

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL JOINT LETTER

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41 ORGANISATIONS CALL ON THE CYPRIOT AUTHORITIES TO TAKE ACTION TO STOP THE ESCALATING HARASSMENT AND ATTACKS AGAINST KISA AND PROTECT CIVIC SPACE IN CYPRUS

We, the undersigned organisations, express our deep concern regarding the continuing and escalating harassment and attacks against KISA, a leading non-governmental organisation fighting for human rights and equality for all in Cyprus. KISA's work promotes a society free of racism and discrimination, also by defending the rights of migrants, refugees and victims of human trafficking.

During the early morning of 5 January 2024, KISA experienced a targeted bombing attack. An explosive device was planted outside its offices, destroying all windows and causing extensive damage to the photocopier, computers, and part of the organisation's archives. The organisation suspects that the bombing was carried out by individuals within racist and nationalist circles, considering that KISA and its members have been the object of repeated threats. Despite the seriousness of the bombing, the Cypriot authorities have yet to issue an official response. While the police are investigating, they did not issue an information note, contrary to the standard practice in case of such incidents.

The lack of official and public communication regarding the assault and the investigation, and support for KISA and civil society organisations in general, indicates a worrying disregard by the authorities. Indeed, we are deeply concerned about the reported failure of the authorities and police to take any steps to protect KISA as well as the inadequate response to the numerous threats, and actual acts of physical and verbal violence, harassment and smear campaigns formally reported to the police.

Furthermore, this attack is not an isolated incident, but the result of a long campaign to discredit and silence independent voices in Cyprus, in particular KISA. In 2021, 38 organisations denounced the ongoing harassment against KISA, and the restrictions imposed on the organisation including its de-registration as a non-governmental organisation. Although KISA has since then a new formal legal status as a non-profit company and the deregistration is under appeal, the government – in particular the Ministry of the Interior – continues to block several of KISA's essential activities in support of migrants and refugees.

The undersigned organisations are also deeply concerned that KISA members and volunteers, in particular former Executive Director Doros Polykarpou, continues to face criminalisation that appears to be linked with his activities as a human rights defender. Mr Polykarpou, was convicted on 21 December 2023 and, just ten days after the bomb attack, sentenced to pay a fine for supposedly 'interfering' with police work in 2019, after exercising his right to observe a police officer's interaction with a young motorcyclist (a minor, stopped for possible traffic offences) and to provide basic information to the child regarding his rights. Another trial related to the criminalisation of Mr Polykarpou in his work as a human rights defender is on-going and concerns a visit to the Pournara reception centre to investigate claims of inhuman conditions by unaccompanied children. Mr Polykarpou reported his physical assault by private security guards in March 2022 but was later prosecuted for various charges (case 16767/22). These cases follow decades of criminal charges levelled against Mr Polykarpou which according to KISA are part of a pattern of cases aiming to intimidate, discredit and interfere with the work of KISA as a human rights defender. Before this latest ruling, Mr Polykarpou had been acquitted in all legal cases against him.

Our concerns extend beyond the immediate impact on KISA to encompass broader issues of civic space in Cyprus. In particular, the rise of anti-migrant, racist rhetoric and racist violence in the country is alarming and requires attention and action to change.

In order to promote an enabling environment for independent civil society and solidarity with migrants and refugees and remove restrictions to civil society's space in Cyprus and in Europe as a whole, the undersigned organisations call upon the following authorities to:

The Cypriot authorities:

- Publicly condemn the recent bombing attack against KISA, and ensure a thorough, independent, impartial and prompt investigation into and appropriate response to the January 5th bombing including the prioritizing of the hypothesis that the attack was related to KISA's human rights and anti-racist work.
- Ensure a thorough, independent, impartial and prompt investigation of previous complaints presented by KISA and its members regarding harassment, attacks, smear campaigns, and threats. Implement effective measures to ensure the safety of KISA's employees, members and service users.
- Protect KISA's freedom of association and end the criminalisation of KISA and its members.
- Take steps to enable KISA to continue its activities, including granting KISA full access to reception and detention centres where migrants and refugees are held.
- Take concrete measures to end any legislation or policy which encourages racism, hate speech, xenophobia and intolerance against migrants, refugees and racialised people in Cyprus. Take action to combat extremist narratives and racist rhetoric in the media and public discourse.
- Comply with international and regional standards on the right to freedom of association and the protection of human rights defenders, and in particular the joint OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission Guidelines on Freedom of Association, the OSCE Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the recommendations of the Council of Europe NGO Expert Group.

The European Union:

- Condemn the attack that took place on 5 January 2024 and other pending complaints, and call on the Cypriot authorities to ensure an adequate response and to end the ongoing harassment against KISA and interference in its work, in line with the 2023 European Commission recommendations on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes and the Council conclusions on civic space.
- Closely monitor the situation in Cyprus, especially the climate of violence and xenophobia, addressing the hostility against migrants, refugees and anti-racist and migrants' rights organisations.
- Address these attacks against human rights defenders and their organisations in the Annual Rule of Law Cycle and make a targeted recommendation to Cyprus to ensure a safe space for rights defenders and put an end to the ongoing attacks and to the restrictions on KISA's freedom of association and the criminalisation of KISA and its members.
- Call on the Cypriot authorities to respect and uphold the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights, the rule of law principles, and the right to freedom of association.
- Develop an early warning system to detect harassment of individuals and civic organizations, including those advocating for migrant rights and racial justice, to prevent their criminalisation. This system should prompt swift EU-level responses such as recommendations, dialogue, sanctions, and emergency funding. Additionally,

collaborate with civil society to establish a 'Rapid Response System' (building on the existing EU's external human rights defenders mechanism) offering helplines, legal aid, and temporary relocation to protect civil society since the first signs of attacks.

Signatories:

International and European organisations:

AMERA International
Amnesty International
Borderline-europe Human Rights without Borders
European Civic Forum
European Network Against Racism (ENAR)
EuroMed Rights
FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights), in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
Front Line Defenders
Greek Helsinki Monitor
Human Rights Cities Network
Institute of Race Relations
International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
La Strada International
Migreurop
Minority Rights Group
Netherlands Helsinki Committee
Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM)
PRO ASYL
Protection International
Statewatch
World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

National organisations:

Aditus Foundation, Malta
Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD), Tunisia
Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana (ARCI), Italy
Cairo Institute for Human Rights (CIHRS), Egypt
Center for Peace Studies, Croatia
Center for Public Innovation, Romania
Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies (DCHRS), Syria
Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX), UK
Gentium, Spain
Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), Greece
Hellenic League for Human Rights, Greece
Human Rights Association (IHD), Turkey
Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Hungary
Irídia, Spain
Irish Council for Civil Liberties, Ireland
Legal Center for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment – PIC, Slovenia
Ligue des droits de l'Homme (LDH), France
Network for Children's Rights, Greece
Tamkeen for Legal Aid and Human Rights, Jordan
Vatra Psycho Social Center, Albania