

To Ms. Mary Lawlor,  
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human  
rights defenders  
Email: [hrc-sr-defenders@un.org](mailto:hrc-sr-defenders@un.org)

Chisinau, 30 September 2025

## SUBMISSION

This submission is presented by the Legal Resources Centre from Moldova (LRCM)<sup>1</sup> regarding the situation of human rights defenders.

### Motivation to uphold, protect or promote human rights

LRCM is a non-governmental, non-profit, independent, politically unaffiliated organization that contributes to the consolidation of democracy and the rule of law in the Republic of Moldova through research, monitoring and advocacy activities. We started in 2010 and operate through public policy analysis and advocacy, justice monitoring, reactions to dangerous decisions with systemic impact, informing and raising awareness of society and development partners, strategic litigation, trainings and other empowerment activities. This is reflected in our work monitoring human rights compliance in Moldova and summarising violations of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgments in Moldovan cases. We also engage in capacity-building: for example, in recent years LRCM trained over 100 legal professionals on ECHR standards and over 700 students on integrity and rule of law, instilling the values of human rights and justice in the next generation. These efforts show our commitment to various human rights causes (e.g. fair trials, anti-discrimination, good governance), and they illustrate that our motivation comes from seeing human rights as the foundation of democracy and social well-being in Moldova.

### Importance of civic space for human rights work

In Moldova, there is generally a viable space for civil society and human rights work, and we recognize that this space is crucial. If our human rights work were not permitted, society would have developed very differently – likely with less transparency, accountability, and justice. Many human rights violations might have gone unreported and unaddressed, and reforms (such as those in the justice system or anti-discrimination framework) would have stalled. By contrast, in Moldova's Transnistrian region, which is under an unrecognized de facto authority, for the civic space for human rights work is extremely challenging. This region remains

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<sup>1</sup> The [Legal Resources Centre from Moldova](#) (LRCM) is a non-profit organization that contributes to strengthening democracy and the rule of law in the Republic of Moldova with emphasis on justice and human rights. We are independent and politically non-affiliated.

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effectively outside any independent monitoring mechanisms, making human rights work there particularly difficult and precarious<sup>2</sup>.

### Human rights work we are most proud of (Last 5 Years)

One of the pieces of human rights work we are most proud of in the past five years is the “[Shields for Human Rights Defenders](#)” project (2021–2024), which LRCM implemented with partners. Under this project LRCM provided targeted legal aid and court-monitoring in seven trials involving ten defenders (a total of 89 hearings), alongside digital-security support and strategic advocacy. Cases included defamation and jurisdictional disputes against NGOs, internal governance disputes in an independent media organization, disciplinary and dismissal sanctions against child-protection officials for protecting children’s rights, physical assault of a civic activist by a local mayor, and administrative harassment of equality-body members after a discrimination finding. Results so far include annulment of two disciplinary sanctions, reinstatement of one defender, partial wins in dismissal litigation, and a final conviction for minor hooliganism against a local authority who assaulted a defender. The monitoring presence deterred procedural abuses and improved courtroom conduct. The project significantly strengthened protection for human rights defenders in Moldova. Through this initiative, LRCM has created a dedicated [webpage](#) for Human Rights Defenders — an informative and guidance-oriented resource designed for everyone. The platform provides materials to help defenders orient themselves, strengthen their capacities, and enhance their protection. We developed two emergency guides for HRDs ([Identification, assessment, assistance, and monitoring of Human Rights Defenders at risk](#); [What to do if you are detained](#)). These practical tools have improved defenders’ resilience and knowledge of their rights. We provided trainings on personal and digital security, held special sessions for environmental defenders, and offered free legal assistance to activists who were taken to court for their human rights work. The project also ran a nationwide awareness campaign on the role of HRDs, producing some visual materials to sensitize the public and authorities about the importance of human rights defenders.

Moreover, we monitored court trials involving HRDs and published annually reports on Radiography of attacks on civil society organizations and human rights defenders in the Republic of Moldova ([2022](#), [2023](#), [2024](#)) documenting attacks and challenges faced by Moldovan HRD. Using this evidence, LRCM advocates for improvements to the laws governing civil society and [HRDs](#). This comprehensive approach – combining direct support, capacity building, documentation, and advocacy – is a landmark achievement for us. We consider this a major contribution to protecting those who defend the rights of others.

### Impact of funding cuts in the past 12 months

Like many civil society organizations, LRCM has felt the strain of recent funding cuts in the donor landscape. In the past 12 months, several external funding sources for Moldovan NGOs have been reduced or reallocated. For example, an abrupt suspension of certain USAID funds in January 2025 forced NGOs, including ours, to seek alternative funding, cut salaries or lay off some staff. While LRCM has a diverse donor base, any significant funding cuts constrain our ability to respond to new human rights issues and to maintain the same level of support to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://radiomoldova.md/p/44419/access-for-human-rights-defenders-is-limited-on-the-left-bank-of-the-nistru-experts>



defenders. In practical terms, over 70% of our budget was affected, while this year there are no secured resources to continue providing legal assistance to human rights defenders who are unjustifiably drawn into litigation. To overcome this, we submitted several additional project proposals to ensure the continuation.

### **The biggest risk facing our work**

Frequent attacks on NGOs and human rights defenders are deliberately aimed at silencing them, discouraging them from continuing their work, or discrediting their efforts. Our monitoring reveals that such attacks often materialize in false and derogatory public statements, hate-inciting speeches, stigmatization, insults, intimidation, threats, legal actions, and decrees designed to obstruct the work of CSOs, restrict access to information of public interest, and infringe upon human rights and freedoms protected both nationally and internationally. For example, LRCM has been demonized for allegedly promoting foreign interests and benefiting from substantial external funding and “privileged access” to the media, development partners, power structures, and international political organizations. In addition, some NGOs, including LRCM, continue to be associated with the notion of “GONGOS” (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations) even though we never applied to receive/or ever received state funds. This type of orchestrated propaganda and defamation represents the most acute risk to our work, as it undermines the very space in which a human rights NGO can function.

Related to this is the risk of restrictive legislation or official retaliation that often accompanies smear narratives. For instance, in many countries in the region HRDs are falsely labelled as “foreign agents” to justify restrictive laws against them. Such a [draft law](#) was registered in Parliament by the opposition parties with pro-Russian views in 2025. While Moldova’s current government is generally supportive of civil society, the spectre of such legislation or a future policy shift remains a concern. The lack of an official legal status for human rights defenders in Moldova (they are not formally recognized or protected by law as a distinct group) means that HRDs have [limited legal protection](#) against harassment. This gap could be exploited by hostile actors. In summary, the biggest risk we face is a combination of reputational attacks and potential legal/political backlash.

### **Accessibility of international mechanisms to human rights defenders**

Accessibility is also about knowledge, some mechanisms like the European Court of Human Rights are relatively well-known in Moldova (owing to many ECHR cases against the country), but others – like certain UN Special Procedures– are less familiar to our local defenders. Accessing international human rights mechanisms can be challenging for many human rights defenders, especially those at the grassroots level, and this holds true in our context as well. While LRCM, as a professional NGO, has the expertise to engage with the UN and regional systems (we have lawyers who prepare submissions to treaty bodies, and we have even litigated cases up to the ECtHR), individual HRDs or small groups often struggle to navigate these processes. The procedures can be complex – involving formal documentation, legal argumentation, and proceedings in foreign languages (English, French, etc.), which are hurdles for defenders who may not have legal training or language skills. We have observed that many local activists were not even aware of certain mechanisms or how to approach them until they received guidance. This is one reason our “Shields for Human Rights Defenders” project



invested heavily in capacity building: we [trained hundreds](#) of defenders on topics like international fair trial standards and how to behave in risk situations.

### **Key message that we would like the Special Rapporteur to bring to the international community about human rights and human rights defenders**

The most important message LRCM would like the UN Special Rapporteur to convey to the international community is that human rights defenders are the backbone of democracy, and they need strong support and protection. Their work benefits entire societies by holding authorities accountable and safeguarding fundamental rights. In practical terms, we urge the Special Rapporteur to emphasize that states and the international community must:

- **Recognize and legitimize the status of human rights defenders in law:** Governments should formally acknowledge HRDs and their crucial role. In Moldova, HRDs currently *“do not have recognized official status, limiting their legal protection and formal recognition of their activities.”* This must change. A clear legal definition and status for HRDs would affirm that defending human rights is a legitimate and protected activity, not something subversive.
- **Ensure a solid legislative framework and effective protection mechanisms for HRDs:** The international community should encourage states to enact laws and policies that protect defenders. This includes developing rapid response mechanisms for when HRDs are at risk (for instance, protection orders or emergency hotlines) and holding perpetrators of attacks accountable. The Republic of Moldova’s Ombudsman has called for introducing sanctions for those who threaten or attack human rights defenders and creating an inter-institutional mechanism to safeguard HRDs. These kinds of protections need to be replicated worldwide.
- **Increase awareness and sensitization about the role and rights of HRDs:** Many challenges faced by HRDs stem from misunderstanding or misinformation about their work. States should undertake public information campaigns (in partnership with NGOs) to highlight that HRDs act in the public interest and are not “enemies.” Additionally, all stakeholders – from law enforcement to local officials – should be sensitized. As one outcome, officials should refrain from using hostile rhetoric (such as labelling NGOs as foreign agents) and instead publicly acknowledge HRDs’ contributions.
- **Train authorities and stakeholders to support human rights defenders:** States should provide regular training for police, prosecutors, judges, and other relevant actors on the rights of human rights defenders and how to handle cases involving them. This includes training on international standards for freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Such efforts build a culture within state institutions that is respectful of civil society’s role.
- **Monitor and report on all cases of harassment or attacks against HRDs:** The message should be that every infringement on a defender’s rights is unacceptable and must be investigated. Governments, together with NHRIs and civil society, should establish systems to track incidents and provide remedies. States should not view such monitoring as adversarial, but rather as a tool to improve governance. The international community can assist by funding observation missions and ensuring that data on HRD safety feeds into global reporting.



- **Provide assistance and solidarity to human rights defenders in need:** We call on states and international partners to offer concrete support – whether legal aid, psychosocial support, or emergency relocation – to defenders facing risks. No defender should feel alone or helpless; there should be avenues for them to seek help nationally and internationally. The Special Rapporteur should encourage the establishment of national defender protection funds and urge donors to be flexible in assisting at-risk HRDs (including those in exile).
- **Foster cooperation and partnerships:** Finally, the international community should promote **cooperation between governments, civil society, NHRIs, and international organizations** in protecting human rights defenders. Multi-stakeholder working groups are an excellent way to craft and implement policies for HRD protection. At the international level, countries should share good practices and even consider regional agreements for the protection of HRDs. Solidarity across borders – such as joint statements by groups of states at the UN Human Rights Council – can amplify the message that attacks on HRDs are intolerable.

In essence, the Special Rapporteur should relay that **defending human rights is a public service**. Human rights defenders are drivers of positive change and accountability, and they deserve recognition, resources, and protection commensurate with the importance of their role. The international community must move from rhetoric to action: adopt laws that protect defenders, educate society to value their work, and respond decisively when they are in danger.

*With the highest consideration,*



**Ilie CHIRTOACĂ,**  
Executive Director

