

PART II

Supporting civil society to strengthen democracy and guarantee human rights and security

Civil society plays a critical role in ensuring that human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy are respected across all 57 participating States of the OSCE. ODIHR acts as a bridge between national authorities and civil society organizations to ensure increased respect for human rights and strengthen the security of the OSCE region. The stories below highlight ODIHR's work on preventing and addressing human rights abuses, from innovative tools for human rights defenders to protecting the rights of people in detention.



2.1

Building solidarity among human rights defenders at international borders



Exploring new technologies, their risks and opportunities, a training course for human rights defenders working at international borders in the Northern Mediterranean region, Warsaw, Poland, 4-6 December 2024

Human rights defenders play a vital role in protecting the rights of migrants and refugees crossing international borders. Their work promotes the rule of law and accountability in migration and border management. At a time when the protection of human rights is increasingly under strain, their efforts ensure that states uphold the dignified treatment of all individuals, as required by national legal frameworks, OSCE commitments and international law. Partnerships between states and civil society organizations, which often serve as first responders, are essential to safeguarding these principles and supporting the fundamental right to seek asylum.

In 2024, ODIHR provided targeted support to 156 human rights defenders working in more than 30

countries. A series of regional training events strengthened their expertise in addressing the human rights implications of emerging technologies in migration and border management. For smaller grassroots organizations, ODIHR training addressed critical gaps in knowledge and provided concrete tools to strengthen their efforts.

The training courses also addressed the challenges posed by the growing trend towards criminalizing migrants, refugees and humanitarian actors protecting their rights. In addition, ODIHR introduced tailored training on trial monitoring of migration-related cases, enabling them to document and challenge these practices effectively.

Beyond the technical skills, there was also a focus on personal security and well-being, recognizing that the



MARC TILLEY
Mission Lifeline, Search and Rescue

ODIHR's training captured the need for greater awareness and resilience amongst human rights defenders who face criminalization. It was a useful source of connections, standards and tools that I can take forward for my own work as well as to support people on the move who face criminalization.

sustainability of defenders' work hinges on their ability to remain safe and resilient. A key feature of each course was the emphasis on collaboration and solidarity. By fostering a growing sense of community among participating human rights defenders, ODIHR's events help to create lasting connections that can be a vital extra line of support in an increasingly challenging environment.

The impact of these initiatives has been significant. ODIHR's sustained engagement provided a space for them to share their experiences, build mutual support networks and adapt their responses to the evolving challenges. Participants reported increased confidence and effectiveness in their work, as well as an enduring sense of solidarity.



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ANDRÁS LÉDERER

Head of Advocacy, Hungarian Helsinki Committee and core trainer

Human rights defenders working on complex issues such as migration often feel alone. ODIHR's training series not only provided important skills and inspiration to carry out this work more effectively and professionally, but also created a sense of belonging that remains with all of us, trainers and participants alike. Being a trainer for these sessions has been a highlight of my past two years, both professionally and personally.”



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QUITTERIE PINTON

Human Rights Legal Project, Greece.

We are a small grassroots legal aid organization, based on the island of Samos. We defend the fundamental rights of people on the move and seek accountability for human rights violations at the border. Thanks to the training on new technologies and human rights, we learned about new ways to gather evidence to strengthen our litigation efforts.”



OSCE/Veronica Grazi

Exploring new technologies, their risks and opportunities, a training course for human rights defenders working at international borders in the Northern Mediterranean region, Warsaw, Poland, 4-6 December 2024

2.2

Starlight Stadium, innovative educational tool for human rights defenders



Human Rights Monitoring training using Starlight Stadium as a training tool, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 22 May 2024



Starlight Stadium testing session with students of the Masters Programme in Human Rights and Sustainability in Central Asia (MAHRS), OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 7 December 2023

In October 2024, ODIHR launched **Starlight Stadium**, an online educational game for human rights defenders (HRDs). Developed as a gamification of ODIHR's well-established Human Rights Monitoring, Safety and Security curriculum, Starlight Stadium aims to make this monitoring methodology more widely accessible to defenders working across the region.

Split into four episodes, players join a fictional human rights monitoring organization and follow the steps of the monitoring cycle through a fictional case study. In Episode 1, players learn to conduct an Initial Assessment of the Human Rights Problem, before moving on to Information Gathering in Episode 2. Episode 3 covers Verification, Analysis and Report Writing, before the findings and report are used in Episode 4 to conduct an Advocacy campaign. Throughout each episode, players learn about the application of human

rights monitoring principles and work to ensure that their actions are safe and secure.

To ensure its accuracy and relevance, ODIHR developed the game in close consultation with human rights and educational experts working across the region through frequent in-depth consultations and workshops.

Throughout development, the game and its content were tested with more than 250 human rights defenders, students and professionals, and their feedback was incorporated to make the game more usable, entertaining and faithful to the lived experiences of the testers.

As defenders working in Ukrainian – and Russian-speaking communities face increasing barriers to accessing in-person training or appropriate online resources, ODIHR translated and localized Starlight Stadium into Ukrainian and Russian. This provides defenders working in these languages



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FEEDBACK FROM A GAME TESTER, MAY 2024

My understanding of human rights monitoring principles has improved during the game. Some activities that are part of our everyday work were presented from a different angle, giving us a new perspective.”

with online, remote, free, self-paced educational resources to enhance their human rights monitoring abilities.

Beyond the direct relevance of the game to human rights defenders, the consultations with students and educators have highlighted how the game can be valuable in educational contexts, helping users learn about the important work that HRDs undertake, to simulate what working as a HRD could entail, and to reinforce what they learn in theory by working through the case study in the game. ODIHR's increased connections with educators has led to the development of supplementary materials to facilitate the use of the game in classroom/ training settings.

Launched on [FreedomLab](#), ODIHR's online platform for human rights defenders, the game has already had over 2,000 page visits. This highlights the clear demand for such a resource, and the powerful potential it has to build capacity and foster connections within civil society.



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FEEDBACK FROM A GAME TESTER, MAY 2024

The game offered a completely different approach to human rights training since it focused on practical learning, with visual effects providing better and faster learning.”

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FEEDBACK FROM A GAME TESTER, OCTOBER 2024

I found this training approach engaging! Using interactive techniques as a learning tool really captures attention and keeps participants involved. I think that incorporating real-world scenarios and active participants makes it easier to stay focused and absorb information more effectively.”

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FEEDBACK FROM A GAME TESTER, OCTOBER 2024

Starlight Stadium presents a unique and valuable approach to human rights education with several strengths, particularly in its interactivity, teamwork, interactive experience [and] educational value.”

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FEEDBACK FROM A RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE GAME TESTER, NOVEMBER 2024

As an educator, I am excited to use the game in my activities. I am sure it will contribute to spark discussions we don't always cover. What a great way to learn!”



Launch of Starlight Stadium educational tool for human rights defenders, Warsaw, Poland, 3 October 2024

2.3

Training human rights defenders on monitoring freedom of peaceful assembly



OSCE/Maria Kokce



Launch event of the e-learning course during the annual meeting of the ODIHR CSO freedom of peaceful assembly monitoring network, Warsaw, Poland, 22-23 March 2024

The right to freedom of peaceful assembly protects the many ways in which people gather together in public. It has been recognized as one of the foundations of a democratic, tolerant and pluralist society in which individuals and groups with different backgrounds and beliefs can interact peacefully with one another. The right to freedom of peaceful assembly can also help give voice to minority opinions and bring visibility to under-represented groups and is one of the fundamental freedoms on which all democracies are based.

ODIHR has been monitoring the freedom of peaceful assembly across the OSCE region since 2011. To date, ODIHR has observed 143 public assemblies in 35 participating

States and has published six reports highlighting trends, challenges and positive practices related to the enjoyment of freedom of peaceful assembly. A key part of this work is to train human rights defenders, national human rights institutions, civil society activists and OSCE staff on how to monitor assemblies using ODIHR's well-established methodology.

The growing demand for ODIHR's assembly monitoring training highlighted a need for an innovative approach, particularly as opportunities for in-person training became severely limited during the COVID 19 pandemic. In response, ODIHR developed a self-paced, e-learning course, providing the first online platform that enables human rights defenders, national

human rights institutions and activists to enhance their skills in monitoring peaceful assemblies and to assess whether they are facilitated in a human rights-compliant way.

The [Independent Monitoring of Freedom of Peaceful Assembly](#) course was launched in March and is available on [FreedomLab](#), ODIHR's online platform for human rights defenders. Available in English and Russian, the course fills a gap in online resources on peaceful assembly monitoring. The course is used both by people who are already actively engaged and wish to deepen their knowledge as well as by those who are new to assembly monitoring.

The course content is divided into eight modules, with each module containing video lectures, additional resources and quizzes, to make the learning interactive. Eighteen trainers from across the OSCE region contributed to the video content, including experts on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, human rights-compliant policing of assemblies and the use of force in line with international standards. Monitors from different regions also shared their practical experiences through video testimonies.

Since its launch, the e-course has been widely accessed, and many civil society organizations have included it as a mandatory element of their own assembly monitoring training programmes. Users have praised the course for its depth, practicality and relevance.

This positive response reflects the growing demand for tech-enabled tools in human rights education, as well as highlighting ODIHR's commitment to supporting human rights defenders with practical and innovative solutions.

A SELECTION OF FEEDBACK FROM DIFFERENT USERS IN 2024

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This well-structured course helps even experienced monitors to refine their approach and — perhaps more importantly — to stand their ground by reminding us that the monitoring of assemblies is an internationally established practice and a civil right.”

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The course provides a thorough understanding of the principles, mechanisms and challenges associated with monitoring the freedom of peaceful assembly. It covers a wide range of topics such as legal frameworks, data collection.”

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The course provides excellent examples from real, lived experience and not just theory, so that is great! You can tell from who the speakers are that they have lots of different experiences in different countries.”

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This e-learning course [...] has been instrumental in deepening my understanding of human rights advocacy. Its immersive experience, with captivating video lectures, a wealth of materials, practical exercises and engaging quizzes, truly sets it apart. A vital asset for human rights monitoring!”



Labour day, Paris, France, 1 May 2022

2.4

Training detention monitors to protect human rights while preventing terrorist radicalization in prisons

Preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism (VERLT) in prisons has gained attention at the international, regional and national levels, with OSCE participating States increasingly focusing on security measures to manage (suspected) violent extremist prisoners and prevent the spread of violent extremism in prisons. At the same time, the management of these prisoners, as well as the design and availability of rehabilitation and reintegration measures for them, has a significant impact on their human rights. Prisoners' concerns and complaints about human rights violations and poor prison conditions can fuel violent radicalization and the spread of VERLT, a potential consequence recognized at the international level and in the OSCE's comprehensive concept of security.

While international and national actors have stepped up efforts on a range of related issues and capacity-building initiatives — primarily for prison authorities on how to identify and tackle violent extremism in prisons — ODIHR found that independent scrutiny of human rights compliance in preventing and combating VERLT in prisons is often still underdeveloped.

The Office therefore created a tailored training course for independent detention monitors based on its mandate to provide technical assistance and advice on two core areas of ODIHR's human rights work: counter-terrorism and torture prevention/preventive detention

monitoring. The training draws on the practical tool, *Protecting Human Rights in Prisons while Preventing Radicalization Leading to Terrorism or Violence: A Guide for Detention Monitors*, published jointly by ODIHR and Penal Reform International (PRI), and aims to increase scrutiny of measures that states take to manage (suspected) violent extremist prisoners and to prevent and counter the spread of VERLT in prisons, thus strengthening human rights protection in prisons and reducing the risk of VERLT.

Due to strong interest in this emerging topic, in 2024 ODIHR trained 53 detention monitors from 14 jurisdictions across the OSCE region, including practitioners from National Human Rights Institutions, National Preventive Mechanisms under the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, civil society organizations and lawyers. In order to reach a range of countries and language groups, ODIHR organized two regional training courses in South Eastern Europe and a third for other selected European countries. A similar course was held in Central Asia in 2023.

Using an interactive methodology and case studies, participants learned about the relevance to their work of terrorism and VERLT and the main human rights risk areas in detention settings. The regional courses also facilitated the sharing of experiences and good practices among detention monitors from selected participating States on how to address human rights challenges in their work.



RAOUL NOLEN

Director of Programme Development,
Penal Reform International

It is great to see our joint guide come to life and spark so many valuable discussions during this training. It is very important to continue engaging civil society organizations, national torture prevention mechanisms, lawyers and other stakeholders in learning and sharing practical, first-hand knowledge and experience on monitoring human rights in prisons while preventing radicalization leading to terrorism and violence.



Detention monitor training in Skopje, North Macedonia, 26-27 March 2024, in Warsaw, Poland, 2-3 July 2024, and in Belgrade, Serbia, 4-5 December 2024

Participants of the three regional courses reported that they had substantially improved their knowledge and skills on the subject. They also noted that a deeper understanding of possible human rights violations in this context prompted them to pay more attention to aspects they had not previously considered.

The training course is one element of a multi-year project to increase oversight, improving protection of the rights of people deprived of their liberty while effectively preventing

and combating VERLT in prisons. In addition to the launch of the ODIHR/PRI Guidance Tool (2021) and regional conferences in Central Asia (2022) and South Eastern Europe (2023), in 2024 ODIHR organized a webinar to accompany the publication of the French translation of the tool. All of these events aimed to promote dialogue between policymakers, practitioners and detention monitors and to raise awareness about the importance of independent detention monitoring in this field. Participants in these events requested additional training for detention monitors.



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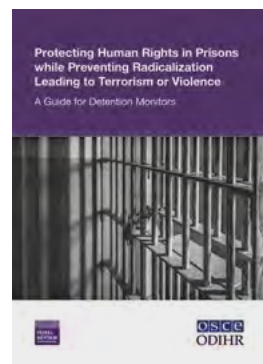
ERINDA BLLACA
Executive Director, Institute for Activism and Social Change

A better understanding of the specific human rights issues enables detention monitors to raise key questions with prison authorities in the course of their work, and this is what ODIHR's training helps us to achieve.”

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FEEDBACK FROM A COURSE PARTICIPANT

The training was very useful, as these two days helped me realize what needs to be considered when monitoring a specific environment and population. The principles remain the same; only the specifics need to be identified.”



2.5

Ensuring respect for the human rights of Roma and Sinti



ALBA HERNÁNDEZ SÁNCHEZ
co-founder of the Romnja Feminist Library and co-founder of the Feminist Collective of Romani Gender Experts

Racism and discrimination against Roma and Sinti communities continue across the OSCE area. They take various forms: hate incidents and hate crimes; anti-Roma rhetoric; human rights violations; and racist and discriminatory behaviour and practices. These marginalize Roma and Sinti people, preventing their full participation in society. These challenges are exacerbated by the shrinking space for civil society organizations, with many such organizations changing the scope of their work or ceasing to exist altogether over the last decade, leaving critical gaps in the ability to address human rights violations.

In response, in 2024 ODIHR carried out a comprehensive analysis of past and current trends in human rights work and considered ways in which human rights work can be revitalized for Roma and Sinti civil society. This included extensive desk research, surveys of Roma and Sinti human rights organizations and interviews with Roma and Sinti human rights experts, culminating in an expert workshop in November. The workshop

brought together Roma civil society organizations and human rights activists to validate the research findings, share best practices and jointly develop actionable strategies.

The research highlighted the increasing neglect of work to counter human rights violations against Roma and Sinti communities and provided clear recommendations to improve the situation. Key takeaways included the need for greater use of international human rights mechanisms, better engagement with national human rights institutions and national equality bodies, and the importance of including intersectional and gender perspectives in human rights work for Roma and Sinti. It is clear that Roma civil society requires adequate funding and a holistic approach that addresses structural barriers, fosters capacity building and nurtures community leadership. Another valuable insight is the need for civil society to adapt to emerging challenges and trends, such as the rise of AI and digital technologies. The full results of this research project and recommendations will be published in 2025.

Revitalizing human rights monitoring and advocacy with Roma civil society organizations is essential for addressing the persistent inequalities and injustices faced by Roma communities. We must incorporate an intersectional and gender-responsive lens in this work to address overlapping forms of inequality and exclusion within Roma communities, ensuring that diverse lived experiences and challenges are not overlooked, paving the way for truly inclusive progress. However, these efforts require institutional support and sustained funding to be effective. Without this, the transformative potential of Roma-led initiatives remains limited, despite the critical role they play in advancing justice and equality in the OSCE area.

2.6

Improving detention monitoring to effectively prevent and address sexual violence in places of detention



Training course on Integrating the Issue of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Detention Monitoring, Belgrade, Serbia, 25-27 March 2024

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in places of deprivation of liberty is an extreme form of discrimination and a serious human rights violation, which continues to be under-reported, under-researched and largely neglected. Promoting gender equality and protecting the human rights of individuals in places of deprivation of liberty is crucial to preventing SGBV. Civil society organizations, national human rights institutions, ombudsperson institutions and national preventive mechanisms — which all work to prevent the torture and other ill-treatment of people deprived of their liberty — play a key role in detecting instances of SGBV. As independent external monitors they visit places of detention and identify

risk factors, detect misconduct and make recommendations on how to tackle this form of violence.

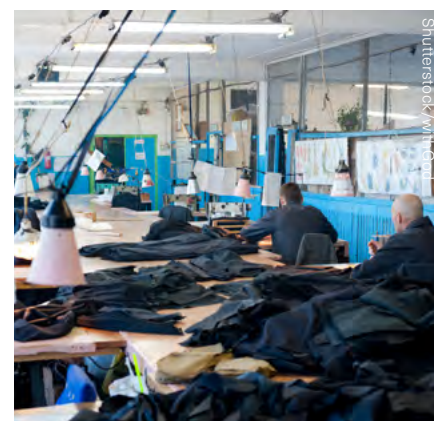
In March, ODIHR delivered a three-day training course in Belgrade on preventing and addressing SGBV in places of detention for national human rights bodies and civil society. As in many other OSCE countries, SGBV remains under-reported in Serbia, due to factors including social stigma, fear of retaliation, or inadequate support mechanisms for survivors.

During the training, which was led by two international experts, participants deepened their understanding of SGBV and examined best practices for detention monitoring and reporting to effectively address the particular



NATAŠA TANJEVIĆ
Deputy Protector of Citizens, Serbia

We used ODIHR's guidance to create structured interview questions for the monitoring visits. During our visits we now use the knowledge we acquired during the training and pay special attention to the composition of the monitoring teams and preparation for conducting interviews with people deprived of liberty who are at greater risk of SGBV."



risks and challenges associated with monitoring SGBV in places of detention. Participants ended the training by creating their own action plans for systematically including SGBV in their detention monitoring work.

During a follow-up seminar in the autumn, participants reported that their monitoring had significantly improved. Despite challenges, such as a shortage of specialists or medical staff and high workload, the team of the Protector of Citizens (which performs the tasks of the National Preventive Mechanism) succeeded in developing practical solutions to strengthen their detention monitoring. Through ODIHR's training, monitors gained the confidence and skills to proactively identify and address SGBV in places of deprivation of liberty.

ODIHR's guide on *Preventing and Addressing Sexual and Gender based Violence in Places of Deprivation of Liberty* available in English, Russian, Polish, Tajik and Uzbek, is the first comprehensive policy guidance at the international level on information and practices related to the prevention of SGBV in the OSCE region and beyond.

Drawing on this publication, ODIHR published its *Guidance Note for Oversight Mechanisms* on how to integrate this issue in their detention monitoring work. This is available in English, Russian, Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian.

At the request of penitentiary staff from Uzbekistan, this year ODIHR produced its *Quick Guide* on Preventing and Addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Places of Deprivation of Liberty, summarizing the key issues and actions to be taken by penitentiary staff. This is currently available in English, Russian and Polish.

