

# Research report

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|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Forum:           | United Nations Human Rights Council                                                                   |
| Issue:           | Addressing restrictions on dissidence and<br>freedom of speech in repressive authoritarian<br>regimes |
| Student Officer: | Kate Jager & Lotus Veltman                                                                            |
| Position:        | Main chair & deputy chair                                                                             |



# LMUNA

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## Introducing your chairs

Hii! My name is Lotus, and I have the honor of being your Deputy Chair for UNHRC at LmunA '25 and I'm beyond excited to be working alongside my amazing friend Kate, your Main Chair!

I'm currently in my 5th year of VWO at Farel College in Amersfoort, and this will actually be my 7th MUN conference. I joined my very first MUN when I was just 12 years old, and since then I've fulfilled just about every role possible; from delegate to organizing committee and this will be my second time chairing!



Outside of school, there's a good chance you'll find me on the soccer field, at the gym, or doing pretty much any sport I can get my hands on.

I also love making music, I recently started learning guitar and piano (still very much a beginner, so don't expect a concert... yet), and I used to sing in a band!

I can't wait to meet all of you, hear your ideas, and make LmunA '25 a conference we'll all remember!

Your chairs(:

Hi delegates! My name is Kate and I am seventeen years old. I am thrilled to be your main chair alongside my wonderful friend Lotus Veltman at the upcoming addition of LmunA in UNHRC. I live in Amersfoort and attend Farel College, where I am in my final year of VWO. LmunA 2025 will be my ninth MUN conference and third time as a chair. MUN's have played a great part of my high school career, in which I have had the pleasure to be a delegate, chair, part of an organising committee and also a Secretary General (FAMUN 2025).

Besides school, I love working out, hanging/ going out with my friends, crocheting and travelling. I can't wait to meet all of you, hear your ideas, and make LmunA '25 a conference we'll all remember!



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# An introduction to the topic

“Addressing restrictions on dissidence and freedom of speech in repressive authoritarian regimes”

Restrictions on dissidence and freedom of speech in repressive authoritarian regimes involve the deliberate silencing of political opposition and criticism by governments that maintain strict control over their citizens. Leaders in such regimes often use censorship, surveillance, and intimidation to suppress journalists, activists, and ordinary people who speak out, shutting down media outlets, blocking online platforms, and imprisoning opponents.

Freedom of expression is vital for accountability and social progress, yet its absence fuels corruption, human rights abuses, and disinformation. Restricting dissent prevents communities from voicing grievances, reduces political participation, and creates a climate of fear that can impact regional stability.

In recent decades, these restrictions have grown more advanced, aided by surveillance technology, state-controlled media, and repressive laws. According to Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders, press freedom and civil liberties have declined sharply, with countries such as China, Russia, and Iran among the most repressive.

This research report will examine how authoritarian regimes restrict dissent, the effects on individuals and societies, and the measures the international community can take to protect freedom of expression worldwide.

## Definition of key terms

**Authoritarian Regime** - A political system in which power is concentrated in the hands of one leader or a small group, with limited freedoms and repressive control.

**Repressive regime** – An Authoritarian government that actively suppresses opposition and civil rights through censorship, intimidation and violence.

**Dissidence** – The open expression of disagreement or opposition to government policies.

**Freedom of Speech** – The right to express opinions freely without censorship or retaliation.

**Censorship** – The control or suppression of information and expression by the state.

**Self-Censorship** – The withholding of opinions or information due to fear of punishment or repercussions.

**Transnational Repression** – The intimidation, harassment or targeting of dissidents abroad by their home government.

**Press Freedom** – The ability of media to operate independently without interference or threats.

**Digital repression** - Governments' use of the Internet and other digital technologies to suppress freedom and control public debate

## General overview

### Freedom of Speech

Freedom of speech is the right to express one's opinions without fear of censorship, punishment, or retaliation. It is a cornerstone of democratic societies, enabling accountability, informed decision-making, and the free exchange of ideas. This right is protected under

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which emphasize the importance of open discourse for societal progress.

## Restriction of Dissidence

Dissidence refers to the public expression of disagreement or opposition to official policies or governing authorities. In repressive states, dissenters, often journalists, activists, political opponents, and human rights defenders, are frequently targeted through harassment, imprisonment, or even violence. Methods to suppress dissent include strict media laws, surveillance programs, banning public gatherings, and spreading state propaganda to delegitimize critics.

According to **Freedom House**, global freedom of expression has seen its largest decline since 2005. Countries rated “not free” in terms of press freedom increased from 14 in 2005 to 33 in 2023 ([freedomhouse.org](https://freedomhouse.org)).

## Impact of Limited Freedom of Speech

### Social Impact

When freedom of speech is curtailed, societies face a chilling effect in which individuals self-censor to avoid repercussions. Artistic and cultural expression is stifled, public debate becomes dangerous, and marginalized voices are silenced. The absence of open dialogue can worsen social divisions and lead to the spread of misinformation, as citizens are forced to rely on state-controlled narratives. Minority groups, activists, and journalists often face disproportionate targeting, eroding trust between communities and the state.

### Economic Impact

Restricting free expression can significantly hinder economic growth. Knowledge-based economies depend on the free exchange of ideas, innovation, and transparency, all of which are undermined in closed environments. Foreign investors may avoid politically repressive states due to perceived instability or reputational risks. Sanctions imposed by other nations in response to human rights violations can further damage economies, leading to unemployment, inflation, and poverty.

Countries with low press freedom scores saw on average **1.5–2% lower GDP growth annually** compared to countries with high press freedom, according to a 2023 World Bank report.

### Global Impact

The suppression of free speech weakens international human rights norms, emboldening other states to adopt similar measures. Authoritarian regimes often engage in transnational repression, targeting dissidents abroad through intimidation, surveillance, or even assassination attempts. Such practices strain diplomatic relations and threaten the safety of exile communities worldwide. The global flow of accurate information is also compromised, impacting regional security and humanitarian responses. Between 2014 and 2024, **48 governments carried out 1,219 incidents of transnational repression** across 103 countries, with China accounting for **272 incidents (~22%)** ([theguardian.com](https://theguardian.com)).

## Geopolitical Shifts

The rise of authoritarian regimes is reshaping global politics. States with repressive policies often form alliances based on shared political interests, such as mutual resistance to Western democratic norms. Examples include:

- **China and Russia:** Collaboration on censorship technologies and media control.
- **Iran and Venezuela:** Information control and digital surveillance cooperation.

Meanwhile, democratic states face challenges balancing economic ties with human rights advocacy, creating tensions in trade, security agreements, and international forums. Reported is that **60 countries experienced democratic backsliding in 2024**, compared to 34 countries that improved.

## Conclusion

Restrictions on dissidence and freedom of speech in repressive authoritarian regimes represent a profound threat to both domestic stability and international norms. By combining traditional methods of control with modern surveillance and censorship technologies, these regimes have made opposition increasingly dangerous. The impacts are felt socially, economically, and globally, while geopolitical alliances between authoritarian states complicate international responses. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated diplomatic pressure, support for independent media, and the strengthening of international

## Major parties involved

### Repressive Authoritarian Regimes

#### Extreme Information Blockade / Total Control

- **North Korea** – Maintains an almost complete information blockade, with severe penalties for unauthorized communication.
- **Eritrea** – Strictly controls media and suppresses virtually all forms of dissent.

## Internet Censorship & Media Control

- **China** – Implements extensive internet censorship (the “Great Firewall”), controls media narratives, and detains dissidents both domestically and abroad.
- **Iran** – Restricts online expression, arrests journalists, and suppresses protests through force.

## Post-Coup / Conflict Repression

- **Myanmar** – Following the 2021 military coup, journalists are arrested, media outlets are shut down, and internet access is restricted.
- **Afghanistan (Taliban-controlled)** – Media freedom has been severely restricted, and journalists face persecution.

## Targeted Arrests & Political Repression

- **Russia** – Enforces “foreign agent” laws targeting independent media and NGOs, leading to shutdowns and arrests.
- **Belarus** – Suppresses independent media and arrests political opponents.
- **Saudi Arabia** – Imprisons activists and journalists, monitors online activities to suppress dissent.
- **Egypt** – Controls media outlets, arrests journalists, and monitors social media to prevent criticism.
- **Turkey** – Imposes restrictions on media freedom and arrests journalists and activists critical of the government.
- **Kazakhstan** – Restricts media freedom and suppresses opposition through legal and extrajudicial measures.
- **Sudan** – Restricts media freedom and suppresses opposition through legal and extrajudicial measures.

## United Nations

- **Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)**: Monitors and reports on human rights violations, including restrictions on freedom of expression.
- **Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression**: Investigates and advises on issues related to free speech and media freedom.
- **Human Rights Council**: Holds sessions to address human rights abuses and can issue resolutions condemning violations.

## Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

- **Reporters Without Borders (RSF)**: Publishes the annual World Press Freedom Index, highlighting countries with severe press freedom restrictions.
- **Amnesty International**: Documents and campaigns against human rights abuses, including the suppression of free expression.



- **Human Rights Watch (HRW):** Investigates and reports on global human rights issues, including censorship and repression of dissent.
- **Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ):** Focuses on the safety of journalists and the defense of press freedom worldwide.

## Timeline of key events

- |                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1948</b>        | The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is adopted by the United Nations, including Article 19, which guarantees freedom of opinion and expression.                                          |
| <b>1966</b>        | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is adopted, obligating states to protect freedom of speech and peaceful assembly.                                                        |
| <b>1970s–1980s</b> | Dissident movements emerge in various authoritarian states, including Eastern Europe (e.g., Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia) and Latin America, often facing censorship, imprisonment, and surveillance. |

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1989</b>      | Fall of the Berlin Wall signals the collapse of several authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe; international attention highlights the role of free expression in political change.                                                                                                             |
| <b>1990s</b>     | Internet and digital communication begin to expand; authoritarian governments respond with increased censorship, online monitoring, and control of information.                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>1998</b>      | Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) strengthens commitments to monitor human rights, including freedom of expression, in member states.                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>2000s</b>     | Social media platforms start to be widely used globally. Governments in repressive regimes implement internet filtering, surveillance, and social media restrictions to curb dissent.                                                                                                            |
| <b>2010</b>      | Social media and online networks play a central role in mobilizing protest, but authoritarian governments respond with internet shutdowns, arrests of activists, and media crackdowns.                                                                                                           |
| <b>2013</b>      | Edward Snowden's leaks reveal the extent of global state surveillance programs, highlighting the challenges to free expression under authoritarian oversight.                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>2015–2018</b> | Digital repression expands: laws regulating “fake news,” online content, and public criticism are used to silence dissent in countries across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. International NGOs and UN bodies issue reports documenting increased restrictions on journalists and activists. |
| <b>2019</b>      | Hong Kong pro-democracy protests see widespread use of technology for organization, countered by strict surveillance, arrests, and censorship, illustrating modern authoritarian responses to dissent.                                                                                           |
| <b>2020</b>      | COVID-19 pandemic is used by some authoritarian regimes to further restrict freedom of speech, limit protests, and control information under “public health” pretexts.                                                                                                                           |
| <b>2021</b>      | Global digital censorship reaches new levels with AI-powered monitoring, social credit systems, and internet shutdowns in response to protests or political criticism. International human rights organizations continue to push for online freedom of expression protections.                   |
| <b>2022–2023</b> | International efforts, including UN resolutions and advocacy campaigns, seek to hold authoritarian regimes accountable for restricting dissidence. High-profile arrests of journalists and activists bring global attention to ongoing challenges.                                               |

## Previous attempts to solve the issue

- International treaties and declarations – UDHR Article 19 and the ICCPR guarantee freedom of expression; however, many authoritarian states ratify these but exploit vague “national security” clauses to suppress dissent.
- UN Human Rights Council resolutions – Condemnations of repression and calls to release political prisoners; failed due to lack of enforcement and non-cooperation from targeted states.
- Special Rapporteurs and fact-finding missions – Raise awareness and provide reports; often blocked from entering countries or ignored by regimes.

- Targeted sanctions – Travel bans and asset freezes on officials; undermined by inconsistent global participation and states prioritizing economic ties.
- Support for NGOs and independent media – International funding and training initiatives; restricted by repressive laws, censorship, and criminalization of foreign-backed groups.

Main reasons for failure: weak enforcement, political resistance, geopolitical interests outweighing human rights, and limited access to affected regions.

## Possible solutions

To effectively address restrictions on dissidence and freedom of speech in repressive authoritarian regimes, solutions should focus on tackling the structural and systemic issues that allow such restrictions to persist.

Key areas that may be addressed include:

- **Judicial independence** – ensuring that courts operate free from political influence, reducing the use of legal systems as a means of silencing critics.
- **Protection of journalists, activists, etc.** – establishing safeguards against harassment, censorship, arbitrary detention, and violence targeting those expressing dissent.
- **Transparency and accountability mechanisms** – implementing independent oversight bodies, anti-corruption measures, and open government practices to limit the concentration of unchecked power.
- **Access to independent media** – expanding the availability of non-state-controlled media outlets and strengthening protections for press freedom, both in traditional and digital formats.
- **Digital rights and internet freedom** – safeguarding privacy, encryption, and access to information, while preventing internet shutdowns and surveillance used to target dissenting voices.
- **International monitoring and pressure** – supporting the work of UN Special Rapporteurs, human rights organisations, and multilateral initiatives that document violations and encourage compliance with international human rights law.

Addressing these underlying problems can contribute to creating an environment in which freedom of speech and political expression are respected and protected.

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