

Oslo and Geneva, 24 April 2017

Madam Annalisa Ciampi
United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to
freedom of association and peaceful assembly

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Congratulations on your appointment; Looking to future collaboration

Dear Special Rapporteur,

On behalf of the Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF) and all Human Rights Houses, we would like to warmly congratulate you on your appointment by the Human Rights Council to become the next United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF) protects, supports and empowers human rights defenders and their organisations. To accomplish this, HRHF brings organisations together in Human Rights Houses, and unites the Houses in an international network. HRHF advocates with partner organisations to promote the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, and the right to be a human rights defender – to ensure that individuals and organisations can work freely and openly to protect human rights at home and abroad.

Today, more than 100 independent human rights organisations work together in 16 Human Rights Houses. HRHF is based in Oslo, with an office in Geneva and representation in Brussels and Tbilisi. The Houses are located in Eastern & Western Europe, the Caucasus and the Balkans.

Over the last several years, systematic violations of freedom of assembly and of association have escalated in several of the countries where Human Rights Houses are established.

Today we face States advocating “traditional values” and “illiberal” democratic values, which in reality aim at raising their own cultural norms and particularities above international law and standards, hence undermining universal human rights as a principle. Such authorities promote an “authorisation based system,” as analysed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights in Belarus, Miklós Haraszti, with regulations that ban the use of public space, the participation in the public debate and the possibility to organise and associate, without authorisation.

An “illiberal democracy” or a country run by “traditional values” is a country in which the State or non-State actors can suppress dissenting views to protect their own interests. Limitations on the right to freedom of assembly, restrictions on the right to freedom of association and attacks on human rights defenders, all together, aim at limiting the peaceful expression of dissenting views. Limitations put on the right to exercise core freedoms aim at suppressing those who raise criticisms against authorities due to human rights violations, at silencing those who request changes in public policies which violate human rights obligations, and at stopping those who make human rights violations visible abroad.

The limitation of access to foreign funding for human rights defenders constitutes one of the key ways by which States retaliate against human rights defenders and their organisations. The “foreign agents” legislation in the Russian Federation has become a model for many States in the world. Though the states establishing such limitations justify such restrictions by the need for transparency and accountability of NGOs, we see it as governments’ control of political activities in the country and lack of acceptance of the role and work of human rights defenders. Recent developments in Hungary are of particular concern in this regard.

In addition to legal limitations, such States also give impulse to less critical NGOs, including by using State funds. This weakens the essential work of independent NGOs, while legitimising the work of NGOs organised by the governments and supportive of the governments' policies, GONGOs. Political leaders like ministers and parliamentarians establish their own civil society organisations, which they run sometimes parallel to having their political leadership roles in society. Over time GONGOs are favoured legally (on activities), financially and operationally at home. They are also sent to international fora to spread their views. In many countries in which we work, the authorities aim at replacing independent civil society with groups indebted to those in power.

This combination of repression against critical NGOs on the one hand and favouritism toward "compliant" NGOs on the other has led to suspicion, discouragement, and fragmentation within civil society in several countries. Such developments are seen in many States, including democracies and European Union member States.

Against this background of a global decline in freedoms, we have over the last few years closely cooperated with the mandate you are to take over. We aimed at sharing expertise with the mandate holder. We also aimed at increasing direct contacts between the Special Rapporteur and the organisations we work with.

We were very proud to organise Maina Kiai's consultation with civil society from Europe and Central Asia, ahead of his first official country-visit to Georgia.¹ We organised a similar regional consultation with the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, as she took office.² We would be glad to look into the possibility to host a regional consultation with civil society also for you, once you took up your office.

Beyond the regional consultations, HRHF also participated in most thematic and strategic consultations organised by Maina Kiai. For each of those, HRHF also supported participants from NGOs working on the theme focused on by the Special Rapporteur for his reports to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly. We believe this is a unique manner to collect information and gather intelligence, as well as create ownership over the reports published, thereby increasing their visibility and impact. In providing support to the mandate for these thematic and strategic consultations, we were closely cooperating with other international NGOs, such as the World Movement for Democracy, the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), and the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS).

We look forward to meeting you and explore opportunities to mutually reinforce our work and bolster support to the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Please let us know as to your availability.

Yours sincerely,



Maria Dahle
Executive Director



Florian Irminger
Head of Advocacy

Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF)

¹ "Georgia: visit by UN expert on freedoms of assembly and association," 4 February 2012, available at <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/17576.html>.

² "Lawyers and civil society give input to Special Rapporteur," 11 June 2016, available at <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/21680.html>.