and fearless generation emerging in Russia.

After the presidential elections of 18 March 2018, Vladimir Putin could start his 18th year as leader of Russia. This means there is a whole generation of young people who have never experienced a life without Putin in charge. What is it like to be young and politically active in today’s Russia?

One of these young people is Lisa Liubavina, and she has the answer. She is active in the independent political movement Vesna in St Petersburg.

“Young people have what it takes to create change in Russia. We are not as afraid as the older generation. Growing up with the Soviet system taught them to keep silent and stay out of trouble. We young people have the muscles to fight corruption, injustice and lies,” she says.

Surrounded by over 500 Norwegian youngsters spread over two floors at Kulturhuset in Oslo on the ‘Russian Election Night’ she talks about the importance of dialogue and solidarity to foster change.

Another young political activist who shares her view is Viktor Vorobev. He is a supporter of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and is connected to Yabloko, one of Russia’s oldest parties.

“Human rights do not have borders, they go beyond that. We can support each other and show solidarity as a civil rights movement across borders,” Vorobev says.

It is getting crowded at Kulturhuset in Oslo, as the results from the elections tick in. Some are knitting politically motivated words on wrist warmers in the knitting corner, some are writing letters to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex refugees, and others are enjoying a warming bowl of borscht while listening to the young political activists.

“We see a growing civil society in Russia, where people are protesting and contesting threats and the risk of being arrested. They are organising, developing new networks and demanding their freedom of speech. A new political culture is evolving in Russia, with an understanding of and desire for individual rights,” says Inna Sangadzhieva, Senior Adviser on Russia and Belarus.

She thinks Navalny’s popularity comes from the increase in more critical voices in Russia, and that this poses a real threat to the Putin’s regime’s ability to manipulate and win future elections.



Lisa Liubavina, from the political movement Vesna.



Viktor Vorobev, Russian political activist.

**Organisations involved:**  
Amnesty International Norway, Agenda, FRI, Queer World, Bellona, Nature and Youth and Friends of the Earth Norway

# Shedding light on Europe’s black holes

Sharing experiences in memory of Anna Politkovskaya



Simon Ostrovsky, Investigative Editor with Coda Story.



Inna Sangadzhieva, Senior Adviser on Russia.

“No reporter should ever be detained for simply doing her or his job,” says journalist Simon Ostrovsky.

He is speaking about his colleague, the journalist Stanislav Aseyev, who has been held captive in Donetsk, East Ukraine, for two years. Ostrovsky himself spent three days in captivity in the Donetsk region in 2014.

“That is why I know we have to urgently get the word out about his situation and secure his release as soon as possible,” Ostrovsky says. He was one of those who signed a letter calling for Aseyev’s release that garnered much international attention.

Ostrovsky was one of 30 journalists, human rights activists and lawyers carefully selected from the NHC’s extensive network who shared their experiences and planned joint actions at the NHC 2018 Anna Politkovskaya Conference. The participants found common ground in their work for human rights in disputed territories.

“In the former Soviet Union there are several unresolved conflicts that enable human rights violations to continue with impunity because the international community is preoccupied with geopolitical concerns,” says Inna Sangadzhieva, Senior Adviser on Russia and Belarus.

The disputed territories are difficult to access from the outside and report on from the inside. Nevertheless, activists, lawyers and journalists uncover violations, defend victims and disseminate information at great personal risk.

“The three-part cooperation model we promote allows journalists, lawyers and human rights activists to pool their respective skills and resources for mutual benefit,” says Sangadzhieva.

Sharing knowledge and experience is fundamental for much of our work. Over many years, we have developed great working relations with Norwegian prison authorities as well as activists who monitor prisons in their home countries. In January, 10 independent prison observers from Russia visited Norwegian prisons.

Although in many ways Norway’s prisons are in another category to those in our partners’ home countries, there is a lot to learn for all parties involved.

“In Russia there is a completely different system. Those who work in Russian prisons have a completely different perception of what is important and what is not. Security is more important than anything else, even human rights,” says Anastasia Garina, head of the Committee Against Torture in Moscow.



Liv Hernæs Kvanvig, Coordinator of the IPPFoRB.



Kasthuri Patto, Member of Parliament, Malaysia, at the first IPPFoRB Academy in Oxford

# Knowledge is power

With the aim of building knowledge on freedom of religion or belief, IPPFoRB held its first Academy for Parliamentarians this year.

“We noticed that there is a lack of understanding about Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights amongst relevant actors. This prompted the idea of having an Academy for Parliamentarians,” says Baroness Elizabeth Berridge, who sits in the UK’s House of Lords and is a member of The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) Steering Committee.

With the aim of counteracting increasing global restrictions on religious practices and belief, 13 parliamentarians from around the world came together in the British university city of Oxford in September, to learn and to discuss the challenging topic of freedom of religion or belief.

For these parliamentarians, educating themselves about this fundamental human right is the first step in the right direction.

“I am very excited about the Academy! I look forward to interacting with other parliamentarians from around the world, sharing best practices and discussing the challenges that can arise in connection with freedom of religion or belief,” says Kosovo MP Saranda Bogujevci.

Drawing on leading academics and experts such as Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the three-day intensive course consists of lectures, case studies and group work, with a focus on building foundational knowledge about freedom of religion or belief. There is also an emphasis on building bridges between freedom of religion or belief and other human rights.

“The purpose of this Academy is to equip parliamentarians with specific tools, knowledge and contacts, enabling them to develop action-oriented responses to violations of freedom of religion or belief in their region and globally,” adds Liv Hernæs Kvanvig, Coordinator of the IPPFoRB for the NHC.

Mohammedali Yaseen Taha, a member of Iraq’s parliament, says: “I cannot wait to head back home and apply my newly obtained knowledge.”

With a smile, Kasthuri Patto, a member of Malaysia’s parliament, adds: “I realise I cannot do everything, but I must not do nothing.”

Since the Academy, Patto has raised her voice in the Malaysian parliament calling for no one to be excluded and no voice suppressed, so everyone may practise their faith in peace.





Activist in Berlin dressed in a rainbow flag demonstrating against arrests in Chechnya.  
Photo: AFP Photo / John MacDougall

Chapter 4 – Challenging international institutions

“My brother got down on his knees next to me and gave the gun to me... he started crying. I swear he was crying as he said: “I promised our father that I wouldn’t kill you. I beg you, shoot yourself, just shoot yourself.” ”

Statement from a lesbian woman in Chechnya

# Paving way for the stories of survivors

No international report or resolution can speak for a survivor or a victim, but we can make sure their voices are included.



Mina Skouen, Senior Adviser on LGBTI.

“They took me to the forest and sat me down next to a large tree. They tied my hands and put a grenade in my hands. They said that when I got tired and dropped the grenade, I would blow myself up. I sat there for two hours. I cried a lot, begged higher powers to forgive me for my sins. I thought I was going to die.”

“My parents pierced the skin on my back with needles and made small cuts on my arms and legs. They took something like a vacuum to get the blood out. After that, they filled a bathtub with very salty water, and I had to lie there.”

These are quotes from women interviewed in the report Violence against lesbian, bisexual and transgender women in the North Caucasus region of the Russian Federation by the Queer Women of North Caucasus project. The report is one of the first of its kind, revealing living conditions for women in a region that has gained notoriety over the past two years for its persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

In 2017, the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta broke the news of massive human rights violations against hundreds of LGBT people in Chechnya. Since then, the crisis has received wide international attention, from both state and non-state actors.

One significant response in 2018 came on 1 November, when Norway and fifteen other OSCE states invoked the Moscow Mechanism with respect to Russia. This rarely used mechanism allows participating states to nominate an independent expert to investigate and report on human rights violations in another participating state.

“What has been striking is the way the voices of the victims and survivors sound loud and clear through the legalese in which international reports and resolutions are written,” says Mina Skouen, Senior Adviser on LGBTIQ issues.

Access to international advocacy channels is very often closed to those who need them most. This is a very clear strategy from repressive regimes: Cut them off, claim they do not exist.

“The fact that the survivors and victims’ stories are so well reflected in for example the Moscow Mechanism report nevertheless shows that the distance can be overcome, and the victims’ voices can reach the institutions. In this way, their voices are surfacing in arenas where it would not be safe to show their faces. Some of them are not even alive to tell. But their stories are there, finding advocates and allies ready to voice their opinion,” says Skouen.

The NHC, and many others, made extensive efforts to assist the independent Moscow Mechanism expert with up-to-date and well documented information about what victims and survivors have experienced. In this way we support LGBT rights defenders as they challenge international institutions to put mass persecution on the international agenda and increase pressure on national authorities.

## Moscow Mechanism

The Moscow Mechanism had only been invoked seven times before. Russia considered the process *biased, outdated and redundant* and refused to cooperate. Coordinated assistance from other actors in providing evidence was therefore crucial.



Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal, Deputy Secretary General.

# Strengthening justice in Georgia and worldwide

Without high level of professional integrity, international justice may become elusive for victims, as enemies of justice get the upper-hand.

In a series of reports, the NHC documented that, in the aftermath of the 2008 war, there had been no genuine investigation by Georgia or Russia of war crimes; a pre-condition for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to launch an investigation. Finally, in January 2016 the ICC decided to investigate.

“The most widespread crimes were conducted by Russian-backed South Ossetian irregulars, who conducted ethnic cleansing of Georgians living in South Ossetia, as documented by the NHC and partners. Thousands of displaced people still live in settlements built by the Georgian government,” says the NHC’s Deputy Secretary General Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal.

In 2018, the NHC continued to provide relevant information to the ICC investigation and support civil society actions for victims inside Georgia. So far, however, the investigation has not resulted in any indictments.

“There has been growing concern in recent years that the ICC has failed in several cases to get indicted individuals arrested. Even more troubling, in several cases where those indicted were brought to trial, the ICC Prosecutor failed to present sufficient evidence for conviction,” says Ekeløve-Slydal. Media revelations and expert criticism in 2017–2018 about misconduct within the Office of the Prosecutor further undermined trust in its effective functioning.

In an unprecedented move in March 2018, the NHC sent an open letter to ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, challenging her to commission an external inquiry into alleged misconduct within her office, as well as improper relationships with the first prosecutor, Moreno-Ocampo. “We argued that the serious allegations could threaten the credibility of the ICC if not investigated fully,” says Ekeløve-Slydal.

In her response letter, the Prosecutor outlined comprehensive measures taken to improve the functioning of her office, and concluded that a broad inquiry was unnecessary.

The NHC letter attracted considerable attention among ICC member states and in international media. Integrity issues within international institutions now attracts more scrutiny; the NHC contributing significantly.

“The ICC’s professional integrity is of paramount importance for its success in bringing justice to victims in Georgia as well as in other demanding situations,” says Ekeløve-Slydal.

## Integrity in justice

The NHC succeeded in placing integrity issues at the ICC Office of the Prosecutor on the international agenda. In a detailed answer to NHC concerns, Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda outlined measures taken to improve professionalism at her office. Deputy Secretary General Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal spoke at an international conference in the Hague Peace Palace on integrity issues relating to international criminal justice.



This is what  
you have  
supported  
in 2018

- Campaigning for the release of, and providing legal aid to, leading human rights defender **Oyub Titiev**, who has been imprisoned without cause in Chechnya.
- Reuniting 10-year-old **Fatima Davlyatova** with her mother **Shabnam Khudoydodova**, after a politically motivated travel ban on the independent activist and her family.
- Evacuation, legal aid and medical assistance for **LGBT people from Chechnya**.
- The release of journalist **Muhammad Bekjon**. In 2018, after 18 years in prison in Uzbekistan, he was finally reunited with his family in the USA.
- Releasing Tajik football player **Parviz Tursunov** from Belarus prison. He had been held on false extremism charges after refusing to shave off his beard.
- The release of Tajik political prisoners **Khayrullo Mirsaidov** and **Shukhrat Kudratov** after wide-ranging international pressure.
- Release of opposition leader **Ilgar Mammadov**, who spent more than five years in prison on baseless and politically motivated charges in Azerbaijan.
- Campaigning to free Ukrainian filmmaker and Council of Europe award-winner, **Oleg Sentsov**.

Support us!

Help us make the list longer! By supporting the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, you are helping to free political prisoners, giving aid to human rights defenders who are in danger and strengthening activists who are standing up to authoritarian regimes in their home countries. You are also ensuring human rights are taken seriously in Norway.

Support us by:

- 1) Becoming a member at our website [www.nhc.no](http://www.nhc.no),
- 2) Donating to our donation account at **5081 05 58927**  
... or VIPPS NOK 100, 300 or 500 to **20935**



International campaign for the release of filmmaker **Oleg Sentsov**.

In 2011, Parviz Tursunov was allegedly banned from playing football because of his beard.  
Photo: Radio Ozodi, Tajik service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty



**Oyub Titiev** was arrested in January on trumped-up charges.



**Fatima davlyatova** (10) was prevented from leaving Tajikistan to reunite with her activist mother.



# Meet our partners

This annual report would have contained many blank pages without the work of more than 140 partners from Vladivostok to Budapest. Here is your chance to get to get to know some of them.



A Truth Hounds expert inspects a house destroyed by shelling in Zajtsjevo, a village in Donetsk oblast, 2018.

## Collecting evidence of war crimes

In September 2014, shortly after Crimea was annexed by the Russian Federation and military conflict broke out in Eastern Ukraine, *Truth Hounds* organised its first field mission to collect evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Since then, they have travelled 156,000 km, visiting over 60 towns and villages along the contact line in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea, collecting more than 1,000 witness statements.

“We document war crimes, irrespective of the side that commits them,” says Svitlana Valko, the Founder of Truth Hounds. “Atrocities have no nationality.”

The NHC has supported and participated in these fact-finding missions. In 2017, cooperation was extended to creating a war-crimes database and exploring possibilities to provide documentation for Magnitsky sanctions against perpetrators.

Valko explains why it is crucial to have a network of international partners: “To fight impunity and promote accountability, we should cooperate not only with courts, but also with a wide audience outside of war zones. International justice is a slow, ponderous and unwieldy process. With the help of international partners like the NHC, we are trying to use all possible tools to fight impunity worldwide.”



Agzam Turgunov works to protect the rights of political prisoners.

## Protecting the rights of political prisoners in Uzbekistan

“We never believed we would ever get out of prison alive,” says Agzam Turgunov, “but we swore that if one day we were free, we would dedicate our efforts to help other political prisoners.”

The NHC is proud to call Agzam Turgunov and Dilmurod Sayidov partners. The two former political prisoners were released after the death of president Islam Karimov in September 2016. They now work to protect and promote the rights of those who remain political prisoners.



Charles Santiago, APHR Chair

## Building religious freedom in Southeast Asia

Late 2017 saw IPPFoRB’s first collaboration with ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) in Bangkok. Southeast Asian parliamentarians and civil society actors came together to discuss tactics for protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the region.

“IPPFoRB has been APHR’s prominent partner and has provided expertise and resources to assist APHR in its efforts to combat intolerance and challenges to FoRB in the region,” says Charles Santiago, who chairs the APHR.

Home to several religious and faith-based communities, Southeast Asia is one of the most religiously diverse regions in the world. “While this is an advantage for us, it also means is room for politicisation and the abuse of religious freedom,” he adds.

After a successful initial collaboration, IPPFoRB and APHR have continued their partnership in Southeast Asia by further developing the already established *Southeast Asia Parliamentary Working Group on FoRB* and planning to support the Working Group through capacity-building, training and knowledge development activities.

Both APHR and IPPFoRB have a similar mandate in the context of FoRB – to enable parliamentarians to protect FoRB. “Our collaboration is key to enhancing political leadership in the context of FoRB in this region,” adds Santiago.

Greetings  
from the  
board



2018 was another year in which the board could be proud of the great work done by the dedicated staff of the NHC, making a difference for many human rights activists under increasingly challenging circumstances and being a strong voice nationally and internationally for human rights.

With generous support from the Norwegian law firm Wikborg Rein, we are also proud to have established the Norwegian Helsinki Committee Emergency Fund to support brave human rights defenders who stand up to authoritarian attacks on democracy. The Emergency Fund enables us to offer legal, medical or humanitarian support, or send our experts out at short notice to document human rights crisis situations.

During our 40th anniversary celebrations, some of our international guests wanted to see a Norwegian gaol, so we took them to Oslo Prison. One of our guests was Oyub Titiev, the head of the Grozny office of the Russian Human Rights Centre Memorial. We toured the whole facility from top to bottom. Little did we know then that less than two months later, on 9 January 2018, Oyub himself would be arrested in Chechnya on trumped-up drug charges.

The NHC has participated actively in the international campaign to free Oyub, and thanks to our Emergency Fund we have been able to make a considerable contribution to his defence, so that he can have good legal representation.

Ragnhild Astrup Tschudi  
Chair of The Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Support the  
Emergency  
Fund

Urgent situations call for urgent response. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee Emergency Fund provides immediate assistance to human rights defenders at risk.

Every day we see situations where people are in imminent danger. With the help of the Emergency Fund, we document abuse, support evacuation and cover legal assistance and medical aid.

We are looking for individuals, companies and organisations who are ready to support human rights defenders working at the frontline. Donate to our donation account at 5081 05 58927 or VIPPS NOK 100, 300 or 500 to 20935. You may also contact us at [nhc@nhc.no](mailto:nhc@nhc.no).


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), the Open Society Foundation (OSF), and the OAK Foundation. Membership fees and private donations are important additional sources of income.


Finances

The NHC’s total income in 2018 was NOK 46.1 million, out of which project support for partners constituted NOK 25.8 million. Donations amounted to NOK 100,000.


The staff




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**Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal,**  
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**Fernanda Zubillaga Nilsen,**  
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**Øystein Solvang,**  
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observation (on leave  
from August 2017)


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Senior Adviser, based in  
Geneva. UN-related issues  
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**Marius Fossum,**  
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**Inna Sangadzhieva,**  
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**Aage Borchgrevink,**  
Senior Adviser, Georgia,  
North Caucasus and  
International Justice



**Valentina Kazachevskaya,**  
Project Adviser at the  
NHC representative office  
in Central Asia (Almaty)



**Mine Yildirim,**  
Head of the Freedom of  
Belief Initiative, Turkey

Organisation

The annual meeting is the NHC's highest decision-making body and consists of members of the council and the board. The board holds six meetings a year, taking decisions on NHC strategy, principles and financial matters. The Secretary General heads the secretariat and is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the NHC.

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