

Mary Lawlor

Office of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

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Geneva and Oslo, 30 March 2020

Dear Mary Lawlor:

Human Rights House Foundation warmly congratulates you on your appointment by the Human Rights Council to become the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders.

Your appointment comes at a critical time. There are a range of challenges facing human rights defenders, including issues that affect many of our partners across the network of Human Rights Houses. We believe in the vital importance of your mandate, extend our full support to you as you undertake fulfilling your role, and hope that you will work with us and our partners to address the real challenges to defenders across western and eastern Europe, the western Balkans, and the Caucasus.

As you know very well, across this region interconnected issues affecting human rights defenders are growing. Governments increasingly label human rights defenders as traitors who work against the national interest or who threaten “traditional values”. We see wider use of legislation targeting defenders and their organisations and attacking their activities (e.g. targeting their freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association), legal status and financial viability (e.g. including through foreign funding legislation, and impossible registration procedures). Such an environment has allowed for a proliferation of hate speech and smear campaigns aimed at defenders. We hope that these issues will be a priority for your mandate and would value an opportunity to discuss these with you and support your efforts to address them, including through your reporting.

In addition, there are several country situations which particularly warrant your attention and possibly an official visit from your mandate. While these countries may not necessarily represent the worst situations, a country visit could make an important difference for human rights defenders at a pivotal moment in a country’s political development. One such country is Georgia. Partner organisations in Georgia believe a visit from your mandate would make a significant difference at a time when Georgia is at a “crossroads” in relation to protections for human rights defenders. They hope to encourage their government – who have an open invitation to Special Procedures visits – and your mandate to see if a visit can be arranged soon. We welcome the opportunity to discuss this in greater detail.

We have enjoyed closed cooperation with your mandate in recent years; including facilitating and supporting an unofficial visit to Belarus in 2019. We hope to continue this cooperation with you. We stand ready to support you in your work with civil society at the national and international levels, and connecting you with relevant groups as you seek to further deepen the UN and states’ commitments toward human rights defenders.

We look forward to meeting you and exploring opportunities to mutually reinforce our work and bolster support for human rights defenders.

Best regards



Maria Dahle
Director