



Community
of Democracies

Handbook on Countering Transnational Repression

Practical Guide for Democratic States to Protect
Exiled Dissidents and Diasporas

Prepared for:
Community of Democracies

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This handbook is aimed at democratic states who wish to counter transnational repression and protect exiled dissidents and diasporas who exercise their democratic rights lawfully.

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What is transnational repression?

Transnational repression (TNR) occurs when a government targets an exiled individual (a dissident, journalist, former government insider, student, human rights defender or a member of a prosecuted ethnic or religious minority) outside its borders, in a host country. The aim is to silence them or prosecute them in order to prevent them from acting or speaking out against the regime.

TNR can be enabled by the host country – for example, when another authoritarian state cooperates with the country of origin of the targeted national in extrajudicial removal out of the country or enabling harassment. There are well documented cases of Türkiye¹ or Thailand² cooperating with friendly states to enable prosecution and / or removal of nationals at the request from their government.

But a democratic country respecting human rights may also inadvertently enable TNR through neglect or ignorance. It can happen either by unknowingly cooperating with the authoritarian state and sharing information allowing them to locate a dissident, acting upon an unfounded arrest warrant or other information in the Interpol database, denying right to stay in the country or not providing sufficient protection to an individual at-risk. Therefore, the first step to improvement is awareness and better detection of TNR cases – for which purpose this Handbook is designed. If neglected, TNR might become an avenue for a hostile state to build and expand their covert malign influence, threatening national security of the host state.

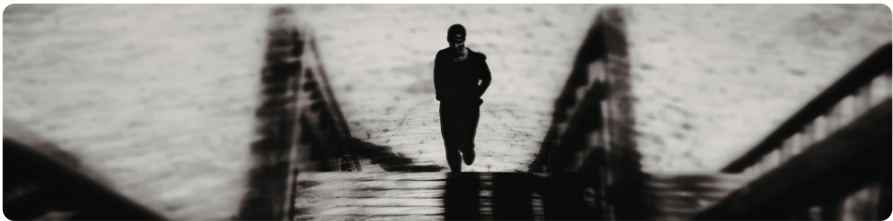


Image: Bogdan Stan

The top ten perpetrators of TNR are China, Türkiye, Tajikistan, Russia, Egypt, Cambodia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, and Iran³. This is not an exhaustive list, and authorities should stay vigilant for signs of TNR being deployed against diaspora members coming from any authoritarian state with history of human rights abuse.

1. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, Pressure Builds on Turkmen Activists in Turkey (August 2021), [rferl.org](https://www.rferl.org)
2. The Guardian, Dissident rock band Bi-2 leave Thailand after Russia deportation fears (February 2024), [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)
3. Freedom House, Collaboration and Resistance: Tracking Transnational Repression in 2025 (April 2026), [freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression](https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression)

Mechanisms of repression

The mechanism of action can range from physical threat through prosecution to forced removal from the country (through rendition or unlawful deportation).

Repression can happen in two ways:

Inside the host country

Some countries choose to target the dissidents on the territory of the host state. In most extreme cases, it can involve assassination – such as the murder of Chechen fighter Zelimkhan Sultanovich Khangoshvili in Berlin by the FSB, murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul or poisoning of the Russian defector and Putin's critic Alexander Litvinenko on the British soil.

TNR can include assault or physical intimidation, or even unexplained disappearance and detention by agents of the state present in the country. But attempts to silence dissidents don't always need to involve physical threat: authorities may also use proxy coercion, when individual's family is coerced to pressure them to return to the country of origin – this method has been deployed by China to silence anti-CCP activists⁴. Psychological warfare is equally harmful, and hostile states can deploy spyware and digital threats against dissidents to cause significant psychological distress. In such cases, legal response and attribution can be more difficult. These non-physical tactics are much more widespread, because they are a lower-cost form of repression. The use of spyware or mobility control, if unaddressed, can make it easier for a government to find and trap targeted individuals.

Diplomatic expulsions and heightened awareness have limited hostile states' ability to act inside democratic host countries in Europe. For that reason, perpetrators are now more likely to “outsource” such intimidation to criminal groups or recruit perpetrators online. For example, in early 2026, Lithuanian authorities made 13 arrests in a criminal case concerning attempted politically motivated murder of two people, Lithuanian and Russian nationals. The suspects were actively engaging with the local crime networks⁵.

4. International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), Inside China's machinery of repression — and how it crushes dissent around the world (April 2025), [icij.org/investigations/china-targets](https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-targets)

5. Reuters, Lithuania charges 13 people with two attempted murders linked to Russia's GRU, police say (April 2026), [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com)

Perpetrators can also deploy methods to make life and ordinary functioning difficult for targeted individuals, such as the use of debanking and anti-money laundering and terrorism financing regulations to freeze the funds of activists. TNR can also involve adding a vehicle to the Interpol's Stolen Motor Vehicle (SMV) database, which means the targeted individual can have their car seized when crossing borders or encountering a police check. A state can also add a valid document to the Interpol's Stolen and Lost Travel Documents (SLTD) database, effectively rendering it invalid. It may cause an individual being denied entry into a country where they legally reside.



Image: Ron Lach

Through removal to the country of origin

An authoritarian state can try to forcefully return its citizen back to the origin country to prosecute and / or silence them. This can be done through renditions or unlawful deportations. They may result from fabricated criminal cases, issuance of unfounded international arrest warrants and abuse of Interpol Red Notice system or featuring dissidents and human rights defenders (HRDs) on terrorism lists. Such fabricated legal claims may result in a country unknowingly acting upon them and refusing asylum or deporting an individual prosecuted for political reasons.

Another method, employed specifically by Belarus⁶, involves passport and document restrictions to force individual's return to the country. Through making it impossible to renew passports or to access other consular services abroad, the state forces prosecuted individuals back into the country of origin, where they risk arrest and further prosecution.

6. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Belarus: Presidential decree denying consular services puts Belarusians abroad at risk, [ohchr.org](https://www.ohchr.org/)

Policy recommendations

Governmental level

Develop mechanisms of oversight on any technical cooperation with authoritarian countries

A country should develop an informal response mechanism – a cross-institutional network working on TNR. Any technical or legal cooperation with a country deemed authoritarian should go through a cross-institutional check. A good measure of caution should be applied to any country rated ‘Not Free’ by Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World* index⁷. There should be a political oversight and further scrutiny to any request coming from such country either through Interpol, banking system, or through any other bilateral or multilateral channels. The purpose of this is creating institutional memory, preventing mechanism from derailing with changes in the governmental bodies.

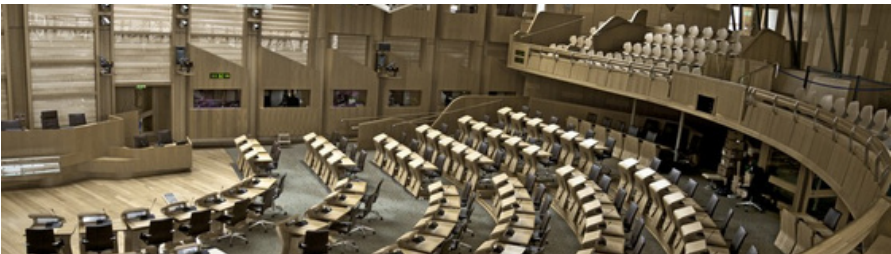


Image: Liz Leyden

Develop a structured strategy, learn from each other

Governments should start with collecting data on trends and common perpetrators, assessing the current threat level and developing a strategy towards addressing TNR. It can be done drawing from experience and good practices of countries, that have robust and successful counter-TNR strategy like Australia⁸ or the UK⁹ which have published assessments and governmental recommendations. Recognising the patterns and threats will later enable to use the domestic legislation to hold perpetrators accountable, as well as help to detect the threat early to prevent assassinations, attacks, and renditions.

7. Freedom House, Countries and Territories, freedomhouse.org/countries

8. Department of Home Affairs, Countering Foreign Interference in Australia, homeaffairs.gov.au/nat-security/files/cfi-australia.pdf

9. HM Government, Transnational repression in the UK: Governments Response, gov.uk

Policy recommendations

Governmental level

Task a governmental office with addressing transnational repression

This will allow to have a single point of contact for reporting cases of TNR, and a more structured approach to coordinate across multiple arms of the state (i.e. Home Office, law enforcement agencies, immigration agencies). For example, Germany has created a dedicated TNR coordination unit in the Federal Foreign Office, and the UK established a dedicated team within the Home Office.

Such governmental office should be responsible for monitoring the changing practices, participating in international working groups, and developing educational materials and manuals for different governmental agencies based on the strategy adopted by the government. It should also manage interagency collaboration and ensure that training and guidance also funnel down to law enforcement and relevant officials at the subnational level. The unit should also be responsible for liaising with technology companies to respond to coordinated campaigns by state actors against dissident in the host country.

The unit should also be responsible for establishing cooperation with civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders (HRDs) representing diasporas at risk. Engagement should be made through consultations, establishing an early warning system and a “hotline” – direct contact line to report suspected TNR activities, especially those putting personal safety at risk.



Image: Ross Helen

Policy recommendations

Law enforcement

Train officers to spot signs of TNR

Police are often unaware of TNR as a phenomenon and don't act on it when it is reported to them. Dedicated training should be provided in order to increase detection and prosecution of such cases – especially as attribution may pose difficulty.

Additionally, train law enforcement on awareness of TNR stemming from abuse of the Interpol system. Such training should encompass learning most notorious perpetrators and methods, not limited to false issuance of Red Notices. Authoritarian state may leverage other tools in the Interpol systems to get information about the whereabouts of a targeted individual – for example, by issuing a diffusion or a Blue Notice which obliges states to cooperate on collecting additional information about a person's identity, location or activities¹⁰. Providing such information to the malicious actors may pose a threat to the targeted individual, who may not be aware of such notice issued.

Interpol notices and bilateral requests from authoritarian states should never be the sole ground to conduct arrests. By rule, extradition to authoritarian countries where a person can face torture or inhumane treatment should be outright denied. National Central Bureaus in each country should host a human rights ombudsperson who can engage with immigration lawyers and NGO experts and flag spurious notices.

Produce public materials available in different languages

Proactively reach out to communities at risk. Distribute materials available in the languages of those who are most vulnerable to persecution and targeting. Use civic education and awareness raising campaigns to encourage members of the targeted diasporas to reach out to the police if they fall victim of TNR.

10. Otherside, INTERPOL Red Notices 2025: Record Rejections.

Policy recommendations

Law enforcement

Offer protection to individuals flagged as at risk

Identify figures at risk and offer them close protection, or lower-level police protection. Introduce a contact point (“hotline”) which more prominent (and thus more exposed) figures can reach out to when in danger or when they detect suspicious and potentially threatening unusual activities (i.e. a tracking device is found in a car).

Collect detailed data on TNR

TNR is often intertwined with criminal networks operating in the host country. In cases of harassment or coercion faced by members of diaspora, law enforcement is the first line of response. A dedicated reporting tool for TNR cases should be set up. This will help collect detailed data to help the government identify patterns and perpetrators and develop response mechanisms. Without such overview, no effective policy is possible.



Image: Getty Images

Policy recommendations

Migration system

Respect right to asylum and provide alternative avenues for targeted groups

Train caseworkers processing asylum applications in which countries individuals can be more vulnerable to, and more likely to suffer from, TNR. Asylum process should recognise collective persecution. Grant prima facie refugee status to members of communities who are persecuted en masse (in or outside of the country). Consider introducing alternatives to asylum process where criteria of political prosecution are met – i.e. humanitarian residency for vetted individuals, extended accreditation for journalists.

Issue alternative travel documents in response to mobility controls

In cases where individuals are denied consular services by their own country or using them poses significant risk to their safety, offer issuance of alternative travel documents. For example, Poland issues a temporary document for travelling abroad and confirming identity called 'Polish travel document for a foreigner' to Belarusian citizens unable to go back home for passport renewal. This service is also offered by Lithuania – in both countries, an individual needs to hold a valid residence permit to use the service.

Work with the civil society and diaspora to vet people

If any doubts arise that an individual may act covertly on behalf of an authoritarian state, work with the network of trusted representatives of the national civil society already present in the country to identify potential cases of targeted TNR. Introduce clear verification mechanisms: work with contact points in the diaspora that can work as an 'early warning system' for any individuals that may attempt to infiltrate and harass members of the diaspora. This needs to be done carefully, to avoid stigmatizing diasporas and framing them as potential agents of TNR.

Policy recommendations

Diplomatic relations

Cultivate contacts with HRDs and lawyers from authoritarian countries

Fund diaspora civil society initiatives. More resources would enable them to increase their own resilience and encourage governments to tailor responses to meet their needs. Relationships with human rights defenders (HRDs) and lawyers defending them are also crucial for countering TNR. These people will have the best overview of the methods and intentions of the perpetrating state. Such partnership will improve the host states' ability to monitor the situation and detect any threats.

Impose accountability and vet diplomats

Expel diplomats that act as agents of influence and perpetrators of TNR. Infiltration aimed at the diaspora should be recognised as foreign interference and come with legal consequences. For proven perpetrators, other means of sanctioning should be explored (up to travel restrictions and personal sanctions through Magnitsky laws¹¹).

Share best practices amongst like-minded countries

This can be done through working groups. In March 2023, Freedom House launched a Coordination Group to Counter Transnational Repression which brings together members from 46 countries coordinating on best practices to counter transnational repression. Not only NGOs and civil society organisations should participate, but a similar platform should be set up to facilitate engagement and discussion between diplomats and employees of governmental agencies.

11. European Parliament Think Tank, Global human rights sanctions - Mapping Magnitsky laws: The US, Canadian, UK and EU approach, europarl.europa.eu/thinktank

Policy recommendations

Diplomatic relations

Push for reforms in Interpol

Even with heightened level of scrutiny, the abuse of the Interpol Red Notice system causes significant harms. Based on the principle of trust, it assumes validity of claims made through its information system. When a targeted individual reports an issue, review from the Notices and Diffusions Task Force (NDF) can take multiple months. During this time, the targeted individual can experience severe distress and limitations to their ability to travel freely, use of the banking system, or rent (where passing criminal checks are needed). Authoritarian states also abuse Interpol system to send information requests to other member states to track down the whereabouts of their victims.¹²

As mentioned above, authoritarian states may also misuse the Interpol's Stolen Motor Vehicle (SMV) and Stolen and Lost Travel Documents (SLTD) databases. So far, information can be added by member states to these without further scrutiny – and unknowing individuals can't do anything to contest them. Further oversight should be added to verify entries to the database coming from countries with track record of abuse of the Interpol system for TNR.



Image: Getty Images

12. BBC News, Russia using Interpol's wanted list to target critics abroad, leak reveals (January 2026), (<https://bbc.com/news>)

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Freedom House: Countries and Territories (Index). [freedomhouse.org/countries](https://www.freedomhouse.org/countries)



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