



## EUROPEAN UNION SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

### EUSR for Human Rights – Newsletter – August-September 2025

After two months on the job, it is time to revive the newsletter, which has been a major communication channel for most EU Special Representatives thus far. Sadly, since the publication of the last newsletter, the world has taken a turn for the worse from the perspective of **human rights**, **democracy** and **international humanitarian law** (IHL), the key tenets of my mandate.

I am deeply motivated to take on this crucial role, which allows me to fight for human rights in the EU's external action. I have already undertaken a number of missions and have had a range of internal and external meetings, including with civil society organisations, individual human rights defenders, Member States, bilateral partners, other EU institutions, international organisations, journalists and others. The main challenge is making sure everyone gets the time they deserve.

In my role, I want give attention to both the visible human rights issues and the **invisible** ones. In addition to the formal dialogues, I also aim to be present in concerned communities. I met with the **Human Rights and Democracy Network** (HRDN), an informal network of over 50 non-governmental organisations working on human rights in the Brussels context. They are a valuable sounding board and source of information for my office, and I reiterated my open-door policy to civil society and my intention to hold consultations with civil society prior to my bilateral missions. In my first meeting with **Human Rights Watch**, I was asked to take things personally, which indeed I do. Championing civil society and human rights defenders will be a major priority, as they are facing increasingly grim perspectives and limited space to operate.

The EU is rightly increasingly strengthening its “hard” security. As former Defence Minister I know that this will only be effective if coupled with strong “soft” security. We need to start viewing the protection of human rights as a strategic investment, including for a conducive business environment. Along these lines, I have been reflecting on the EU's narrative related to human rights. I hope to be able to be a **positive and proactive communicator** on human rights issues, and I aim to be present on many types of platforms, including social media. You can already, for example, check [my first video](#). I also hope to reach younger generations with my work.

I cannot do the work alone. Therefore, I am pleased to already have met with the **European Human Rights Ambassadors**, who expressed their strong support for my work. I have also had many meetings with actors ranging from the External Action Service (EEAS), European Commission to Member State representatives in Brussels, who have helped me navigate the human rights, democracy and international humanitarian law (IHL) landscape.

### RECENT EVENTS

Russia's aerial campaign, including deadly drone and missile attacks, has had a devastating impact on the civilian population in **Ukraine**, including children. In September, a glide bomb hit a crowd of elderly people gathering in the village of **Yarova** to collect their monthly pensions, killing 24 people and injuring 19 others. This dramatic attack illustrates Russia's continued disregard for the fundamental tenets of the rules of war, including the obligation of armed forces to spare and protect civilians in the planning and conduct of their military operations. Recently, the **EU Delegation in Kyiv** was itself impacted during a massive drone and missile attack, which also damaged the British Council premises.

Russian drones and aircrafts also repeatedly violated European airspace, as part of what NATO described as “*a wider pattern of increasingly irresponsible Russian behaviour*”.

Mid-August 2025, the **Integrated Food Security Phase Classification** (IPC) declared a famine in **Gaza** Governorate, with critical thresholds of extreme food deprivation, acute malnutrition and starvation-related deaths having been met. The IPC projected that famine would expand to other governorates by the end of September. In mid-September, Israel intensified its ground incursion into **Gaza City**, which has been catastrophic for the civilian population already facing multiple displacements, destruction of critical infrastructure and malnutrition without access to the required humanitarian assistance.

In Gaza, the **killing of journalists** has been a major concern. At the beginning of September, **Reporters without Borders** reported that at least 210 journalists had been killed in Gaza, leaving few behind to report on the drastic situation. Of course, the **UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory** concluded in its September report that Israeli authorities and security forces had committed four of the five genocidal acts defined by the 1948 Genocide Convention.

The situation across the Occupied Palestinian Territories should be on our radar. In September, I met with two **child advocates** from the **West Bank**, who explained that their lives had taken a drastic turn two years ago, as they have had to live in daily fear amidst housing raids, children’s play being interrupted by tear gas, friends and family having been shot, the stress of passing through checkpoints even to go to school, and grieving the fates of fellow children in Gaza. Another group of NGOs told us about the ever-worsening **settler violence** and general expansion of **settlement activities** – illegal under international law - in the West Bank.

I was also alarmed to learn that the Israeli National Security Committee approved a Penal Bill amendment proposing the mandatory reintroduction of the **death penalty in Israel** for terrorism-related offences, against the advice of the Knesset’s legal advisors. This amendment comes after a **series of Knesset legislative proposals** aiming to curb civic space and cooperation with international accountability actors. The EU opposes the death penalty at all times and under all circumstances, as the capital punishment violates the inalienable right to life and is incompatible with human dignity.

In her **State of the Union** address of 10 September 2025, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced **new proposals to the Council** on sanctions on extremist ministers and violent settlers, the partial suspension of the Association Agreement on trade-related matters as well as measures to advance relief to Gaza. Over the summer, my office contributed to these efforts by providing an analysis for the **review of Israel’s compliance** with its human rights obligation under the **EU-Israel Association Agreement**. Meanwhile, several Member States have announced their recognition of the State of Palestine, while denouncing Hamas and demanding the immediate liberation of all hostages. The current reality on the ground remains catastrophic. While a two-state solution remains our goal, we should also ensure that aid reaches those in need, in line with the humanitarian principles.

The humanitarian situation and the human rights violations in **Sudan** and the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** (DRC) continue to worsen in the world’s most overlooked conflicts. Equally concerning is the continued democratic backsliding and systematic human rights violations in the **Sahel** region. The military authorities in **Burkina Faso**, **Mali** and **Niger** have shown little genuine intention to honour their international commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights. Instead, they selectively refer to these landmark instruments when convenient to their political narratives — a practice that undermines their very spirit. The EU

remains committed to supporting the people of the Sahel and reiterates its expectation that these commitments be upheld consistently and in good faith. The recent announcement by the three Sahel countries that they intend to withdraw from the **International Criminal Court** is concerning, as it risks depriving victims in the region of a critical path to justice and security.

## **BILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS**

On the occasion of the **Yalta European Strategy** (YES) annual conference, on 12 and 13 September, I undertook a two-day visit to **Ukraine**, a country I have often visited in my previous capacity. Once again, I was struck by the country's resilience, unwavering determination to preserve its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and identity, and by its commitment to EU integration. By choosing Ukraine as my first country visit, I meant to send a strong message of support to a neighbouring partner, who has fallen victim of egregious violations of international law, and who is committed to joining the EU. I engaged with civil society, Ukrainian authorities as well as EU and UN actors present on the ground.

The human rights and humanitarian consequences of the Russian aggression of Ukraine, as well as domestic and international accountability efforts were at the core of all my conversations and meetings. I reiterated the EU's unfailing determination to support accountability efforts. The mission was also an opportunity to discuss progress and challenges on some "domestic" human rights issues (including anti-corruption efforts and conflict-related sexual violence), which Ukraine has been addressing as an EU candidate country. The plight of deported and forcibly transferred **children** and of their families, the issue of **prisoners of war** (POWs) and civilian **detainees**, as well as the situation of **veterans**, including their reintegration into Ukrainian society, all require particular attention.

The war in Ukraine and its far-reaching consequences, but also the situation in **Russia** and **Belarus**, were also central to my engagements and bilateral meetings during this year's **Warsaw Security Forum**. Throughout my meetings with **Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya** and her recently released husband, **Yulia Navalnaya**, **Oleksandra Matviichuk**, **Zhanna Nemtsova**, **Sir William Browder**, **Mikhail Khodorkovsky**, and **Yaroslav Bazylevich** whose wife and daughters were killed in a Russian missile attack on Lviv, I was deeply impressed by the determination and drive of my interlocutors towards preserving the rule of law, justice and accountability, and against repression. In a panel discussion on **women, peace and security** (WPS), I called for the normalisation of the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and men, and underlined that human rights, justice and accountability are essential, not least to achieve and sustain peace.

In September, I had the pleasure of receiving the **National Secretary for LGBTIQA+ rights of Brazil**, **Symmy Larrat**, for an exchange on policies for the protection of the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons. In the EU and Brazil, we see the need for continued action to address discrimination, including in the area of health and employment. I was impressed by Brazil's efforts to advance the topic both nationally and in South-South Dialogues, and I look forward to exploring further cooperation during our next Human Rights Dialogue in November.

In preparation of the upcoming Human Rights Dialogue with **Saudi Arabia**, I had a productive first encounter with the Saudi Ambassador in Brussels. We agreed on the benefits of advancing fundamental rights and the rule of law for a conducive business environment and improving the quality of life for future generations. We also agreed on the need to pursue dialogue in a spirit of mutual respect. We also briefly recapped the outcomes of the previous dialogue as well as the topics we would like to cover moving forward. We agreed on the need for the EU and Saudi Arabia to join forces to uphold international law, particularly in the context of Gaza. I remain extremely alarmed about the rapid increase in **executions** in Saudi Arabia, including for non-lethal, drug-related offences.

## MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS

My first mission in this mandate was to Geneva to meet with the key international actors upholding human rights, the **High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk**, and the **President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Mariana Spoljaric**. I also met with the **UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan**, including to discuss the human rights of women and girls and how we can advance on this priority issue in the centre of our discussion.

With the **United Nations** at a pivotal moment of its 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we need to be reminded of the value these multilateral institutions and the rules they are tasked to uphold provide to all of us. We are already seeing the dramatic effects of the financial and political strains, from the lack of resources to respond to the humanitarian crises in Sudan or Haiti to the eroding predictability and trust in international relations. Unilateral action by any actor can never substitute a world order built on rules that puts people at the centre. That is why the EU will be steadfast on promoting the centrality of human right in a reformed UN system.

In Geneva, I also hosted together with the EU Delegation a lunch on justice and accountability in the context of **Syria**, with the participation of the **Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-Syria)**; **International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM-Syria)**; **Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIMP)**; **Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (CoI)**; **Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights** as well as the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)**.

All actors emphasized the need to urgently work on both **past and present violations** and to secure access for investigations. We also discussed **civic space** in Syria, and the alarming rise of **sectarianism** in the country, which has also been relayed to me by all Syrian civil society representatives I met over the past month. I hope to be able to engage myself with civil society inside Syria very soon as well as with the transitional authorities to advance justice and accountability. Last month, I also met with the spiritual leader of the **Druze** community in Israel, **Mowafaq Tarif**, who expressed grave concerns about the recent attacks on the Druze community in Sweida.

## INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

The basic rules of war, enshrined in the universally ratified Geneva Conventions and customary law, are our collective commitment to uphold a minimum of humanity, and preserve human rights and dignity in times of war. I am encouraged by the broad cross-regional support for **ICRC's Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law**, which ICRC President Spoljaric told me about during my Geneva visit. All EU Member States have joined the initiative, and I will use my voice and mandate to support it.

In my meeting with **Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)**, I was told about the impact of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) run operations, aiming to replace the UN-led humanitarian coordination system. Between June and July, MSF-operated health centres received 28 dead bodies from GHF sites, treated 174 people from gun wounds originating from such sites, most of those treated being young men. In addition, a clearly identified MSF water tank whose route had been clearly communicated in advance was struck by the Israeli military while distributing 10,000 litres of drinking water. Moreover, 14 MSF workers have been killed since 7 October 2023. I was heartbroken to learn that only days after my meeting with MSF, the organization had to suspend its operations in Gaza City.

Humanitarian actors have repeatedly called on the international community to mobilise to facilitate the **medical evacuation** of the sick and wounded. In the current context, it is of absolute urgency. I

welcome the recent initiative by **Denmark** (joined by a large coalition of countries), calling on Israel to allow patients from Gaza to be treated at hospitals in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem. It bears stressing that, under binding norms of international humanitarian law, parties to a conflict are obliged to ensure adequate care for the wounded and sick. MSF also told us about access restrictions to its medical facilities in the **West Bank**.

## **INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW, JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

The attacks against the **International Criminal Court** are a manifestation of a worrying trend of repeated threats and challenges to the international rule of law and the institutions that underpin it. In recent years, the ICC and its officials have been facing threats and sanctions in direct retaliation for their work. After the ICC issued arrest warrants against **President Vladimir Putin** and Russia's commissioner for children's rights, **Maria Lvova-Belova**, Russia initiated criminal proceedings and issued arrest warrants against one third of the judges and the ICC Prosecutor.

In response to the ICC arrest warrants against Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** and former Defence Minister **Yoav Gallant**, the US has sanctioned ICC officials as well as individuals and organisations who support the ICC. To date, nine elected senior officials as well as three Palestinian NGOs and UN Special Rapporteur **Francesca Albanese** have been designated.

As repeatedly stated by the EU, **sanctions and threats against the Court are inadmissible**. Accountability and the rule of law are inseparable. Any attempt to undermine the independence of an international judicial institution is a threat to the rules-based international order. Such developments risk fuelling impunity, and depriving victims and survivors of a critical path towards justice and peace. **US sanctions** against three prominent Palestinian human rights organisations – **Al Haq**, **Al Mezan** and the **Palestinian Centre for Human Rights**, all key partners of my office, [severely jeopardise](#) their ability to operate.

I made a point to visit The Hague at the outset of my mandate, to convey my strong support to international organisations, courts, as well as civil society organisations working on accountability. During the mission, I had meetings at the [ICC](#) (Principals and Trust Fund for Victims), **EUROPOL**, **EUROJUST** and the **Genocide Prosecution Network Secretariat**, the **International Commission on Missing Persons**, and a number of civil society organisations.

During my meeting with **Antonia Mulvey** from **Legal Action Worldwide (LAW)**, we discussed, among other topics, the current window of opportunity in **Lebanon** in justice and accountability. An indictment of those responsible for the devastating **Beirut Blast** is due to be delivered before the end of the year. Ahead of my mission to Lebanon later in the fall, I will also be meeting with the **victims and survivors** of the Blast, who have been waiting for truth and justice for too long. It will also be key to cover the **humanitarian situation in Lebanon** and the continued violations of IHL, including the killing of civilians, despite a ceasefire being formally in place.

## **RULE OF LAW AND DEMOCRACY**

I had the honour of holding a [key note address](#) at the **International Democracy Days in Brussels** on this year's theme Democracy and Inclusion in an Age of Insecurity. From my personal and professional experience as a former Minister of Interior and Minister of Defense and long-serving politician, I have seen first-hand how threats to our democracy are threats to our security and *vice versa*.

In my bilateral meeting with the **Secretary-General of IDEA**, **Kevin Casas-Zamora**, we both shared the view of making this connection more visible, from the local to the international level. In an increasingly polarized political landscape, I was encouraged to hear from the **National Democratic Institute** of

continuing bipartisan cooperation in the US on electoral observation as a support to the integrity of the electoral process around the globe.

In late August, I attended the **European Forum Alpbach 2025**, where I participated in two interesting panel discussions on “Ukraine’s Civil Society: Driving Resilience and Recovery” and “Regaining Trust: Competent Democracy vs. Autocratisation”. With many students and young professionals participating, the overall message was that with democracy in decline around the world, Europe must reinvent itself. Global alliances of democratic states and civil society are needed to find solutions suited to today’s information and technology environment.

I also met with the Secretary-General of the **World Organization Against Torture (OMCT)**, **Gerald Staberock**. In addition to being a key partner in combating torture, including as part of the ‘United against Torture’ consortium, OMCT is also a valuable source of information on the **rights of persons on the move**. In its fourth edition of the landmark report [‘Torture Roads’](#), OMCT highlighted particularly the human rights violations suffered by children on the move in **Tunisia**. I will continue to closely follow the thematic of the rights of persons on the move, including in the context of **Libya** and Tunisia.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND MEDIA FREEDOM**

My office met with a group of **journalists** from **Azerbaijan**, most of whom work in exile, given that the space for independent media in the country has shrunk to a bare minimum in recent months. They informed us about the situation of independent media and journalists in Azerbaijan, specifically about the latest cases of detention or imprisonment based mostly on fabricated charges of smuggling.

The journalists also reported on the catastrophic **detention conditions** in Azerbaijan, including inadequate basic hygiene supplies, nutrition, and medical care. I am deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation of the media landscape in Azerbaijan and the repression against journalists. A free and independent media is the cornerstone of a functioning democratic society, and honest politicians who have their voters' best interests at heart should not be afraid to look in the mirror held up to them by the media.

While I welcome the recent successive pardoning and releases of **Belarusian political prisoners**, we cannot stop calling for an end to repression, and for the release of the 1,200 political prisoners who remain behind bars in dire detention conditions, subjected to torture and inhuman treatment. **Ales Bialiatski** is one of them. On the occasion of his 63<sup>rd</sup> birthday, I [called](#) for his release and that of all political prisoners in Belarus. As a consequence of Israel’s attack on **Qatar**, the situation of the Baha’i community and other minorities in the country has become even more precarious. Already in August, a Doha court sentenced Baha’i dignitary **Remy Rowhani** solely for exercising his fundamental rights. I was relieved to hear that on 1 October, Rowhani was acquitted by an appeals court.

However, we have also been informed of a campaign against the Baha’i in **Iran**, which has intensified since the 12-day war with Israel. I also met with **Vida Mehrannia**, wife of **Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali**, a Swedish-Iranian academic who has been detained in Iran for nine years. For three months since Israel’s attack on Evin prison in June, Dr. Djalali forcibly disappeared. I was relieved to hear that some weeks after my meeting, Dr. Djalali was returned to Evin prison. However, we need to keep pushing for his full release.

During my visit to Warsaw and my meeting with **Sir William Browder**, we discussed the case of 71-year-old British citizen **Ryan Cornelius**, which my office has engaged on for some time. Unfortunately, he remains detained in the **United Arab Emirates** in a debt-related case since 2008. I will continue to call for his release.

We have seen some positive developments in the region. In **Egypt**, we finally witnessed the release of **Alaa Abdel Fattah** and other human rights defenders from detention. Yet, many remain held in excess of the formal maximum pre-trial detention period, including **Hoda Abdelmoneim**, whose health is rapidly deteriorating, and **Ibrahim Metwally**. Both have been “recycled” into new cases under similar charges. As Egypt has committed to addressing the issue of prolonged pre-trial detention, it is key to advance such releases in the spirit of the National Dialogue and the Presidential Pardon Committee. I was pleased to hear the President of Egypt sent back the draft **Criminal Procedures Code** to Parliament, which I hope will allow for broad consultation with civil society and bringing the law in line with Egypt’s human rights commitments, including on pre-trial detention. I look forward to discussing this law and other important initiatives during my upcoming engagements with the authorities.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

I am looking forward to the upcoming **EU-African Union dialogue on human rights** on 7 October, which I will have the honour of co-chairing. I welcome the high-level participation by our African partners. I believe that during the dialogue we will be able to communicate openly and sincerely on a wide range of human rights issues of mutual interest. As usual, the dialogue was preceded by an exchange with civil society.

I am also looking forward to the upcoming **EU – ASEAN Dialogue on Human Rights** on 15 October in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where I will also participate in the **ASEAN Business and Human Rights Forum**, the CSOs Forum. In this context, I will meet with local governmental officials and civil society.

*Kajsa Ollongren*

*EU Special Representative for Human Rights*

---

**All newsletters can also be read on the EUSR’s [webpage](#).**

**If you want to be added to the distribution list, please send an e-mail to:**

EEAS-EUSR-HR@eeas.europa.eu

**You can follow the EUSR on social media:**

X: @KajsaOllongren

Instagram: @kajsaollongren

BlueSky: @kajsaollongren.bsky.social