



NHSMUN

National High School Model United Nations

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A Note on the NHSMUN Difference

Esteemed Faculty and Delegates,

Welcome to NHSMUN 2027! We are Armen Bagdassarian and Sabeeh Mirza, and we are elated to serve as this year's Secretaries-General. Thank you for choosing to attend NHSMUN, the world's largest and most diverse high school Model United Nations conference. As a space for collaboration, consensus, and compromise, NHSMUN strives to transform today's brightest thinkers, speakers, and collaborators into tomorrow's leaders. We believe that an emphasis on education through simulation is paramount to the Model UN experience.

Realism and Accuracy: Although a perfect simulation of the UN is never possible, we believe that one of the core educational responsibilities of MUN conferences is to educate students about how the UN System works. We strive to invite real UN, NGO, and field experts into each committee through our committee speakers program. Moreover, we arrange meetings between students and the actual UN Permanent Mission of the country they are representing. These exclusive resources are only available due to IMUNA's formal association with the United Nations Department of Global Communications and consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. No other conference goes so far to deeply immerse students into the UN System.

Educational Emphasis: At the heart of NHSMUN lies education and compromise. Part of what makes NHSMUN special is its diverse delegate base. As such, when NHSMUN distributes awards, we strongly de-emphasize their importance in comparison to the educational value of Model UN. In particular, our daises look for and promote constructive leadership and diplomacy that strive toward consensus, as real ambassadors do in the United Nations.

Research and a Dedicated Staff: Our staffers care deeply about delegates' experiences and what they take away from their time at NHSMUN. Our Directors spend over six months preparing Background Guides, in addition to Update Briefs written to reflect the rapidly changing nature of the topics to be discussed. Our staffers are trained rigorously to provide the best conference experience possible. Our daises provide thoughtful comments on submitted position papers. Our staff aims to tailor the committee experience to delegates' reflections and research, but also to facilitate an environment where all delegates' thoughts can be heard.

Empowering Participation: The UN relies on the voices of all of its member states to create resolutions. This is our philosophy at NHSMUN too. Our Rules of Procedure and our staff focus on making every voice in the committee heard, regardless of country assignment or skill level. Additionally, unlike many other conferences, we also emphasize delegate participation after the conference. Delegates spend countless hours researching topics critical to the UN and broader international sphere.

Delegates, it is our sincerest hope that your time at NHSMUN will be thought-provoking and stimulating. NHSMUN is an incredible time to learn, grow, and embrace new opportunities. We look forward to seeing you work both as students and global citizens at the conference.

Best,

Armen Bagdassarian
Secretary-General

Sabeeh Mirza
Secretary-General

Position Paper Requirements

Delegate research and preparation is a critical element of attending NHSMUN and enjoying the debate experience. We have provided this Background Guide to introduce the topics that will be discussed in your committee. We encourage and expect each of you to critically explore the selected topics and be able to identify and analyze their intricacies upon arrival to the conference.

The task of preparing for the conference can be challenging. To assist delegates, we have updated our [Beginner Delegate Guide](#) and [Advanced Delegate Guide](#). These guides contain more detailed instructions on how to prepare a position paper and excellent sources that delegates can use for research. Use these resources to your advantage. They can help transform a sometimes overwhelming task into what it should be: an engaging, interesting, and rewarding experience.

To accurately represent a country, delegates must be able to articulate its policies. Accordingly, NHSMUN requires each delegation (the one or two delegates representing a country in a committee) to write a position paper for each topic on the committee's agenda. More information about how to write and format position papers can be found in the [Research Guide](#). To summarize, position papers should be structured into three sections.

I: Topic Background – This section should describe the history of the topic as it would be described by the delegate's country. Delegates do not need to give an exhaustive account of the topic, but rather focus on the details that are most important to the delegation's policy and proposed solutions.

II: Country Policy – This section should discuss the delegation's policy regarding the topic. Each paper should state the policy in plain terms and include the relevant statements, statistics, and research that support the effectiveness of the policy. Comparisons with other global issues are also appropriate here.

III. Proposed Solutions – This section should detail the delegation's proposed solutions to address the topic. Descriptions of each solution should be thorough. Each idea should clearly connect to the specific problem it aims to solve and identify potential obstacles to implementation and how they can be avoided. The solution should be a natural extension of the country's policy.

Each topic's position paper should be **no more than 10 pages long** double-spaced with standard margins and 12 point font size. This is a maximum; **3–5 pages per topic is often a suitable length**. The paper must be written from the perspective of your assigned country and should articulate the policies you will espouse at the conference.

Each delegation is responsible for submitting position papers on or before **February 26, 2027**. If a delegate wishes to receive detailed feedback from the committee's dais, their position paper must be submitted on or before **February 5, 2027**. The papers received by this earlier deadline will be reviewed by the committee dais and returned before February 26. Instructions on how to submit position papers will be shared directly with faculty advisors.

Submission instructions for position papers will be sent to faculty advisers via email. If delegations are unable to submit their position papers on time, please contact us at nhsmun@imuna.org.

Delegations that do not submit position papers will be ineligible for awards.

Committee History

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was established on March 15, 2006, by the UN General Assembly through the adoption of Resolution 60/251. The goal of this resolution was to create a UN body dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe.¹ Its creation was part of a broader reform of the United Nations human rights system. The UNHRC replaced the UN Commission on Human Rights, which had operated since 1946.²

Unlike the first commission, which used to operate under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the UNHRC was created as an intergovernmental body of the General Assembly.³ Its main goal is to promote universal respect for the protection of all freedoms and human rights, address the situations of human rights violations, and formulate recommendations to strengthen the framework of human rights.⁴ An example of this is the Resolution A/RES/55/96, titled “Promoting and Consolidating Democracy,” which focuses on strengthening democratic processes worldwide. It called on member states to respect human rights while having a transparent electoral system.⁵ Another example is the resolution adopted in the 56th session of the UNHRC, which focuses on freedom of expression as a requirement for other human rights.⁶

The Council is composed of 47 member states elected by a secret ballot by an absolute majority of the United Nations General Assembly. Members serve for three years and are not eligible for re-election immediately after having served two consecutive terms. To have an equitable geographic distribution, seats are located across five regional groups: 13 seats for African States, 13 seats for Asian Pacific States, six seats for Eastern European States, eight seats for Latin American and Caribbean States, and seven seats for Western European and other States.⁷

The UNHRC holds three regular sessions per year regularly at the Palais des Nations in Geneva. However, the Council can hold a special session or urgent debate with short notice if a member state requests it, supported by one-third of the Council.⁸ Proceedings in the Council involve interactive dialogue with states, special procedures, NGOs, and civil society organizations.⁹ Even though the UNHRC cannot enforce its decisions or use military force, the Council relies on public exposure, independent investigations, and report violations to the UN General Assembly.

1 United Nations General Assembly, 60/251 Human Rights Council, Resolution 60/251, A/RES/60/251, (April 3, 2006), docs.un.org/en/a/res/60/251.

2 “Introduction,” United Nations Human Rights Council, accessed August 25, 2026, www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/chr/commission-on-human-rights.

3 Mónica Pinto, “Special Procedures: Human Rights Council,” Oxford Public International Law, last modified December 2025, opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law-mpeipro/e2154.013.2154/law-mpeipro-e2154?d=%2F1.0.1093%2Faw-mpeipro%2Fe2154.013.2154%2Faw-mpeipro-e2154&p=emailAy9D%2F.QJ9Vgy2&print.

4 “Welcome to the Human Rights Council,” United Nations Human Rights Council, accessed August 25, 2026, www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/about-council.

5 United Nations General Assembly, 55/96 Promoting and consolidating democracy, Resolution 55/96, A/RES/55/96, (February 28, 2001), docs.un.org/en/A/RES/55/96.

6 Geneva, “Report on the 56th session of the Human Rights Council,” Universal Rights Group, last modified July 15, 2024, www.universal-rights.org/report-on-the-56th-session-of-the-human-rights-council/.

7 “Membership of the Human Rights Council,” United Nations Human Rights Council, accessed August 25, 2026, www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/membership.

8 “Sessions,” United Nations Human Rights Council, accessed August 25, 2026, www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/sessions.

9 “NGO Participation in the Human Rights Council,” United Nations Human Rights Council, accessed August 25, 2026, www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ngo-participation.

TOPIC A

UNHRC | NHSMUN 2027

Human Rights Violations in Belarus



Photo Credit: Indian Prime Minister's Office

Introduction

Human rights are a fundamental principle of the United Nations (UN), which recognizes freedoms such as expression and assembly, as well as the right to participate in free and fair elections, as essential to public life.¹ Although governments are expected to protect these rights and allow citizens to participate without fear, their protection varies considerably across states. Belarus is a clear example of the consequences of continued restrictions on these fundamental freedoms. Thus, it has become a significant concern for the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC).²

Aleksandr Lukashenko became the president of Belarus in 1994 and has since consolidated extensive control over the state, repeatedly responding to political opposition and public protests with repression. This repression intensified following the disputed 2020 presidential election, when large-scale protests erupted after citizens challenged the official results, and authorities responded with mass arrests and the use of force.³

Since 2020, the government has further expanded its control through the use of anti-extremism legislation and other measures targeting political dissent. International organizations have documented arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, forced exile, and restrictions on independent media and civilians.⁴ These events have demonstrated that repression has extended beyond political opponents to journalists, activists, and civic organizations.⁵

These policies have affected institutions beyond the political sphere, including civil society, education, religion, and the media, contributing to an increasingly intolerant environment for public participation. The 2025 presidential election further demonstrated the lack of genuine political competition in Belarus. International organizations and governments questioned the legitimacy of the election and warned that political repression remained a serious concern.⁶ Many prominent rivals to Lukashenko were either imprisoned or in exile and therefore unable to participate in the election.⁷ Despite widespread

criticism, the international community remains divided over how best to respond to Belarus' continuing human rights crisis.⁸

One of the primary international responses to the crisis has been the use of targeted sanctions, a tool used by governments and regional organizations to pressure governments or individuals to change their behavior.⁹ These measures have restricted access to financial resources, trade, and travel to pressure the Belarusian government to change its policies. Some states support maintaining strict sanctions and pursuing legal action, arguing that stronger measures are necessary to hold authorities accountable for human rights abuses.¹⁰ Others favor diplomacy, arguing that excessive economic pressure could further isolate Belarus and make future negotiations more difficult.¹¹ Within the UNHRC, this broader disagreement shapes debates over whether to strengthen independent investigations and public reporting or prioritize dialogue and technical cooperation with Belarus.

The situation in Belarus there presents an ongoing challenge for the UNHRC and its member states. While restrictions on civil society, political participation, and fundamental freedoms continue, concerns over the protection of human rights and the well-being of the Belarusian population have also grown. Member states must consider how to protect human rights and promote accountability while respecting national sovereignty, restoring stability, and facilitating international cooperation.

History and Description of the Issue

THE CONSOLIDATION OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE UNDER ALEKSANDR LUKASHENKO

In 1991, following the fall of the Soviet Union, Belarus became an independent state. However, its transition from the Soviet system to an independent government came with significant political and economic challenges. Inflation, corruption, and economic instability increased, while the newly established government struggled to address these challenges effectively.¹² Amidst this, Belarus's first presidential election since independence was in 1994.

After winning the presidency, Aleksandr Lukashenko used constitutional referendums to expand presidential authority, weaken parliament, and remove presidential term limits.¹³ These changes helped Lukashenko remain in power while reducing political competition and the influence of other branches of government.¹⁴ Examining this gradual erosion of democratic

institutions provides important context for understanding the broader human rights situation in Belarus.¹⁵

Unlike many established politicians, Lukashenko was not viewed as part of the country's political elite in 1994. This helped him appeal to citizens dissatisfied with the government and the worsening economic conditions. Lukashenko's background also contributed to his popularity. After graduating from the Mogilyov Teaching Institute and the Belarusian Agricultural Academy, he served in the army and later worked as an instructor in political affairs. In 1993, Lukashenko led an anti-corruption committee that investigated illegal acts by state officials.¹⁶ This background, combined with his anti-corruption work, helped him gain support among citizens seeking an alternative to the country's political elite, which many viewed as corrupt.¹⁷

Lukashenko won the election against then-Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich. He got 80 percent of the votes.¹⁸ However, tensions began to grow between the parliament and the newly elected president. Belarus' constitution kept a balance of power between the different bodies of the state. This meant there were limits to the president's power. However, Lukashenko believed that he



President Lukashenko during a meeting with the President of Azerbaijan

Credit: Press Service of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan

A protest in Minsk in 2020

Credit: Homoatrox



needed more power to resolve the key problems in the country.

In 1996, Lukashenko organized a constitutional referendum. This was a public, simple majority vote used to make changes to the constitution.¹⁹ Lukashenko leveraged it to expand the powers of the president, extending his term in office and reducing parliament's role in government decision-making.²⁰ These changes weakened the separation of powers and further concentrated political authority in the executive branch.

During the 1990s and 2000s, opposition parties faced increasing restrictions on political participation, while legal and financial pressures allowed the state to exert greater control over the media.²¹ Concerns over political repression intensified when several opposition figures disappeared under suspicious circumstances between 1999 and 2000. This included former Minister of the Interior Yury Zakharenko, Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian Parliament Viktor Gonchar, and Russian Public Television cameraman Dmitry Zavadsky, all of whom had spoken out against Lukashenko's rule.²² Although investigations did not identify who

was responsible for the disappearances, the cases raised concerns about the suppression of political opposition under Lukashenko.

Lukashenko also maintained public support through an economic model that differed from the approach taken by Belarus's first government after independence. Rather than privatizing state industries, his government retained control over much of the economy, allowing it to provide social services, economic support programs, and job protections. This approach created an implied social contract in which the government expected citizens to accept restrictions on political freedom in exchange for economic stability and social protection.²³ However, this arrangement did not produce universal support. Over time, economic stagnation, limited political freedoms, repression, and distrust of election results increased public dissatisfaction, particularly among younger people and urban residents.

Concerns about the state of democracy in Belarus became increasingly notable throughout the 2000s and 2010s. International organizations repeatedly criticized the country's elections for

failing to meet democratic standards, opposition candidates faced barriers to participation, and civil society organizations faced increasing restrictions.²⁴ The government made voter registration more difficult, there was increased scrutiny of organizations receiving foreign funding, and groups were threatened with closures if they criticized the government.²⁵

These gradual restrictions became more significant during the 2020 presidential election. Despite growing challenges to Lukashenko's public support, the Central Electoral Commission announced that he had won 80.23 percent of the vote, compared with 9.9 percent for opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. This was a result that opposition groups contested.²⁶ Tsikhanouskaya demanded a recount and claimed victory, while countries including Poland and Germany alleged widespread electoral fraud.²⁷ In response, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians participated in protests, which became the largest demonstrations in the country's history.²⁸ The government, however, refused to recognize the opposition's claims and affirmed Lukashenko's victory.

The government's response marked a new phase of repression under Lukashenko. Security forces arrested thousands of people, used force against protesters, and targeted journalists, activists, and opposition leaders, while many other opposition leaders were forced into exile. Human rights organizations subsequently documented widespread violations, including cases of unfair detentions and torture.²⁹

The 2025 presidential election further demonstrated that Lukashenko continued to consolidate his power, despite continued international criticism. He secured a seventh term while prominent opponents remained imprisoned, barred from participating, or in exile, and independent media and civil society faced severe restrictions. Many UN experts warn that ongoing political repression could contribute to further human rights violations.³⁰

RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSEMBLY, AND ASSOCIATION

In the early 2000s, the Belarus government heavily restricted people's freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Freedom of expression is a basic right protected by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). It is the freedom to hold opinions and to seek, receive, and share information.³¹ This is an essential right that supports a democratic and transparent society. One way the Belarusian government has limited the freedom of expression is through the censorship and prosecution of independent media. On February 26, 2026, Belarusian journalists Uladzimir Yanukevich and Andrei Pakalenka were each sentenced to more than 10 years in prison for their work with the independent news outlets Intex-Press and Bar24. The government had designated both outlets as "extremist."³² Using anti-extremism laws to punish journalistic activity restricts the ability of reporters to share information and may discourage others from reporting critically on the government.

The freedom of assembly is the right of individuals to gather peacefully in private and public spaces to express their opinions. It is a basic right that allows citizens to collectively express their concerns and call for change.³³ Following Belarus's 2020 presidential election, citizens attempted to exercise this right. After the Central Electoral Commission announced that Lukashenko had won more than 80 percent of the vote, hundreds of thousands of people participated in peaceful protests. Authorities responded by using force against protesters and detaining thousands of participants. By dispersing peaceful gatherings through force and punishing people for participating, the government restricted their right to peaceful assembly.³⁴

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), freedom of association is the right of individuals

to form, join, and participate in organizations without unjustified interference by the government. This right allows people to work collectively to represent their interests, defend human rights, and participate in public life. Following the August 2020 election, Belarusian authorities detained members of the Viasna Human Rights Centre and charged them with organizing actions that “violate public order.”³⁵ By detaining members for their legitimate work with a human rights organization, the government interfered with their ability to organize and participate freely in civil society.

As Lukashenko consolidated political power, activists, journalists, and opposition groups faced increasing restrictions. During the 2000s, independent media organizations and journalists faced increasing pressure from the government.³⁶ Meanwhile, state-controlled media received government support and dominated the country’s information environment. For example, during the 2006 presidential election, Lukashenko received approximately 95 percent of prime-time coverage on state television and 90 percent of coverage in state-owned newspapers.³⁷ Opposition candidates and organizations have reported that citizens could not access different points of view in their media to help inform their voting decisions.³⁸

In the 2000s and 2010s, Belarusians needed to get permission before holding protests or any form of public assembly. The permits were denied most of the time, especially if the request was made by an opposition group. Those who decided to still participate in unauthorized protests or assemblies then

faced imprisonment or penalties. When citizens protested past alleged electoral irregularities, security forces dispersed the demonstrations and detained journalists, opposition activists, and protesters. Amnesty International reported that these actions violated the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and political participation.³⁹

According to Reporters Without Borders, cyberattacks, online restrictions, and arrests during the 2010 presidential election also made it harder for citizens to access independent information online.⁴⁰ Online activists, independent media outlets, and opposition groups faced censorship and website blocks. For example, authorities blocked access to Charter 97, an independent Belarusian news website founded in 1997 to promote democracy and human rights.⁴¹ Decree No. 60, titled “On Measures to Improve the Use of the National Segment of the Internet,” further expanded the ability of authorities to monitor online activity. Its identification and monitoring requirements reduced online anonymity and made it easier for authorities to identify independent journalists, activists, and government critics. These measures, therefore, restricted people’s ability to express critical views online without fear of government surveillance or punishment.⁴²

Throughout the 2010s, the Belarusian government also maintained restrictive policies toward LGBTIQ+ people. Even though consensual same-sex relationships were not criminalized, Belarus did not adopt comprehensive protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and did not legally recognize

During the 2006 presidential election, Lukashenko received approximately 95 percent of prime-time coverage on state television.

same-sex relationships.⁴³ In 2013, the LGBTIQ+ organization GayBelarus, also known as Lambda, attempted to obtain legal registration. Following the registration attempt, activists reported that police summoned members for questioning, raided clubs associated with the LGBTIQ+ community, and subjected some activists to humiliation and physical abuse.⁴⁴ Authorities also banned a planned Pride rally, while police dispersed previous LGBTIQ+ demonstrations. These actions made it more difficult for LGBTIQ+ people to organize publicly, advocate for their rights, and participate freely in civil society. International organizations continue to identify violations of the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association as among Belarus's most serious human rights concerns, affecting both marginalized groups and average citizens alike.

POLITICAL PRISONERS, TORTURE, AND ARBITRARY DETENTION

After the 2020 election, security forces carried out large-scale arbitrary arrests, detaining around 37,000 people between May 2020 and May 2021.⁴⁵ Many detainees were reportedly tortured or otherwise mistreated because they were

believed to oppose the government. By March 2022, more than 1,000 people were imprisoned on political charges, with some facing sentences of 10 years or more.⁴⁶ The government also carried out a broader campaign of repression intended to silence those who disagreed with Lukashenko's rule.

Human rights organizations have described many of these arrests as cases of arbitrary detention, meaning that people were detained without a valid reason or fair legal process. Fair legal proceedings are protected under Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees the right "to be innocent until proven guilty according to law in a public trial."⁴⁷ Belarusian authorities have frequently detained people without clear evidence of criminal activity and have, in some cases, restricted their access to legal representation.⁴⁸

As arrests increased, reports of abuse inside detention centers also became more common. Detainees reported poor conditions, inadequate medical care, and physical and psychological abuse. This included threats and humiliation by prison guards. The UN has stated that some of these actions could constitute torture under international law.⁴⁹ One example is Marfa



An opposition activist in a Belarusian prison

Credit: Silverrebel

Rabkova, a coordinator for the Viasna Human Rights Center, who was arrested in 2020 despite her health problems.⁵⁰ According to Amnesty International, authorities repeatedly denied her medical care, worsening her condition. Her case drew international attention to the treatment of prisoners and the lack of adequate medical care in Belarusian detention centers.

UN experts have urged Belarus to provide political prisoners with adequate medical care and investigate allegations of torture and ill-treatment.⁵¹ However, human rights organizations report that few officials have been held accountable and that authorities continue to use the criminal justice system to silence political opposition.⁵²

Amnesty International has also raised concerns about the conditions faced by political prisoners. In 2024, the organization reported that a number of prisoners, including prominent activist Maryia Kalenikava, had been held “incommunicado” for more than 500 days.⁵³ Essentially, they were isolated from the outside world, facing restricted communication, limited outside time, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment. Human rights organizations have warned that these conditions have contributed to severe physical and psychological suffering.⁵⁴

One well-known political prisoner was Ales Bialiatski, a human rights defender and founder of Viasna, which works to defend political prisoners and document government abuses. He was awarded the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize for his human rights work.⁵⁵ On March 3, 2023, a Belarusian court sentenced him to 10 years

in prison for allegedly smuggling cash into the country and financing protests that authorities claimed violated public order.⁵⁶ His imprisonment received international attention, with human rights organizations arguing that he was targeted for his activism rather than for committing a legitimate crime.⁵⁷

Political prisoners, arbitrary detention, and torture remain among the most significant human rights concerns in Belarus. Between the 2020 election and January 2026, around 50,000 activists, journalists, opposition supporters, and other citizens have been detained.⁵⁸ Viasna has reported 7,239 convictions in politically motivated criminal cases, while 1,184 political prisoners remain imprisoned.⁵⁹

RESTRICTIONS ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE USE OF EXTREMISM LAWS

Belarusian authorities have increasingly used counterterrorism and anti-extremism laws to target independent groups, religious organizations, human rights defenders, and opposition supporters.⁶⁰ Civil society refers to organizations that operate independently from the government and allow people to participate in public life outside formal politics.⁶¹ These include human rights organizations, religious groups, charities, community organizations, and trade unions.⁶² Lukashenko’s government also carried out a purge of independent organizations, closing down 1,000 groups, including civil society organizations. NGOs, community groups, and independent initiatives were increasingly forced to close or stop operating.

Between the 2020 election and January 2026, around 50,000 activists, journalists, opposition supporters, and other citizens have been detained.

Human rights defenders became a major target of this repression. Organizations that documented abuses and provided legal assistance to detainees faced increasing government pressure. The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders reported that the laws adopted in 2021 and 2023 restricted activists' ability to work freely and increased potential punishments. As a result, activists faced criminal investigations, fines, and possible prison sentences because of their work.⁶³

A key tool the government used to suppress public dissent, especially after the 2020 protests, was the Law on Countering Extremism. In 2007, Belarus adopted the law with the stated goal of protecting national security and preventing violent extremism. However, UN experts have warned that the law uses vague terms such as "extremist activities" without clear definitions. In Belarus, this can be applied to those simply having or acting on beliefs different from the societal norm.⁶⁴

As a result, authorities can apply the designation to peaceful journalism, political speech, and other civic activities.⁶⁵ Gathering without government approval could be punished with 30 days of detention and a 2,000 euro fine.⁶⁶ Further, in January 2023, Daria Losik was sentenced to two years in prison for "facilitating extremist activity" after giving an interview to Belsat about her imprisoned husband.⁶⁷ Because Belarus had designated Belsat an "extremist" organization, authorities treated the interview itself as a criminal act. Her case demonstrates how the law can be used to punish peaceful expression rather than violent extremism.

The use of anti-extremism policies eventually extended beyond political opposition into education and culture.⁶⁸ Schools increased patriotic and military programs and monitored teachers and students for political activity, while some teachers lost their jobs for supporting the 2020 protests.⁶⁹ Cultural organizations also faced pressure to promote narratives aligned

with government policies. The UN expressed concern that the growing use of anti-extremism laws was allowing political repression to extend into additional areas of public life.⁷⁰

Religious organizations also faced increasing pressure. The US Department of State reported that authorities maintained significant control over religious groups through registration requirements, surveillance, censorship, and restrictions on religious gatherings.⁷¹ Religious leaders faced pressure after displaying opposition symbols, praying for political prisoners, or publishing material that authorities classified as "extremist." Authorities also restricted some clergy members' access to political prisoners. This pressure was not entirely new; for example, New Life Church in Minsk had faced years of fines and a prolonged property dispute.⁷² After authorities evicted the congregation from its building in 2021, the building was demolished in 2023, and the church's pastor was detained for allegedly distributing "extremist" content.

Government restrictions also affected organizations that had operated for years.⁷³ Viasna Human Rights Center lost its legal registration in 2003 and continued to face pressure despite providing assistance to victims of human rights abuses.⁷⁴ In 2021, authorities also shut down the Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The closure of these organizations reduced access to community services and made it more difficult for citizens to organize independently.⁷⁵

Overall, the government has increasingly limited participation in public life through anti-extremism laws, the closure of NGOs, the designation of civic organizations as extremist, and pressure on religious groups. These policies have reduced the space for independent civic participation in Belarus and raised continuing concerns about violations of basic human rights.



A poll in Belarus

Credit: Nabil Al-Tikriti

Current Status

CONSEQUENCES OF THE 2025 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

January 26, 2025, marked Aleksandr Lukashenko's claim to a seventh presidential term.⁷⁶ The legitimacy of the election was questioned. Many member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) issued a statement arguing that Belarus did not ensure a free and fair election.⁷⁷ Free and fair elections include rights to vote without discrimination, to have equal access to the place of voting, and to vote anonymously, among others.⁷⁸

The United States and European Parliament described the election as a “sham” because genuine opposition candidates remained imprisoned or in exile and independent political activity had been severely restricted.⁷⁹ The European Parliament denounced the “ongoing and long standing grave violations of human rights and democratic principles in Belarus.”⁸⁰

In the 2025 election, many Belarusian citizens

abroad were prevented from voting because the government did not open polling stations outside the country.⁸¹ Additionally, the 2025 presidential election did not have political competition. During the election, independent organizations were shut down after being labeled extremists or after being forced to operate outside Belarus. The European Platform for Democratic Elections criticized the lack of many basic standards of a democratic election. This included a lack of democratic election processes, where multiple parties participate freely and have equal access to information.⁸²

Because of this, human rights organizations stated their concerns regarding the atmosphere of the electoral process. Amnesty International described the election's atmosphere as a “climate for repression and fear.” Belarus's government had created an environment where people could not freely use their political rights of freedom of assembly, association, and expression.⁸³ After the elections, political repression continued. United Nations experts worried that continued political repression would likely lead to more human rights violations, such as arbitrary or unjustified detentions and restrictions on the freedom of

expression.⁸⁴

Analysts at the Wilson Center pointed out that with each presidential term, Belarus becomes increasingly dependent on Lukashenko.⁸⁵ With every election, the chances of a political change through a democratic election decrease. Such was the case in the 2020 presidential election when opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya challenged Lukashenko and then rejected the official election results. Shortly after, she was forced to leave the country. Since then, many people associated with her campaign have been arrested for supporting her.⁸⁶

Five years after the 2020 election, the political opposition is still struggling. Many opposition leaders can only continue their work after leaving the country. Others are still in prison in Belarus. Many citizens avoid political activities out of fear. Strict rules against community groups, independent media, prisoners, and public protests have made it harder for people to take part in public life in general.⁸⁷ Despite the difficult situation in Belarus, several human rights organizations, including Viasna Human Rights Center, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, believe Belarus could improve its political and humanitarian situation. Civil society groups continue to work for reform and human rights in Belarus, even while many are in exile. This shows that people have not given up hope for change.⁸⁸ However, the future of political participation, democracy, and human rights in Belarus remains uncertain.

By early 2026, approximately 1,100 people remained imprisoned on politically motivated

charges.⁸⁹ Some were held in pretrial detention, while others were serving sentences imposed after trials that human rights organizations described as unfair. Many had been prosecuted for peaceful political expression, journalism, activism, or participation in protests rather than for acts of violence.⁹⁰ Their detentions therefore raised concerns about violations of the rights to liberty, freedom of expression, and a fair trial. Several political prisoners have died in custody, while human rights organizations have warned that many others with serious illnesses face inadequate medical care. Ihar Lednik was one activist who opposed Lukashenko's government who died in February 2024 because he did not receive proper medical treatment for his heart problems while in prison.⁹¹ Lukashenko's government has also arrested lawyers trying to help prisoners and punished families for receiving food. In 2025, the UN Group of Independent Experts concluded that widespread and systematic violations, including persecution and politically motivated imprisonment, amounted to crimes against humanity.⁹²

GLOBAL RESPONSES TO BELARUS'S HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Human rights violations in Belarus have gained international attention. Even before 2020, there were concerns about democracy and political freedom in Belarus. However, the government's response to the 2020 presidential election led to stronger reactions from international organizations, human rights institutions, and governments. Since then, the international

Five years after the 2020 election, the political opposition is still struggling.

community has used sanctions, diplomatic pressure, monitoring, and investigations to address human rights violations in Belarus.

After the 2020 presidential election protest and the government's action against opposition, the European Union (EU) imposed sanctions on Belarusian organizations and officials. These included travel bans and economic restrictions. They were placed on people who were believed to be responsible for human rights abuses. The EU clearly stated that the purpose of these sanctions was to pressure Belarusian authorities to end the repression, respect fundamental human rights, and release political prisoners.⁹³

Following the 2025 presidential election, pressure only grew. On March 27, 2025, the EU announced new sanctions against 25 people and seven organizations. These sanctions targeted those who were involved in the 2025 election results and those who supported Lukashenko's regime. These sanctions included members of the Central Election Commission (CEC), government officials, and several organizations. These new sanctions increased the EU's total sanctions on Belarus to 46 entities and 310 individuals.⁹⁴

Another important international response came from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In 2020, multiple states used the Moscow Mechanism, which allowed independent experts to investigate serious concerns about human rights violations in Belarus. This investigation examined all types of allegations regarding electoral fraud, torture, unfair arrests, and the excessive use of force against protesters.⁹⁵ After the investigation, a report prepared under the Moscow Mechanism found clear evidence of human rights violations in Belarus.

The report recommended that the government investigate these abuses and punish those responsible.⁹⁶ It also called on the government to respect fundamental freedoms, release political prisoners, and begin a dialogue with opposition groups and civil society. However, Belarusian authorities rejected the report's findings and did not implement its main recommendations. Instead, arrests, politically motivated prosecutions, and restrictions on civil society continued. In 2023, 38 OSCE participating states invoked the Moscow Mechanism again, and the resulting investigation found that the human rights situation had deteriorated further since the

Armed soldiers during a 2020 protest

Credit: Homoatrox



2020 report.⁹⁷

Along with the ongoing sanctions and diplomatic pressure, international legal actions have increased. In September 2024, Lithuania asked the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate Belarus, claiming that Belarusian authorities and government had committed crimes against humanity.⁹⁸ Lithuania argued that the actions that Belarus took, including the persecution and forced displacement of opposition members, could and should be crimes that the ICC needs to investigate.

These developments gained more importance on March 12, 2026. The ICC Office of the Prosecutor opened an investigation into the situation in Lithuania and Belarus after concluding that there was a reasonable basis to believe that crimes against humanity involving deportation and persecution through deportation had occurred. The investigation concerned alleged crimes by Belarusian authorities but had not yet produced charges against specific individuals. Even though Belarus is not a party to the Rome Statute, the ICC may exercise jurisdiction because part of the alleged conduct occurred in Lithuania, which is an ICC member state. Through the ICC, individual Belarusian officials could eventually face criminal charges and arrest warrants if prosecutors gather sufficient evidence linking them to crimes within the Court's jurisdiction.⁹⁹

The international response has not only come from organizations and governments. Human rights groups, Belarusian organizations, and independent media working while in exile have played an important role in documenting

the human rights violations and raising enough awareness of the situation in Belarus. Throughout reports, campaigns, and cooperation with international organizations, these groups have helped keep international attention focused on the situation in Belarus, despite government restrictions on their work.¹⁰⁰

China has stated that it remains a close partner with Belarus and publicly respects the Belarusian people's choice to elect Lukashenko.¹⁰¹ Belarus has also established closer ties with Russia. Thus, Belarus has become more dependent on Russia in politics, money, and security. Their close relationship can be seen in several ways. For example, Belarus and Russia have increased cooperation through union state agreements, or a deal between two countries to collaborate while remaining independent countries.¹⁰² Moreover, Russia has increased its military presence in Belarus. This has given Russia more influence over Belarus's foreign decisions. As a result, Russia has gained greater influence over Belarus's foreign and security policies.¹⁰³

Some experts strongly believe that Belarus's relationship with Russia has made international pressure less effective. Despite Russia and Belarus not always agreeing on everything, they heavily depend on each other economically and politically. Thanks to their relationship, Russia has helped Belarus reduce the impact of the Western sanctions and diplomatic isolation, making it easier for the government in Belarus to resist the international pressure.¹⁰⁴

Nowadays, Belarus keeps raising serious concerns about human rights and democracy.

In September 2024, Lithuania asked the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate Belarus.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev meets with Belarusian journalists in 2009

Credit: Office of the President of the Russian Federation



International investigations, sanctions, and monitoring efforts show that multiple countries and organizations are trying to respond to the human rights violations. As a result of this, the international response to Belarus keeps being an important discussion about human rights and democracy.

IMPACT ON JOURNALISTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN 2026

In 2026, the government in Belarus increased its pressure on human rights defenders and journalists. Authorities started using anti-extremism laws to punish journalists, target civil society groups, and persecute people who documented and publicly shared about the human rights violations occurring in Belarus.¹⁰⁵ The government also increased pressure on activists who were living abroad by taking away their property and seeking their extradition.¹⁰⁶

The Belarus government has imprisoned well-known figures in the media. For example, in May 2026, journalist Kiryl Pazniak reportedly had pneumonia and COVID-19, and his health was declining.¹⁰⁷ Kiryl and his 20 year old daughter

had been arrested in 2025 under charges related to alleged “extremist activity.” Human rights groups warned that the lack of proper medical care for Pazniak showed the poor conditions that many journalists face daily in Belarusian prisons. The government has occasionally released political prisoners following negotiations with the United States that led to the easing of some sanctions.¹⁰⁸ However, the continued arrests of journalists and reports of poor medical healthcare have shown that the government has not stopped making new arrests.

In April 2026, independent journalism in Belarus reached a turning point with Andrzej Poczobut. Poczobut is a Polish-Belarusian journalist and winner of the 2025 Sakharov Prize. He was released after he spent five years in prison. His release, confirmed by Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, was part of a ten-person exchange involving Belarus, Poland, Russia, and Moldova, conducted with US diplomatic involvement.¹⁰⁹ The agreement happened after international concern grew regarding the worsening of his health after long periods of isolation and a lack of proper medical care. His release, along with that of other political prisoners, was seen as a positive

step for the situation. However, the US Special Envoy John Coale said that around 900 political prisoners were still held in Belarus.¹¹⁰ Despite the progress, concerns about political repression and human rights violations in Belarus remain.

Concerns have also grown regarding labor rights. A statement by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) emphasized that Belarus continues to violate workers' rights. These organizations have reported that Lukashenko's government is jailing leaders and union activists. The government has also allowed forced labor among prisoners, medical institution staff, and residents of social care homes. People who disagreed with the government lost their jobs and often had trouble finding new ones.¹¹¹ International organizations reported that people who were trying to protect the workers faced detentions, investigations, and other forms of pressure from the government. Human rights groups said that these actions made it harder for people to participate in public life.¹¹²

The government has also tightened its control on the education system. This includes reducing Belarusian language education, standardizing what is taught in classrooms, and expanding military programs in schools.¹¹³ In this way, Lukashenko has aimed to spread his ideologies and weed out those who are not loyal to him. Pavel Tserashkovich, an advisor on science and education, estimated that more than 6,000 teachers in Belarus had lost their jobs due to government repression.¹¹⁴ Reports indicate that more than 50 teachers have been imprisoned, including educators accused of participating in peaceful protests, supporting opposition groups, criticizing the government, or engaging in independent union activity.¹¹⁵ Some detained educators have also reported torture or other forms of ill-treatment.

During a meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC), the United Kingdom said that the human rights situation in Belarus remained concerning.¹¹⁶ The UK raised concerns

regarding the arbitrary detention of more than 1,100 political prisoners. Although some political prisoners were released, authorities reportedly forced some of them to leave Belarus rather than allowing them to return home. Conditioning their freedom on departure coerces them into choosing between continued imprisonment and exile. This may violate their right to remain in or return to their own country and may separate them from their families and prevent them from participating freely in Belarusian public life. The UK also raised concerns about torture, ill-treatment, and the use of the justice system to punish critics of the government. The UK called on Belarus to release all political prisoners, cooperate with the UN investigation, and stop its repression of Belarusians living abroad.¹¹⁷

Despite these challenges, Belarusian journalists and human rights defenders continue to document abuses and support victims from inside Belarus and in exile.¹¹⁸ Although some political prisoners have been released, continued arrests, arbitrary detention, and restrictions on independent media demonstrate that journalists and human rights defenders remain at serious risk.

Bloc Analysis

POINTS OF DIVISION

Although many member states recognize that the human rights violations in Belarus have become an international concern, they disagree on how the HRC should act. One major area of division is whether diplomatic talks or stronger pressure is most likely to improve the situation.

Some states argue that years of dialogue have not ended arbitrary detention, attacks on journalists and human rights defenders, or restrictions on civil society. They therefore support stronger investigations, targeted sanctions imposed by individual governments, and greater diplomatic pressure. Other

states favor combining targeted pressure with continued communication, arguing that negotiations can secure the release of political prisoners and create opportunities for reform. A third group opposes sanctions because they may affect ordinary citizens, deepen Belarus's dependence on Russia, and reduce opportunities for cooperation.

Some member states believe that international organizations such as the UN and the OSCE should play a stronger role in documenting human rights violations and promoting accountability. They support independent investigations, evidence preservation, regular reporting, and continued monitoring by the HRC's Special Rapporteur and Group of Independent Experts. Other countries, especially those emphasizing sovereignty and cooperation, believe that international organizations should focus mainly on facilitating dialogue and increasing cooperation instead of establishing country-specific investigative mechanisms.

The final point of division is how to balance Belarus's sovereignty with the international responsibility to protect human rights. Some states believe that when serious human rights violations occur, the international community should take stronger action, even if it means scrutinizing conduct within a state's borders. Nevertheless, other states argue that national sovereignty and non-interference should be respected. They believe that lasting political change should come from the government of the country rather than from outside.

STATES SUPPORTING STRONG INTERNATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND PRESSURE

This bloc is mainly formed by EU Member States and other democratic countries that believe that Belarus should face consequences for the human rights situation. Some possible countries for this bloc are Poland, Estonia, Germany, Lithuania, France, Latvia, Belgium, Czechia, Canada, and

Denmark, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, and Switzerland. Some of these countries have a close relationship regarding politics, economy, and geography with Belarus. Many have welcomed Belarusian journalists, opposition leaders, and human rights defenders who were forced to leave their country.

These countries believe that after years of diplomatic talks there has not been enough progress. They emphasize that the government of Belarus has kept violating the human rights of their citizens despite the recommendations from the UN, international organizations, and OSCE. Because of this, they believe that more international pressure is needed. Members of these states support sanctions, continued international investigations, targeted pressure against responsible officials, and stronger cooperation with accountability mechanisms.¹¹⁹ They believe that if they reduce the pressure, it could lead to more repression in the country.

International investigations regarding human rights violations are also something important for them. They have supported investigations through the OSCE Moscow Mechanism and the UN with the purpose of collecting and preserving evidence, identifying patterns of abuse, and supporting future accountability proceedings.¹²⁰ On the other hand, they provide financial support to independent media and human rights defenders that work from the inside and outside the country.¹²¹ Many of the members of this bloc believe that these groups are important since they help document human rights violations and support victims. Member States in this bloc typically support increased diplomatic pressure, sanctions, investigations, and protection and assistance for victims, journalists, and human rights defenders. Their stated objective is to end violations and hold responsible officials accountable, rather than to determine Belarus's political leadership.

STATES SUPPORTING CONDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND TARGETED ACCOUNTABILITY

This bloc is composed of countries that recognize the human rights issues in Belarus but believe that diplomacy should be maintained regarding international responses. Some possible countries associated with this position include the United States, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and other states willing to combine criticism and targeted measures with direct diplomatic engagement.¹²² These countries have criticized the arbitrary detention, attacks on journalists and human rights defenders, and restrictions on civil society. But they believe that keeping direct communication with the government could help with a change.

Unlike the previous bloc, these countries believe that sanctions should be used selectively as leverage alongside diplomacy rather than treated as an end in themselves. While supporting sanctions against authorities responsible for the violations of human rights, they believe that negotiation can lead to better results, such as the release of political prisoners.¹²³ Diplomatic efforts contributed to the release of political prisoners in 2025 and 2026 through negotiations with the

United States.¹²⁴ Supporters cite these releases as evidence that conditional engagement can produce immediate humanitarian results, although hundreds of political prisoners remain detained.

They are also supportive of working along with the UN and the OSCE regarding international investigations, humanitarian aid, and election monitoring.¹²⁵ As the other bloc, these countries also provide financial support to journalists, independent media, and human rights defenders. Instead of ignoring or isolating Belarus, they believe that communication can encourage reforms and help negotiate the current problem in the country. Member states in this bloc are likely to support diplomatic engagement, international monitoring, targeted accountability measures, and negotiated sanctions relief tied to measurable steps such as prisoner releases and improved detention conditions.

STATES EMPHASIZING SOVEREIGNTY, DIALOGUE, AND TECHNICAL COOPERATION

This bloc is made up of countries that prioritize state sovereignty, non-interference, dialogue,



Photo of a 2020 Minsk protest

Credit: Homoatrox

and technical cooperation. Some acknowledge concerns in Belarus but dispute the value or impartiality of country-specific investigations and coercive measures. Some possible members of this bloc are China, Russia, Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, Nicaragua, and other states that regularly emphasize sovereignty and oppose country-specific human rights mechanisms. States such as Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Egypt, and South Africa may occupy a more flexible position between this bloc and Bloc 2, depending on the proposed resolution. Even though they express concern about limits of freedom of expression, assembly, association, political prisoners, and restrictions on civil society, they usually avoid supporting any type of measures that they believe will increase international tensions.

Instead of isolating the Belarusian government, they believe that the international community should maintain communication and pursue reform through negotiation, technical assistance, and cooperation, arguing that long-term stability is more likely to result from constructive dialogue than external pressure. These countries agree that sanctions can affect ordinary people, reduce opportunities for diplomatic conversations, and make future conversations more difficult. These countries believe that international organizations should help countries solve problems with dialogue instead of punishment. Member States in this bloc are more likely to support humanitarian aid, technical cooperation, and compromise with Belarus, rather than sanctions, condemnatory resolutions, or expanded country-specific investigations.

Committee Mission

The UNHRC works to protect human rights worldwide through official visits, reports, investigations, diplomacy, and technical assistance.¹²⁶ The UN General Assembly has given the Council a mandate to promote and protect fundamental human rights and address human rights abuses. The Council meets three

times a year in Geneva and can also hold urgent sessions when serious crises arise. When the Council investigates a situation, it can appoint independent experts to collect information, assess allegations, and produce reports documenting human rights abuses. However, the Council has limits: it cannot impose economic sanctions or directly force states to change their laws. Despite these limitations, the UNHRC plays an important role in bringing international attention to human rights violations and creating mechanisms for accountability and cooperation.¹²⁷

The crisis in Belarus presents a significant challenge for the Council because it affects a wide range of internationally protected rights, including religious freedom, voting rights, freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Member States have different views on how the Council should respond, with some supporting stronger accountability measures and others emphasizing dialogue and cooperation.¹²⁸

Delegations must remain within the mandate of the UNHRC. Military force and actions that interfere directly with Belarusian sovereignty fall outside the Council's authority.¹²⁹ Instead, delegates should focus on measures within the Council's mandate, such as strengthening international monitoring, supporting investigations, protecting civil society, and assisting journalists and activists in Belarus and in exile. Delegations can also consider humanitarian assistance and cooperation with other UN agencies to improve conditions for political prisoners and promote respect for human rights.

The UNHRC gives delegates an opportunity to address some of the most serious human rights concerns in Belarus. Proposed solutions should balance respect for national sovereignty with the protection of human dignity and fundamental rights. Delegates should focus their research on the issues identified by the UN, including arbitrary detention, restrictions on media freedom and peaceful assembly, prison conditions, and

repression of civil society.¹³⁰ By addressing these issues, delegates can develop proposals that promote human rights, accountability, and long-term stability in Belarus.

TOPIC B

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Human Rights Defenders and New Technologies



Introduction

On 9 December 1998, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 53/144, containing the “Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.”¹³¹ Commonly known as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, it identifies protections that states should provide to people who peacefully promote and defend human rights. Although the Declaration is not a legally binding treaty, it draws upon rights already protected under international law. Human Rights Defenders draw attention to violations of recognized human rights by states or other powerful actors. Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) come from all ranges and sections of society but are often found in civil society professions like non-governmental organizations (NGOs), intellectuals and journalists, labor advocates, lawyers, public figures, and opposition politicians. HRDs may also just be normal people concerned about the health and justice of their country. HRDs may also include environmental and land advocates, Indigenous leaders, women’s-rights activists, LGBTQ+ advocates, trade unionists, healthcare workers, and people documenting abuses during conflicts.¹³²

The 1998 resolution importantly recognized the relationship between the political conditions in a state and the likelihood of HRDs calling attention to violations of human rights. In addition to respecting fundamental human rights, the UN expects states to maintain and promote political climates where the professional work of monitoring, documenting, and publicizing human rights violations and advocating for positive changes to society can be conducted.¹³³ One important condition for the work of HRDs is the free flow of information. A second condition is the freedom to form political and community associations. It is a prerequisite of defending human rights to be able to study, discuss, and debate what may constitute a violation of human rights or to engage in political and cultural dissent.¹³⁴

In many ways, digital technologies have helped HRDs reach new audiences and call attention to pressing issues. As recently as July 2026, a protest movement in Albania against government corruption and the construction of a resort on environmentally protected land has gained

virality through a prolific online campaign. Importantly, the “Flamingo protest,” as it has been called, has relied on social media and digital communication to connect a large Albanian diaspora to the protests.¹³⁵ Digital technologies allow HRDs to collect, verify, preserve, and safely share evidence of violations. Smartphones allow witnesses to record events as they happen, while satellite images and open-source investigation tools can help confirm where an incident occurred.¹³⁶ Encryption can help protect messages, calls, shared files, and other sensitive information. HRDs must also protect research stored on their devices and online accounts because unauthorized access could endanger their sources, colleagues, and work.¹³⁷

A long-known concept in the study of democratic politics is the importance of the ‘public sphere’ in contributing to a well-educated and politically engaged citizenry. The German philosopher Jurgen Habermas argued that the development of the public sphere – the spaces where citizens gathered outside the home and the workplace to socialize and exchange ideas –

was a cornerstone of Europe's liberal political transformation and age of Enlightenment in the 18th century.¹³⁸ As public communication has moved further online in the twenty-first century and new artificial intelligence technologies have reached consumer audiences, the protection and maintenance of civil society has become a core concern for the UN Office of Human Rights.¹³⁹ There are pressing challenges that the unchecked and aggressive use of digital technology poses for HRDs and public spheres.

Domestic HRDs include citizens and agencies based within the territorial borders of the state whose human rights causes they champion. Transnational HRDs include the immigrant, exile, and diaspora communities concerned with the human rights and politics of a home state, but living abroad in a different country. Because the repertoire of digital repression tactics is broad-ranging and still developing, these tactics often affect both domestic and transnational HRDs. The guide focuses on (a) domestic mass surveillance; (b) the digital harassment and repression of transnational activists; (c) generative artificial intelligence, disinformation, and reputational attacks; and (d) internet shutdowns and platform restrictions.

Several fundamental human rights enshrined in international law are potentially infringed on or threatened by the trends in these new technologies. Many protections appear in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 17 protects individuals from arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy, while Articles 19, 21, and 22 protect expression, peaceful assembly, and association.¹⁴⁰ States may restrict freedom of association for certain legitimate purposes, but the government must show that the restriction is based on a clear law, responds to a real and specific threat, and is the least restrictive effective response.¹⁴¹ A broad reference to national security is not enough to justify surveillance of HRDs. Authorities must explain why the information is needed and provide safeguards against abuse.

This includes the right to privacy, freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, and prohibitions against discrimination.¹⁴² The right to privacy, which is most directly relevant to this topic, covers not only a person's information and communications but also the data and metadata created through everyday digital activity.¹⁴³ For example, recording

Laura Cristina Dib, a Venezuelan human rights defender now based in the United States

Credit: Periodismodepaz



of how many times a person visits a certain website, the route of their daily commute to work, or their medical records are all variations of digital data that are protected under the right to privacy.

History and Description of the Issue

DUAL ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

New technologies can transform society, but progress can also come with new risks. For example, the Luddite movement of 19th century England resisted the expansion of industrial manufacturing into community and family-led businesses, arguing that mechanized production would destroy the livelihood and culture of artisanal craftsmen. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine a modern world without the instantaneous communication provided by cell phones and digital messaging. Similar optimism surrounded the Arab Spring of the early 2010s, when activists used social media and online groups to organize protests, form political movements, and reach international audiences. Some observers believed these technologies might encourage democratization around the world.¹⁴⁴

Digital technologies are one more case in the long history of humans grappling with the ambivalent relationship between technology and progress. Digital technologies can support or harm human well-being, rights, and freedoms, creating difficult decisions for states.¹⁴⁵ A September 2020 UN Guidance Note on the Protection and Promotion of Civic Space declared:

“Digital technologies have created new spaces for exchange, mobilization, and participation. At the same time, obstacles to expression, participation, and assembly have evolved or intensified, such as in the case of internet shutdowns,

online surveillance, online attacks, and disinformation campaigns. Responses to these challenges are also more complex, as online civic space platforms are often privately owned.”¹⁴⁶

The Guidance Note identifies risks including surveillance, hacking, online harassment, smear campaigns, doxxing, hate speech, propaganda, and disinformation. In addition, states have the capacity to effectively turn off the internet inside their borders, block targeted websites and flows of information, and scrub and censor internet postings and websites.¹⁴⁷

It is important to keep in mind that computers, the internet, and digital technology did not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, the political and economic conditions in which technologies are developed can influence how they are designed and used. This dual nature has been present since the early development of computing after World War II.

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union helped shape the development of computing and digital technology. Many American and British scientists involved in the development of computing also worked on military technology projects. For example, physicist John von Neumann contributed to the Manhattan Project and later helped shape the development of early computing, including work connected to ENIAC. Early computing was therefore closely connected to government, military, and national-security priorities.

However, many technologists of the 1960s generation were idealists and participants in the “hippie” counterculture. The counterculture and optimistic spirit of 1960s California deeply influenced modern computing. Many digital technologists wanted to use computers, the internet, and digital radio to build free and alternative media environments and encourage decentralized online communities.¹⁴⁸ Examples included the Fidonet project, a network of community message boards created in the

Jamal Khashoggi

Credit: April Brady / POMED



1980s; the Chaos Computer Club in Europe, which brought together “benevolent hackers,” and “hacktivist” collectives like WikiLeaks and Anonymous, which published information about digital repression.¹⁴⁹ However, as digital technologies became commercialized during the 1990s, private companies and governments gained increasing control over the infrastructure that supported these once-decentralized spaces.

In the early days of computing, the cost of developing new programs and tools was very high. Governments were often the only entities that could afford to fund advanced cyber capabilities. An important precursor to digital technologies being weaponized against HRDs is state-on-state cyber conflict. This demonstrated that digital tools could be used for espionage, disruption, and influence across borders. Early examples included the disputed 1982 account of American software being used to damage a Soviet pipeline; the 1996 “Moonlight Maze” hack of the United States military by suspected Russian state-backed hackers; a 2001 incident in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict where both sides used cyber means to crash over 250 websites; the “Titan Rain” hacks in 2003, where Chinese-

affiliated hackers infiltrated American and British government databases; a 2004 North Korean hack of South Korean military and government computers; and a 2007 massive cyberattack allegedly carried out by Russian state-backed hackers on Estonia that disrupted government, media, banking, and other online services.¹⁵⁰

These state-on-state operations demonstrated the reach of digital tools that could later be adapted to target individuals and civil society. The 2007 attack on Estonia is particularly worth considering as a precursor to contemporary digital transnational repression of HRDs. The attack followed a dispute over the relocation of a Soviet-era memorial and included the disruption or flooding of online information spaces.¹⁵¹ Similar information attacks, including flooding online spaces with one viewpoint, are now used to discredit HRDs and overwhelm their messages.

A significant turning point in the public understanding of digital repression was the October 2018 murder of the Saudi Arabian dissident writer and Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi.¹⁵² Khashoggi was murdered by Saudi agents inside the Saudi consulate

in Turkey. Investigations found that Pegasus spyware, developed by the Israeli company NSO Group, had infected Khashoggi's fiancé's phone.¹⁵³ Other people close to Khashoggi were also targeted or infected, including fellow Saudi dissident Omar Abdulaziz, with whom Khashoggi communicated with about opposition projects.¹⁵⁴ The Saudi Arabian diaspora community overall relied on internet-connected social media, messaging, banking, and publishing services to communicate and advocate across borders.¹⁵⁵ The attack on Khashoggi is believed to have been in retaliation against Khashoggi's support of this activist network and a means of repressing the network.

Khashoggi's murder prompted reporters to investigate the international sale and use of Pegasus. By 2021, the Pegasus Project had identified hundreds of journalists, HRDs, politicians, officials, and diplomats as possible targets.¹⁵⁶ The very communication and networking apps that allowed the network to form and publicize dissident speech also created gateways through which state actors could identify and harm activists. Pegasus also illustrates the growth of the commercial surveillance industry. NSO Group, a private Israeli company, licensed Pegasus to foreign law enforcement and intelligence agencies, while Israel's Ministry of Defense approved its export.¹⁵⁷ NSO said that it could not monitor how customers used the spyware, even as investigations linked Pegasus to the targeting of journalists and activists. These cases raise questions about the responsibilities of the company selling the technology, the state

approving its export, and the government agency using it.

STATES AND THE TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION OF ACTIVISTS

The dangers to domestic HRDs are well known. States have invariably utilized their vast resources to repress dissidents and maintain their power through violent practices.¹⁵⁸ Morally dubious rulers have looked for opportunities to consolidate power through repressive policing, restricting public space, censoring dissent, and intimidating HRDs. When improperly used, digital technologies can enhance state actors' capacity to pursue repression for political gain.¹⁵⁹

Transnational HRDs face their own set of challenges. States have increasingly turned to digital tools in a practice often called digital transnational repression (DTR), to intimidate, smear, harass, and cause physical violence to HRDs abroad.¹⁶⁰ The vulnerability of diaspora and immigrant communities to repression by the home states is also not a new problem.¹⁶¹ Diaspora HRDs may be navigating unfamiliar institutions or lack full citizenship protections in their host states. They also face reprisals and intimidation from their home countries, where many have extended family and connections remaining. Transnational and diaspora HRDs use digital communications technologies to explore dissident politics and taboo subjects. However, those technologies can expose them to digital harassment and espionage. At the same time, the international nature of DTR raises questions of territorial sovereignty, the limits and boundaries

The very communication and networking apps that allowed the network to form and publicize dissident speech also created gateways through which state actors could identify and harm activists.

of jurisdiction, the legitimacy of national interests, and national security.

It is by nature difficult to identify the origin point and full history of state uses of digital technology for repression. This is because many of these actions are covert, deniable, and closely guarded secrets. Still, some general trends emerge. States have long surveilled, harassed, and repressed activists at home and abroad. Many current digital methods developed from similar practices used before the internet. Moreover, because advances in computer hacking and digital harassment were made by private amateurs and criminal actors, states have often adopted the digital repertoires of techniques and programs innovated by criminals in their pursuit of activists.

One precursor to targeted digital surveillance like phone hacking is wiretapping, or the meddling into landline phone wires to listen in and record private conversations. Wiretapping was a technique used globally during the 20th century, both legally by police forces and illegally by repressive domestic intelligence agencies. Between the 1950s and 1980s, criminal hackers began experimenting with hybrid techniques for exploiting weaknesses in the integration of

digital, computing, and internet technologies with existing analog phone, computer, and information storage systems, giving rise to a “hacking panic.”

In Latin America in the 1970s, military dictatorships and oppressive regimes emerged in countries including Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. These countries formed a transnational system of surveillance and repression called Operation Condor. Through this system, governments shared information and targeted political exiles, their relatives, and others living beyond their home countries.¹⁶² The Condor countries were early adopters of the new computing and phone hacking technology and established a centralized database of dissidents and their personal information in Santiago, Chile, alongside a digital communications system for the country’s intelligence officers in Latin America to facilitate their operations.¹⁶³ Similarly, before the Iranian Revolution in 1979, investigative reporters revealed international spying by the Iranian monarchy against political dissidents living abroad. Iranian authorities combined physical surveillance, infiltration, and media influence with new technologies connecting information gathered abroad to police headquarters in Tehran.¹⁶⁴

Chilean President Augusto Pinochet (left) meets with US Sec. of State Henry Kissinger (right); both men were very involved in Operation Condor

Credit: Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Chile.



By the mid-late 1980s, computer hacking was a full-on criminal enterprise. In 1983, a group known as the 414s gained access to computer systems at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and deleted billing records.¹⁶⁵ Incidents like this encouraged governments to respond by developing new legal and policing capabilities.¹⁶⁶ Digital systems also created new opportunities for state surveillance. In Canada, members of the Sikh diaspora alleged that Indian intelligence agents used shared intelligence records to monitor and intimidate supporters of the Khalistan movement.¹⁶⁷ This example shows how digital information could be used for transnational repression, not only ordinary cybercrime.

In 1999, the United States witnessed its first known recorded case of a police agency, the FBI, accessing a personal computer system without the owner's consent as part of a criminal investigation into the Mafia.¹⁶⁸ A subsequent WIRED Magazine investigation revealed that since 2002, senior FBI leaders had warned officers about overusing hacking spyware because of the risks associated with violating legal protections on privacy and unlawful searches.¹⁶⁹

By the 2010s, hacking techniques had become integrated into state efforts to pursue activists, political opponents, and perceived enemies. Citizen Lab found that during the Syrian Civil War, the Assad government targeted opposition leaders with cyberattacks intended to obtain personal information and communications. The attacks often relied on relatively inexpensive Remote Access Trojans, or RATs, adapted from methods used by criminal hackers.¹⁷⁰ The example demonstrates that states do not need the most advanced tools to monitor HRDs effectively or at scale.

As states use technology to target political opponents and activists, they may work closely with private companies and hackers. This can lead to weaker limits on companies developing powerful surveillance and security tools for governments. It can also mean unintended

consequences as the drive to innovate more powerful technology leads to misuse. A pressing issue, therefore, is how to design regulations and international laws around the development and use of hacking and 'offensive' digital tools.

States have legitimate and important responsibilities to protect citizens – including those who may be targets of transnational repression. National security, as well as national sovereignty, are important concerns. From a regulatory perspective, laws need to be designed to clarify to states that they must take into consideration proportionality and individual human rights when they pursue offensive capacities. This extends to industry. Regulations need to keep in mind the state's legitimate needs with the potential for misuse and unintended consequences. Indeed, states often have legitimate reasons of national security or criminal justice for pursuing certain actors beyond their borders through digital means. Beyond law, transnational cases raise dynamics of international relations and diplomacy. States may be less or more willing to stand up to other states who violate their national sovereignty through cyber means depending on the balance of power and macro-factors like trade or defense treaties. For example, it is well known that Russia often pursues cyberattacks against states in Western Europe, but countries like Germany are dependent on Russia for natural gas imports and may be unwilling to upset that balance and confront Russia over its violations.¹⁷¹

There are a number of observable, general behavioral consequences and effects when states engage in the transnational repression of activists. For one, the morale and prestige of social movements might suffer as domestic partners are discouraged by harm done to allies living supposedly 'beyond the reach' of the state abroad. For example, online smears are an ongoing problem for female Syrian activists since the ousting of the authoritarian Assad regime in 2024. Female activists describe how online smear campaigns try to discredit their political standing and alienate them from reform

movements in the country.¹⁷² Another effect is that society may become more cautious about what people feel safe saying when activists are punished for speaking out. For example, in a 2024 study on the effects of surveillance on HRDs in Uganda and Zimbabwe, activists explicitly described being scared to speak out or associate with colleagues once they felt they had become targets of surveillance – even if they had not broken any laws. Additionally, false beliefs about diaspora activist movements might become amplified in domestic society, as states spread rumors and cover stories to justify their transnational activities. For example, Philippine journalist Maria Ressa and her news organization were accused of violating foreign-ownership rules and serving foreign interests in an attempt to distract from her work. Ressa faced years of legal cases but was later acquitted of tax-evasion and foreign-ownership charges, although her 2020 cyberlibel conviction remains under appeal.¹⁷³

STATES AND MASS SURVEILLANCE: DOMESTIC POLICING

Practices of mass surveillance are longstanding programs of governments attempting to stop crime and assert control over populations. Fundamental to mass surveillance is the collection of large amounts of information about people, places, and behaviors, as well as creative ways to analyze that information to create models and records to locate dangerous people. In 19th-century France, geographers used city-planning maps to label “hot spots,” pointing to associations between areas with poverty and large amounts of crime. This technique finds its legacy in modern predictive policing.¹⁷⁴

Governments with different political systems have historically monitored suspected opponents. In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, secret police relied partly on networks of informants. The United States also conducted extensive political surveillance during the twentieth century. The legendary FBI director J. Edgar Hoover kept

large files of personal information on suspected Communists during a period known as the ‘Red Scare.’ This was between the 1940s and the end of the 1960s. FBI agents intercepted mail, entered homes, conducted physical surveillance, and questioned family members, friends, and coworkers.¹⁷⁵ In the 1960s, the FBI also surveyed social movement groups, including Civil Rights icon Martin Luther King Jr. and more outspoken opponents of the Vietnam War like the whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg.¹⁷⁶ Investigations and blacklisting also cost numerous artists and entertainers their careers and caused others to leave the country.¹⁷⁷ The Red Scare demonstrated how actual or suspected surveillance can create a wider culture of fear.

In 1980s Iran, intelligence services and the police televised forced confessions from prominent political dissidents to weaken the morale of opposition political movements.¹⁷⁸ Some of these confessions were reportedly obtained through torture. The generation of such a widespread and publicly consumed spectacle was understood to not just have a chilling effect on dissent, but to affirm the absolute power and reach of the regime. These broadcasts targeted individuals while warning a much larger audience about the risks of dissent. Contemporary digital surveillance can make people believe the authorities are monitoring them online, so they may avoid being outspoken. The fear of being watched or reported for ‘bad ideas’ can influence an entire population, even if most people are not directly monitored.

In 2013, the whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed details of mass-surveillance programs involving the United States and its Five Eyes intelligence partners: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Normally, governments require warrants issued by a judge to conduct searches on personal property, communications, and data. However, laws adopted or expanded after the attacks of 11 September 2001 gave US intelligence agencies broader powers to intercept international communications, creating concerns that



A 2024 meeting of the Five Eyes

Credit: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

domestic communications could also be collected.¹⁷⁹

Snowden's disclosures showed that allied governments intercepted communications traveling through phones, internet networks, fiber-optic cables, and satellites.¹⁸⁰ They also revealed how the United States served as a central hub for information shared among intelligence partners. In the United States, telecommunications giants Verizon and AT&T were required to supply the United States' data analysis intelligence branch, the National Security Agency (NSA), with large amounts of customer communications data.¹⁸¹ Further reporting revealed that the program also intercepted emails, browsing data, internet messaging, and computer traffic from American and international internet users.¹⁸² The disclosures demonstrated that dragnet surveillance of digital communications was a reality and raised serious concerns about privacy and the chilling effects on activists.¹⁸³

PRIVATE MEDIA, RADICALIZATION, AND FALSE INFORMATION

In Western liberal-democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom, private media have generally operated independently, but governments have still attempted to influence news and public opinion. During the Cold War, the CIA's chief propagandist Cord Meyer cultivated relationships with journalists and supported media outlets, including Encounter Magazine and Radio Free Europe, to influence public opinion against the Soviet Union and left-wing causes.¹⁸⁴ The United Kingdom ran a similar operation, working with writers and circulating information that supported its anti-Soviet foreign policy.¹⁸⁵ These historical efforts prefigure more contemporary issues of states co-opting private social media spaces, spreading misinformation, and conducting complex online propaganda campaigns.

For example, an important contemporary case is Norway's state-owned telecommunications and internet service provider company Telenor, which operates internet services in countries with repressive political environments like Malaysia,

Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Thailand. As Feldstein explains, “Telenor is obligated to respond when Pakistan demands an Internet shutdown, Bangladesh requests user data, or Thailand seeks to implant network interception devices. But acceding to government demands likely results in Telenor violating Norwegian regulations and also contravenes international law.”¹⁸⁶

The resources needed to influence public opinion were once so vast that mainly only states could afford them. Then, the proliferation of internet communication technologies lowered the cost of entry into independent media. However, the same low-cost and potentially high-visibility environment has empowered malicious non-state actors with violent or hateful ideologies. Such groups can also harass, threaten, or overwhelm HRDs online, disrupting their work and discouraging them from speaking publicly.

White supremacist organizations were some of the earliest adopters of internet-based forums and message boards in the 1980s. These groups built online communities that expanded their organizational and messaging capacity of hate groups across borders and cross-sections of society.¹⁸⁷ This phenomenon was carried into the 1990s and 2000s, when international internet-based forums like Stormfront and Iron March connected international extremist networks and allowed users to circulate propaganda, publications, and threats.¹⁸⁸

The proliferation of hate speech, violent subcultures, and harmful ideologies on the internet is far from new, but powerful digital

tools for generating and distributing media have increased the speed and scale of violent subcultures and hate speech. Women and identity-based HRDs face additional risks because online harassment frequently uses sexualized, racist, religious, homophobic, or transphobic attacks to undermine their credibility and personal safety.¹⁸⁹

Current Status

CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL REPRESSION OF HRDS

The slate of new technologies and the duality of the danger and promise they hold for human rights have stirred the United Nations Office of Human Rights to launch several reports and investigations into contemporary challenges. Surveillance, hacking, online harassment, artificial intelligence, and other technologies affect HRDs. These practices are not limited to one region or political system, although their scale, purpose, and available safeguards differ considerably among countries.¹⁹⁰ The rate at which states – small and large, developing and developed, conflict-ridden and democratic – have adopted the use of repressive digital technologies is alarming and troubling.

States have become sophisticated and creative in how they target HRDs. In one interesting case, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia targeted a dissident Russian-language media organization, Meduza, which had moved abroad to Latvia. In addition to

White supremacist organizations were some of the earliest adopters of internet-based forums and message boards in the 1980s.

hacking Meduza's social media and webpages, Russian agents also attacked the internet-based financial services software that the organization used to collect donations and accept payments from subscribers.¹⁹¹ This presents a concerning front for HRDs as economic resources and infrastructure are fundamental for keeping independent media organizations in the diaspora afloat. Freedom House's 2023 report on the transnational repression of journalists rightly points out that cyberattacks and harassment of independent media organizations make it more difficult for journalists to travel, meet with sources, and report the stories that call attention to human rights abuses.¹⁹²

Another 'creative' attack on HRDs is when states abuse the INTERPOL (an international policing institution) system to criminalize HRDs. States can issue "red notices" to INTERPOL informing host countries that they are interested in trying an individual for a crime, prompting the host country to arrest and detain the suspect. For example, a Turkish journalist living in exile was subject to one such notice from the Turkish government in October 2022 while traveling to Greece. The journalist had never committed a crime but had incensed the government by reporting on corruption in Turkey.¹⁹³

The list of contemporary examples is endless. Consider that recently, "Governments in countries like Egypt, Iran, and Vietnam are behind wide-ranging phishing campaigns that seek to infiltrate the communications of exiles."¹⁹⁴ One is hard pressed to find a country or regional alliance not engaged in some form of digital and internet communications espionage or repression program!

In Vietnam, a 2021 investigation by Amnesty International revealed a campaign of transnational repression between 2018 and 2020 against HRDs by Vietnam's hacking program "Ocean Lotus." This team was responsible for hacking the phones of Vietnamese political dissidents, corrupting the websites of organizations promoting free speech, and

creating fake webpages for state propaganda.¹⁹⁵ One Vietnamese non-profit organization that is based in the Philippines was specifically targeted and spied upon, making it difficult for the organization to do its work in settling Vietnamese refugees and immigrants. Freedom House notes that threats of gender-based and sexual violence can compound the psychological trauma experienced by HRDs who face transnational digital repression. They cite interviews conducted in 2023 with Cambodian and Chinese female journalists working abroad who reported rampant online abuse, intimidation, and reputational attacks by anonymous 'bot networks' they traced back to state agents. These cyberattacks included posting personal information on sex-work websites and the creation of fake webpages. Further, the anonymous nature and wide scale of the attacks amplified the psychic harm to the journalists' sense of personal safety and autonomy.¹⁹⁶ In cases where activists come from countries and cultures with more traditional gender norms, sexual smears can be very destructive to the reputation of female activists living abroad and weaken their legitimacy among home country networks.¹⁹⁷

Generative artificial intelligence can make these attacks easier to create and distribute. Applications can manipulate ordinary photographs to create false nude images or videos depicting sexual assault.¹⁹⁸ Some of these tools connect directly with social media platforms, allowing perpetrators to create and publish abusive material quickly. In a 2025 UN Women survey, eight percent of women HRDs and activists reported experiencing deepfake-related abuse, while 15 percent reported the non-consensual sharing of personal images.¹⁹⁹ These attacks can damage defenders' reputations, push them to censor their work, and contribute to threats and harassment offline.

Synthetic media creates a second challenge for HRDs who document violations. Once the public becomes familiar with deepfakes, governments or other accused actors may claim that authentic photographs, recordings, or videos

were created by AI. This is sometimes called the “liar’s dividend,” since convincing fakes make real evidence easier to deny.²⁰⁰ Information about when, where, and how footage was recorded can help investigators verify it. Recording a violation from several angles and preserving the original file may make false claims easier to challenge, but platforms and courts should not automatically reject material that lacks this information, since many HRDs and witnesses cannot safely collect or share identifying data.²⁰¹ A fabricated recording could also portray an HRD saying or doing something that damages their credibility. Even if it is later disproven, the recording may already have harmed the defender’s work, relationships, or safety.

Commercial spyware can also be difficult for HRDs to detect because tools such as Pegasus can infect a phone without requiring the user to click a link. Once installed, the spyware can secretly collect stored data and information from the phone’s apps, camera, and microphone.²⁰² Victims may also struggle to obtain a remedy because legal protections remain uncertain and responsibility is divided between the private company that developed the spyware and the government that used it.²⁰³ Because spyware

can expose conversations, contacts, locations, sources, and plans for protests while leaving little or no trace, an attack on one HRD may also place colleagues, sources, family members, and wider activist networks at risk. Fear of exposing others may also discourage HRDs from speaking publicly or continuing their work.²⁰⁴

In 2023, the United States Department of Justice arrested two people accused of operating an illegal overseas police station in New York on behalf of China. According to prosecutors, the station helped Chinese authorities locate, monitor, and intimidate dissidents living in the United States.²⁰⁵ These “overseas police stations” amplified digital harassment campaigns to persuade HRDs and other dissidents to return to China, where they could be prosecuted. There were two other well documented cases of this in the Netherlands and Spain.²⁰⁶ One additional harm from widespread transnational tactics is the interruption of solidarity between HRDs abroad and the communities at home. Journalists and activists from the Chinese Uyghur diaspora told Freedom House in 2023 that they had been forced into “information blackouts” concerning their families and communities in China. This was both because they were afraid that contact

This cyberattack simulator is used to train law enforcement for cybersecurity crises

Credit: IBM Research



would put their families at risk, but also because digital censorship made it difficult to get communication in and out of the country.²⁰⁷

Another worrying trend is how some autocratic states weaponize domestic criminal laws meant to regulate the misuse of digital communications technology. The regulation of the internet is important. States have a necessary role in putting in place laws and agencies that protect the public's cybersecurity, access to the internet, and oversee the expansion of internet infrastructure and fair pricing in the market. Feldstein points out that "Police departments have created cybercrime units with sophisticated surveillance capabilities to monitor social media chatter and hold transgressors accountable. Prosecutors [often] work with ministries of justice [to] charge individuals with crimes based on directives from the leadership group."²⁰⁸ He notes the important examples of how the regime of the Philippines' autocratic ruler Rodrigo Duterte spuriously pursued criminal cybercommunications charges against journalist and Nobel Prize winner Maria Ressa, and how in Ethiopia, an anti-terrorism law was utilized by the police to persecute political dissident bloggers.²⁰⁹

Governments are not the only actors that shape whether HRDs can communicate across borders. Technology companies must also decide how to respond when governments ask them to remove critical content. Google services are generally blocked in mainland China, but Chinese authorities may still seek the removal of Google-hosted content. People may circumvent domestic blocks, while diaspora communities, exiled HRDs, journalists, and international organizations

can access material from abroad. A 2025 investigation found that China's Ministry of Public Security asked Google to remove 412 videos, including 346 containing allegations of political corruption or stories about senior government officials. Google removed more than 200 of the requested videos.²¹⁰ These government requests may restrict political criticism and information about alleged official misconduct. For HRDs, the removal of online material can eliminate evidence, reduce access to international audiences, and limit communication with journalists and human-rights organizations.

Platforms also increasingly use automated systems to decide what content is removed, restricted, or sent for human review. Keyword filters and other automated tools may remove lawful speech, including documentation of human rights abuses, because they cannot reliably distinguish harmful material from reporting or advocacy.²¹¹ These problems are especially serious during crises and in languages for which systems have limited training data. Automated systems may also misinterpret posts that require context.²¹² For HRDs, these safeguards can help prevent documentation and advocacy from being incorrectly removed while still allowing platforms to address genuine threats and harassment.

A recent trend worth considering is the outsourcing of transnational surveillance and harassment through the private sphere. Recently, as part of its war against Ukraine and campaign of sabotage, Russia has been using the social media platform Telegram to recruit petty criminals and unsuspecting young people to act as agents. By layering 'job ads' through multiple

Keyword filters and other automated tools may remove lawful speech, including documentation of human rights abuses.

fake identities and middlemen on Telegram, Russian intelligence has been able to recruit petty criminals in foreign countries to conduct arson, graffiti, shootings, and other forms of harassment against Russian and Ukrainian anti-war humanitarians living abroad. In one shocking stunt in 2024, Russia recruited locals in Paris to leave coffins under the Eiffel Tower with messages warning the French public not to support Ukraine. In another 2023 instance, locals in Estonia were recruited to vandalize the car of an anti-war journalist.²¹³ The ability to recruit internationally warps the social media platform into a low-cost tool for translating digital communication into physical world violence and public intimidation against humanitarian and civic engagement.

A final shocking case is the August 2026 announcement by the Trump Administration of a new policy to enable and encourage American technology companies to pursue cyber-espionage against international groups that the US deems criminal or threatening.²¹⁴ While the policy targets criminal hacking groups, allowing private companies to conduct offensive operations could create legal uncertainty and expand beyond its original purpose. For example, would these companies be governed by domestic or international law? Could a company misuse this authority against business rivals or label foreign activists opposing a data center on public land as criminals?

One early legal initiative that could serve as a model for how states address digital transnational repression is the United States' 2016 Global Magnitsky Act.²¹⁵ This is an American law that allows the United States Treasury to impose financial sanctions on international leaders suspected of authorizing or playing a role in human rights abuses. Going after the assets of the individuals behind the state program's digital repression could be a powerful tool of deterrence. Yet it also raises thorny problems of international relations and diplomacy. The United States is often accused of overstepping with its international sanctions program. In the

case of Iran and North Korea, commentators have argued that sanctions that are too stringent push regimes into more illicit and dangerous behavior.²¹⁶ Another action is showing symbolic support for the freedom of expression and the freedom of the press by issuing stronger public statements supporting diaspora journalists. In 2023, the Media Freedom Coalition brought together a large group of states to sign a statement in support of the rights of international journalists.²¹⁷

MASS SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance is a practice that is dependent on collecting and processing large amounts of data. Contemporary 'mass surveillance' programs trace their history back to innovations in databases and administrative techniques for collating and sorting large amounts of collected data on subjects. States are legally allowed to conduct surveillance for domestic law enforcement and concerns of national security. The laws governing such uses of surveillance put requirements on states not to abuse notions of necessity, legitimacy, and proportionality. The extent of the surveillance measures they apply are appropriate to the level of risk and threat in question and that they meet a reasonable and legitimate aim.²¹⁸ For example, it is reasonable that states require driver's licenses and have digital systems and databases in place to track traffic violations. States need to make sure those with fines and court summons are held accountable. Yet, a speeding ticket would not warrant a law enforcement agency having access to and tracking one's private emails to assess the morality of one's weekend plans.

The mass market availability of computers, smartphones, and internet-enabled devices alongside data-storage capabilities and algorithmic techniques for analyzing data has had an extreme amplification effect on the powers of surveillance. An important technical development here is the analysis of metadata. Metadata are the atoms of the internet. Anytime one runs

software or visits a website, the computer code of that software intermixes with one's computer and internet connection to produce a unique sequence of information. It is now accepted that digital collection and metadata analysis can produce intricate network maps showing interconnected users' activity, habits, locations, and communicated content.²¹⁹ Metadata analysis is important in dragnet surveillance, when intelligence and police agencies collect large amounts of data and filter, for example, for key speech terms in messages or websites visited as criminally suspect. For example, a 2021 national court case raised the alarm about the potentially illegal use of bulk surveillance and metadata analysis by the South African government against its own citizens. While South Africa's intelligence service ran the operation as part of its national security program, claiming to target terrorist threats abroad, it admitted that the dragnet nature of the program meant that it was also intercepting digital communications from citizens. The South Africa case reopens longstanding concerns about dragnet digital surveillance and issues of proportionality and mission creep. Analysis of the case raised the issue that the South African government never clarified the legal basis, if such a program was justified by a tangible national security threat and if it therefore was justified at the expense of violations of citizens' right to privacy.²²⁰

Technological revolutions in data storage, transfer, machine optics, and machine learning have led to a proliferation of advanced private image-recognition surveillance companies. Companies like Vigilant Solutions and Euclid

Analytics, through the deployment of private networks of cameras and sensors in public and commercial spaces, can track the faces, expressions, moods, and locations of regular people to make predictions about behavior.²²¹ This advance in image-based recognition, analysis, and prediction has been particularly alarming for its adoption by law enforcement and a turn towards "predictive policing." A 2025 study in the UK found close to 75 percent of UK police forces employ digital technologies in predictive policing programs, such as geographic hot spot policing.²²² One concern is that machine learning models, at a basic level, depend on the training data sets and conceptual assumptions that they are fed. It has been a chronic problem that machine learning technologies have mirrored and exacerbated racial biases into their predictive models.²²³ These models tend to apply existing racialized and gendered concepts of criminality to data sets of the same, already criminalized, demographic. In a landmark study, the investigative reporting outlet ProPublica found that an AI software called COMPAS, used to predict which offenders would commit future crimes, had a fundamental algorithmic flaw. As a result, "black defendants were twice as likely to be incorrectly labeled as higher risk than white defendants. Conversely, white defendants labeled low risk were far more likely to end up being charged with new offenses than blacks with comparably low COMPAS risk scores."²²⁴ This is a vicious cycle where socially constructed concepts of criminality become objectively validated through biased training sets.²²⁵

In its 2025 review of predictive policing in the

A 2025 study in the UK found close to 75 percent of UK police forces employ digital technologies in predictive policing programs.

UK, Amnesty International warned that these practices create feedback effects where existing harmful practices of policing for socially or politically biased concepts by the government create the data that is fed to training models and then intensify the harmful practices.²²⁶ Amnesty further warns that as predictive policing spreads across the globe it can create a chilling effect on freedom of assembly, especially in the most policed areas. Citizens afraid of getting caught up in police dragnets will choose to avoid civic spaces important in the exercise of political expression and dissent, weakening the civic bonds necessary for defending human rights.²²⁷ Such a chilling effect on HRDs is exactly what a team of researchers describe in a 2024 study on activists' fear of digital surveillance in Uganda and Zimbabwe. HRDs in both countries reported being fearful of participating in activist, community, and university groups and decreasing feelings of trust in public participation generally after experiencing digital surveillance by state agencies.²²⁸

The use of predictive technologies for state conceptions of criminality is another reason why the culture of the technology industry matters. It does not matter how objective or effective an algorithm is, if the training data it is fed is based on racist or sexist assumptions or if it is applied to a policing context already designed to be politically repressive and profit oriented. Consider the way a predictive algorithm that functions properly can be deployed in a punishing and unjust way. As the scholar-artist Trevor Paglen reasons, it would be an easy extension of existing technology that monitors and assesses “micro-infractions” to use web-scraping models to locate political speech deemed undesirable and automatically increase the internet subscription rates for that individual.²²⁹ Predictive and assessment technologies have the power to not just violate the right to privacy but also punish political speech and activism through increasingly automated and all-encompassing means.

For Paglen, an additional, if no less important, concern is how the proliferation of machine-

generated images in digital spaces will erode information literacy. Paglen warns that AI generated images affect humans on a more raw, emotional, and pre-conscious level, disrupting our ability to tell fact from fiction.²³⁰ This has the potential to upend shared understandings of current events and scientific knowledge and worsen the conditions of civil political discourse and decision making. Returning to Habermas' concept of the public sphere, the mass production of AI images may divide the public into smaller communities with different ideas about what is real.

For example, in August 2026, a national scandal emerged in the United States about the misuse of an artificial intelligence-based mass surveillance camera system for tracking vehicle locations by police officers. The surveillance system is part of a public-private partnership between the company Flock and roughly half the police departments in the United States. Reporters found multiple cases of police officers utilizing the system to stalk romantic partners and harass people they disliked. The case demonstrates how a powerful system developed for reducing crime can be mishandled for devious purposes, including violating the right to privacy and increasing violence against women and vulnerable groups.²³¹

In China, concerns about the assimilation of the Muslim Uyghur people have resulted in an extensive digital surveillance system in the province of Xinjiang. Measures include communications interception and analysis, biometric data collection, and digital data collection of personal information like SIM cards, license plates, and passports.²³² These measures can help authorities identify and monitor Uyghur HRDs, track their contacts and movements, and discourage people from documenting or speaking out about alleged abuses.

Some important regulations and laws have been proposed recently to try and address the spread of surveillance technologies and mass data gathering. It is interesting to note, as well,



A Flock camera

Credit: Tony Webster

some of the tensions and disagreements in approach between the different regulators. One of the strongest regulatory acts concerning artificial intelligence (AI), data processing, and surveillance comes from the European Union with the 2024 EU AI Act. The EU's law is remarkable in that it enforces overarching bans on the creation and dissemination of AI surveillance tools depending on their risk factor. The tools it deems the most dangerous include public-space facial recognition surveillance and social ranking systems. Some higher risk algorithmic analysis surveillance tools are subject to potent regulatory frameworks. This includes layered review boards, requirements on transparency, and a public option for citizens to request information about how tools are used or to report tools they find are suspect.²³³ Despite the strength of this regulation, it mainly applies to the commercial sector of AI technology development and carves out generous exceptions for AI technology use by military and national security sectors. This raises some questions of whether this regulation will still be strong enough on its own to protect HRDs because, as we have seen, it is often states co-opting their defense capacities that target HRDs.²³⁴ In contrast to the EU law, the

UK has taken a more pro-industry stance in its experiments with AI regulation, as can be seen in the title of one regulatory paper – “A pro-innovation approach to AI regulation.”²³⁵ This regulatory framework proposes to allow different consumer regulation sectors to be the agents that create and enforce laws over AI tools and points to the existence of anti-discrimination laws and consumer safety laws already existing that regulators should be empowered to use.²³⁶

One step taken by the UK that could be a useful regulation is the establishment of a national repository for algorithmic transparency called the “Algorithmic Transparency Standard.” This repository would allow for the public, regulators, and activists to have access to the source code of AI models and analytic algorithms used by police and security companies. This could lead to both better public literacy of algorithmic surveillance and allow activists to better call attention to bias and overreach by these tools. Unfortunately, the UK does not mandate police or security companies to upload their codes to the repository, meaning disclosure rates are low. Amnesty International has recently implored the UK government to make use of the repository

mandatory so as to better serve international standards for transparency.²³⁷

For HRDs, these protections are especially important because new technologies can identify activists, track their movements and connections, and discourage lawful expression and assembly. States must therefore decide how to test these systems for accuracy and bias while allowing carefully regulated uses for legitimate public-safety purposes.

POPULAR PROTESTS, INTERNET SHUTDOWNS, AND PLATFORM RESTRICTIONS

In January 2026, UNESCO noted that 2024 was the worst year on record for internet shutdowns since 2016.²³⁸ That year, the UN Human Rights Council also directly condemned “measures to intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online in violation of international human rights law.”²³⁹ Further, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition documented at least 313 shutdowns in 52 countries during 2025, the highest annual total the coalition had recorded.²⁴⁰ The impacts of a shutdown do not just affect HRDs. Shutdowns may impact

a whole society by interrupting healthcare communications, access to election information, business activity, and calls for assistance during violent crackdowns.²⁴¹

When conditions in an authoritarian country are too harsh, mass mobilizations occur and broad sections of society take to the streets to demand change. Ruling regimes are often terrified of these occurrences because they are a visible reminder of the simple arithmetic lined up against them – there are always more people being oppressed than there are rulers. At these moments, regimes are desperate and turn to drastic tactics to end mass mobilizations swiftly. In 2019, mass mobilizations occurred in both Iran and Sudan. In Iran, citizens protested after a sudden rise in fuel prices; in Sudan, protesters demanded that the military transfer power to a civilian government. Both governments responded similarly and shut down internet signals across the countries during violent crackdowns. The restrictions impeded organizing and made it more difficult to document and publicize alleged abuses.²⁴²

More recently, in 2025, authorities in Togo blocked social media, messaging, and search platforms during anti-government protests.

The Khartoum, Sudan, protest that led to an internet blackout

*Credit: Mahmoud Haggag
Mahmoud Ali/Anadolu Agency*



During the blackout, authorities violently cracked down and reportedly killed seven people, injured dozens, and arrested 60 people.²⁴³ Civil-society groups helped citizens circumvent the block and used publicly available monitoring tools to collect technical evidence of the restricted services. Such crackdowns like these demonstrate that governments may restrict internet access precisely when HRDs need it to organize, document alleged abuses, and communicate with outside organizations.²⁴⁴

Governments may justify shutdowns as necessary to preserve public order, prevent violence, protect national security, or limit misinformation. However, human-rights organizations argue that broad shutdowns affect entire populations and are rarely a necessary or proportionate response. For HRDs, losing internet access is not merely an inconvenience. When the internet goes down, HRDs may lose contact with journalists, colleagues, and people who can provide legal or emergency support. They may be unable to confirm whether someone has been detained, send photographs or videos, or warn others about immediate danger. Journalists are then left with fewer sources and may struggle to verify what is happening.²⁴⁵ Rumors and official accounts can fill that information gap, while evidence of abuses remains difficult to share with the outside world.

In January 2026, Uganda's Communications Commission ordered the suspension of public internet access nationwide. This happened only two days before the general elections and was justified as a response to "online misinformation," "electoral fraud," and the "incitement of violence that could affect public confidence and national security during the election period."²⁴⁶ This suspension affected social media platforms, web searches, video streaming, email services, and instant messaging. Critical services such as hospital systems, banking networks, tax platforms, utilities, and the electoral commission portal remained active.²⁴⁷ The shutdown occurred amid a wider crackdown in which authorities ordered at least 10 NGOs to cease operations

and arrested prominent human rights activist Sarah Bireete.²⁴⁸ According to a 2022 OHCHR report, blanket internet shutdowns of public access like these can never be justified under international human rights standards, because of their indiscriminate effects.²⁴⁹ Uganda's actions were still considered a nationwide blanket shutdown because most people could not access ordinary internet services, even though some essential systems remained online.

In some cases, a targeted restriction on a particular internet-based service might be justified. Brazil's temporary suspension of X in 2024 happened after the Supreme Federal Court determined the platform had failed to comply with court orders, pay fines, and appoint a legally required representative.²⁵⁰ Unlike in Uganda, Brazil only banned one platform after judicial proceedings and lifted the ban after X complied with the requirements. Even so, some critics still questioned whether preventing every Brazilian user from accessing X was proportionate.

A shutdown does not always mean turning off the internet nationwide. Authorities may cut mobile data in one area, block messaging or social-media platforms, disrupt VPNs, or slow connections until they are nearly unusable. This slowing of internet traffic is known as throttling.²⁵¹ People may technically remain online but be unable to send messages, upload videos, or communicate reliably. For HRDs, even a partial restriction can make it difficult to document events or reach journalists and support networks. Under OHCHR's framework, a service-specific restriction may be permissible only in exceptional circumstances when it is lawful, necessary, proportionate, and the least restrictive available response.²⁵²

Shutdowns differ greatly in duration. Most recorded shutdowns were brief: 70.8 percent lasted one day or less, while 95.4 percent ended within 30 days.²⁵³ Platform blocking, however, may continue for years. China maintains long-term blocks on Google, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and many

other international services through systems commonly known as the Great Firewall. Domestic alternatives exist but operate under government censorship and surveillance requirements. For HRDs, these restrictions limit access to international information and make it harder to communicate with journalists, diaspora communities, and human-rights organizations abroad.

Since internet infrastructure is operated by private companies, governments often rely on telecommunications providers to carry out shutdowns.²⁵⁴ A company might not be able to reject a government demand entirely because it must operate under the laws and court orders of the country where it provides services. Refusal may expose companies to fines, loss of operating licenses, the blocking of their services, or retaliation against local employees. However, Freedom House emphasizes that particular caution is needed when shutdown requests concern HRDs, civil-society activists, journalists, or other at-risk people.²⁵⁵ Companies should challenge disproportionate orders when possible. If they cannot reject a demand entirely, they should limit its duration, geographic reach, and affected services; document the order; and notify users when legally permitted.

Further, some shutdowns or internet throttling might not be government orders. If thousands of people flood into one area and all try to use the same mobile phone infrastructure, a system not designed to handle so many devices at once could fail. Damaged cables, technical problems, or outages at major service providers could also cause this. In modern times, internet access is essential for exercising many human rights. Deliberate shutdowns can violate these rights, particularly when they broadly restrict access for an entire population. HRDs and community organizations are often the first to report lost access, particularly in remote areas. Preserving their reports, screenshots, error messages, and copies of government orders can support later investigations even when immediate technical confirmation is unavailable.²⁵⁶ Internet providers

and platforms can support accountability by preserving network data, disclosing government orders, and publishing information about disruptions.

During youth-led protests in Kenya on June 25, 2024, internet connectivity fell sharply for approximately seven hours. The internet providers blamed an undersea-cable outage, but they did not clearly identify the damaged cable or provide detailed updates like with an earlier confirmed outage. Technical researchers could not conclusively determine the cause. This uncertainty made it harder for civil society groups to establish responsibility and seek a remedy. When responsibility is disputed, HRDs may struggle to prove that authorities interfered with communications or seek a remedy.²⁵⁷ Possible remedies include restoring access, releasing government orders and technical records, and requiring independent approval for future restrictions. In committee, delegates should consider whether reports from HRDs should trigger investigations and whether governments and telecommunications companies should have to explain sudden disruptions rather than leaving defenders to prove that a shutdown was deliberate.

Bloc Analysis

POINTS OF DIVISION

OHCHR recognizes that digital technologies provide new ways to advocate for, defend, and exercise human rights. These technologies shape how people communicate, obtain information, debate, and mobilize, but they can also threaten rights when used without adequate safeguards.²⁵⁸ States disagree over what that approach should require and how much authority governments should retain over digital activity. Some states favor strong privacy protections, corporate accountability, and international monitoring. Others prioritize national sovereignty,

public order, and broad state authority over domestic digital activity. A third group supports protections for HRDs but favors more gradual or nationally adapted reforms.

Freedom House's Freedom on the Net provides a useful starting point for understanding how governments regulate digital activity.²⁵⁹ It evaluates obstacles to internet access, restrictions on online content, surveillance and privacy, and punishment for online expression. These categories closely reflect the conditions HRDs face when using new technologies. However, Freedom on the Net covers only 72 countries, but 87 percent of the world's internet users.²⁶⁰ Alternatively, the CIVICUS Monitor tracks data from 198 countries and territories on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression.²⁶¹ Together, these sources provide delegates with a broader view of both digital freedom and the civic conditions in which HRDs operate.

Delegates should also research their country's policies on the new technologies affecting HRDs. A country may protect civic freedoms while still conducting extensive surveillance or resisting international scrutiny. Freedom on the Net examines barriers to internet access, online censorship, surveillance, privacy violations, cyberattacks, internet shutdowns, and punishment for online expression.²⁶² However, neither Freedom on the Net nor the CIVICUS Monitor captures every technology policy or international position relevant to this topic. A country rated "Free" by Freedom on the Net may lean toward strong international protections, while a country rated "Not Free" may place greater emphasis on state control. However, these categories are not automatic bloc assignments, since Freedom on the Net measures domestic conditions rather than predicting how governments will approach particular international proposals.²⁶³

STRONG INTERNATIONAL PROTECTIONS

Countries in this bloc are states that actively work to uphold, expand, and defend civic freedoms, both domestically and globally.²⁶⁴ They generally protect public participation, although their specific policies on national security, surveillance, and platform regulation may differ.²⁶⁵ Their placement in this bloc depends primarily on their support for digital rights, limits on surveillance, corporate accountability, and international oversight rather than their rating in any single index. A "Free" rating in Freedom on the Net may support placement in this bloc, but delegates should still examine the country's surveillance practices and international positions.²⁶⁶

In committee, states in this bloc would likely push for strong international commitments to protect freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. They may advocate for independent monitoring, funding for NGOs, digital protections for activists, and international partnerships that strengthen transparency and accountability. They may also support limits on spyware and biometric surveillance, stronger judicial oversight, transparency surrounding government requests for user data, digital-security assistance for HRDs, and human-rights responsibilities for technology companies.

States in this bloc may support restricting the sale and government procurement of commercial spyware, requiring independent authorization before authorities access private communications, and creating remedies for HRDs whose devices or personal data have been compromised. They may also call upon technology companies to conduct human-rights assessments, publish information about government data requests, protect encryption, and establish accessible reporting and appeal systems for HRDs facing online harassment.

European states may support this bloc because regional frameworks regulate personal data, digital platforms, and high-risk uses of artificial

intelligence. However, they may still disagree over facial recognition, national-security exceptions, encryption, and law-enforcement access to data.²⁶⁷ European Union membership therefore does not automatically determine a state's bloc placement.

These states may also argue that host countries have a responsibility to investigate cross-border spyware attacks, protect exiled HRDs and their families, and hold foreign officials or surveillance vendors accountable when sufficient evidence exists. Within the bloc, disagreements may arise over sanctions, encryption, law-enforcement access to data, national-security exceptions, and whether particular surveillance technologies should be regulated or prohibited.

NATIONAL CONTROL AND SECURITY

Countries in this bloc place greater emphasis on national sovereignty, public order, cybersecurity, and governments' authority to regulate digital activity within their borders.²⁶⁸ Some states combine digital monitoring with foreign-agent, cybercrime, or national-security laws that allow authorities to identify, investigate, or prosecute HRDs based on their online activity or international connections.²⁶⁹

Countries in this bloc may use internet shutdowns, mass surveillance, platform blocking, or broad data-access powers to maintain state control. Many receive low Freedom on the Net ratings, but their placement should be based on documented policies and practices rather than the score alone. Other relevant policies may include biometric surveillance, mandatory data disclosure, restrictions on encryption, social-media blocking, broad cybercrime laws, and the use of digital tools to monitor activists.

Russia, China, and Venezuela provide examples of governments that combine several forms of digital control. Russia, for example, has practiced internet blocking, online monitoring, cybercrime or foreign-agent designations, and transnational repression.²⁷⁰ China has several

digital surveillance measures involving facial recognition, platform control, surveillance, and overseas targeting.²⁷¹ It also maintains extensive platform and website controls, monitors online activity, restricts anonymity, and punishes some users for protected online expression.²⁷² In Venezuela, authorities have blocked news and communications platforms, detained people for online activity, and used digital tools to identify or intimidate perceived opponents.²⁷³ Other governments, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have also faced criticism over online censorship, surveillance, and punishment for digital expression. These governments may argue that strong state control of digital space is necessary to combat terrorism, cybercrime, foreign interference, extremism, misinformation, or threats to public order.

States in this bloc may argue that international rules should distinguish unlawful repression from legitimate law-enforcement and national-security activity. They may oppose universal bans on spyware, facial recognition, or other surveillance technologies and instead support each government's authority to determine when those tools are necessary. They may also argue that technology companies operating within a country must comply with its domestic laws, including lawful requests for user data, content removal, or assistance with criminal investigations.

In committee, these states may resist international oversight and frame restrictions as necessary for stability, sovereignty, or security purposes. They might support language on voluntary reporting, information sharing, or regional dialogue, but reject clauses that call for sanctions or direct oversight of their domestic affairs. They may seek narrower or voluntary language, limit the formal role of NGOs, and insert clauses protecting state control over civic activity.

These states may nevertheless support some forms of international cooperation, especially against cybercrime, terrorism, online exploitation, or foreign interference. Their principal

disagreement with the first bloc concerns who defines misuse, whether international institutions should monitor domestic practices, and how much discretion governments should retain over surveillance and online activity. In cases of alleged transnational repression, they may demand strong evidence of state responsibility before supporting investigations, sanctions, or other international action.

GRADUAL REFORM AND SUPPORT

Countries in this bloc believe that new technologies require meaningful safeguards, but they also argue that international standards must account for differences in national laws, security concerns, resources, and regulatory capacity. These states may recognize the importance of digital rights and civic participation while also supporting substantial government authority to regulate online activity. This bloc relates to countries rated “Partly Free” on the Freedom on the Net Index, but placement really depends on whether a government supports reform but favors gradual implementation, national flexibility, technical assistance, or voluntary cooperation over binding international oversight.

These states may support privacy protections, judicial oversight, and safeguards for HRDs while retaining surveillance powers for law enforcement and national security. They may favor regulating high-risk technologies rather than prohibiting them, voluntary international reporting rather than external investigations, and technical assistance rather than sanctions.²⁷⁴

This bloc may be especially attractive to states who support the protection of HRDs but lack the financial, technical, or institutional capacity to implement complex systems for detecting spyware, auditing algorithms, regulating technology companies, or investigating transnational attacks.²⁷⁵ These states may call for international funding, forensic assistance, regulator training, model legislation, and technology transfer. They may also support pilot

programs, human-rights impact assessments, and gradual restrictions on the highest-risk technologies.²⁷⁶ Freedom House’s internet-freedom recommendations specifically call for digital-security training, stronger technical knowledge among judges, financial and administrative support for legal action, and greater resources and expertise for independent regulators.²⁷⁷

In committee, these countries may support moderate resolutions while seeking national flexibility in how international recommendations are implemented. This bloc might propose compromising language, such as acknowledging the importance of civic freedoms while emphasizing each country’s national context. They may support capacity-building programs, technical assistance, digital regulation and HRD protection, or gradual reforms instead of sweeping international monitoring systems. They may also support judicial oversight, transparency reporting, digital-security training for HRDs, and regulation of the highest-risk surveillance tools while resisting complete bans, sanctions, or mandatory external investigations.

On corporate responsibility, these states may favor shared standards, voluntary transparency measures, and cooperation between governments, companies, and civil society rather than immediate binding obligations. For transnational repression, they may support improved reporting systems, digital forensic assistance, and cooperation among host states while emphasizing due process and reliable attribution. Diplomatically, they are key to building consensus between rights-based oversight advocates and sovereignty-focused states.

Committee Mission

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is an intergovernmental body responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the world.

It reviews the human rights records of all UN Member States through the Universal Periodic Review, appoints independent experts known as Special Rapporteurs, establishes commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions to investigate serious violations, and adopts resolutions and recommendations addressing country-specific and thematic human-rights concerns. The Council works closely with OHCHR, which provides the Council and its mechanisms with substantive, technical, and administrative support.²⁷⁸ In Resolution 58/23, the UNHRC requested the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to consult HRDs and other stakeholders and prepare a report on how new and emerging technologies affect defenders' work and safety.²⁷⁹ The report will identify major challenges, effective practices, and recommendations for protecting HRDs, including women HRDs, in the digital age.

When addressing this topic, delegates must consider how digital technologies can assist HRDs while also exposing them to surveillance, harassment, censorship, and physical danger. OHCHR's current consultations specifically examine how digital technologies affect defenders' work and safety, and examples of effective protections.²⁸⁰ The Council may recommend that government surveillance be lawful, necessary, proportionate, and independently supervised; that states maintain internet access during protests, elections, and conflicts; and that HRDs receive digital-security training and protective tools. States with limited regulatory capacity may also need funding, technical expertise, and assistance strengthening independent oversight bodies. It may also encourage states to investigate suspected misuse of commercial surveillance tools and ensure that affected people can access, delete, or regain control over personal data and seek an effective remedy.²⁸¹

The UNHRC is not an international legislature, court, criminal prosecutor, or sanctions body. Its resolutions generally establish standards and recommendations rather than directly binding states or companies.²⁸² However, it can establish

international expectations, request investigations and reports, create or renew expert mandates, encourage states to accept technical assistance, and call upon states and companies to change harmful practices.²⁸³ Delegates should therefore develop realistic recommendations that protect HRDs, respect the Council's mandate, and address the different technological and regulatory capacities of Member States.

Research and Preparation Questions

Your dais has prepared the following research and preparation questions as a means of providing guidance for your research process. These questions should be carefully considered, as they embody some of the main critical thought and learning objectives surrounding your topic.

TOPIC A

- 1 How have anti-extremist laws and the presidential elections of 2025 changed the rights of civic groups, media, and schools in Belarus?
- 2 What ways have political prisoners and prison conditions in Belarus violated international human rights standards?
- 3 How does Belarus's relationship with Russia help the Belarusian government to resist political pressure and Western sanctions from other countries?
- 4 How can other countries hold Belarusian leaders accountable while protecting citizens and respecting national sovereignty?
- 5 How can international organizations support journalists who have been exiled and activists who keep reporting abuses from abroad?
- 6 What steps and measures can the UN Human Rights Council take to protect basic rights in Belarus without the use of military force or sanctions?

TOPIC B

- 1 How can platforms remove genuinely harmful material without also deleting evidence, criticism, and advocacy produced by HRDs?
- 2 When may governments lawfully use spyware, facial recognition, or other surveillance technologies, and what independent oversight should be required?
- 3 What responsibilities do companies have when their technologies are used to monitor, censor, or harass HRDs?
- 4 How should states protect exiled HRDs from digital transnational repression, and what evidence should be required to attribute an attack to a foreign government?
- 5 When, if ever, may governments restrict an online service, and how should HRDs challenge unlawful internet shutdowns or platform blocks?
- 6 Should accountability rely on sanctions, criminal investigations, export controls, corporate regulation, international monitoring, technical assistance, or some combination of these measures?

Important Documents

TOPIC A

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About the Authors

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Estibaliz Jiménez is a second year undergraduate at Universidad Anáhuac México Campus Norte, where she studies law with an interest in public international law. Born in Mexico City, she has been actively involved in Model United Nations through high school and college. She participated for three years as a delegate at NHSMUN, representing countries in committees such as SPECPOL, WHA, and Security Council, where she earned two awards of Excellence and one of Merit. She also participated in a CSW committee and earned Best Delegate at a DISEC committee organized by her high school. Despite participating in multiple debates, Estibaliz has been a Director in a DISEC simulation organized by her high school and as an Assistant Director for UNHRC at NHSMUN. This year, she will be a Director for the UNHRC at NHSMUN 2027. Outside of Model UN, Estibaliz worked for a year at a law firm, gaining experience and knowledge in immigration and foreign trade and customs. As well, she is a member of her law school's student council. In the future, she hopes to pursue a career in public international law and work for an international organization.

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Dr. Reid Kleinberg is a Visiting Fellow with the Centre for Ideology and Discourse Analysis in the Department of Government at the University of Essex, where he also received his PhD in 2023. Reid's current research project explores the history of the nexus between North Atlantic military and policing institutions and practices of racialized and politicalized securitization. Reid has taught courses broadly in the fields of critical security studies and criminology with attention to racialized policing and new forms of algorithmic and predictive policing. He has published on these topics in the academic journals *Crime, Media, Culture* and *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, as well as in Routledge's *Handbook of Secrecy Studies*.

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