

# Report on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders



Cornelia Riehle

## News

On 11 July 2023, the Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) published a [report](#) examining the opportunities for human rights defenders from third countries to enter and stay in EU Member States, including good practices and ways to improve the situation. The report, which was drafted on the request of the European Parliament, is based on input from the Agency's multidisciplinary research network "[Franet](#)", expert interviews, secondary research, and consultations with relevant stakeholders.

To assess the situation, the report examined how existing relocation programmes function for human rights defenders as regards their entry into and stay in the EU, including visas and residence permits. It also focused on the obstacles they face, including the type of support defenders need and receive once relocated. [Annex I](#) of the report provides a table listing Member States' practices in this respect.

According to the report, the current situation in the EU is characterised by a patchy and complex system: different types of visas used for this specific group of people, varying relocation practices across the EU, and scant support for longer-term stays in the EU. As a result, the report sets out six points for consideration by the EU and its Member States to improve the situation for human rights defenders:

- Better and more frequent recourse should be taken to the existing flexibility in EU law. For instance, access to short-stay visas should be facilitated by applying the existing exceptions and derogations in the EU Visa Code. The European Commission could compile a dedicated catalogue of the various options available for this purpose;
- The EU Member States could broaden the scope of their relocation programmes or, where not yet available, introduce such programmes;
- Awareness about human rights defenders could be improved, both in their home countries and while in relocation;
- The benefits and risks of digitalisation and the use of technology impacting on human rights defenders' opportunities to come to the EU should be taken into account;
- During their stay, increased and adequate support should be provided that goes beyond the provision of visa and residence permits, with the aim of enabling the defenders to effectively continue their human rights work;
- The EU should ultimately review the adequacy of its legal tools for supporting human rights defenders, especially the Visa Code, the Visa Information System (VIS) Regulation, the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) Regulation and the Entry-Exit System Regulation, and also suggest possible amendments, if necessary.

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FRA emphasised that, in general, any support and protection instrument for human rights defenders should serve to ensure the safety, integrity and dignity of human rights defenders and their family members as well as to support their ability to continue their human rights work.

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