

Civic Space Cohort of the Summit for Democracy

Support to Civil Society in Exile

Country lead: Czech Republic

Supported by: Canada, Denmark, Norway, Slovakia, United Kingdom, United States

Civil society activists, including human rights defenders and independent journalists, remain at risk for their activities in too many countries. The number of reported attacks against them is increasing, including through smear campaigns, violence and harassment both online and offline, arbitrary detentions, torture, enforced disappearances and even extrajudicial killings. Those representing marginalised groups are often targeted. These threats force many HRDs in different parts of the world to leave their home countries and force them into exile.¹

While in exile, civil society organisations, activists and HRDs are forced to adapt to the new circumstances. On the one hand, the situation provides them with an opportunity to continue their work. It may even allow them to acquire new skills and experiences which would be highly valuable if they are ever able to return to their home countries. On the other hand, being in exile generates a wide variety of challenges which not only restrain the ability of civic actors to work effectively but also negatively affect their everyday life including their personal security.

Examples of areas in which civil society in exile faces significant challenges:

- Legal entry into the country of exile (visa facilitation, etc.)
- Regularisation of the immigration status (residence permits, work permits, etc.)
- Access to services provided by the government (health insurance, mental health and psychological support services, financial benefits, etc.)
- Ability to work effectively in the country of exile (registration of new civil society organizations, banking etc.).
- Ability to work effectively in the country of origin; for example:
 - Reaching of internal audiences in the country of origin in light of censorship, resulting in unstable dependence on tech solutions.
 - Refreshing civil society contact networks and sources in country of origin in a way that is safe for all parties.
- Financial support from donors
- Personal security – including of their families (physical security, online security, etc.)
- Misuse by the government of the country of origin of legitimate tools (exchange of banking information, international legal cooperation, Interpol Red Notices, etc.)

We have developed the following call to action:

1. *To share best practices on allowing civil society activists under threat due to their human rights work to timely and safely enter and continue their work in a country of exile.*
2. *To work to protect civil society activists from threats imposed on them while in exile by the government of the country of origin.*
3. *To support initiatives to provide legal, administrative (incl. banking) and psychosocial help enabling civil society activists in exile to navigate the new environment so they can effectively continue engaging the country of origin.*

¹ The cohort recognizes that providing support to civil society organisations, activists and HRDs who continue their work in the country of origin remains crucial.