Volunteering, Civic Space and Resilience: Why Safeguarding Volunteers Matters

by Dervla King, Comhlámh, November 2026

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As the UN-designated International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development (IVY 2026) draws to a close, the safeguarding of volunteers remains an issue that is increasingly pressing - for different reasons and in different ways - in various contexts around the globe. Comhlámh began the year by hosting the Irish launch of the "Call to Action for the Future of Volunteering[1]" at an event in Dublin on International Volunteer Day 2025. Drawing on research and conversations involving thousands of volunteers worldwide, the Call starts with a stark observation: volunteering today takes place against a backdrop of conflict, displacement, climate disruption, democratic strain and widening inequalities. While volunteers remain essential contributors to social cohesion, humanitarian action, sustainable development and community wellbeing, they are often "unrecognised, undervalued and under-resourced". Importantly, the Call argues that creating safe conditions for volunteering is no longer a peripheral concern, but a pre-requisite for volunteering itself.

The question, however, is what we mean by "safe". At the Global Volunteering Forum in Paris in October 2026[2], Jagan Chapagain, Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), spoke about the increasingly dangerous conditions faced by volunteers serving in some of the world's most challenging contexts. From Palestine to South Sudan, recent years have seen historically high levels of violence, detention and intimidation directed towards humanitarian workers and volunteers.

Threats to volunteering are not confined to armed conflict. Across many European countries, volunteers are reporting forms of intimidation, harassment and hostility that can make participation more difficult, less safe, and take a greater personal toll. There are growing concerns about the contraction of civic space and the increasingly hostile environment faced by civil society actors working on global justice issues such as migration, human rights, equality and social inclusion. The CIVICUS Monitor (2025)[3] has

[1] Call-to-Action-for-the-Future-of-Volunteering-DEC-2025.pdf
[2] Theme - IVCO 2026
[3] Global Findings 2025 - Civicus Monitor

highlighted how intimidation, disinformation, public vilification and restrictions on participation can raise the personal costs of civic engagement. These pressures are often experienced directly by volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations.

There is growing evidence that this trend is being felt by migrant solidarity responders across the island of Ireland and the United Kingdom. Some examples were highlighted by volunteers supporting international protection applicants in Ireland, responding to a survey conducted by the Irish Refugee Council. They reported harassment, stalking, threats, abuse and violence associated with anti-migrant mobilisation[4]. In the North of Ireland, migrant-support organisations have documented intimidation campaigns, online harassment and threats directed at staff, volunteers and activists[5], according to a 2026 Human Rights First report on intimidation of migrant-support organisations. Similar patterns are present in the UK, where volunteers with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) have faced online abuse, physical intimidation, protests and misinformation because of their role in rescuing migrants in the English Channel. In recent months, the RNLI has increased security measures and has worked with police to protect volunteers and facilities after reports of online and physical abuse[6].

These examples reflect wider European concerns. The PICUM network has documented the continuing criminalisation, harassment and public hostility faced by individuals and organisations acting in solidarity with migrants and refugees[7]. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights has pointed to the increasingly challenging operating environment for organisations working on migration and fundamental rights issues[8]. Such developments suggest that a shrinking civic space is not only an outcome of formal legal restrictions on

[4] 'I've worked in conflict zones. but I've never felt as unsafe as I did during the summer in Ireland' and Call for State to address homeless asylum seekers' needs
[5] "Locals Only": Migrants and Their Supporters Targeted in Northern Ireland and Groups supporting migrants in Northern Ireland face harassment and intimidation - Investigations & Analysis - Northern Ireland from The Detail
[6] Police working to protect RNLI in Dorset amid opposition to small boat rescues | Immigration and asylum | The Guardian and RNLI steps up security after abuse by far-right agitators over small boat rescues | Immigration and asylum | The Guardian
[7] Cases-of-criminalisation-of-migration-and-solidarity-in-the-EU-in-2023.pdf
[8] Fundamental Rights Report 2025

organisations, but that it might also be related to whether people feel able to participate safely, openly and freely in public life.

Although these contexts differ, they reveal a common pattern: volunteering itself can become contested. When this happens, volunteers may face risks that extend beyond the activities they originally signed up to undertake. This is where the IVY 2026 agenda offers an important reframing. The Call to Action argues that safeguarding volunteering should not be understood solely in terms of physical safety. Volunteers must also be able to organise, participate and advocate without fear of intimidation, exploitation, harassment or retaliation. In this sense, safeguarding volunteering and safeguarding civic space are deeply interconnected. The implications extend well beyond the volunteering sector.

Research on volunteering consistently highlights its contribution to social trust, participation, inclusion and community resilience. Volunteering helps create the relationships, networks and habits of cooperation that enable communities to respond collectively to challenges. When volunteering becomes associated with hostility, intimidation or personal risk, participation can carry significant social and emotional costs. This may discourage existing volunteers, deter potential new volunteers and weaken the networks that communities rely upon during times of crisis.

The overall effect has important implications for resilience and preparedness. The European Commission's Preparedness Union Strategy adopts a whole-of-society approach that explicitly recognises citizens, communities, civil society organisations and volunteer action as essential components of crisis preparedness and response[9]. Resilience depends not only on public institutions but also on trusted local relationships, active citizenship and community mobilisation. If shrinking civic space reduces people's willingness to volunteer, the consequences may extend far beyond any single policy area. The same climate of hostility that discourages someone from volunteering with refugees today may discourage them from volunteering during floods, storms, public health emergencies, energy disruptions or climate-related disasters tomorrow. Over time, this can erode the local

[9] Preparedness Union Strategy: reinforcing Europe's resilience in a changing world | EEAS

networks, trust, knowledge and the surge capacity that preparedness planning increasingly assumes will be available.

The emerging European preparedness agenda draws on the idea that resilient societies depend upon people being willing and able to act together. Volunteering is one of the principal ways through which communities organise, respond and express solidarity. Protecting volunteers is therefore not only a volunteering issue. It is a civic space issue, a democratic participation issue and a resilience issue. Building on the IVY 2026 Call to Action, policymakers should invest in volunteer infrastructure, strengthen volunteer wellbeing and safety measures, and counter misinformation and hostility directed at civic participation. Volunteering is a core component of preparedness and resilience planning, while at the same time, volunteers are much more than service providers. They represent the social infrastructure that enables communities to respond, adapt and care for one another. Therefore, safeguarding volunteers means safeguarding the civic space, trust and solidarity upon which resilient societies depend. The third point of the Call to Action, as presented in Dublin on IVD one year ago, remains one to which we must be attendant.

Call to Action on the Future of Volunteering, Area 3 - Safeguarding

It is now more urgent than ever to create safe environments where volunteering can thrive. The safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity of all volunteers, and the people with whom they engage with, across all contexts, are paramount to ensure that they contribute without fear of harm or exploitation.

Authors and citation

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