



88th PEN International Congress

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RESOLUTION ON THREATS TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND PROTECTION OF CIVIC SPACE

*Proposed by Writers in Prison Committee and PEN Chile
Seconded by San Miguel PEN and Vietnamese Abroad PEN*

The Assembly of Delegates of PEN International, meeting at the 88th PEN International Congress in Uppsala, Sweden, from 27 September to 1 October 2022

Recalling the PEN Charter's commitment to the defence of freedom of expression; its declaration of literature as a common language between peoples and commitment to the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations; and PEN members pledging themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong, as well as throughout the world wherever this is possible, and PEN's declaration in support of a free press and opposition to arbitrary censorship in times of peace.

Observing that civic space, by which we mean the broad set of conditions that allow individuals and groups to express themselves, associate, organize, participate freely and non-violently in public affairs, and communicate with others without fear of hindrance or reprisal, is under systematic attack by governments and other powerful actors, leading to a global emergency of shrinking civic space.

Recognizing that under conditions of shrinking civic space, freedom of expression is the first casualty, and that indeed, free speech is under unrelenting attack across the globe from Africa to the Americas; Asia to Europe and the Middle East. Across these regions, writers, journalists, artists, activists, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations are systematically targeted for persecution by state and non-state actors because of their creative works, divergent or critical views as well as for their aspirations to defend and advance the ideals of liberty and democracy in their countries.

Noting that over the years, under conditions of shrinking civic space in various countries around the world, civil society organizations, including PEN Centres have continued to face the brunt of systematic repression, including through outright censorship; legislative and administrative restrictions leading to shut downs like in the painful cases of PEN Nicaragua and five other Nicaraguan NGOs in February 2021 and the Belarussian PEN Centre in August 2021; arbitrary arrest and detention; judicial harassment, forced exile, among other egregious acts of repression simply because of doing their work and expressing critical views on public affairs. These repressive conditions are acts of censorship by authoritarian governments and they substantially limit the ability of PEN Centres in a growing number of countries to operate freely in their mission of providing a safe space for dialogue, celebration of literature and defending freedom of expression.

Reiterating that civic space is the heartbeat of a free, pluralistic, just, peaceful, and democratic society and that an open civic space is a prerequisite for the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, including press freedom and free speech – all of which are at the core of the Charter of PEN International, we reaffirm the commitment of all PEN Centres and members worldwide to courageously speak out, individually and collectively, in defence of freedom of expression, and to work collaboratively with peer organizations in our countries, regions and globally to counter the expanding spectre of shrinking civic space whenever and wherever it rears its head.

The General Assembly of PEN International expresses grave concern about global trends of systematic attacks on freedom of expression and the emergency of shrinking of civic space:

1. In Africa, authorities in **Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Rwanda,** and Nigeria continue to impose restrictions on freedom of expression by using censorship, repressive legislation, administrative decrees, arbitrary arrest, incommunicado detention and imprisonment of writers, journalists, human rights defenders, and opposition supporters. **Rwanda** and **Uganda** continue to subject critics of government policy and officials to judicial harassment, enforced disappearance, torture, extrajudicial killings and forced exile. In recent times, authorities in 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have used Internet shutdowns to curtail free speech, particularly during periods of heightened public debate or protest against government policy (**Nigeria, Burkina Faso, South Sudan, Eswatini** and **Senegal**), civil strife or conflict (**Ethiopia, Nigeria** and **Sudan**) or contested elections (**Congo, Uganda, Zambia** and **Chad**).
2. In the Americas, as of June 2022 at least 9 journalists in **Mexico** have been murdered as a direct consequence of their investigative work. In **Nicaragua**, approval of the Law on the Regulation of Foreign Agents aimed at censorship of critical voices and sanctioning civil society groups that receive funding and donations from abroad forced the Nicaraguan PEN Centre to suspend its activities, with several of its members forced into exile after threats to their safety. In **Cuba**, authorities continue to aggressively restrict freedom of expression by vigorously silencing, imprisoning, and forcing into exile writers, artists and activists deemed to be in the opposition. Within nine months (July 2021 and April 2022) authorities in the **United States of America** banned 1, 586 books in a move that targeted 1,145 unique books.
3. In Asia, **China** remains a notorious jailer of writers, journalists, and activists, including over a dozen members of the Independent Chinese PEN Center, along with the systematic persecution of ethnic minorities, in particular the Uyghur. Among the more than one million Uyghurs currently being held against their will in so-called “re-education camps” are writers, artists, and activists. In **Afghanistan** the Taliban continue to target critical voices and violently enforce social and political conformity to reflect their ultra-conservative ideology. In **Bangladesh**, the Digital Security Act 2018 has been used to charge more than 100 journalists as part of the authorities’ efforts to silence independent media. In **Myanmar**, since the military coup, at least twenty-six (26) writers and around a hundred and thirty (130) journalists have been arrested. Seventeen (17) writers and sixty-eight (68) journalists remain in prison at present. At least three (3) poets and two (2) journalists were killed by the military junta. On 25 July the military Junta executed four pro-democracy activists, including writer Ko Jimmy, marking the first judicial executions in 37 years. In **Vietnam**, there are over 200 activists in prison and at least 332 activists at risk. Among the imprisoned activists are 92 women and 71 ethnic advocates, who received lengthy prison sentences, among them writer and activist Pham Doan Trang who

was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment in December 2021 for calling for social reforms and free elections.

4. The past year has proven to be one of the most hazardous for writers and journalists in Europe and Central Asia. At least 15 journalists have been killed since September 2021 while carrying out their profession – the highest figure since 2015. The Russian Federation's full-scale military invasion of **Ukraine**, launched on 24 February 2022, triggered a human rights and humanitarian crisis on an unimaginable scale, with journalists and media workers being targeted, kidnapped, attacked, and killed. In the **Russian Federation**, independent voices have come under increased pressure, with independent media outlets being blocked and anyone found guilty of disseminating 'fake' information about the armed forces facing up to 15 years in prison. The crisis in **Belarus** that broke out in 2020 shows no signs of abating; 29 media workers were behind bars at the time of writing. In **Türkiye**, writers and journalists are facing arbitrary prosecution and judicial harassment through anti-terror, defamation, and other similar laws. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (**SLAPPs**) continue to be used as a tool to silence journalists, the media, and human rights activists across the region.
5. In the Middle East, the **Egyptian** government has continued to eradicate freedom of expression and open civic spaces through draconian laws, censorship, and arbitrary imprisonment of critical voices, including writers and journalists. In **Iran**, authorities' persecution of writers continued to worsen as medical negligence in prisons and detention facilities has become a central concern amid the prevalence of Covid-19. The **Moroccan** authorities escalated their crackdown on freedom of expression, subjecting imprisoned journalists to extra-punitive measures and imprisoning human rights activists over their critical views on social media, while denying them the right to a fair trial. In May, the brutal murder of **Palestinian** journalist Shireen Abu Akleh revealed the extent of impunity in Israeli authorities' killings of Palestinian journalists. Other authorities across the region, mainly in **Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Oman, and Saudi Arabia**, continue to expand online censorship and use vague charges, including "dissemination of fake news" or "spreading rumors", to silence critics, including writers and journalists.

The Assembly of Delegates of PEN International:

I. Demands that state and government authorities of the aforementioned nations:

- A. Immediately and unconditionally release all writers, journalists, activists, artists, and other cultural workers imprisoned or secretly detained without trial, simply for exercising their legitimate right to freedom of expression.
- B. Strictly uphold their international human rights obligations to protect their citizens, including critical writers, journalists, artists, and activists, by among other measures, repealing repressive laws and putting in place adequate measures to nurture and protect civic space as a foundation for an authentic democracy that respects, protects and facilitates the human rights of citizens and civil society organizations to safely speak out, organize, associate, participate and claim their rights, including the right to express their opinion, views and criticism of the political, social, economic and cultural structures around them.
- C. The authorities of Belarus and Nicaragua immediately and unconditionally rescind their hostile legislative, administrative, judicial or political practice leading to banning or shutting down of PEN Centres and to institute measures to guarantee their safety and that of other civil society

organizations to operate; and for the authorities to desist from all acts of persecution targeting writers, cultural workers, journalists, human rights defenders and civil society organizations for simply doing their legitimate work.

II. Calls on nations with authorities that respect, protect and facilitate the enjoying of human rights by their citizens:

- A.** To boldly voice opposition to all human right violations in their regions and globally; and to act in solidarity with campaigns organized by PEN International in defense of persecuted PEN Centres, writers, journalists, and cultural workers
- B.** To adopt bolder and coordinated responses to the global rise in authoritarianism and the widespread emergency of shrinking civic space that imperil and significantly threaten to erode gains won in many countries over decades of struggle, solidarity and emerging global consensus on democratic governance and respect for human rights as foundational for peaceful, open, and just societies.