

Call for Papers

Edited Volume: Activism in Exile - Reimagining Agency and Protection in an Era of Crisis

This edited volume has two motivations. First, a growing awareness that multiple contemporary crises — populism, conflicts, shrinking civic space, climate change, austerity — are combining to push more and more human rights defenders and activists into exile. Second, the volume emerges from a specific research project. The project is a collaboration between the Centre for Reconciliation Studies, University of Bonn (Germany), and the UNESCO Chair, Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space at the Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York (UK), funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, and titled "[Activists in Exile in an Era of Mass Displacement: Universities as Sites of Protection and Supporters of Agency for Activists from Russia and Myanmar](#)". The research has a particular focus on Russian activists in exile in the Czech Republic and Myanmar activists in exile in Thailand.

This edited volume seeks to address a gap in academic literature on activism in exile and protection infrastructures in the contemporary polarised political context. The focus is not exclusively on universities as sites of agency and protection, but we welcome contributions on universities. We invite contributions that examine the agency of activists in exile, the architectures of protection that shape their possibilities, and the evolving and different roles and different modalities of intervention of universities in these dynamics. Contributions on any countries, regions or cases are welcome.

Below we set out further context for the volume, and some questions that contributors might address.

Activism and agency in exile

In recent years, the rise of authoritarian rule, populism, shrinking civic space, and human rights backlash has forced growing numbers of human rights defenders and related causes activists into exile. While exile is often framed primarily as a condition of loss — of networks, resources, and voice — it may also open up new forms of political action, agency, identities and mobilisation. Exile can provide access to transnational advocacy networks, international institutions, and audiences that were previously unreachable, while also posing profound risks of precarity, uncertainty and repression across borders.

Analysing trajectories of activism in exile requires attention to **at least three key dimensions** that shape how activism is exercised. The **first dimension** moves beyond the dichotomy of “all or nothing” — that is, viewing the exercise of activism as a binary between constant engagement and total demobilisation. It is essential to recognise the multiple ways in which activism can persist, transform, and adapt in exile, including changes in its forms, intensity, frequency, goals, strategies, and even the issues or causes it seeks to advance. Activism abroad may take on new modalities that differ from those in the home country, reflecting both the constraints imposed by exile and the opportunities it presents.

The **second dimension** concerns the conditions of exile and intersecting social and political factors that shape activism abroad. These include the political and legal characteristics of the host country, proximity to the home country, continuity (or disruption) of ties to the local activist community, as well as social identities such as gender, race, and class. These factors play a decisive role in shaping diverse trajectories of activism in exile. For example, women, LGBTQ+, Indigenous activists, and members of other marginalised groups often encounter compounded barriers that

constrain their opportunities to continue their activism. In contrast, activists affiliated with established NGOs or professionalised networks frequently benefit from prior organisational experience and international connections, enabling more rapid and effective mobilisation in host countries. Additionally, transnational ties to global movements or diaspora communities can enhance the visibility, legitimacy, and access to resources of exiled activists, influencing both the form and scope of their political and civil engagement.

The **third dimension** emphasises the collective nature of activism and how it may be transformed in exile. Activism is rarely an individual endeavour; it is shaped by networks, solidarities, collaborative practices and common values and goals that sustain engagement over time. In exile, these collective forms often undergo significant modification due to changes in social environment, available resources, and shared experiences of displacement and activism. Activist groups may reorganise around new priorities, adopt different modes of communication, or forge alliances with local and transnational actors. At the same time, exile can generate tensions within collectives, as differences in generational perspectives, political strategies, or access to resources emerge. Understanding the collective dynamics of activism in exile is therefore crucial not only for capturing whether and how engagement persists, but also for examining how it is reshaped in response to the constraints and opportunities of a new context, as well as how protection infrastructures address (or fail to address) these dynamics.

Protection infrastructures, ecosystems and universities

Against this background, formal protection infrastructures designed to support exiled activists, usually located in the Global North, remain fragmented, underfunded, and insufficient to provide a long-term response to such multidimensional and complex situation. Measures typically focus on individuals, even though activism is characterised fundamentally by its collective nature. There is a pressing need to rethink the relationship between exile, activism, and institutions in light of these challenges.

To describe the dynamics underlying protection and activism in exile, Susan Banki (2025) refers to an ecosystem, in which activism hubs in different physical locations interact with one another toward the common goal of exerting pressure on the home country. Comparing the ecosystem to the functioning of a living organism, Banki notes that some parts of the ecosystem act as producers, generating the resources needed to sustain activism in exile, while others function as consumers, relying on those resources for support.

The concept of an **“ambiguous architecture of precarity”** highlights how a tangled suite of policies, directives, and norms — emanating from local, national, and international institutions — produces uncertainty and vulnerability in the lives of refugees and exiled activists (Banki 2025). This precarity is reflected in the distinction **between temporary relocation and formal asylum or refugee status** (Jones 2015). While short-term relocation measures may respect individual agency and allow for eventual return, long-term or permanent protections can erode autonomy and constrain options for mobility. Paradoxically, the very ambiguity and fragmentation of these systems may also create opportunities for “venue shopping,” enabling individuals to navigate different institutional spaces to secure protection or resources. These dynamics also raise broader tensions in protection practices: the balance between safeguarding individuals versus collectives, and the forms of activism enabled or undermined under different kinds of infrastructures.

Universities, today central to protection infrastructures, have historically provided both formal and informal spaces of refuge and a range of resources, reflecting diverse forms, intensities, and levels of engagement in supporting refugees and activists who are temporarily under protection or in exile. This spectrum ranges from minimal support — such as allowing activists to register as students, facilitating visa procedures — to more comprehensive measures, including access to

housing, scholarships, legal assistance, and psychological support. However, the role of universities as part of a wider protection ecosystem is fraught with tensions and contradictions.

These institutional supports — particularly in the case of scholars at risk — have been criticised as forms of “academic humanitarianism” (Yaraar 2024), that can risk reproducing common shortcomings associated with the humanitarian field. These include offering short-term responses and reinforcing hierarchies by prioritising elite activists with prior organisational experience or formal credentials, while overlooking grassroots defenders who may lack visibility or access. Further, universities have been critiqued for inadvertently perpetuating power hierarchies, often failing to fully recognise the qualifications of exiles and thereby producing a sense of being “included but diminished.” These dynamics reflect a broader critique of universities as operating more through a charity-based rather than a solidarity-based model. In this context, the question arises as to whether universities, beyond providing accommodation, scholarships, etc. can play a broader, more holistic role: functioning as think tanks, offering protective fellowship schemes and summer schools, facilitating knowledge production and exchange, and sustaining spaces for dialogue with existing activist hubs while fostering the development of new ones.

Yet the commitment of many universities to neutrality and non-politicisation generates further tensions. Activists’ work is often inherently political, challenging institutions that emphasise a narrow definition of academic freedom — which traditionally pertains to thought and expression — over direct political action. Navigating these tensions requires universities to critically assess how their protective infrastructures can support activism while addressing internal, structural, and epistemic hierarchies.

Contributors to the volume must address one or more of the themes and questions set out below. We welcome theoretical, empirical and reflective contributions.

1. Activist agency in exile

- How is activism undermined and enabled, or both, by exile?
- Are there ways in which activism is being creatively reimagined - in its organisational forms, resourcing, strategies - in exile?
- How does the nature, objectives and location of exile activism change over time?
- What are the roles of, and relationships and tensions between, activists at home and in exile? How do these dynamics shift across different generations of activists and geographic locations of exile?
- How do time, location, gender, age/generation and the choice (or impossibility) of return shape activism in exile?
- To what extent can activism at home, in proximate and more distant host countries be considered an 'ecosystem' (Banki)? And what role to different parts of the ecosystem play?
- What role do or could universities play in this 'ecosystem'?

2. Protection infrastructures

- What are the norms, laws and policies that potentially provide protection for activists? What are the implications of the lack of coherence between these norms, policies and laws? How do their inconsistencies affect activism?
- How do activists exhibit agency in the ways in which they navigate these infrastructures?
- What are the tensions between the fact that measures protect individuals whereas much activism depends on collectives?
- What role do or could universities play as part of this infrastructure - 'stabilisers' (Mazzero 2025), 'enablers', etc?
- How are protection arrangements shaped by proximity and precarity, and by the growing phenomenon of transnational repression?

3. Universities as sites of protection

- What roles are universities playing as sites of protection (overtly and covertly)?
- Beyond protection of individuals, are there additional roles universities could play to protect activists and activism?
- Could universities move beyond a humanitarian model of protection to a solidarity-based model?

Submission Details

We invite proposals of 300–500 words outlining the contribution's main argument, methodology, and relevance to the volume. Please also include a short biographical note (up to 200 words).

Selected authors will be invited to participate in a face-to-face workshop at the University of York to discuss their draft papers, receive feedback, and engage with other participants prior to the submission of full chapters.

Key Dates:

Deadline for abstracts: 10 January 2026

Notification of acceptance: 31 January 2026

Workshop: May 2026

Full chapters due: 30 September 2026

Chapter Length: 6,000–8,000 words (including references)

The edited volume will be submitted to a leading academic publisher in the fields of human rights, political sociology, and international studies.

Contact:

Please send your proposals and any questions to: Rosario Figari Layus (rfigari@uni-bonn.de) and Paul Gready (paul.gready@york.ac.uk).