



Submission for the

Final Report

of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders

29 September 2025

This submission has been prepared by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee in response to the call for input of the Special Rapporteur, to inform her final report to the 61st session of the Human Rights Council.

Introduction

Founded in 1989, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC) is the country's oldest and largest non-governmental public benefit human rights organisation, whose primary aim is to protect human dignity through legal and public activities. The HHC helps those whose human rights have been violated by the state, in particular refugees, detainees, and victims of discrimination. It contributes to monitoring Hungary's compliance with relevant UN, EU, Council of Europe, and OSCE human rights standards and cooperates with international human rights fora and mechanisms. Comprising more than 40 professionals, the HHC's main areas of focus are:

- (a) Protection of the rule of law;
- (b) Protection of the rights of refugees;
- (c) Monitoring law enforcement activities; and
- (d) Protection of the rights of detainees and ensuring fairness in the criminal justice system.

The information presented in this submission does not contain confidential data and may therefore be used in the public domain. The submission follows the list of key questions and types of inputs sought by the Special Rapporteur.¹

Human Rights Work and Its Societal Impact (Q1, Q2, Q4, Q8, Q9, Q11)

A guiding principle of the HHC's strategy is to intervene in each issue with the best mix of tools (domestic and/or international litigation, research, public awareness raising, empowerment, training, advocacy) with the aim of achieving lasting and systemic change, primarily in, but preferably not limited to Hungary. This is one of the reasons for our engagement with regional and international human rights fora: on the one hand, in an environment of acceleratingly shrinking space for engagement with domestic authorities and decision-makers, these fora have proved vital in raising awareness of systemic human rights violations and urging domestic actors to address them. On the other hand, many of the problems identified in Hungary affect and/or are present in other UN member states too. In certain areas, such as international protection, issues rarely arise in isolation and can therefore be better addressed at a regional or international level.

Our work led to the ending of the arbitrary detention of all asylum-seekers in Hungary in May 2020, following successful litigation before the Court of Justice of the European Union² and the European Court of Human Rights.³ Evidence and legal analyses presented by the HHC to EU institutions on the rule of law backsliding in Hungary were instrumental in establishing a solid factual basis for various rule of law mechanisms. In turn, these mechanisms prompted a complex reform that, despite its

¹ UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, Call for Input – Raising their voices: HRDs respond to the human rights crisis, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2025/call-input-raising-their-voices-hrds-respond-human-rights-crisis>.

² Joint cases of C-924/19 PPU and C-925/19 PPU, ECLI:EU:C:2020:367, available at: <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?jsessionid=C16D681B46B23326F33C5969D838DEA3?text=&docid=226495&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=req&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=17859708>.

³ Ilias and Ahmed v. Hungary, app. no. 47287/15 [GC], available at: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/?i=001-198760>.

deficiencies, strengthened judicial independence⁴ and created new, or opened up civic participation in existing, financial oversight bodies.⁵

Despite the systematic erosion of rights-protecting institutions and our formal exclusion from detention monitoring since 2017, the HHC has managed to find alternative ways to maintain independent oversight of the human rights performance of law enforcement bodies. This persistence has ensured that systemic issues, such as inhumane detention conditions⁶ and ill-treatment by police officers and prison staff,⁷ remain on the agenda of international bodies. A further notable achievement has been the easing of excessive restrictions on prison visits in Hungary, demonstrating that sustained human rights work can deliver tangible improvements even in restrictive political environments.

Defending Space in a Closing Civic Environment (Q3, Q6)

For over a decade, the Hungarian government has carried out a sustained assault on civic space. Investigations ordered by the prime minister, legislative initiatives such as the 2017 Russian foreign agent-style anti-NGO law, the criminalisation of providing legal assistance to asylum-seekers, the special 25% tax on funding certain migration-related activities and expression of opinions, the increasing recourse to "sovereignty protection" to crack down on dissent and freedom of association, politically motivated bans on peaceful assemblies, and state-orchestrated smear campaigns all aim to intimidate independent organisations and individuals and to isolate them from society.⁸ These measures are designed not only to restrict particular groups but also to dissuade the public from associating with them, thereby weakening democratic life as a whole.

The HHC has assumed a leading role in resisting these pressures. We have brought key cases before the Constitutional Court, the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights, ensuring that repressive measures are judged against binding European standards. We also spearhead international advocacy, supplying evidence and legal analysis to the United Nations,⁹ the

⁴ See the joint assessment of Amnesty International Hungary, Eötvös Károly Institute, and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee of 22 May 2023 at https://helsinki.hu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Assessment_of_the_Judicial_Reform_052023.pdf.

⁵ See the joint assessment of Amnesty International Hungary, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, K-Monitor, and Transparency International Hungary of Hungary's compliance with conditions to access European Union funds of November 2024, available at: https://helsinki.hu/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/12/HU_EU_funds_assessment_Q3_2024.pdf, especially pp. 5-8. Participation in monitoring committees attached to EU funds in the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework was opened up to independent civil society organisations in 2023 as a precondition to access EU funding.

⁶ See the Interim Resolution of the Committee of Ministers, [CM/ResDH\(2025\)32](#), 6 March 2025.

⁷ Report to the Hungarian Government on the visit to Hungary carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 16 to 26 May 2023, [CPT/Inf \(2024\) 36](#).

⁸ See, for example, the HHC's written submission to the OSCE Warsaw Human Dimension Conference of 2024, https://helsinki.hu/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/10/OSCE-Warsaw-Human-Dimension-Conference_Fundamental-freedoms_HU-CSO-input_02102024.pdf or the joint submission of Ökotárs Alapítvány, Amnesty International Hungary, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, and Power of Humanity Foundation on shrinking civil space to Hungary's 3rd UPR in 2021, available at: https://helsinki.hu/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/03/UPR_submission_3rdcycle_civil_space.pdf.

⁹ See, for example, the HHC's submission to the Human Rights Committee regarding the 6th periodic report of Hungary, available at: https://helsinki.hu/wp-content/uploads/HHC_submission_to_HRC_12022018.pdf.

Council of Europe and European Union institutions.¹⁰ The HHC proudly provides good offices to visiting delegations of regional and international human rights mechanisms and mandates.

At the same time, the HHC recognises that sustainable protection of civic space requires collective strength within Hungary. We therefore invest in movement-building by mentoring smaller civil society organisations and informal civic groups; sharing advocacy tools and legal expertise; and providing complex assistance to organisations targeted by their governments in restrictive environments, both inside and outside of Hungary.

These efforts, in addition to supporting the sustainability of a diverse civil society, foster trust and solidarity, enabling very different actors to speak with a stronger, often united voice when the government attempts to divide and stigmatise them.

By combining strategic litigation and international advocacy with capacity-building, the HHC works both to defend existing space and to create new space for democratic participation. By defending those targeted by orchestrated attacks, the HHC combats the ulterior motive behind such attempts: to deter others from standing up. This dual approach strengthens pluralism and keeps the promise of fundamental rights alive, even under hostile conditions.

Financial Pressure and Resilience (Q5, Q6, Q7)

Funding cuts have had both direct and indirect effects on the HHC's work, leading to a higher demand for our assistance from beneficiaries (as the number and capacities of service providers has diminished), while also affecting approved grants. At the same time, a global scramble for the remaining potential donors and funding schemes has begun. Nevertheless, a decade of experience of working in a hostile environment has better equipped the organisation to respond to these challenges, with a dual focus on staff well-being and security, and on maintaining organisational sustainability.

In parallel with funding cuts, the Hungarian government introduced – under the guise of sovereignty protection – legislation in May 2025 seeking to prohibit funding from outside Hungary through imposing administrative requirements for receiving such funding that would in practice eliminate or at least significantly diminish the accessibility of domestic funding for targeted organisations.¹¹ At the time of submission, the bill is pending a parliamentary vote.

The Continuing Relevance of International Human Rights Law (Q7)

For organisations operating in increasingly restrictive environments, regional and international human rights instruments remain nothing less than a lifeline. They provide binding legal obligations and universally recognised benchmarks against which states can be held to account, while keeping open

¹⁰ See, for example, the joint analysis of Amnesty International Hungary and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee on how the Act on the Protection of National Sovereignty breaches EU law of February 2024, available at: https://helsinki.hu/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/02/Sovereignty_Protection_Act_breaches_EU_law_2024.pdf.

¹¹ See more on Operation Starve and Strangle, available at: <https://helsinki.hu/en/operation-starve-and-strangle-20250522/>.

avenues for litigation, advocacy and public awareness raising when domestic remedies and dialogue are inaccessible or ineffective.

Jurisprudence, authoritative guidance and soft-law instruments rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN human rights treaties and regional conventions such as the European Convention on Human Rights continue to serve as "golden standards": shared definitions of rights that have evolved over decades and retain their authority even when national politics turn hostile. These instruments are not abstract ideals: they enable concrete interventions – from urgent appeals and Special Rapporteur communications to court judgments – that safeguard individuals and strengthen democratic institutions.

Their continued effectiveness, however, depends on a genuine partnership between states, international institutions and civil society. Member States that remain committed to a rules-based international order in which human rights are the common norm, play a decisive role by supporting robust UN and regional mechanisms, defending their independence, and ensuring that their findings have tangible consequences. Human rights defenders, in turn, provide the documentation, legal arguments and human stories that give these mechanisms meaning and credibility. Hindering the cooperation of civil society with international human rights mechanisms should therefore concern all Member States that seek to uphold rules-based international relations.

This mutual reliance is reflected in the HHC's daily work – from strategic litigation in Strasbourg and Luxembourg to engagement with UN Treaty Bodies and Special Mandate Holders – and illustrates how international standards and institutions continue to make the defence of human rights possible in a regime seeking to eliminate all domestic checks and balances. By standing firm on their commitments, states and international bodies reinforce the essential space in which civil society can protect human dignity, even where domestic avenues are illusory or ineffective.

At the same time, the global context is changing in ways that cannot be ignored. The steady expansion of human rights that characterised past decades is neither irreversible nor guaranteed to remain central in the future. Emerging political, economic and social trends place new pressures on civil society and human rights defenders and reveal a widening gap between parts of the world struggling to preserve democratic values and others where even the most basic needs remain unmet. These realities call for stronger and more adaptable international instruments: closer monitoring of implementation, more robust enforcement, and genuine universality that resonates beyond liberal democracies.

International Protection Mechanisms: Strengths and Gaps (Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11)

International human rights mechanisms are broadly accessible, with comprehensive mandates and clearly defined entry points. They remain indispensable forums for raising concerns, setting standards and prompting remedial action when domestic remedies are blocked.

At the same time, operating in restrictive environments highlights the need for these mechanisms to evolve. Actors working in shrinking civic space or outright hostile environments are usually faced with

limited resources. Complex and lengthy procedures, especially when dependent on a state's willingness to cooperate, can discourage their use. These are not reasons to diminish the mechanisms' value, but challenges to be addressed so that their protective potential can be fully realised.

Inclusion of incidents in the annual reprisals report or the public statement of the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders have led to an end to concerted attacks or reprisal on at least two accounts.¹²

An important step in this regard was the introduction of the simplified reporting mechanism for Treaty Bodies. An assessment of this should be carried out, with input sought from civil society organisations, to identify its strengths and weaknesses. Further practical improvements could include more agile urgent-action procedures, stronger follow-up to ensure implementation, and closer links to regional bodies, including potential joint monitoring or communications.

¹² On 20 February 2023, the pro-government portal Origo.hu falsely alleged that a person accused of paedophilia was a client of the HHC because a well-known staff member was "an old friend" of his. The staff member denied any acquaintance, demanded a correction, and filed criminal charges within hours. Nevertheless, the story was rapidly echoed across the government-controlled media and reprinted in regional newspapers, shifting the focus to the fabricated claim of a 15-year friendship. The following day the Special Rapporteur issued a public statement on social media (<https://x.com/MaryLawlorhrds/status/1628349175451594752>) which was widely reported in the independent press and signalled to external actors what was unfolding in Hungary. The smear campaign ceased immediately thereafter.

The 2019 Annual Reprisals Report of the Secretary-General (A/HRC/42/30, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/42/30>) likewise documented Hungarian cases (§48) in which individuals and organisations engaging with the UN were portrayed as "traitors" serving foreign interests, and the UN itself was targeted by government-sponsored billboards. Following that inclusion, such direct attacks on UN cooperation ended. While the broader practice of portraying human rights defenders as foreign agents or threats to national sovereignty persists and continues to underpin restrictive legislative proposals, direct references to cooperation with UN bodies have not recurred.