

Regional Workshop on “Preventing Violations of IHL Through Socialization of Norms: An Exchange of Practice”

Brussels, 17 October 2025

Co-organized by the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs and the European Commission’s DG ECHO, and the ICRC.

This report presents a synthesis of discussions and reflections from the regional workshop held in Brussels on 17 October 2025. The event brought together representatives of EU institutions, Member States and experts to explore how International Humanitarian Law (IHL) can be better promoted and internalized through education, training, and the socialization of humanitarian norms. The workshop offered a rich exchange of practice and ideas on how to prevent violations of IHL by fostering lasting respect for humanitarian principles within societies and institutions.

1. Background and Objectives

The workshop was convened at a time when the principles of IHL are under increasing strain. In many contexts, the boundaries of humanitarian law are challenged by the erosion of consensus around basic norms of protection as dehumanizing rhetoric rises. The event’s objective was to move beyond the legal dimension of IHL and focus on how these rules can be internalized, becoming part of professional culture, education systems, and civic values. By linking the theory of norm socialization to practical training and communication methods, participants sought to identify approaches capable of embedding IHL across different institutional and social contexts.

2. Narrative Summary of the Discussions

The workshop unfolded as a full-day exchange that moved from training practice to societal norm-building, blending institutional presentations with reflective dialogue. Throughout the sessions, there was a shared sense of urgency and purpose: participants acknowledged that while IHL remains universally ratified, its principles are increasingly violated in practice. The discussions were marked by openness and practicality, with a focus on the concrete challenges of teaching, communicating, and embodying humanitarian values.

Opening Session

The opening statements set the tone for a day of frank reflection. Eloi Fillion (ICRC Brussels), Natalia Starowicz (Austria), Annick Villarosa (DG ECHO), and Nicolas Nely (France) each addressed the crisis of compliance with IHL. Speakers underscored that attacks on civilians, restrictions on humanitarian access, and the targeting of essential infrastructure have reached alarming levels. They emphasized that such violations not only generate immediate humanitarian suffering but also erode the foundations of peace and social cohesion. Annick Villarosa linked the conversation to the EU’s efforts in promoting IHL, as well as the EU’s

preparedness agenda, including its section on Population Preparedness. Nicolas Nely called for a renewal of commitment, insisting that humanitarian values must be transmitted through education and culture “from childhood to adulthood.”

Panel 1 – IHL Training and Education at Home and Abroad

Moderated by Nele Verlinden (ICRC), this panel showcased diverse experiences from institutions translating IHL into practice. Anna Kondratova (Research Service, Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine) presented Ukraine’s IHL training programme for parliamentarians, their assistants and parliament. The programme has evolved to accommodate different interests and availabilities. Domenica Bumma (EEAS) described the Human Rights and Democracy Factory. The Factory is a collaborative, peer-based learning platform that moves away from conventional training and cultivates a community of practice across EU institutions. Alina Secrieru (European Judicial Training Network) underlined the impact of peer-to-peer learning, likening EJTN exchanges to an “Erasmus for judges and prosecutors,” where participants learn through direct experience, simulations, and shared reflection. Natalia Starowicz (Austrian MFA) added a deeply personal perspective, recalling how her field experience in Ukraine shaped her commitment to IHL. Her contribution also highlighted the essential value of “learning by doing.”

Discussion

Breakout group discussions highlighted several common priorities for effective training. Across groups, participants stressed the need for credible trainers with practical field experience, the value of peer-to-peer learning, and the importance of building trust, rapport, and safe spaces, particularly when participants come from diverse backgrounds. Groups emphasized that training should be clearly framed (introductory vs. specialized), context-specific, and grounded in real-life cases, with immersive methods such as simulations, role plays, and crisis exercises helping participants internalize key messages. Many also underlined the need to engage leadership and decision-makers to ensure institutional buy-in, develop regionally tailored approaches, and embed trainings within existing structures to ensure continuity. Gender balance among trainers, integration of gender perspectives, and the careful preparation of trainers for challenging questions were also recurring themes.

In the plenary, participants reaffirmed the emotional dimension of learning, particularly in fields such as IHL, where exposure to conflict-related realities can make training both intense and deeply impactful. They underscored the urgency of strengthening awareness of IHL and the decisive role played by those delivering the message, noting that experience sharing often resonates more than formal instruction. Individual interventions further illustrated these points: suggestions included establishing an IHL-focused TAIEX program, using realistic crisis simulations in diplomatic training, and prioritizing humility, authenticity, and personal connection in trainer–participant interactions.

Overall, the discussions converged on the view that meaningful behavioral change arises from context-relevant, practice-based learning delivered by credible trainers who can connect with their audience on both professional and personal levels.

Panel 2.1 – The Theory and Practice of Norm Socialization

The second session, moderated by Nishat (ICRC), explored how norms take root within societies. Sophie Legros (London School of Economics) examined how social norms are sustained by expectations and power structures, stressing that genuine change requires a multi-dimensional approach rooted in local legitimacy and collective ownership. Matej Kovarik (ICRC) presented findings from *The Roots of Restraint in War*, showing that internalized adherence to norms, rather than obedience driven by punishment or peer pressure, leads to the most sustainable respect for IHL. Hans Roggen (Vias Institute) illustrated these ideas through the BOB campaign against drunk driving, demonstrating how positive storytelling and repetition has transformed social behaviour in Belgium. Participants discussed how IHL could be communicated in a similar way - through relatable, emotionally resonant narratives rather than through fear or legalism. A lively exchange followed on the question “How do we ‘BOB’ IHL?” with participants proposing the creation of relatable symbols or campaigns that make humanitarian behaviour part of everyday identity.

The discussions also touched on the EU Preparedness Union Strategy, emphasizing the behavioural dimension of crisis readiness and the importance of addressing optimism bias and social learning. The discussion concluded that fostering humanitarian norms requires positive engagement, sustained repetition, and local adaptation rather than top-down dissemination.

Panel 2.2 – Socializing IHL Norms and Principles

The final session focused on practical and generational approaches to embedding IHL in society. Tamar Tomashvili (Jean Pictet Competition) described the competition’s experiential method of “taking the law out of the books,” fostering empathy and cross-cultural understanding among young participants from diverse backgrounds. Nicolas Nely shared France’s efforts to institutionalize IHL training within its Diplomatic Academy and to promote humanitarian awareness among students and young professionals. He reflected on the value of reaching the youth, suggesting, for example, that respect for IHL be rewarded in video games. Jani Leino (Finnish Red Cross) presented data from the *Rules of War 2024* survey, showing that while public knowledge of IHL remains limited, there is strong intuitive support for limits in warfare and compassion for civilian victims. The ensuing discussion explored how such intuitive empathy can be strengthened through education, media, and popular culture, to counter the growing normalization of violence.

3. Key Insights

Across all sessions, a consistent message emerged: preventing violations of IHL requires more than legal dissemination. It demands a transformation in how individuals, institutions, and societies perceive and internalize humanitarian values. Training is most effective when it

connects with personal motivation and lived experience. Programmes that encourage participation, dialogue, and emotional engagement, such as simulations or peer learning, are far more likely to produce behavioural change than lecture-based approaches.

The discussions also highlighted the importance of credibility and trust. Trainers and facilitators must possess not only technical expertise but also authenticity and field experience. Participants respond more strongly to peers and mentors who embody the principles they teach. This reinforces the idea that socialization is not about instruction but about example and community reinforcement.

Speakers and participants agreed that promoting IHL requires integration across multiple layers of society: education systems, diplomatic training, media, and cultural initiatives. Efforts to socialize humanitarian norms must go beyond military and legal communities, involving teachers, journalists, community leaders, and digital creators. Public familiarity with IHL is low, but empathy remains strong; the challenge is to transform empathy into sustained normative conviction.

The workshop underscored the fragility of socialized norms in the current global environment. The erosion of consensus on key humanitarian prohibitions, including withdrawals from disarmament treaties, shows that progress cannot be taken for granted. Social norms, once established, must be continuously reinforced through education, communication, and leadership by example.

4. Conclusion

The Brussels workshop reaffirmed that the prevention of IHL violations depends on cultivating a culture of restraint and empathy that extends across all sectors of society. Participants called for renewed investment in training and education models that foster behavioural change, and for communication strategies that make humanitarian norms visible and relatable to the public. By combining structured instruction with community engagement, emotional connection, and creative outreach, it is possible to make IHL not just a set of rules, but a shared social expectation - a part of who we are, not only what we are obliged to do.

Annex – Key Findings and Takeaways

1. Training

1.1 Design and Delivery

- **Consider timing** of training – some training is necessary at the start of one’s career, while other aspects should be incorporated at different stages as appropriate.
- **Practical, experience-based learning** is essential. Use simulations, case studies, and scenario-based exercises (“learning by doing”) rather than lectures.
- **Tailor training** to the audience’s profile (age, language, professional background, etc). Trainers should adapt content and tone accordingly.
- **Clarify the level** (introductory vs. advanced) so expectations are clear.
- **Consider the advantages of different formats (online and face-to-face)** and perhaps combining them: online for flexibility and reach, in-person for engagement and networking.
- **Contextualize** training in local realities (e.g., connect IHL to cultural or regional norms).

Trainers and Facilitation

- Trainers should have **field or lived experience**, fostering credibility and trust.
- Ensure **diversity** among trainers and integrate different perspectives throughout content.
- Emphasize **peer-to-peer and collaborative learning** - participants learn from one another’s practice.
- **Train the trainers** to maintain quality, consistency, and sensitivity to context.

Engagement and Impact

- Encourage **emotional connection** - personal stories and real-world relevance improve retention and motivation.
- Create **safe, trusting environments** that promote open discussion, especially across diverse groups.
- Build **leadership buy-in** - decision-makers must value and support training efforts.
- Evaluate not just knowledge gained but **behavioral impact** six months later; use participant feedback loops for ongoing improvement.
- Use **failure as a learning tool** - simulations should allow for mistakes that generate reflection and growth.

Sustainability

- Embed IHL learning in **existing training systems** (diplomatic academies, military schools, civil service curricula).
- Encourage **regionalized models** to make sessions more relevant to participants’ realities.
- Consider **joint programs** between human rights, humanitarian, and legal communities to foster cross-sector learning.

2. Socialization of Norms

Approach and Strategy

- Promote **multilevel and multisectoral** approaches - combine individual, institutional, and community engagement.
- Build **local legitimacy**: avoid top-down imposition; co-create messages with communities.
- Build on **what already exists**.
- Leverage **existing cultural references and traditions** to make IHL relatable.
- Foster **coalition-building** - involve community leaders, educators, youth, and power holders.

Narrative and Communication

- Use **positive storytelling** to internalize norms (as with Belgium's "BOB" campaign).
- Focus on **relatable, inclusive figures or symbols** that embody humanitarian values ("anyone can be BOB").
- Make IHL **visible in everyday life** - through popular culture, schools, games, and social media.
- Encourage **empathy-based communication**, showing shared humanity and the universal need for protection in war.

Targeting and Internalization

- Engage people **early**, in childhood or youth, to shape long-term values.
- Integrate IHL principles into **education systems** and youth activities (competitions, simulations, curricula).
- Connect training to **identity and moral ownership**: norms endure when they become part of one's self-concept.
- Reach **non-traditional audiences** (e.g., gamers, influencers, and private-sector actors) through creative channels.

Institutional and Societal Integration

- Link IHL awareness to resilience, crisis readiness, and civic responsibility
- Use **social learning mechanisms** - people adopt norms when they see them practiced by peers.
- Promote **moral courage** and counter dehumanization by emphasizing equality and shared rights.
- Recognize **moments of socialization** - crises, public movements, or personal experiences that can serve as catalysts for norm adoption.

To strengthen adherence to IHL:

- Training must **inspire and equip**, not just inform.

- Socialization must **embed humanitarian values in identity and culture**, not only in law or institutions.
- The bridge between the two is **experience** - shared, practical, and human.