

Annual Report

2019

19



Norwegian
Helsinki Committee



Content

- Page 4 Reflections from Secretary General
- Page 6 This is us
- Page 7 Our story
- Page 8 Countering democratic setbacks in Europe
- Page 10 Measuring a decade of human rights
- Page 12 Europe, as seen from the barricades
- Page 14 An important tool in armed conflict
- Page 16 Global efforts to combat threats to freedom
of religion or belief
- Page 18 Between democratic openings and repression
- Page 20 Greetings from the board
- Page 21 Economy
- Page 22 The staff
- Page 23 Organisation



Thousands of Poles took part in demonstrations against Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS) in 2019, and in support for the embattled judiciary.
Photo: Kylli Kittus

“We can be the difference between new European dictatorships and survival of democracy in Europe”

Bjørn Engesland, Secretary General

Reflections from Secretary General

The heroes of Europe

Civil society in Europe needs stronger support from us than in many years.



It was a proud moment when two high-profile Norwegian politicians, Jonas Gahr Støre, leader of the Labour party and Ine Marie Eriksen Søreide, Minister of Foreign Affairs, congratulated the Hungarian Helsinki Committee on winning the Andrei Sakharov Freedom Award 2019. The award was, as they both said, a clear recognition of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee's achievements and dedicated efforts to promote human rights, democracy and rule of law.

Mr. Støre also said that he used to say that the existence of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee makes him sleep well at night, because he knows that competent people are on watch if something bad happens out there in the world. «Now I also know that the Hungarian Helsinki Committee will make me sleep better at night here in Norway, because they work for a safer world with their strong fight for democracy and human rights in Hungary», the former Minister of Foreign Affairs said during the award ceremony in November 2019.

I think these words illustrate something important after all we experienced in 2019, that civil society in Europe is the bulwark against the authoritarian developments happening in the heart of Europe.

This may not be the most comfortable message for each and one of us, but I think it's the right one: We can do a lot to change the situation. We can be the difference between new European dictatorships and survival of democracy in Europe. We – the civil society and the states – can fight authoritarianism.

The changed situation requires a changed strategy from countries like Norway. One of the most important things Norway and other stable democracies can do is to support the civil society heroes in European countries where democracy and human rights are under attack, like in Poland and Hungary.

We hope that 2020 and the coming years will show us that Norway and other countries seized the opportunity to change the downward developments in Europe, by supporting European heroes like Márta Pardavi and András Kádár in the Hungarian Helsinki Committee. They are two admirable representatives of the movement against authoritarian developments in Europe today. They are the real European heroes.

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





The NHC is in a special position to evaluate and follow up the developments in several countries in Central and Eastern Europe through its role as contact point for bilateral relations under the Active Citizens Fund. Photo: Aurora Hannisdal

Central Europe Section:

Countering democratic setbacks in Europe



Csilla Czibalmos,
Head of Central Europe
Section

The new democratic setbacks are challenging Europe by its heart. In 2019 NHC had to strengthen its focus on Central Europe.

– It is not a shock anymore that democracy is in decline in many parts of the world where we are present. But it is still seen with disbelief that European countries backtrack and dismantle democracy in places where we thought the battle was won, says Csilla Czibalmos, Head of Department for Central and Eastern Europe.

That is why raising awareness about the situation in Europe in general and in Hungary and Poland in particular, has been the main objective in 2019. The NHC is in a special position to evaluate and follow up the developments in several countries in Central and Eastern Europe through its role as contact point for bilateral relations under the EEA Grants' Active Citizens Fund.

– This means that we are in position not only to highlight the challenges, difficulties and drawbacks in these countries, but we can also point out and contribute to positive developments through the facilitated bilateral partnerships between Norwegian organizations and the ones from the beneficiary countries supported by the Active Citizens Fund, says Czibalmos.

38 partnerships have been established so far between Norwegian entities and organizations from Bulgaria, Slovakia, Greece, Estonia and Portugal. But these partnerships under the Active Citizens Fund are only one way in which we have raised awareness about the challenges surrounding us. We have also attended and organized events that shed light on the democratic deficit we experience, on the shrinking space for civil society, on disrespect for the rule of law and the dangers of populism and hate speech in our societies.

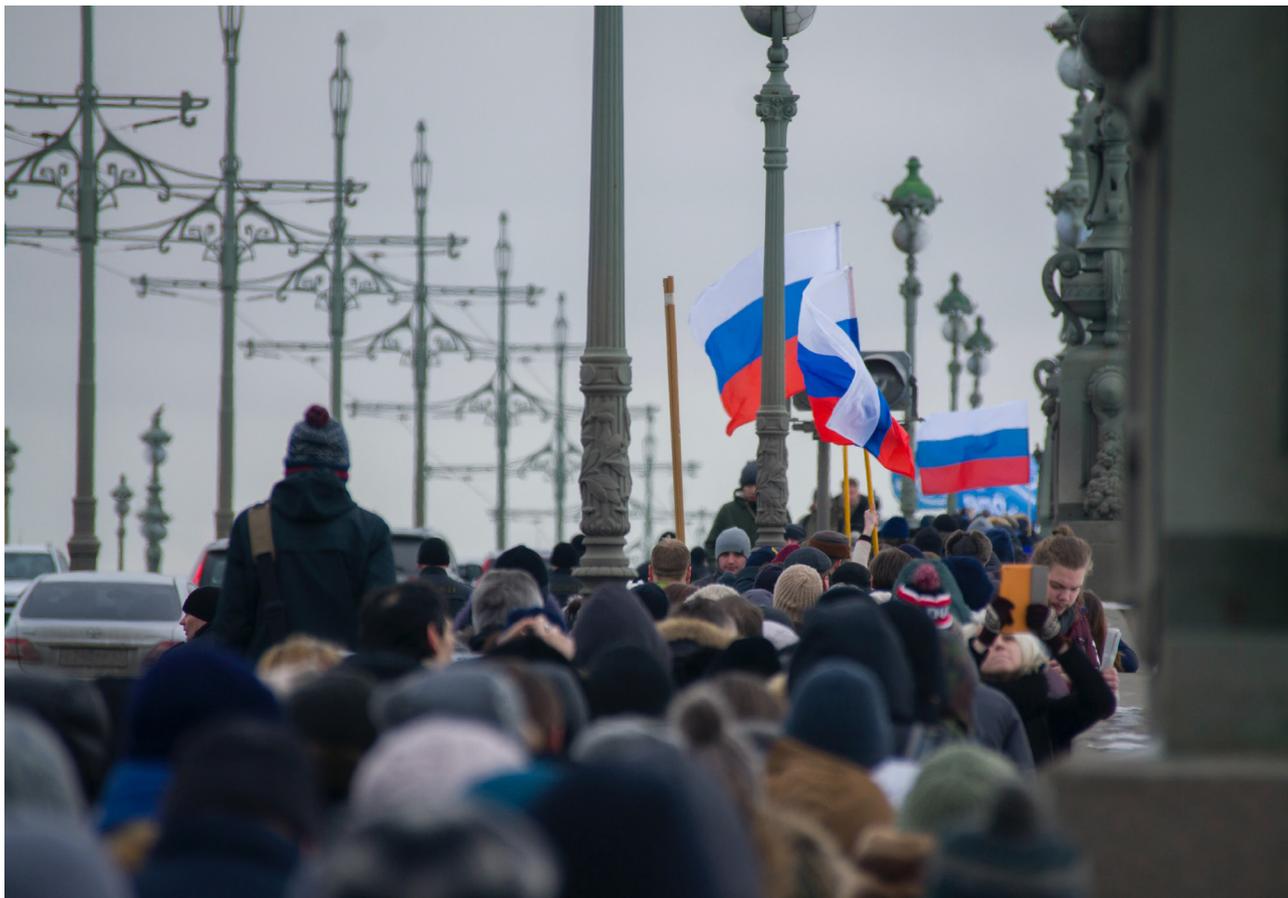
The Active Citizens Days event was of significance.

– It brought together organizations and practicing experts in civic and human rights education from 10 countries, Norway included, for a one and a half day-long event, says Czibalmos.

Over 60 participants engaged in discussions on the role of civic education for the rule of law, inclusive societies, civic engagement and populism.

Of equal significance has been the informal Helsinki seminar that gathered 9 sister Helsinki Committees from across Europe in a first attempt to define a baseline for further cooperation.

– Discussing the recent developments concerning threats to human rights activists, the shrinking space for civil society organizations, attacks on the rule of law in several European countries has only reinforced the need for more cooperation and synergy-building among likeminded organizations, says Czibalmos.



In 2019 the protests against Putin's regime in Russia continued to grow. Photo was taken on Trinity Bridge in Saint Petersburg. Photo: Kirill Zjarkoj

Russia Section:

Measuring a decade of human rights



Inna Sangadzhieva,
Head of Russia Section

Ten years since Natalia Estemirova was brutally murdered in Chechnya and since Sergei Magnitsky died in prison, 2019 marked an important year in our continued focus on human rights in Russia.

– Since none of the responsible persons behind the orders of these awful crimes were convicted, the documentation of the grave human rights abuses and demand for proper investigation of them, remained to be the priority of NHC’s work, says Inna Sangadzhieva, head of the Russia Section.

2019 also marked the year where our advocacy towards the Norwegian Government to adopt Global Magnitsky Mechanisms, succeeded and became a part of Norwegian foreign policy.

In 2019, NHC presented two reports related to our work on Russia. The first, [Lost in Russia](#), presented in Kirkenes in February, concerned the refugee crises in Storskog in 2015. In the report we criticized the Norwegian government for rushing with the law-amendments, which limited the right to seek asylum. «The Norwegian authorities considered Russia as a safe third country, assuming that the Russian asylum system is well functioning, which is totally wrong», says Sangadzhieva.

Most of the refugees from Russia in Norway come from Chechnya, a republic in North Caucasus, where the human rights situation remains alarming. Despite this, our colleague Oyub Titiev, the head of Memorial Human Rights Centre in Grozny, was released in June 2019 after having spent almost 1,5 years in custody.

– We see how falsification of cases against critics of the regime has become a new norm in Russian courts, says Sangadzhieva.

In September 2019 we launched a second report, focusing on the human rights situation in the so-called [Grey Zones](#) or non-recognized territories in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Ukraine. The report discusses the role of Russia, and international actors, as well as how to strengthen the status of neutral human rights work in the territories, including ways of bringing cases to the European Court of Human Rights and promoting universal jurisdiction cases.

In 2019, NHC hosted two delegations from Russia and other former Soviet Republics. The issues discussed during the visits included how Norway ensures respect for human rights within prisons and how authorities act to protect women’s rights and prevent gender-based violence.

– Dialogue with our Russian colleagues is crucial not only to develop a common understanding of the universality of human rights, but also to get a better look at the situation for human rights in our own country, notes Sangadzhieva.



The NHC has committed itself to being involved for a long time in the fight for equal access to human rights. Here from one of many demonstrations and events in Oslo. Photo: NHC

Equal Rights Section:

Europe, as seen from the barricades



Mina Wikshåland Skouen,
Head of Equal Rights
Section

2019 has been a year where we have shed light on not only human rights challenges, but also on the people fighting to change the situation.

– While we see that women, LGBTI persons and other groups exposed to discrimination are facing increased pressure, we have reinforced our engagement to combat this, says Mina Wikshåland Skouen, Head of NHC’s Equal Rights Section.

Our partners counter violence perpetrated by far-right extremist groups by establishing LGBTI support groups in Ukrainian regions, they train public officials in North Macedonia to combat heavy discrimination of LGBTI persons in the public sector, and produce educational materials so that universities in Georgia have high quality materials to teach gender and LGBTI issues.

– [2019 is considered to be the first year](#) in a decade where there are more backlashes than victories for the LGBTI community in Europe, but we also see our partners become tougher, braver and bolder, says Skouen.

In Oslo we even managed to bring voices of Chechen lesbian women to the stage at Pride House, at an event entitled “From Chechnya with love”.

Through our campaign [12 women on the barricades](#) we told the stories of 12 brave women human rights defenders to inspire interest for the most pressing human rights challenges women are facing in Europe today. A main product of the campaign was a calendar made up of these stories, made in collaboration with the Norwegian feminist illustrator Jenny Jordahl.

– 2020 will be the year when hundreds of people have the calendar and these 12 amazing human rights defenders as a daily inspiration in their homes and offices, says Skouen.

The women presented in this calendar are those fighting for victims of gender-based violence, such as the Chechen human rights lawyer Malika Abubakarova, or those fighting for dignity among Europe’s most vulnerable communities, such as Turkish LGBT activist Hande Kader who was murdered in 2016, or those fighting for democracy, such as Gohar Shahnazaryan from Armenia or Marta Pardavi from Hungary. Many of the women in this calendar, as well as other activists, gathered in Oslo for the annual Anna Politkovskaya seminar in October.

As of 2020, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee also has its own section focusing on those that are particularly exposed to human rights violations and discrimination.

– By establishing an Equal Rights Section, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee has committed to being involved for a long time in the fight for equal access to human rights regardless of the gender you have and who you love, Skouen concludes.



Ten years after she was killed, the Documentation Center named after Natalia Estemirova is developing cutting edge software and databases which have identified almost 70 000 profiles of victims of human rights abuses.
Photo: Reuters

Documentation Section:

An important tool in armed conflict



Aage Borchgrevink, Head of
Documentation Section

A core task of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee is to promote accountability and to preserve a factual record of historical events. In 2019 the Natalia Estemirova Documentation Center made ground-breaking progress.

In 2019 NHC's Natalia Estemirova Documentation Center (NEDC) was the world's largest digital archive of human rights documentation (with more than one million individual documents) about armed conflicts and international crimes in Chechnya and the North Caucasus.

Using and developing cutting edge software and databases, the analysts working at the Center have identified almost 70 000 profiles of victims of human rights abuses, among these are almost 6000 victims of enforced disappearances and almost 7000 civilians who were killed.

In 2019 the Center started sharing information with the public in Russian and English on its website (www.nedc-nhc.org). The website contains audio materials – stories told by victims or their family members – in addition to videos and descriptions of the gravest and most widespread violations. There are a number of search options.

– It is our hope that the NEDC website will be used by the general public, especially in Russia, as a source of information, says Aage Borchgrevink, Head of NHC's Section for Documentation.

The Center's first report "Justice denied in the North Caucasus" (to be published in 2020) contains information about emblematic cases of abductions, killings, disappearances and torture, including the case of our colleague Natalia Estemirova, who was killed in 2009. The report lists the reactions of the national investigative and prosecutorial authorities, examples, unfortunately, of systematic impunity. Several new reports on topics such as torture and enforced disappearances will soon be available at the website.

The experience of the Center was key when the NHC together with our German partner, the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), in November 2019 supported Syrian plaintiffs residing in Norway to hand in a complaint to the Norwegian police (Kripos) against 17 high-ranking Syrian officials for their role in torture and killings in Syria.

Norway can investigate these crimes due to universal jurisdiction, i.e. the principle that core international crimes can be prosecuted in other jurisdictions than where they occurred. The Center's fact-finding methodology and its tools for legal analysis were employed in the processing of interviews with Syrian victims, a number of whom lives in Norway.

– The Syrian case shows how the Center can be an important tool in other armed conflicts, says Borchgrevink.



2019 was the year where we brought together 120 parliamentarians, experts, ambassadors, observers and other relevant stakeholders in Singapore to highlight this fundamental human right on a global level.

Freedom of Religion or Belief Section:

Global efforts to combat threats to freedom of religion or belief



Liv H. Kvanvig, Head of
FoRB Section and
Director of IPPFoRB

It has been a year of moving beyond words and taking bold steps in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

Joined by 61 new parliamentarians from around the world, it has been quite a year for the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) who consistently strive to put the right to FoRB on the agenda of political leaders around the world.

We also have another victory to celebrate – 40% of the new members who joined the network are female parliamentarians. This gives hope for increased global female leadership in parliament, which stands at just about [one quarter](#) of the world's parliamentarians.

But the past year also calls us to become more united in the face of growing challenges.

– We witnessed the attacks on Christchurch in New Zealand, Sri Lanka and others. It is a reminder that we need widespread political commitment towards protecting and promoting this human right, says Liv H. Kvanvig, Director of IPPFoRB and Head of NHC's Section for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

In 2019, we organized an intensive training for 11 parliamentarians in Oxford, which helped build their knowledge on FoRB. We also organized consultations with parliamentarians in Ghana to map the challenges and opportunities to FoRB in West Africa. Together with a delegation of parliamentarians and our regional partner, we engaged in discussions with the new Malaysian government on improving the situation of religious minorities in the country.

IPPFoRB also supported the call by two parliamentarians for the immediate release of Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir, a Mauritanian prisoner of conscience who was sentenced to death for his writings on religion, caste and politics in Mauritania. He was released a few months later.

– 2019 was also the year when we brought together 120 parliamentarians, experts, ambassadors, observers and other relevant stakeholders in Singapore to highlight this fundamental human right on a global level, says Kvanvig.

One of the key outcomes of this high-level gathering was the launch of the [Singapore Declaration of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), which was adopted and signed by over 60 parliamentarians. It upheld and advanced six commitments, including abolishing blasphemy and apostasy laws, promoting respect for non-discrimination and non-coercion, and ensuring prohibition of racial or religious hatred.

– With threats to FoRB constantly evolving, our section is committed to building and supporting global political leadership in the parliamentarians' fight to protect the right to FoRB for everyone, everywhere.



Marius Fossum, NHC's Regional Representative in Central Asia, detained in Almaty, Kazakhstan while observing a protest in Almaty under the Presidential elections. Photo: Chris Rickelton

Eastern Europe and Central Asia Section:

Between democratic openings and repression



Lene Wetteland,
Head of Eastern Europe and
Central Asia Section

2019 ranged from the positive opening for cooperation in Uzbekistan to increased repression in other states.

– We see that our partners are facing threats from authorities or vigilante groups that use violence with impunity. This means that their work is considered more efficient and seen as a threat for those that benefit from human rights violations, says Lene Wetteland, Head of NHC’s Eastern Europe and Central Asia Section.

Protests took place as response to political developments in many of the cooperation countries, including Belarus, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. During large scale protests against restrictions on the right to assembly in Kazakhstan, our regional representative Marius Fossum was himself among the many thousands arrested by the police for exercising their fundamental rights.

– We continued our support to carefully selected civil society actors also in 2019. We see a clear increase in the level of interest for our analysis in the public, and we have also made achievements in terms of advocacy, says Wetteland.

Our close cooperation with partners in the programme countries combined with our advocacy work, has proven effective. For example, a number of political prisoners have been released in Azerbaijan following our advocacy efforts in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The NHC office in Kazakhstan presented an extensive report on torture and political repression in Tajikistan together with exiled activists.

We widened the network and cooperation between our partners through joint activities. In 2019 we initiated and published the joint report “Disputed Territories, Disputed Rights” on human rights in the grey zones of Eurasia. On the occasion of the 2019 local elections in Norway we invited 9 young activists to observe and learn about the Norwegian school elections and the activities of youth parties.

In Armenia, many of our long-term partners have taken up new roles with the new government after the April 2018 revolution and December 2018 parliamentary elections. Others decide to stay civil society activists.

– Both paths taken by civil society actors in Armenia illustrate well how long-term support to a wide representation of civil society actors makes them duly prepared to take important responsibilities when the opportunity rises, says Wetteland.

In a surprise turn, Uzbekistan has opened up its borders to international human rights activists, and regional representative Fossum has visited colleagues in Uzbekistan several times in order to assess how we best can assist the development of civil society activism.

– We are proud of standing together with our partners in fighting injustice and achieving results despite all, concludes Wetteland.

Greetings from the board



2019 was another year where human rights, democracy and pluralism was at stake, under assault and pressured even by leaders of democracies around the globe. In 2019 we could again proudly follow the important and even lifesaving work by the dedicated staff of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee.

It is obviously not every day we see concrete results of our human rights work. But that we did on June 21, 2019 when our friend Oyub Titiev was released from prison after about a year and five months in custody. He was the head of the Chechnya branch of the human rights organization Memorial and was jailed in January 2018 on trumped up charges of possession of marijuana and threatened with four years of “correctional labour”.

Then we saw what international cooperation can do to bring focus on human rights abuse, and we saw the significance of our Norwegian Helsinki Committee Emergency Fund, generously funded by the Norwegian law firm Wikborg Rein. Through the fund we have made a considerable contribution to the great legal team that made a critical difference defending Oyub.

The future will unfortunately most certainly bring more challenges in the field of human rights and democracy, but I am optimistic that the Norwegian Helsinki Committee is ready to take up the fight together with our partners both nationally and internationally.

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.

The NHC also thank the international law firm Wikborg Rein for the cooperation and support over the last years. More companies should follow the example of Wikborg Rein when it comes to social responsibility and support to human rights.

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 2019 was NOK 53.1 million, out of which project support for partners constituted NOK 32 million. Donations amounted to NOK 110,000.

The staff



Bjørn Engesland,
Secretary General



Fernanda Zubillaga Nilsen, Director of Office



Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal, Director of Policy



Marion Godager Tveter, Director of Programs



Emil André Erstad, Director of Communications



Aage Borchgrevink, Head of Documentation Section



Liv Hernæs Kvanvig Head of FoRB Section and Director of IPPForB



Mina Skouen, Head of Equal Rights Section



Csilla Czimbalmos, Head of Central Europe Section



Inna Sangadzhieva, Head of Russia Section



Lene Wetteland, Head of Eastern Europe and Central Asia Section



Aleksandra Sidorenko, Senior Adviser, Documentation Section



Ana Pashalishvili, Adviser, Documentation Section



Usam Baysaev, Adviser, Documentation Section



Marius Fossum, Representative in Central Asia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Section



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Olga Shamshur Flydal, Senior Adviser, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Section



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Communication Section



Astrid Lello Hald,
Adviser, Administration



Mine Yildirim
Head of Freedom of
Belief Initiative

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.



Berit Nising Lindeman,
Head of Eastern Europe
and Central Asia Section
(on leave from August
2017)

Board

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Human rights defender with a special
focus on Russia and Eastern Europe

Kari Schage
Management Consultant,
Resources Global
Professionals

Eirik Moen
Secretary General of the
International Democrat
Union

Vice-Chair: Julie Wilhelmsen
Senior research fellow, Norwegian
Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)

Inger Skjelsbæk
Research Professor at the
Peace Research Institute Oslo
(PRIO) and Professor at the
Centre for Gender Research,
University of Oslo

Kjetil Mujezinovic Larsen
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Public and International
Law, Faculty of Law,
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Inna Sangadzhieva
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