



## Summary Report

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**Panel Theme:** Disinformation, Digital Space and Democratic Processes

### **Authoritarian Transnational Repression: A Persistent and Growing Threat to Free Expression and Democracy in Canada**

*A Framework for Protecting Canadians and Countering Foreign Interference*

#### **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, we have observed foreign authoritarian regimes increasingly extending their repressive reach beyond their borders. Our democratic values, the safety of our citizens, and the integrity of our institutions are under threat from transnational repression orchestrated by these regimes. Journalists, activists, vulnerable communities, and even elected officials within our nation are being targeted, as evidenced by the brave witnesses who have testified at this inquiry.

The urgent need to establish a robust protective framework as part of a whole-of-democracy effort to defend our nation against foreign interference and transnational repression has never been clearer.

The Inquiry has heard from victims across multiple vulnerable communities. For example, Member of Parliament Michael Chong has been targeted by the People's Republic of China (PRC) influence operations and transnational repression for raising concerns about the PRC's actions and advocating for the victims of PRC repression. Similarly, the PRC's influence operations target MPs Kenny Chiu and Jenny Kwan.

Russia, whose influence operations have largely evaded scrutiny in Canada, has also engaged in transnational repression against Canadians, including targeting MPs to discredit and malign them. Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland<sup>1</sup>, MP James Bezan<sup>2</sup>, and former MP Borys Wrzesnewskyj<sup>3</sup>—all of whom are of Ukrainian heritage—have been the subjects of numerous

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Glavin, "How Russia's Attack on Freeland Got Traction in Canada," *Maclean's*, March 6, 2017, <https://macleans.ca/politics/how-russias-attack-on-freeland-got-traction-in-canada/>.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Brown, "Top Russian News Host Takes Aim at Ukrainian Canadians," *CBC News*, January 17, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/top-russian-news-host-takes-aim-at-ukrainian-canadians-1.4980859>.

<sup>3</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "The Western Alliance in the Face of the Russian Disinformation Machine: Where Does Canada Stand?" *Canadian Global Affairs Institute*, June 30, 2021,



attacks and disparaging articles in Russian state media and its proxy platforms - as have activists who are critical of the Kremlin. The content published by Kremlin-aligned influencers often manipulates history and distorts facts to undermine public support and confidence in these MPs of Ukrainian heritage to discredit, intimidate and silence them. In 2014, all of these MPs were placed on Russia's sanctions list for their criticism of Russia's annexation of Crimea.

From elected officials at the highest levels of our democratic institutions to civil society leaders, community activists, and ordinary Canadians expressing solidarity with victims of human rights abuses in places like Tibet, Hong Kong, Ukraine, East Turkistan, Iran, and Uganda, the democratic rights and safety of Canadians are under threat.

In response to these challenges, I propose a framework designed to safeguard vulnerable Canadians through protective measures, deterrence strategies, and support mechanisms. This framework not only addresses immediate threats but also emphasizes the importance of international cooperation and leadership in effectively countering transnational repression.

I will focus on five key areas:

1. Preventative measures to protect vulnerable groups and individuals
2. Measure that we can take to deter perpetrators of transnational repression
3. Identifying, disrupting and stopping these operations
4. Support and rehabilitation for victims
5. International Coordination and Leadership

Many of the activities outlined below could fall under the remit of the new Foreign Influence Transparency Commissioner's office and be coordinated by them.

## **1. Protective Measures for Vulnerable Groups and Individuals**

### **1.1 Preventive Education and Awareness**

Empowerment begins with knowledge. Canada must develop and promote education and awareness programs specifically tailored to counter TNR. This involves creating communication materials and conducting regular seminars and workshops for journalists, activists, and dissidents. These programs will help them recognize potential risks and equip them with strategies to mitigate these threats.

Developing comprehensive resource kits is essential. These kits should cover:

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[https://www.cgai.ca/the\\_western\\_alliance\\_in\\_the\\_face\\_of\\_the\\_russian\\_disinformation\\_machine\\_where\\_does\\_canada\\_stand](https://www.cgai.ca/the_western_alliance_in_the_face_of_the_russian_disinformation_machine_where_does_canada_stand).



- **Digital Security Practices**  
Guidelines on safeguarding online communications and data.
- **Risk Assessment Techniques**  
Tools to evaluate personal and professional vulnerabilities.
- **Psychological Defense Mechanisms**  
Strategies to cope with intimidation and harassment.
- **Emergency Response Protocols**  
Step-by-step actions to take when facing immediate threats.

Collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs) and community organizations is crucial to distributing these resources effectively, ensuring a resilient support network capable of sharing critical information and providing mutual support.

## 1.2 Enhanced Digital Security

In our digitally connected world, cyber-attacks have become a primary tool for authoritarian regimes to identify, monitor, intimidate, and interfere in the activities of their targets. To defend against this, we must ensure that vulnerable Canadians are equipped with:

- **Secure Communication Tools**  
Adoption of encrypted messaging platforms
- **Encryption Methods**  
Training on encrypting sensitive data
- **Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)**  
Use of VPNs to protect online activities from surveillance

Canadian CSOs should be resourced to offer comprehensive cybersecurity training. This includes recognizing phishing attempts, preventing malware installations, and understanding the latest cyber threats. Additionally, establishing secure channels for reporting harassment, threats, or surveillance will ensure that incidents are promptly addressed.

## 1.3 Personal and Legal Safety

A centralized national RCMP/CSIS/CSE hotline dedicated to reporting incidents of transnational repression is imperative. This hotline should:

- **Offer guaranteed confidentiality upon request**
- **Provide rapid response to reported threats**
- **Coordinate with law enforcement and intelligence agencies to investigate and take appropriate action**



Moreover, we must prioritize providing free legal advice to vulnerable activists and communities. This support will help them address threats, including coordinated defamation, lawfare, disinformation, and harassment campaigns orchestrated by foreign entities.

## 2. Measures to Deter Perpetrators

### 2.1 Implementation and Enforcement of Bill C-70 and Related Laws

The full and robust implementation of Canada's new Foreign Influence Transparency Registry (FITR) under Bill C-70 is a cornerstone in deterring foreign influence and intimidation. FITR mandates:

- **Registration of Foreign Agents and Entities**  
Ensuring transparency of their operations within Canada.
- **Sanctions and Penalties**  
Imposing strict consequences on entities engaging in unregistered foreign influence activities.

Furthermore, enforcing existing laws related to harassment, intimidation, and threats will bolster our legal framework, providing additional protection to Canadians from foreign intimidation.

### 2.2 Targeted Sanctions and Diplomatic Actions

Applying and enforcing targeted Magnitsky sanctions against foreign officials and entities involved in transnational repression sends an unequivocal message: Canada will not tolerate such actions. These sanctions include:

- **Travel Bans**  
Restricting the entry of perpetrators into Canada.
- **Asset Freezes**  
Blocking access to assets held within Canadian jurisdictions.

Diplomats and consular staff found engaging in or supporting repressive activities should be expelled without hesitation. Coordinating with international allies to create a unified response against offending states will amplify the effectiveness of these measures.

### 2.3 Public Accountability and Exposure

Transparency is a powerful deterrent. Publicly identifying and condemning foreign actors and their domestic collaborators involved in influence operations and transnational repression increases accountability. By partnering with domestic and international investigative journalists and civil society organizations, we can:



- **Document and Expose Cases of Transnational Repression**  
Bringing hidden activities to light.
- **Build Public Awareness**  
Educating Canadians about the nature and extent of TNR.
- **Deter Future Repressive Actions**  
Making it clear that such activities will not go unnoticed or unpunished.
- **Expose Collaborators**  
Name those who enable, facilitate and directly collaborate in foreign authoritarian influence operations and transnational repression.

### 3. Identifying, Disrupting, and Terminating Ongoing Operations

#### 3.1 Intelligence and Law Enforcement Cooperation

Enhancing cooperation between the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), Communications Security Establishment Canada (CSE), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and local law enforcement is critical. By pooling resources and expertise, these agencies can:

- **Identify Transnational Repression Networks**  
Uncovering the web of actors involved.
- **Disrupt Operations**  
Implementing strategies to interfere with and halt repressive activities.
- **Employ Advanced Digital Surveillance**  
Monitoring and countering activities targeting vulnerable communities.

Establishing specialized task forces focused on identifying and disrupting TNR operations will further strengthen our defensive capabilities.

#### 3.2 Community-Based Interventions

Grassroots involvement enhances the effectiveness of our response. By creating community-based rapid response teams that include community leaders, legal experts, and law enforcement, we can:

- **Provide Immediate Support**  
Offering assistance to those under threat without delay.
- **Monitor TNR Activity**  
Keep a vigilant eye on activity targeting vulnerable communities and individuals.



- **Report Suspicious Activities**

Ensuring that potential threats are quickly and easily communicated to the appropriate authorities promptly.

### 3.3 Legal and Diplomatic Pressure

Applying diplomatic pressure, both unilaterally and multilaterally, on states engaging in transnational repression is essential. Actions include:

- **Exposing Foreign States and Domestic Collaborators**

Bringing their activities into the public eye.

- **Utilizing International Legal Mechanisms**

Where appropriate, employing bodies like the International Criminal Court to hold foreign actors accountable.

### 3.4 Coordinated International Sanctions

Coordinating the application of sanctions among allies targeting perpetrators and collaborators would further strengthen defence against them. For instance, European allies could impose sanctions on foreign authoritarian collaborators operating in Canada, and vice versa. Visa bans and asset freezes on these collaborators would serve as a very powerful long-term deterrent.

## 4. Support and Rehabilitation for TNR Victims

### 4.1 Psychological Support

Victims of TNR often endure psychological trauma. To aid their recovery, we must:

- **Provide Access to Mental Health Services**

Offering specialized professional counselling and therapy.

- **Establish Peer Support Networks**

Connecting victims with others who have faced similar repression to foster mutual support and resilience.

### 4.2 Rehabilitation of Reputations

Authoritarian regimes frequently employ disinformation and smear campaigns against their targets. To counteract this we should:

- **Assist in Restoring Reputations**

Helping victims reclaim their personal and professional standing.



- **Partner with Media and Civil Society Organizations**

Publishing corrective information and highlighting the truth about targeted individuals.

#### 4.3 Legal and Social Reintegration Support

Victims may face ongoing legal challenges resulting from TNR activities, including frivolous lawsuits designed to silence them (a tactic known as "lawfare"). To support them:

- **Encourage Pro Bono Legal Assistance**

Provincial law societies should motivate their members to defend targets of TNR.

- **Aid in Career Restoration**

Helping victims re-establish their careers and public profiles.

## 5. International Coordination and Leadership

### 5.1 Creation of a Global Alliance Against Transnational Repression (GAATR)

Transnational repression is not a challenge unique to Canada; it is a global issue that requires a coordinated response. Canada should take the lead in forming the GAATR, an international coalition of democratic nations committed to combating TNR. The GAATR would:

- **Coordinate Efforts**

Streamlining actions to combat transnational repression.

- **Facilitate Information Sharing**

Enhancing intelligence and data exchange among member nations.

- **Conduct Joint Investigations**

Collaborating on cross-border cases and prosecution where applicable.

- **Implement Coordinated Sanctions**

Presenting a united front against perpetrators.

- **Support Victims Internationally**

Providing a network for those affected by TNR.

By involving partners like the European Union, the United States, Australia, and others, the GAATR would amplify our collective ability to protect citizens worldwide.

### 5.2 Enhance and Expand the Role of RRM Under the New Foreign Influence Transparency Commissioner

Global Affairs' Rapid Response Mechanism has effectively exposed foreign authoritarian narratives and tactics over the past three years, coordinating this work with our allies. However, the RRM is limited by a small team of just eight analysts, restricting its capacity to merely



exposing foreign information operations. In comparison, France has over 80 personnel dedicated to this effort. Canada could adopt a model similar to Sweden's National Agency for Psychological Defence, which was quickly established in 2022 to defend Sweden against foreign influence operations and cognitive warfare and employ nearly 70 specialists.

### 5.3 International Advocacy and Public Awareness

Raising global awareness about the threats posed by transnational repression is paramount. To achieve this:

- **Launch a Global Campaign**  
Educate the international community about TNR.
- **Advocate in International Forums**  
Utilize platforms like the G7, NATO, and the United Nations to promote the rights of activists, journalists, and dissidents.
- **Reinforce Global Commitment**  
Encourage a unified stance against TNR.

## Conclusion

The threats posed by foreign authoritarian regimes through transnational repression are real and escalating. Canada must act decisively to protect its citizens, uphold democratic values, and maintain the integrity of its institutions. They do this persistently, 24/7 both between election periods and during them. By developing and implementing a comprehensive framework, we not only safeguard vulnerable individuals but also strengthen our nation's resilience against external threats.

We must move forward with urgency and determination. The safety of our citizens and the preservation of our democratic principles depend on the actions we take today.

## About The Author

Over the past 15 years, I have dedicated myself to monitoring and analyzing foreign information and influence operations, as well as transnational repression. My engagement with these critical issues began in 2007 during the current phase of Russian operations against the Western democratic world. At that time, the Kremlin sought to destabilize Estonia's democracy through the manipulation of historical narratives and the incitement of riots in Tallinn, actions accompanied by the first-ever state-sponsored cyber attacks by Russia against Estonia's digital infrastructure.

As a journalist, human rights activist, and researcher—not an academic—I have had the privilege of working alongside some of the bravest pro-democracy activists and journalists of our time. Courageous individuals like the late Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, who was





assassinated for advocating democratic values and criticizing Vladimir Putin, and Vladimir Kara-Murza, who was poisoned twice for his activism and, until recently, was imprisoned for two and a half years for speaking out against Russia's war on Ukraine.

I also had the honour of leading the Canadian campaign for Magnitsky sanctions alongside Bill Browder, former Canadian Justice Minister Irwin Cotler, and former Senator Raynell Andreychuk. This advocacy drew significant unwanted attention from Kremlin propagandists, state media, and radical extremists, resulting in threats, intimidation, and harassment. In March 2022, I became one of the first Canadians to be sanctioned by the Kremlin.

My expertise is grounded in nearly two decades of observing and analyzing Kremlin influence operations within the context of the regime's expanding neo-colonial ambitions and its intensification of political repression both domestically and internationally. I have personally been, and continue to be, a target of the Kremlin's transnational repression due to my work.

Through this background and experience, I continue to monitor and expose Russian, Chinese, and other foreign authoritarian information and influence operations in Canada. My years of advocacy and support for Canadian communities vulnerable to transnational repression—including Ukrainian, Uyghur, Tibetan, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Iranian, Belarusian, Baltic, and Russian activists—have deepened my concern for their safety and the threats that authoritarian regimes pose to their ability to freely express themselves in the Western world, including here in Canada.