

Transnational Repression as a Growing Threat to Democracy and Human Rights

Among the contemporary challenges facing democracy and freedom of expression, transnational repression (TNR) is increasingly emerging as one of the most serious yet insufficiently addressed threats to human rights, democratic governance, and state sovereignty. While much attention has been paid to domestic authoritarian practices, far less focus has been given to the ways in which states extend repression beyond their territorial borders to target critics in exile.

Although a universally accepted definition of transnational repression has yet to be established, there is growing international convergence around its core elements. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [defines](#) transnational repression as cases in which *foreign governments reach beyond their borders to intimidate, silence, coerce, harass, or harm*

members of their diaspora and exile communities. Similarly, the European Parliament, in its [Resolution of 13 November 2025](#) on transnational repression against human rights defenders, describes it as a wide range of attacks and threats carried out by states, including authoritarian regimes and their proxies, to defend or advance their interests by reaching across borders to coerce, control, or silence dissidents, political opponents, journalists, activists, human rights defenders (HRDs), and diaspora members.

These actions may involve physical methods, such as targeted killings, abductions, violence, harassment, enforced returns, disappearances, and deportations, as well as the strategic misuse of legal and administrative instruments, including consular services, extradition procedures, arrests, and Interpol notices. In parallel, states increasingly rely



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on non-physical methods, including digital surveillance, intimidation, blackmail, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and threats directed at family members of activists remaining in the country of origin.

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The primary targets of transnational repression are human rights defenders, journalists, political activists, NGO leaders, former officials, and regime critics living outside their home countries. Available evidence suggests that approximately 48 countries—more than a quarter of all states worldwide—are engaged in some form of transnational repression. Between 2014 and 2024, Freedom House [documented](#) 1,219 direct physical incidents of transnational repression occurring in 103 countries. Strikingly, 80% of these incidents were attributed to just ten regimes: China, Türkiye, Tajikistan, Russia, Iran, Belarus, Egypt, Cambodia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Transnational repression poses serious risks not only to its direct targets but also to the security, sovereignty, and legal order of host states. Such acts increasingly occur within democratic jurisdictions, including the United Kingdom, the United States, EU Member States, and Canada. Between 2014 and 2024, 92 incidents against human rights defenders, 22 against journalists, and 70 against political activists were [recorded](#) in EU Member States alone. Disaggregated data indicate that political activists and journalists account for roughly half of all targets, underscoring the strategic intent to silence those who play a critical role in promoting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights globally.

This phenomenon unfolds within a broader context of shrinking civic space worldwide. Governments

and other powerful actors increasingly restrict freedom of expression, association, and participation in public life through legal barriers, funding cuts, administrative pressure, smear campaigns, and digital surveillance. These conditions compel many activists and organizations to leave their home countries in search of safer environments. Yet exile no longer guarantees protection. Authoritarian states are increasingly extending repression beyond their borders, transforming exile into another arena of coercion.

Why Georgia Matters: A Critical Case in the Context of Transnational Repression

While transnational repression is a global phenomenon, the Georgian context merits particular attention. Georgia [represents](#) a hybrid political environment: a country that remains formally embedded in democratic institutions and international human rights frameworks, yet is simultaneously undergoing rapid backsliding towards a one-party dictatorship. This transition increases the risk of emerging transnational repression, which remains insufficiently acknowledged.

These trends are poised to intensify, given the recently proposed legislation, which effectively criminalizes NGO work, bars numerous individuals from joining political parties, and targets activists and critical media, which have been outspoken but will now be silenced with criminal sanctions and jail time.

Georgia's relevance within the broader discussion of transnational repression stems from three interrelated factors. First, for many years, Georgia functioned as a relatively safe haven for journalists, activists, and political exiles from neighboring au-

thoritarian regimes, including Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Iran. Second, in recent years, Georgia has increasingly [adopted](#) legal and administrative practices commonly associated with authoritarian governance, particularly regarding civil society organizations, independent media, and public protest. Third, Georgian civil society actors are increasingly relocating abroad to continue their work, thereby placing them directly within the risk landscape of transnational repression. These trends are poised to intensify, given the recently [proposed legislation](#), which effectively criminalizes NGO work, bars numerous individuals from joining political parties, and targets activists and critical media, which have been outspoken but will now be silenced with criminal sanctions and jail time.

This convergence creates a grey zone in which repression may initially appear fragmented, ambiguous, or incidental rather than systematic. As a result, threats may be underestimated, incidents may be treated as isolated, and responsibility may be diffused across jurisdictions. Georgia thus illustrates how transnational repression can emerge not only from entrenched authoritarian regimes but also from states undergoing democratic erosion while maintaining formal commitments to international norms and institutions.

Understanding Georgia's position within this evolving landscape is therefore essential for assessing both the potential risks faced by Georgian human rights defenders operating from abroad and the broader implications for democratic resilience in the region.

Methods of Transnational Repression

In carrying out transnational repression, perpetrating states employ a wide range of tools, shaped by the constraints they face when operating beyond their borders. These methods can be broadly

grouped into four main categories.

The first category involves remote threats and intimidation, physical violence, digital surveillance, online harassment, coordinated smear campaigns, and threats directed at family members of activists who remain in the country of origin. These methods allow states to exert pressure at a distance while maintaining plausible deniability.

The second category concerns restrictions on mobility, such as passport cancellations, revocation of citizenship, denial of consular services, or the imposition of travel bans. These measures aim to render the target legally vulnerable, restrict movement, or trigger detention or deportation by host-state authorities. In many cases, the affected individuals are left without effective legal remedies.

The third category involves manipulation of international and bilateral mechanisms, including cooperation with third countries to secure detention, extradition, or unlawful deportation. The abuse of the Interpol notification system is a particularly common practice, whereby politically motivated requests result in international alerts that can lead to detention, denial of financial services, and restrictions on travel.

The fourth category consists of direct physical attacks, carried out either by state agents or by proxies operating abroad. These include assaults, kidnappings, assassination attempts, enforced disappearances, and, in extreme cases, killings.

Disaggregated data shows that detention and rendition are among the most frequently used methods against political activists and journalists. In many cases, states combine several methods simultaneously, amplifying pressure and increasing the likelihood of silencing the target.

The implementers of transnational repression may be state institutions, such as law enforcement or in-

telligence agencies, or non-state proxies, including criminal networks operating in host countries. This reliance on intermediaries further complicates accountability and investigation.

It is noteworthy that all of these instruments have been used by the Georgian authorities. However, their use still appears sporadic and uncoordinated, rather than part of a well-thought-out strategy. However, the imminent increase in the number of people fleeing the country as the dictatorship strengthens and new laws are applied will lead to more critical voices relocating abroad and, subsequently, to more of these instruments being used by the Georgian security services and ruling regime.

Host State Responsibility

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Although transnational repression is initiated by perpetrator states, its effectiveness often depends on institutional weaknesses, policy blind spots, or fragmented responses within and by the host countries. Democratic states hosting exiled activists, journalists, and human rights defenders are not merely passive settings where repression occurs; they are key actors whose actions, or inactions, can either deter or inadvertently enable cross-border abuses.

One of the primary challenges host states face is misclassifying transnational repression incidents. Such cases are frequently treated as isolated criminal acts, immigration matters, or diplomatic disputes rather than as elements of a coordinated strategy pursued by foreign governments. As a result, investigations may be limited in scope, politi-

cal motives may be overlooked, and protective measures may not be triggered.

Host-state vulnerabilities are particularly evident within immigration, asylum, and residency frameworks. Exiled activists often depend on temporary or precarious legal statuses that can be exploited through politically motivated extradition requests, administrative pressure, or the abuse of international cooperation mechanisms. When host states rely uncritically on information provided by countries of origin—such as arrest warrants or criminal allegations—they risk facilitating repression rather than preventing it.

Financial and administrative systems can also become tools of repression. Bank account freezes, denial of access to financial services, or restrictions imposed under anti-money-laundering regimes may disproportionately affect activists targeted through fabricated or politically motivated accusations. Similarly, digital harassment and surveillance campaigns frequently unfold in host states with limited regulatory oversight, allowing foreign actors to operate with relative impunity.

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Failure to address transnational repression decisively undermines not only the safety of individuals but also the sovereignty and rule of law of host states. Allowing foreign governments to intimidate or coerce individuals within democratic jurisdictions erodes institutional integrity and sets dangerous precedents for external interference.

Addressing these challenges requires host states to move beyond ad hoc responses and adopt systematic, coordinated approaches, including specialized training for law enforcement, human rights-based

screening of extradition and Interpol requests, secure reporting mechanisms for diaspora communities, and sustained cooperation with civil society organizations.

Transnational Repression: Possible Risks Facing Georgian Human Rights Activists

In recent years, Georgia has experienced a rapid deterioration of the environment for civil society. Beginning in 2024, the ruling Georgian Dream party adopted a series of legislative measures that significantly restricted freedoms of expression and association. These [include](#) the so-called law on transparency of foreign influence, requiring NGOs and media organizations receiving foreign funding to register as entities “implementing the interests of a foreign power”; the Foreign Agents Registration Act, [adopted](#) in April 2025, which introduces criminal liability for individuals and organizations deemed to act as “agents of a foreign principal”; amendments requiring prior state approval for most foreign grants and technical assistance; and bans on foreign financing for broadcasting. The [new family of laws](#), which will enter into force in March 2026, will simply criminalize all NGO activity, either by linking it to the out-of-country finances or dubbing them as political-party entities, equating them with political parties, with draconic legal consequences, including the confiscation of funds.

These legal measures have been accompanied by detentions of protesters, freezing of bank accounts, police raids on offices and private homes, and other forms of intimidation aimed at silencing dissent and creating a chilling effect. As a result, many civil society organizations have found it increasingly impossible to operate within the country.

Some organizations and individuals have attempted to adapt to the restrictive environment, while others have ceased operations altogether or relocated

abroad to continue their work. Although relocation may appear to offer a viable strategy for survival, it also exposes activists to the risk of transnational repression, particularly given Georgia’s evolving political trajectory.

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Past incidents raise further concerns. At Türkiye’s request, Georgian authorities have [taken](#) steps against private educational institutions allegedly affiliated with the Gülen movement. As it became [known](#) a few days ago, Türkiye put at least three Georgian opposition leaders on a “border-crossing ban list.” In 2017, an Azerbaijani investigative journalist was [abducted](#) in Tbilisi and later appeared in detention in Baku, suggesting cross-border cooperation between law enforcement agencies. In 2023, several Russian opposition journalists were reportedly [poisoned](#) abroad; among them was Irina Babloyan, who was poisoned in Tbilisi and later [designated](#) a “foreign agent” by Russian authorities. Georgian authorities have also denied [entry](#) or [asylum](#) to several Belarusian activists. In recent years, Georgia has also strengthened its ties with Tajikistan; bilateral trade [increased](#) by 432% in 2025, and the foreign ministries of both countries have

expressed interest in deepening political dialogue. In May 2025, Georgia's State Security Service [detained](#) and returned Giorgi Bachiasvili — a former financial aide to Bidzina Ivanishvili who had been living abroad — after he was captured in the United Arab Emirates and flown back to Tbilisi in what his lawyers described as a forcible and legally irregular rendition rather than a formal extradition.

Taken together, these developments suggest both capacity and willingness—whether active or passive—to engage in practices that resemble or facilitate transnational repression.

Watching Out

Transnational repression is no longer an exceptional practice but an increasingly normalized strategy used by authoritarian and hybrid regimes to silence dissent beyond their borders. It poses serious threats to individual safety, democratic governance, and the sovereignty of host states. Addressing this phenomenon requires coherent, coordinated, and multi-level responses.

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First, the international community should work toward establishing a universally accepted definition of transnational repression to provide a clearer legal and policy framework. Second, international mechanisms—particularly Interpol—must be subject to enhanced oversight and human rights safeguards to prevent political abuse. Third, global and regional actors, including the European Union, the United

States, the United Kingdom, and international financial institutions, should consider conditioning financial assistance and cooperation on respect for human rights, including accountability for transnational repression.

Existing sanctions frameworks, such as the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, could be expanded to explicitly cover individuals, institutions, and non-state proxies responsible for organizing or enabling transnational repression. The Council of Europe could also play a key role by initiating discussions on a Convention on Transnational Repression to establish shared standards and obligations.

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In the Georgian context, these issues are particularly urgent. As domestic space for civil society, activism, and political opposition continues to shrink and dissenters increasingly operate from abroad, the risk of transnational repression becomes tangible. Georgian civil society organizations and activists should therefore be integrated into international coalitions and protection mechanisms to enable shared learning, preparedness, and collective response.

Ultimately, confronting transnational repression is a shared responsibility. Ensuring that exile does not become an extension of repression by other means requires sustained commitment from states, international institutions, and civil society alike ■