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# TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION IN CANADA

A threat to democracy and public safety

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## List of acronyms

<b>CSE</b>	Communications Security Establishment Canada
<b>CSIS</b>	Canadian Security Intelligence Service
<b>CSSA</b>	Chinese Students and Scholars Association
<b>G7RRM</b>	G7 Rapid Response Mechanism
<b>NCFIC</b>	National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator
<b>NSICOP</b>	National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians
<b>PCO</b>	Privy Council Office
<b>PIFI</b>	Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference (also referred as Hogue Commission)
<b>PRC</b>	People's Republic of China
<b>RCMP</b>	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
<b>TNR</b>	Transnational Repression

## Executive Summary

Transnational repression is emerging as one of the most serious yet least understood threats to security and democracy in Canada. As foreign states increasingly target individuals on Canadian soil, through intimidation, surveillance, digital harassment, coercion of family members abroad, and, in some cases, plans for physical harm, Canada faces a challenge that strikes at the core of its democratic values and institutions.

This report highlights the urgent need to recognize transnational repression not merely as a set of isolated incidents, as it was long regarded, but as a systemic threat affecting thousands of people across Canada's diverse diaspora communities. The consequences are profound. Individuals live in fear, communities become fractured and politically silenced, and democratic processes are weakened as voices are pushed out of public life. The reach of authoritarian governments into Canada's social and political space undermines the state's sovereignty and its ability to protect those who seek safety within its borders.

For years, Canada underestimated the scale and sophistication of this threat, leaving gaps in policy, law enforcement capacity, legal tools, and victim support. These shortcomings allowed foreign governments to operate with relative impunity, exploiting Canada's openness and its limited preparedness to this growing threat. Emerging technologies such as social media and deepfakes have made the threat even more insidious and attribution more difficult. The 2023-2024 Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions exposed the extent of foreign interference, prompting a long-overdue acknowledgement that transnational repression is a national security and public policy priority.

This report underscores why a coordinated, well-resourced, and rights-affirming response is essential. It calls for stronger protections for

at-risk individuals, more robust legal and institutional frameworks, and a government-wide strategy informed by transparency, accountability, and meaningful engagement with affected communities as well as strong collaboration with our international allies, including G7 members.

Ultimately, the report aims to equip policymakers, as well as the general public, with the knowledge needed to confront this evolving threat. Defending against transnational repression is not only about safeguarding targeted individuals; it is about preserving the integrity of Canada's democracy and ensuring that authoritarian influence has no place in the lives of those who call this country home. 🌐

## Introduction

Canada's large diaspora communities include immigrants from around the world who moved there seeking a better life, along with some who fled there to escape danger in their countries of origin. Unsurprisingly, those individuals have frequently become targets of foreign governments and actors who wish to monitor, control, and intimidate their citizens abroad who they see as a threat or an "inconvenience" to the regime. While there is a long history of foreign states targeting Canadian residents with repressive actions that fit the definition of transnational repression (TNR), the phenomenon has been growing in frequency and scope. These acts take place in both the digital and in-person realms, facilitated by increasing globalization and interconnectedness.

Some diaspora communities remain reluctant to speak publicly about TNR or contact authorities for fear of repercussions for themselves or their families. This makes it difficult to gauge the exact scale and seriousness of the threat. However, the consequences of TNR for individuals as well as for fundamental values of freedom of expression and democracy must be taken seriously. In March 2024 at the PIFI, Mehmet Tohti, the executive director of the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project, stated: "It touches your

life. It touches your safety. It touches your security. It touches your family's comfort. It touches your career. It touches your future. You don't sleep."<sup>1</sup>

This report provides an overview of some of the states known to have engaged in transnational repression in Canada, explores the Canadian government response, and provides recommendations for both government and civil society in Canada. Those who choose Canada as a new home deserve to live freely and with the assurance that they are safe. Allowing foreign actors to run roughshod over Canadian laws and put individuals and communities at risk is unacceptable.

## What is transnational repression?

Although organizations such as US-based Freedom House and Toronto-based Citizen Lab, provide definitions of transnational repression, no universally agreed-upon definition of transnational repression exists.

Canada does not have a single nor legally codified definition of “transnational repression” in Canadian law, as emphasized in the *Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference (PIFI)*.<sup>2</sup> However, the *CSIS Act*, the legislation giving the Canadian Security Intelligence Service the mandate to act in Canada, describes transnational repression as “foreign state activity to monitor, intimidate and harass diaspora communities in Canada to achieve its objectives.”<sup>3</sup> These activities are therefore considered under the broader umbrella of foreign interference/foreign influenced activities as defined in Canadian intelligence law.

In its 2024 public report, CSIS defines transnational repression as: “Any efforts undertaken by a foreign state, whether directly or indirectly, to intimidate, influence and/or exact reprisal against individuals or groups living outside their borders.”<sup>4</sup> This includes ... acts such as extrajudicial killing, physical assault, unlawful abduction, physical and online surveillance, and obstruction. It could also include pressuring or leveraging a targeted individual's relatives in a foreign state as a means to influence/coerce them.”

The Privy Council Office (PCO) has published a “backgrounder” on a “Transnational Repression Operation,” in which it states that transnational repression “takes place when foreign governments reach beyond their state borders to advance their interests or silence criticism and dissent using intimidation, threats or violence, often against diaspora and exile communities.”<sup>5</sup> Targets have included political dissidents, human rights and democracy activists, religious and ethnic minority groups, as well as people and organizations that defend the victims in Canada.

The Privy Council, supports the Prime Minister and Cabinet, cites tactics such as:<sup>6</sup>

- Physical intimidation and violence: monitoring and surveillance, vandalism, threats, abduction, assault, or attempted murder;
- Malicious digital activity: hacking, cyberbullying, targeted deepfakes, online defamation and disinformation, doxxing, or threatening online messages;
- Threats against relatives and other connections in the home country
- Legal manipulation: libel suits, extradition agreements, bounties for information on individuals;
- Community ostracism: rejection from community associations, use of labels such as “extremist” or “traitor,” or loss of access to social events and employment opportunities.

Through former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Canada participated in a G7 Leaders’ Statement in June 2025 that defines TNR as “an aggressive form of foreign interference whereby states or their proxies attempt to intimidate, harass, harm or coerce individuals or communities outside their borders.”<sup>7</sup>

Several academic institutions and organization have done valuable work on foreign interference and transnational repression. The Citizen Lab at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy defines transnational repression as the actions of foreign governments to stalk, intimidate, or assault people with the aim to silence dissent among diasporas and exiles, adding that it is “part of a pattern of spreading global authoritarianism and the impairment of human rights and democracy.”<sup>8</sup> The authors add that

“transnational repression breaks down boundaries between domestic forms of control and efforts aimed at controlling those who reside abroad.”

Furthermore, the Citizen Lab also distinguishes digital transnational repression as the integration of digital technologies into existing patterns of transnational repression.<sup>9</sup> Digital transnational repression is facilitated by the adaptability and low expense of some of the technologies used, the difficulty of detecting and tracing the origin of the threat, the profound access into one’s private life, and lack of accountability for state actors and those affiliated with them. This gives governments more tools with which to engage in transnational repression with benefits that surpass the costs.

## The consequences of transnational repression

Transnational repression has a profound impact on victims, their families, and diaspora communities.

Psychologically, it produces chronic fear, anxiety, and hypervigilance, often accompanied by depression, stress, or trauma responses, according to a study by Citizen Lab researchers Noura Aljizawi and Siena Anstis in *Lawfare*.<sup>10</sup> Because the intimidation is ongoing, many victims lose their sense of safety even after resettling in a democratic country. This pressure also leads to social withdrawal: people may isolate themselves from diaspora communities, avoid political discussions, or stop participating in cultural organizations out of fear that these spaces are monitored or infiltrated.<sup>11</sup> In its 2022 report titled “Psychological and Emotional War: Digital Transnational Repression in Canada,” the Citizen Lab provides different categories of the effects TNR can have: self-censorship and the silencing of transnational networks; psychological harm and behavior modification; and repression of family members and friends in the country of origin.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to understand the effect of TNR on the targeted individuals and democratic societies alike. In “Understanding Chilling

Effects”, legal scholar and social scientist Jonathon Penney explains that harassment and surveillance lead people to engage in more socially conforming or compliant behavior.<sup>13</sup> It also leads to deeper psychological dimensions such as anxiety, distress, and depression. This is true for both offline and online harassment as well as surveillance, with the caveat that the capacity of the government to extend TNR to the online realm provides no place to hide. Targeted disinformation and defamation campaigns have similar effects as harassment: instilling fear leading to self-censorship. Online troll armies and bots amplify government reach with chilling consequences on democratic engagement and collective action. Penney added that simply the possibility of surveillance has a conforming silencing effect.

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Leo Shin, a professor at the University of British Columbia, said many Chinese-Canadians are afraid to share their political beliefs as “not knowing whether your friends and your neighbors and your acquaintances are monitoring you; we don’t know, nobody knows, but it’s the possibility of that, is also what makes it work.”<sup>14</sup>

Dissidents who testified to the Hogue Commission repeatedly mentioned feeling deeply fearful. Yuriy Novodvorskiy, a representative of the Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance, explained that Russian Canadians who wish to speak out against the Russian government “are aware that these threats are real, and so they always have to make that calculation of how far they are willing to go, because they are essentially putting themselves and their families at risk.” To protect themselves during protests, activists now wear masks, glasses, and hats to hide their identity, Esmailion said.

The consequences extend into victims’ professional and economic lives. Individuals may face reputational attacks, interference with their work

or studies, or direct pressure on employers and colleagues. Activists, scholars, and students often self-censor, avoiding certain topics or public engagement to protect themselves or their families. In some cases, victims face more direct threats, including stalking, harassment, and surveillance, all of which contribute to feelings of vulnerability. Although physical violence is less common, the credible possibility of it—and the experience of being watched—exerts a powerful coercive effect.

One of the most devastating aspects of transnational repression is the pressure placed on family members who remain in the home country. Victims may witness relatives being harassed, interrogated, or threatened because of their own activities abroad, leading to guilt, fear, and strained relationships. According to Markus Kolga, researcher at iPolitics, in some cases victims and their families have been threatened with sexual violence or death, including explicit threats toward family members back in their home country.<sup>15</sup>

Fear of retribution against family members in Canada and back home is also strong among targeted diasporas and exiles. Mehmet Tohti, executive director of the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project, told the commission that many Uyghurs in Canada have stopped communicating with family members in China, citing “fear that they may give them (the families) trouble. And so basically the Uyghur Canadians live in total darkness without getting any information about their family members, whether they’re alive, and also family unification.” Tohti explained that the cutting off of family communications has led to stress, isolation, and depression. Similarly, in an interview for this report, Cherie Wong, executive director of the Alliance Canada Hong Kong, said she has completely cut ties with her family in China to protect herself and her loved ones. Bakhtiar Semseddin, a Montreal-based Uyghur activist, refuses to self-censor, but said many members of the Uyghur diaspora community have distanced themselves from him to avoid threats from Beijing and its proxies.<sup>16</sup> The breaking of these ties is particularly difficult for victims of TNR who rely on their diaspora community to feel a sense of fellowship and belonging.

This creates an emotional burden that both silences and isolates the individual. In a report by the Canadian organization DisinfoWatch titled “PRC Foreign Interference and Transnational Repression in

Canada: Insights from Vulnerable Diaspora Communities”, Canadian Uyghur, Tibetan, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and Falun Gong community leaders reported threats to their families in their country of origin, cyber intimidation, harassment, and disinformation campaigns.<sup>17</sup> CSIS also explicitly recognizes coercion of diaspora through threats to return or pressure on family members abroad.<sup>18</sup>

For many victims, legal and immigration status also plays a role in their vulnerability. Some fear reporting incidents to local authorities, worrying that their case will not be taken seriously or that their precarious status may be jeopardized. Others hesitate to travel, concerned that they could be detained or coerced in third countries. These concerns undermine victims’ confidence that they are safe or fully protected in their new environment.

TNR also affects human rights organizations. Relentless coordinated online attacks against Sheng Xue, the former president of the Federation for a Democratic China, took a toll on the organization, leading it to internal divisions and a split in 2017.<sup>19</sup> The weakening of human rights organizations has profound consequences for their activism, which includes awareness-raising campaigns; assistance to those whose rights have been violated; lobbying for changes to national, regional, or international law; and more. It also leads to an erosion of civil society, including in democratic countries such as Canada.

TNR also has broader civic and political implications. Victims often retreat from political activities, advocacy, or public debate, which weakens diaspora engagement and limits democratic participation. When one person is targeted, others in the community may self-censor as well, magnifying the chilling effect. Ultimately, many victims describe feeling that exile never truly ends—the reach of the state follows them, shaping their daily choices, their emotional wellbeing, and their ability to speak freely.

Speaking at the PIFI on 27 March 2024, the President of the Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance Yuriy Novodvorskiy stated that many Russian Canadians “retreat away from politics entirely and hide behind apathy” and believe that resistance is pointless. Novodvorskiy says Russia’s aim is to “make the individual feel powerless and unable to accomplish

anything of value.”<sup>20</sup> This lack of civic engagement has an impact on Canadian democracy. Similarly, Jaskaran Sandhu, who represented the Sikh and Punjabi diaspora communities before the commission, argued that TNR prevented Sikh Canadians from enjoying rights protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and “the full glow of liberty and freedom,” including freedom of expression and assembly.<sup>21</sup>

“ Transnational repression creates a chilling effect (...) on wider political or social engagement in their host country.

The Hon. Marie-Josée Hogue, commissioner of PIFI, noted that “transnational repression may impact democratic institutions if it discourages diaspora communities from participating in our democratic processes, such as elections, and undermines people’s trust in Canadian democracy.”<sup>22</sup> Transnational repression creates a chilling effect not only on the target of TNR, leading to self-censorship and isolation, but also on wider political or social engagement in their host country, to the detriment of democracy. Furthermore, in its 2022 report “Defending Democracy in Exile,” the US-based organization Freedom House calls transnational repression a tactic used by authoritarian governments to “manipulate international organizations with the aim of undermining universal human rights standards.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, as political analyst Tasha Kheiriddin noted in that foreign influence, including TNR, “threatens the fabric of our democracy and exposes our country to influence by foreign powers. It exposes potentially millions of our citizens to coercion and intimidation, allowing their human rights to be violated without consequence.”<sup>24</sup>

## Mapping TNR in Canada: Case studies

While not every country involved in transnational repression in Canada is listed below, some prominent cases merit mention.

### Algeria

A growing number of Canadian citizens who identify as Kabyles—ethnic Berbers in Algeria—claim the regime in Algiers is targeting them for their political activism in Canada. Some within the Kabyle Canadian community advocate for a state independent from Algeria. Some belong to the Movement of the Self-Determination of Kabylia, which the Algerian government has labeled a terrorist organization. Canada and the United States, however, have not.

According to Amnesty International, Algeria has leveled bogus terrorism charges against Kabyle activists to stifle dissent. A Montreal man claims that the Algerian regime imprisoned his son, Massinissa Lakehal, to get the father to become less politically active. Massinissa Lakehal was sentenced to three years in prison in January 2025 and was convicted in relation to his father’s activism for Kabyle independence.<sup>25</sup>

Kamal Sehaki, another Kabyle activist in Quebec, has allegedly been pressured by the Algerian Consulate in Montreal to cease all links to members of the Kabylia movement and to provide the names of other activists to Algerian diplomats.<sup>26</sup> According to Kamel Serbouh, president of a Kabyle organization in Montreal, other Canadian-Algerians have been the subject of intimidation by Algerian authorities. This includes allegedly being questioned by authorities when they visit Algeria.

Canada’s response to TNR has been diplomatic rather than targeted. Then Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly provided a statement to Radio-Canada in June 2024 with respect to Algerian TNR: “We maintain long-standing bilateral relations with Algeria, which allows us among other things to engage in discussions with the Algerian government on issues of importance to Canada, particularly on human rights and consular cases.”<sup>27</sup>

## China

According to Freedom House’s 2024 report on transnational repression, the People’s Republic of China is a leading global perpetrator of TNR, including in Canada.<sup>28</sup> The Chinese communities in Canada are large and include ethnic Hans, Uyghurs, Tibetans, Huis, and Mongols. According to the 2021 Canadian census, there are 1.7 million people in the Chinese diaspora, representing 1.7% of the total population of Canada. Students comprise one of the main components of this diaspora.<sup>29</sup> As recently as 2018, almost 85,000 Chinese students were in Canada, though that number dropped to 54,000 in 2024, according to A&M Canadian Immigration Law Corporation.<sup>30</sup>

The publicly available information is expansive and shows the extent of China’s involvement in TNR in Canada. A 2024 report in the magazine *The Economist* noted: “The influence of the (Chinese Communist) party on Chinese abroad takes three overlapping forms: direct intimidation of potential critics, propaganda aimed at the diaspora and pressure on people to censor themselves when discussing Chinese affairs.”<sup>31</sup> Instances of the Chinese government’s TNR efforts in Canada include:

China, through its agents and proxies, regularly subjects anyone who attempts to express views critical of the Chinese Communist Party to harassment – and sometimes even subjects those who have never spoken out to harassment tactics as a reminder to not try. One method its agents use is disruptions of events featuring speakers who seek to shed light on practices in China that target the independence, and even the existence, of minority groups or call for accountability for human rights violations. These efforts are aimed at Uyghur Muslims, Tibetans, expatriates from Hong Kong, Falun Gong followers, and activists tied to feminist and LGBTQ+ causes. Harassment also increasingly takes place via digital platforms, including Douyin (the domestic Chinese version of TikTok), WeChat, X, and with technologies such as robocalls and video calls. Digital TNR—which is likely to grow, as it is cost-effective—is particularly insidious as it can be used for surveillance, disinformation, and harassment.

This harassment has taken many forms:

- In February 2019, students associated with the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) at McMaster University led a protest campaign targeting Uyghur activist Rukiye Turdush, who spoke on campus about China’s detention camps for Muslims.<sup>32</sup> One CSSA member filmed her presentation and others later sent photos to Chinese officials and issued a statement criticizing Turdush’s talk. She said a group of Chinese students in the audience tried to disrupt her talk, adding that one “verbally assaulted me with foul language during the discussion period held afterward.” Six months later, McMaster revoked the official status of the club.
- In March 2019, Chinese consulate officials pressured a human rights institute at Concordia University to cancel a conference featuring a prominent exiled Uyghur leader.<sup>33</sup>
- In early 2023, Mehmet Tohti, the executive director of the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project, reported that he had been receiving threatening phone calls from China that included a claim that his mother and sisters were dead. The underlying message was that if he did not “behave” his parents’ physical wellbeing would suffer.<sup>34</sup> Then, in 2021, he received messages via Twitter that his mother in China was dead just as he was preparing to testify before a Parliamentary committee.
- In July 2019 a Falun Gong practitioner claimed that the chief executive officer of the Ottawa Dragon Boat Festival ordered him to remove a shirt advertising the Chinese spiritual group. The Falun Gong member believed the CEO did so at China’s behest (the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa is a major sponsor of the event).<sup>35</sup>
- In early 2019, Chemi Lhamo, the student president-elect of the University of Toronto’s Scarborough campus and a member of Students For a Free Tibet, claimed she was the target of fervent anti-Tibet harassment online, a tactic consistent with Chinese efforts to suppress dissent. She became the target of hateful online campaigns, death threats, and accusations of anti-Chinese prejudice.<sup>36</sup>
- An extensive report by the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy, documented claims by several Tibetan activists

living in Canada that their families in Tibet have received threatening phone calls and home visits by local police, advising them to tell their children in Canada to stop their vocal opposition to the Chinese government.<sup>37</sup> They also said they personally received phone calls, and some have been harassed during protests in Canada.

- In January 2020, Cherie Wong, executive director and co-founder of Alliance Canada Hong Kong, a group urging Canada to defend the former British colony's democracy, received a threatening phone call demanding that she leave an event to mark the group's launch.<sup>38</sup> The caller added "people are coming to collect me." Chinese agents are suspected of making the phone call. She has also been the target of online harassment and defamation campaigns, including on X and WhatsApp, where she was described as a "race traitor," intimidated, and doxed. About the online harassment, Wong said in a CBC interview that: "It was almost an onslaught, a wave of online harassment. Death threats, rape threats, the amount of online violence almost immediately after each press interview has confirmed my family's suspicions and the kind of whispers I grew up to: The moment you speak out against the (Chinese Communist) Party, there will be consequences facing you."<sup>39</sup> She added: "I am scared out of my mind like every day."
- Benjamin Fung, a Hong Kong-born Canadian who is a professor at McGill University, said he has more than once received blank emails containing malware meant to infect his phone.<sup>40</sup> These spear-phishing emails are also a form of threat as they are always sent 48 hours after he has taken part in public pro-democracy demonstrations.
- Sheng Xue, former president of the Federation for a Democratic China, faced relentless coordinated online attacks via private and public messages on X.<sup>41</sup> She has been called an "anti-Chinese traitor" and "lackey"<sup>42</sup>, has been accused of "poisoning Canadians with a strong anti-China bias"<sup>43</sup> and of having "dangerous opinions."<sup>44</sup> Users have also sent her falsified pornographic images.

Students are particularly at risk, as these activities often occur on campuses. Sheng Xue said, “Overseas students bear the brunt; they do not have the nationality of other countries to protect them and they may have to go back to China, so they become cannon fodder for the Chinese Communist Party overseas.”<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Benjamin Fung expressed his concern about the relationship between Chinese consulates and Chinese student associations in Canadian universities before the House of Commons’ Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security.<sup>46</sup> Not only do they maintain close ties, but the first event of Chinese students’ orientation is often a meeting with the Chinese consulate with the aim of sending a message that they are being watched. At times, the consulates have even tasked students with gathering intelligence of use to China or with keeping an eye on fellow Chinese students who could be involved in activism.<sup>47</sup> In a separate meeting of the committee, Wong testified that Tibetans, Uyghurs, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kongers are worried that “embassies, consulates, and their home governments might revoke study permits or scholarships for unfavorable views, actions or inactions.”<sup>48</sup>

Another tactic China uses to keep tabs on and attempt to influence people it perceives as dissidents or elements critical of the regime has been the creation of what have come to be known as “police stations” in both in Canadian cities and around the world. According to the human rights group Safeguard Defenders, 53 countries play host to 102 overseas police stations. In a 2022 report titled “Patrol and Persuade” the organization explains that the stations are set up by local Chinese Public Security services and involved, in “persuade to return” operations, in which Chinese authorities attempt to get dissidents to return to China.<sup>49</sup> In 2022, stations existed in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, according to the report.

In October 2022, the RCMP reported it was investigating the presence of three China-linked “police stations” in and near Toronto. China claims these facilities are “online service platforms” helping Chinese nationals living abroad by offering services such as driver’s license renewal.<sup>50</sup> It has added that these stations are neither staffed by police officers nor involved in investigations of any kind.

Eight months later, the RCMP announced it had shut down Chinese facilities in Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec.<sup>51</sup> According to

Parliamentary Committee Notes published in April 2023, the RCMP apparently continues to investigate “transnational repression activity, and those responsible for transnational repression, to ensure Chinese and other Canadians are safe from foreign influence.”<sup>52</sup>

Then Canadian National Security and Intelligence Adviser Jody Thomas told the standing committee on procedure and House affairs that Canadian citizens had been working at these stations, in some cases unwittingly or under duress. In December 2022, Canada issued a warning to the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa to end any illegal activity at the stations.<sup>53</sup> In March 2024, two Chinese-Canadian community centers in the Montreal area, Chinese Family Services of Greater Montreal and the Centre Sino Québec de la Rive-Sud, sued the RCMP, alleging defamation over its claims that their facilities were being used by Beijing as illegal police stations.<sup>54</sup>

“ The commission also acknowledged the use of diplomatic missions, community organizations, and students to carry out transnational repression.

The lack of judicial cases concerning the presence and activities of these so-called police stations, and hence the dearth of publicly available information, makes it difficult to establish the extent or impact of the lawfare tool. Nevertheless, Safeguard Defenders’ assessment that China runs such offices in more than 50 nations does lend the accusations credibility.<sup>55</sup>

While the Hogue-chaired commission on foreign interference noted that TNR was not strictly part of its mandate, its final report published in January, noted that China “targets members of Chinese Canadian diaspora communities for the purposes of repression, influence and forced return of targeted individuals to the PRC” and deploys a wide range of tactics, including ones targeting a person’s family and friends living in China.<sup>56</sup> The commission also acknowledged the use of diplomatic missions, community organizations, and students to carry out transnational repression.

## India

Under Prime Minister Trudeau, Canada – and by extension the United States -- increasingly saw India, the world's largest nation by population, a huge economic power, and a growing tour de force on the international stage, as an important interlocutor. Canada is home to 1.86 million residents of Indian origin, according to the 2021 census. It also has the largest Sikh community outside India, with over 770,000 members.<sup>57</sup>

Despite its past as a multiethnic democracy, under the Hindu nationalist influence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, tolerance for other cultures and religions in the country has diminished. The US State Department's 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom has documented several violent acts and rhetoric targeting Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians in India.<sup>58</sup> That intolerance increasingly spilled beyond India's borders, with incidents of transnational repression targeting members of the Indian diaspora in Canada.

India has exerted pressure on residents of South Asian origin in Canada, especially Sikhs, for some time. According to an investigation by Canadian news network Global News, individuals associated with India's diplomatic missions in Ottawa, Vancouver, and Toronto are reported to have been involved in numerous violent acts in Canada aimed at opponents of the Modi administration.<sup>59</sup> Violent acts include shootings, killings, threats, arsons and extortions. Most of the targets are supporters of the Khalistan movement, a Sikh separatist movement that seeks to create an independent homeland. Other scenarios include Indian diplomats pressuring members of the Indian community to collect information about Canada. Threats included withholding visas to those who needed to travel to India.

Most dramatically, in June 2023 Hardeep Singh Nijjar was killed outside a gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) in Surrey, British Columbia. Nijjar, an Indian-born Sikh, relocated to Canada in 1997 and became increasingly active in advocating for Sikh independence.<sup>60</sup> The Indian government viewed his actions with suspicion, accusing him of leading the Khalistan Tiger Force, which India considers a terrorist organization.<sup>61</sup> Nijjar's vocal opposition to what he described as the Modi government's "Hindu-first

policies” further fueled tensions with New Delhi. After his death in what was determined to be a targeted killing, then-Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, citing US intelligence, announced that Indian agents were responsible for the assassination.<sup>62</sup> Canada expelled India’s top diplomat and five others, saying they were believed to be part of a vast criminal network. Indeed, a similar case occurred in New York City in October 2024 when US authorities charged a man they say is an Indian intelligence officer for allegedly directing from abroad a plot to carry out an assassination in the United States.<sup>63</sup> The indictment alleges that Vikash Yadav “directed the assassination plot from India” against a New York–based Sikh lawyer and activist who has called for Punjab’s secession from India. Although the alleged plot failed, it fits in with a pattern of TNR by Indian government. Canadian and US authorities had been working together to investigate several other alleged plots targeting Sikh activists across North America.<sup>64</sup> The Indian government denied the allegations, causing a deep years-long rift between Canada and India.<sup>65</sup>

The National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP), a cross-party group of parliamentarians and senators, listed incidents of Indian interference and transnational repression in Canada. The report “Special Report on Foreign Interference in Canada’s Democratic Processes and Institutions” cites India “as the second-most significant foreign interference threat to Canada’s democratic institutions and processes.”<sup>66</sup> While the report focuses on foreign interference in Canadian politics, it notes Indian involvement in acts aimed at suppressing dissent and critics in Canada, citing Nijjar’s assassination as a clear example.

Proponents of Hindu nationalism, especially those within the Modi regime, have spawned efforts outside India to quash debate or criticism of the movement’s goals. In Canada, more specifically, a report by the National Council of Canadian Muslims and World Sikh Organization of Canada claimed the Hindu extremist movement has made “significant inroads” in Canada and is attempting to shut down criticism of the Indian government.<sup>67</sup> Academics in Canada whose work relates to India have allegedly received death threats after trying to organize conferences on Hindu nationalism or for criticizing the politics of Modi’s party.<sup>68</sup>

## Iran

The Iranian diaspora in Canada, some 400,000 strong, initially consisted of those who fled the regime after the fall of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979. Many other Iranians have since fled repression and persecution in the Islamic Republic. Canadian authorities have noted Iranian efforts to suppress criticism of its regime abroad, often through threats of violence.

CSIS's 2021 Public Report states that it is investigating credible accounts of harassment and intimidation targeting Canada-based relatives of Flight PS752 victims, allegedly carried out by individuals connected to proxies of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>69</sup> In a 2022 statement to CBC, CSIS also confirmed it is examining several “credible” death threats originating from Iran and directed at individuals in Canada.<sup>70</sup> The agency added that it is aware of Iranian state actors monitoring and pressuring people inside Canada in an effort to silence public criticism of the regime. In his first speech as CSIS Director in 2025, Daniel Rogers stated that “in particularly alarming cases over the last year, we’ve had to reprioritize our operations to counter the actions of Iranian intelligence services and their proxies who have targeted individuals they perceive as threats to their regime.”<sup>71</sup> According to the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, Iranian state-sponsored actors also have engaged in digital transnational repression, including doxing journalists, spreading disinformation, and threatening activists online.<sup>72</sup> These campaigns aim to intimidate Iranian diaspora communities and silence criticism. In its 2024-2025 cyber-threat assessment, the Center acknowledges that “Iran’s increasing willingness to conduct disruptive cyber-attacks beyond the Middle East and its persistent efforts to track and monitor regime opponents through cyberspace present a growing cyber security challenge for Canada and our allies.”<sup>73</sup>

Iran’s transnational repression spread worldwide, not just in Canada. On 2 September 2025, Canada and its G7 partners issued a joint statement condemning Iran’s attempts to “kill, kidnap, and harass” dissidents abroad, including in North America.<sup>74</sup>

Investigations suggest hundreds of regime-linked individuals may be present in Canada, raising concerns about infiltration and foreign interference. In an extensive report by Global News, Iranian-Canadian

dissidents describe harassment, intimidation, and threats they believe come from regime proxies, while experts warn that Canada has become a convenient refuge for Iranian officials and elites implicated in wrongdoing.<sup>75</sup>

According to Hamed Esmailion, an Iranian-Canadian social activist who testified before the Hogue Commission, Iran monitors and surveys the Iranian diaspora community in Canada, keeping an eye on civil-rights activists who seek to promote democracy in their home country.<sup>76</sup> Iran also employs operatives to intimidate and threaten Iranians in Canada to prevent criticism of the regime. Esmailion, who is linked to the Association of Families of Flight PS752, a group seeking justice for the victims of the airplane shot down by regime forces in 2020, says he has received “verbal and physical threats” himself. In addition, his parents, who live in Iran, have been barred from leaving.

“ Sowing mistrust within diaspora communities is a goal of TNR, as it prevents common action.

Esmailion told the Commission that Iran has created institutions disguised as community advocacy groups in Canada to cause division in the Iranian-Canadian community while creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Esmailion said Iran’s tactics create a great deal of tension within Canada’s Iranian community, especially in and around Toronto, who fear the presence of pro-regime elements in their midst. Sowing mistrust within diaspora communities is a goal of TNR, as it prevents common action.

Justice Hogue noted in the final foreign interference report that “Iran instead focuses on transnational repression to prevent criticism of its government,” adding that “the (Canadian) government assesses Iran as a considerable transnational threat because it is likely monitoring, influencing, collecting information on, harassing and intimidating the Iranian diaspora community to prevent criticism of Iran.”<sup>77</sup>

The Iranian regime has been behind the assassination of Iranian dissidents abroad, including on Canadian soil. Testifying at 2024 Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development in the Canadian House of Commons, Nazanin Afshin-Jam, a human rights and democracy advocate for the Iranian Justice Collective, said members of the Hells Angels, a Canadian gang, were hired to carry out an assassination plot against a dissident Iranian couple in Washington.<sup>78</sup> CSIS confirmed the use of crime groups to target regime opponents in its 2024 report.<sup>79</sup>

CSIS also identified at least three Canadians on a regime target list. In 2024, Iran allegedly tried to assassinate former Minister of Justice Irwin Cotler, a critic of the regime who had just written an op-ed about transnational repression and has represented Iranian dissidents and political prisoners throughout his career as a lawyer, Justice minister, and human rights activist.<sup>80</sup> While Cotler is not Iranian, the supposed attempt on his life is symbolic of a larger phenomenon. The Iranian regime is becoming increasingly aggressive and resorting to one of the most egregious forms of transnational repression: assassination attempts. In an interview with the Canadian media CTV News, Cotler said transnational repression is a “threat to our national security, our national sovereignty, our collective human rights” and his own case should be viewed as a “wake up call.”<sup>81</sup>

## Russia

Russia has engaged in transnational repression in Canada through a combination of intimidation, surveillance, cyber operations, and influence campaigns. Canadian intelligence reports indicate that Russian operatives have monitored and harassed individuals critical of the Kremlin, often using threats against family members abroad to silence dissent. These tactics extend to the Russian diaspora in Canada, where activists and journalists have faced direct harassment and pressure to curb anti-war advocacy or criticism of Russian policies.

The NSICOP has cited Russia as one of the key threat actors involved in foreign influence, cyberattacks, espionage, and more. In its 2019 Annual Report, the Committee highlighted that foreign intelligence services, especially from China and Russia, have monitored and coerced university

students, faculty, and staff.<sup>82</sup> The committee underlined that the CSIS assessed those countries are the primary threat actors on Canadian campuses. The 2020 Annual Report stated that the “Russian Federation also continues to exploit Russian diaspora and compatriot organizations in Canada.”<sup>83</sup>

In a 2025 public speech, CSIS Director Daniel Rogers, said that Russia has attempted to send intelligence officers to Canada, conducted surveillance on individuals, and targeted diaspora communities through harassment and threats.<sup>84</sup> These actions often include spreading false and discrediting information, extortion, and threatening loved ones abroad, which aim to silence critics and deter lawful advocacy.

CSIS has also confirmed that illicit Russian procurement networks operate in Canada, seeking to acquire sensitive Canadian goods and technologies for Russia’s military efforts in Ukraine.<sup>85</sup> These networks use complex chains of front companies based in Europe to disguise their activities, posing both economic and security risks to Canada.

Digital repression is another key component. Canadian and allied cyber agencies have warned that state-sponsored actors linked to Russia are targeting journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations with hacking, phishing, and online harassment campaigns.<sup>86</sup> These attacks seek to intimidate critics and compromise sensitive information, exploiting the low defense capacity of many advocacy groups.

Research by the Citizen Lab shows that Russian actors have deployed hacking, doxing, and online intimidation against exiled activists and journalists in Canada.<sup>87</sup> These operations aim to track anti-war networks and suppress dissent within diaspora communities, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship. In parallel, Russia has conducted disinformation and influence campaigns targeting Canadian audiences.<sup>88</sup> These efforts include recruiting journalists for active measures, amplifying Kremlin narratives through Canadian media, and exploiting social media platforms to spread propaganda about the war in Ukraine and Western policies.

On October 1, 2024, Marcus Kolga, senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, told the Public Safety and National Security Committee in the House of Commons, that “Russian transnational repression is

a persistent and growing threat to our democracy.”<sup>89</sup> Kolga explained that Russian government actors have surveilled diaspora groups, spread disinformation, incited hate against Ukrainians, and targeted individuals, including himself, with harassment and intimidation, both online and in media. He added that Canada’s Ukrainian community also experienced hate crimes and intimidation traced to Russia, prompting the creation of a national crisis hotline. One of the most prominent cases is that of former Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, who is of Ukrainian descent and has publicly condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Freeland and her family have been the target of acts of transnational repression, including targeted disinformation campaigns to defame them and the entire Ukrainian community.

Russian opposition figures have warned that activists in Canada face risks of extradition requests, legal harassment, and intimidation. Some have sought asylum in Canada after being targeted by Russian authorities for anti-war activities, fearing imprisonment or worse if returned to Russia. In March 2024, Yuriy Novodvorskiy, a representative of the Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance, told the Hogue Commission on foreign interference that Moscow attacks Canada through direct and indirect threats to members of the Russian-Canadian community.<sup>90</sup> This includes disinformation campaigns specifically targeting Russian Canadians, especially on Telegram, YouTube, and Russian internet TV. Other tactics include threatening family members in Russia, according to the Novodvorskiy.<sup>91</sup>

Finally, Russia also employs criminal charges for any sort of political activism abroad, including social media posts. Indeed, Russian dissidents and anti-war activists in Canada have faced legal and bureaucratic challenges that reflect the Kremlin’s reach. Cases such as Maria Kartasheva, whose conviction under Russia’s censorship laws initially jeopardized her Canadian citizenship.<sup>92</sup> This illustrates how Russian repression can indirectly affect individuals seeking refuge in Canada. Indeed, this kind of criminal record becomes an obstacle to Russians in Canada who apply for permanent residency or citizenships and makes it dangerous to travel abroad, as many countries still practice extradition to Russia.

## Rwanda

Rwanda is a notorious perpetrator of TNR, as Freedom House shows in its 2021 country case.<sup>93</sup> Although the Rwandan diaspora community in Canada is relatively small – approximately 13,000 people – agents supportive of the regime of Rwandan President Paul Kagame have nevertheless perpetrated incidents of transnational repression.

Once held up as a model of reconciliation following the resolution of the 1994 genocide, Rwanda has changed under Kagame’s rule. In 2023, the US State Department’s Rwanda Country Report on Human Rights Practices identified “significant human rights issues” including “unlawful or arbitrary killings” and “enforced disappearance” attributed to the Rwandan government.<sup>94</sup> Critics of the regime said the successes of Kagame’s authoritarian rule have come at the expense of human rights in the country.

In Canada, Rwandan authorities have been responsible for several instances of TNR. In 2015, the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) reported “a well-documented pattern of repression of Rwandan government critics” abroad, involving threats, attacks, and killings.<sup>95</sup> It added that Rwanda had attempted to organize “indoctrination training” for youths in Canada.<sup>96</sup> The training was cancelled following a CSIS investigation into the harassment of Rwandans by spies loyal to Kagame.

In a 2023 report, “Join Us or Die’: Rwanda’s Extraterritorial Repression,” Human Rights Watch named Canada as one of several countries in which the Rwandan diaspora has been targeted for intimidation by Kagame’s ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front.<sup>97</sup> The Rwandan government’s efforts to monitor, intimidate, and exert control over refugee and diaspora communities abroad are driven in part by a desire to suppress dissent and retain power, according to the report. Refugees and asylum seekers, by choosing not to return and by speaking out against the authorities from exile, pose a challenge to the official narrative that Rwanda is a country people do not feel the need to escape.

According to the president of the Canadian Rwandan Congress, Pierre-Claver Nkinamubanzi, cases of harassment, intimidation, and spying on Rwandan residents who criticize the Kigali regime do occur.<sup>98</sup> He noted

that he himself has been harassed in e-mails and WhatsApp messages from people using fake names; in one message he was threatened with “big trouble” if he continued his political activities. One Rwandan refugee in Canada who was subjected to a campaign of online attacks by government-affiliated groups claims that a pro-government person went to his mother’s home in Rwanda to gather material against him after he had criticized the regime.<sup>99</sup>

## Canada’s response to transnational repression

Canada’s early response to transnational repression was constrained by longstanding structural, legal, and institutional gaps, leaving many victims of transnational repression isolated and powerless against the threats they were subjected to.

### Limited early recognition of transnational repression

For many years, Canadian officials, policymakers, and even intelligence agencies did not fully recognize transnational repression as a distinct and strategic threat as much of this repression (harassment of diaspora communities, online threats, surveillance, pressure on family members abroad, and interference in political participation) did not fit the traditional security categories that dominated national security thinking. Only in very recent years has there been a national and international awareness about to scale and scope transnational repression. As a result, early cases were often viewed as isolated incidents rather than part of broader campaigns by foreign governments. This limited conceptual understanding reduced the urgency of developing policy tools, dedicated units, or standard procedures for documenting and countering repression, allowing malign actors to operate in a grey zone for far too long and leaving victims to deal with this on their own.

## Lack of legal and policy frameworks

Along similar lines, Canada's legal framework was not designed to address the kinds of intimidation, coercion, and extraterritorial influence that characterize modern transnational repression.<sup>100</sup> Many TNR tactics fall between criminal, immigration, and national security jurisdictions, and do not always meet the threshold for prosecution under existing laws.<sup>101</sup> There were no specific offences tied to acting on behalf of a foreign state to intimidate individuals in Canada, nor were there robust mechanisms to compel digital platforms or telecommunications providers to support investigations. The slow development of foreign-interference legislation and the absence of a dedicated foreign agent registry for many years also contributed to limited early enforcement capacity. These gaps created significant uncertainty among law-enforcement agencies about what tools they could legally use and when.

The RCMP has authority to act under the criminal code. Such charges could entail criminal harassment (Section 264), threats (Section 264.1), or intimidation (Section 243.1).<sup>102</sup> These crimes entail activities such as repeatedly following, communicating with, or threatening the targeted person or anyone known to them; causing the death or other bodily harm to a person; destroying or damaging real or personal property; and intimidation through violence or threats to the targeted person's intimate partner or children. In all cases, however, the penalties for a guilty verdict are light. Thus, because there was no offence in the *Criminal Code* specifically designed for transnational repression, the government mainly had to rely on more general or ill-fitting laws, limiting the effectiveness of deterrence and prosecution.<sup>103</sup>

## Intelligence and operational obstacles

Intelligence and operational obstacles further weakened the early response. Canada never developed a full foreign human intelligence agency like the CIA or MI6, leaving CSIS to perform a hybrid domestic/foreign role with limited capacity. Former CSIS Directors Richard Fadden and Ward Elcock have publicly stated that the agency has not had the personnel or funding needed to match the growth of foreign influence and espionage targeting Canada.<sup>104</sup>

Foreign governments that engage in transnational repression often rely on sophisticated methods that are difficult for intelligence agencies to detect. Threat actors may use community proxies, front organizations such as Beijing's United Front, encrypted online channels such as WhatsApp and Weibo, or individuals with dual roles in cultural, government (consulates, embassies), or student associations at universities.<sup>105</sup> At the G7 Dialogue on Transnational Repression organized by the Canadian government in February 2025, one of the main obstacles mentioned was Canada's intelligence services historically lacked the resources, linguistic capabilities, and cultural expertise to monitor these environments at scale.<sup>106</sup>

Additionally, CSIS faced legal limitations on data retention, information sharing, and protective disclosure to affected communities.<sup>107</sup> The reliance on traditional intelligence approaches made it difficult to spot patterns of harassment, especially when many victims were reluctant to report incidents due to fear of retaliation or distrust of authorities. CSIS historically had limited tools to share classified threat information with victims or community groups, preventing at-risk individuals from understanding the nature of the danger they faced. In Canada, the primary responsibility for monitoring and pushing back against foreign influence falls to the CSIS and the RCMP. NSICOP also issued a special report highlighting gaps in Canada's intelligence capacity to deal with foreign interference.<sup>108</sup> Among other issues, the report indicates that CSIS had difficulties fully gathering, interpreting, and sharing intelligence internally on state-actor interference

Events in 2023 revealed communication and coordination problems between CSIS and the Canadian government the response to allegations of Chinese interference in the 2019 and 2021 elections, which were not brought to public light until 2023. Ministers and even then prime minister Trudeau stated publicly that they had not received or read CSIS warnings of this activity, which it had been investigating for decades.<sup>109</sup>

The RCMP has been under similar funding and operational constraints. The NSICOP report on the RCMP's federal policing mandate explicitly highlights intelligence-function issues such as limited national oversight, decentralized structure, poor data governance, and fragmented intelligence resources. For example, "information is often dispersed, inconsistent, incomplete, incorrect or inaccessible ... some investigative units keep

operational data on stand-alone systems or personal hard drives,” limiting intelligence effectiveness.<sup>110</sup> NSICOP also questions whether RCMP has the right human-resource structure to direct intelligence effectively “less than 20% of intelligence analysts ... report through the Director General National Intelligence.”<sup>111</sup>

## Coordination and institutional fragmentation

The current system for reporting foreign interference, and thus TNR, in Canada is fragmented and confusing. Multiple agencies (CSIS, RCMP, Canada Border Services Agency, Privy Council etc.) are listed for different types of threats, but it’s unclear when or how to contact each. There’s no clear guidance on reporting disinformation, and the use of broad terms like “national security” adds to the confusion. According to submissions to Canada’s Foreign Interference Commission, there was no centralized, formal mechanism for victims of transnational repression to report their experiences or receive support.<sup>112</sup> Law enforcement hotlines and tip lines reportedly turned away many calls because they did not meet “national security” thresholds, limiting access for people who experienced harassment but not necessarily “intelligence-level” threats.<sup>113</sup>

Canada’s response was also hindered by limited coordination between federal agencies, law enforcement, immigration authorities, and provincial or municipal bodies. Transnational repression often manifests as a mixture of online harassment, visa and immigration manipulation, physical surveillance, and diplomatic pressure. These issues cross institutional boundaries, yet there were no formalized coordination mechanisms or standardized reporting pathways. Victims frequently reported being moved from one authority to another, with no single institution assuming full responsibility. Without integrated strategies or information-sharing structures, early signals of coordinated foreign interference were easily missed.

The Communications Security Establishment (CSE), Canada’s foreign signals intelligence and cybersecurity agency, has a broad mandate that includes implications for transnational repression. However, the impact of the CSE’s actions on protections of individuals from such threats is unclear. While its Canadian Centre for Cyber Security provides

cybersecurity advice, there is no content specifically tailored to those at risk of transnational repression. CSE's role is limited to protecting government systems and providing general cybersecurity guidance, not defending individuals directly.

“ The lack of comprehensive guidelines makes reporting particularly complicated, causing frustration among diaspora communities.

Public Safety Canada's website advises that individuals can report suspicious incidents potentially related to national security to the RCMP. For less urgent national security concerns or suspicious behavior, people can reach out to CSIS, although it's unclear how to decide which agency to contact. The existing CSIS hotline for anonymous reporting on foreign interference is a key measure to counter TNR, but follow-up and coordination with targets have been poor. Online threats should be directed to the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, while nonurgent cross-border concerns go to the Canada Border Services Agency. The lack of comprehensive guidelines makes reporting particularly complicated, causing frustration among diaspora communities, as follow-up has not been systematic.<sup>114</sup>

Several targets of transnational repression have reported reaching out to Canadian authorities with little response. The 2022 Citizen Lab study on the psychological and emotional effects of TNR asserted that the Canadian government, law enforcement, and intelligence services had failed to provide victims with emotional, personal, or legal support. Consequently, “participants [in the study] simply avoided dealing with the police, fearing that it might make the situation worse or that they could not be of assistance.” A report by the Canadian Coalition on Human Rights and Amnesty International reiterated those shortcomings, underlining the inconsistencies and difficulties in obtaining effective support from Canadian authorities, including municipal police, the RCMP, the CSIS, and government ministries such as Global Affairs Canada, Public Safety, or the Department of Justice.<sup>115</sup>

## Community trust and under-reporting

As noted, TNR works through a chilling effect, by frightening its targets and their communities. Many members of targeted diaspora communities were hesitant to report intimidation or harassment. They often feared retaliation against relatives abroad, worried about losing immigration status, or believed that Canadian authorities lacked the capacity to help them. Some had prior experiences with corrupt or abusive security agencies in their countries of origin, shaping their willingness to approach police or intelligence services. Without consistent outreach, victim-support systems, or culturally informed engagement, authorities lacked the community-level intelligence needed to understand the scale of the threat.

To confront transnational repression, law enforcement agencies and diaspora communities must establish a relationship of mutual trust and engagement. This process takes time, resources, and a clear understanding of all facets of the threat. CSIS has a small outreach unit, Academic Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement, conducted 147 engagements in 2023, but only 7% involved community groups, and none specifically mentioned diaspora communities, according to the CSIS Public Report 2023.<sup>116</sup> Its materials, including a pamphlet and a newsletter, focus on general advice and place much responsibility on individuals to recognize and respond to foreign interference threats.

Without a dedicated office or agency focused on transnational repression, community trust and feedback loops were underdeveloped. Experts have called for the creation of a standalone body to coordinate reporting, analyze cases, and liaise with diaspora communities.<sup>117</sup>

## Budgetary and resource constraints

Budgetary limitations further hindered Canada's early ability to respond effectively. Agencies such as the RCMP, CSIS and other partners did not have the sustained, dedicated funding needed to build specialized teams for investigation, analysis, victim support and public outreach; most investments prior to Budget 2023 were modest and scattered across existing programs rather than targeted to transnational-repression duties.

The 2023 budget only began to allocate dedicated resources (\$48.9 million over three years for the RCMP and \$13.5 million over five years to Public Safety to stand up counter-foreign-interference capacity).<sup>118</sup>

Finally, the federal funding model (short-term increments, project-based allocations, or emergency top-ups) made long-term capacity building difficult. Investing in institutional change, including new offices, registries, specialist units, permanent outreach programs, requires stable multi-year funding; short funding cycles force agencies into stop-start hiring and training, slowing the maturation of capabilities needed to counter sustained transnational repression. In its “Final Submission to the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions”, the Center for International Governance Innovation recommended longer-term, stable resourcing as a remedy, a recommendation also made by the NSICOP in its special report on foreign interference in Canada’s democratic institutions.<sup>119</sup>

Public-safety and policing agencies must triage threats, directing scarce investigators and analysts toward the highest and most immediate risks (violent extremism, organized crime, major cyber incidents).<sup>120</sup> That operational reality means non-violent, diffuse, or politically sensitive forms of transnational repression (harassment, intimidation of diaspora members, covert influence operations) frequently receive lower priority until they escalate. Multiple oversight reports and committee hearings have recorded that federal bodies have been forced to divert resources to the immediacy of other threats, limiting capacity to proactively detect and disrupt transnational repression

Effectively investigating transnational repression requires linguists, cultural and regional specialists, digital forensics experts, and analysts who understand covert influence networks. According to a special report on foreign interference drafted by NSICOP, budgetary shortfalls constrained hiring, training, and procurement of digital-forensics and analytic tools; agencies reported gaps in specialist capacity needed to trace cross-border networks, attribute activity, and produce court-admissible evidence. The NSICOP and other oversight reviews identified capability and staffing gaps that hampered timely operational responses.<sup>121</sup>

In a 2025 report titled “Engaging the Community: Combating Transnational Repression in Canada”, Freedom House says budget constraints also affected non-operational but essential functions: victim intake, community outreach, multilingual public-education campaigns, and trust-building with diaspora communities.<sup>122</sup> Those services are resource-intensive (hotlines, victim assistance, community liaison officers), and inadequate funding left many community members without clear, well-resourced mechanisms to report harassment or seek protection — reducing detection and slowing investigations.

### Diplomatic constraints and caution

Canada’s reluctance to confront certain foreign governments may have also played a role in early inaction. Concerns about economic relationships, consular cases, or broader geopolitical stability sometimes made officials cautious about attributing responsibility for harassment campaigns. Diplomatic missions linked to foreign states suspected of repression maintained significant access and influence, making the government hesitant to escalate tensions. This diplomatic caution allowed hostile actors to operate through consulates, cultural institutions, and unofficial networks with limited scrutiny

### Evolving nature of the threat

Finally, foreign states’ tactics evolved faster than Canada’s ability to adapt. Modern transnational repression involves coordinated digital harassment, AI-enabled surveillance, manipulation of social media, targeted cyber intrusions, and the deployment of non-official proxies. Indeed, members of diaspora groups use social media applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and WeChat to remain in touch with their communities in Canada as well as with family and friends abroad. While these apps can allow diaspora members to keep in touch and foster a sense of community, occasionally, chat groups can be used to monitor or threaten activists. Targets of TNR may be monitored, hacked, or be the victims of malware attacks sent to their devices.<sup>123</sup> WeChat is unencrypted and regularly monitored by Chinese party-state representatives. Consequently, many Chinese-Canadians

self-censor when they use WeChat to communicate with their families. Canadian policymakers and authorities must first understand the role of technology in TNR to take steps to deal with it.

Canada's security frameworks were slow to adjust to these hybrid methods, which combine elements of state intelligence operations with private actors, criminal networks, or online mercenaries. The government's operational structures were not prepared for the speed, anonymity, and cross-jurisdictional nature of these tactics, contributing to a reactive rather than proactive approach.

## 2024-2025: A wake-up call for Canada?

Although PIFI was mandated to investigate foreign interference allegations and recommend improvements, the Commissioner also shined light on transnational repression and made several recommendations that can have a direct effect on the fight against TNR.

### Recommendations from the Hogue Commission

While the commission focused on foreign interference and impacts on elections, its commissioner acknowledged the seriousness of transnational repression, stating that “what this work has made clear to me, however, is how serious a problem transnational repression is, how harmful its impacts are on individuals, and how important it is for the government to meaningfully respond to it.” Some of the recommendations presented in the Commission's final report presents could be applied to TNR:

- **“Digital Citizen Initiative”**: Funds will continue to go to projects that seek to understand transnational repression. This includes addressing transnational repression with allies and adversaries and engaging with diaspora communities.

- **National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator (NCFIC):** This is a newly created federal role “to coordinate efforts to combat foreign interference.” Given the NCFIC’s potential importance in countering foreign interference and engaging with diaspora communities, this position could become significant if sufficiently resourced.
- **Intelligence agencies:** PIFI recommends “a single, highly visible and easily accessible point of contact or hotline for reporting foreign interference to the government,” “follow-up with those who seek support should be systematic and ensure that those who make reports fully understand what can and cannot be done in response,” and the diversification of personnel based on cultural, ethnic, and linguistic background.<sup>124</sup>
- **An improved hotline:** recognizing the current weaknesses of the CSIS hotline, the commission recommended a centralized, easy-to-use reporting hotline and better follow-up with those who report incidents.

In the past few years, other significant steps taken by the Canadian government include the following measures.

### *Foreign Influence Transparency and Accountability Act*

Bill C-70, known as the *Countering Foreign Interference Act* and passed into law in June 2024, “aims to counter foreign interference by modernizing the *CSIS Act*, updating the *Security of Information Act*, and creating a foreign influence registry overseen by a commissioner.”<sup>125</sup> The Bill introduced new criminal offences related to foreign interference, enhanced CSIS’s authorities, and laid the groundwork for the Foreign Influence Transparency Registry.

The act comprises four main parts:

- **Enhancements to the *CSIS Act*,** updating CSIS’s authorities, including provisions for collecting and querying datasets, clarifying the scope of certain activities, updating information disclosure provisions, and introducing new warrant powers.

- **Amendments to the *Security of Information Act* and the *Criminal Code***, creating new offenses related to foreign interference, such as engaging in deceptive conduct at the direction of a foreign entity to harm Canadian interests or influence democratic rights.
- **Revisions to the *Canada Evidence Act***, establishing a standardized regime for handling sensitive information in federal administrative proceedings.
- **Enactment of the *Foreign Influence Transparency and Accountability Act***, introducing a Foreign Influence Transparency Registry, requiring individuals and entities acting on behalf of foreign principals to register their activities.

While transnational repression is not specifically mentioned in the law, ensuring that the foreign influence transparency registry is effectively put into practice is essential for safeguarding Canadians from transnational repression.

Intelligence capabilities have been significantly strengthened through expanded resources for the CSIS and the CSE. These agencies have enhanced their monitoring of foreign state actors, with particular attention to interference activities originating from countries such as China and Russia. This enhanced surveillance capacity allows Canada to better detect and counter foreign influence operations before they can undermine democratic processes.

### Enhanced security protocols

Canada has also enhanced its security protocols specifically designed to protect electoral integrity. The Critical Election Incident Public Protocol empowers a panel of senior officials to monitor threats during elections and inform the public if foreign interference threatens election integrity. Complementing this is the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections (SITE) Task Force, which coordinates multiple agencies including CSIS, CSE, RCMP, and Global Affairs Canada to monitor and respond to threats during electoral periods.<sup>126</sup> While this is more related to foreign interference rather than transnational repression, it is an important element in the toolkit against TNR.

## National counter foreign interference coordinator

The NCFIC is a position within Public Safety Canada, created in 2023 to lead and coordinate the federal government's efforts to counter foreign interference.<sup>127</sup> The Coordinator acts as the central point of contact for foreign interference issues across government, ensuring a unified and strategic approach. While transnational repression is not mentioned in the mandate, we can view TNR as part of NCFIC's work.

The mandate of the NCFIC is primarily about coordination and leadership, rather than operational or investigative work. The Coordinator brings together federal departments and agencies to address foreign interference threats, deconflict responses, and share information. It also works to raise awareness within government and among Canadians, engage internationally to share best practices, and collaborate with non-federal stakeholders, including culturally and linguistically diverse communities, to strengthen societal resilience. Importantly, the NCFIC does not conduct investigations or produce intelligence assessments as those remain the responsibility of agencies like CSIS and the RCMP.

## G7 responses

The G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (G7 RRM), established in 2017 by the leaders of the Group of Seven, seeks to enhance collaboration among G7 members to detect and counter foreign threats targeting democratic systems. After transnational repression was thrust into the public spotlight in 2022 thanks to revelations by the organization Safeguard Defenders about China's overseas police service stations and involuntary return operations, TNR was made an area of focus and strengthened collaboration for G7 RRM members.<sup>128</sup>

Canada made the decision to make TNR a priority for Canada throughout its January 1 to December 31, 2025, G7 presidency. In February 2025, Global Affairs Canada convened experts, government officials, academics, and representatives of diaspora groups for the G7 Dialogue on Transnational Repression. The two-day dialogue sought to examine international trends in TNR to identify concrete steps G7 governments can take to better protect their societies. The

G7 countries provided recommendations with a view to building a better collective understanding of the threat, sharing lessons learned from respective responses, and identifying concrete actions that can be taken nationally or collectively to protect citizens and defend democracy.

The G7 Transnational Repression Resilience and Response Framework is a coordinated strategy adopted by G7 countries in 2025 to counter TNR. This framework was announced following the G7 Leaders' Summit in Kananaskis and formalized at the G7 Interior and Security Ministers' Meeting in Ottawa in November 2025.<sup>129</sup> The framework focuses on raising awareness, promoting accountability, and protecting victims such as journalists, activists, and diaspora communities. It includes three main components:

- G7 Compendium of Tools, which provides best practices and policy measures;<sup>130</sup>
- Digital Transnational Repression Detection Academy to train analysts to identify and respond to online harassment and surveillance;<sup>131</sup>
- enhanced information sharing and coordination among G7 members and partners.

## Diplomatic and public response

In addressing transnational repression specifically, Canada has taken more assertive diplomatic actions, including the expulsion of foreign diplomats found to be involved in intimidation activities. The government has also implemented enhanced protection protocols for diaspora communities who are frequently targeted by foreign governments, and improved coordination between federal and local law enforcement agencies to respond to threats against these vulnerable populations.

In March 2025, Rapid Response Mechanism Canada issued a statement about a Chinese spamouflage campaign against Canada-based Chinese-language commentators and their families.<sup>132</sup> According to the RRM, this was “the first known instance where a Spamouflage campaign used sexually explicit deepfake photos to target an individual in Canada.” Global Affairs

Canada said it reached out to the targets of the campaign, the social media companies involved, and the Chinese Embassy to Canada.

Canada has invested in public awareness campaigns designed to help Canadians recognize and report foreign interference. These initiatives include digital literacy programs to combat disinformation and education campaigns that empower citizens to protect themselves and their communities from foreign influence operations.

## Conclusion

Transnational repression is no longer an abstract concern; it is a tangible and growing challenge that affects individuals, diaspora communities, and democratic institutions across Canada. This report makes clear that the issue cannot be dismissed as isolated incident but as a systemic threat that undermines the very principles of security, democracy, and sovereignty that Canada stands for. Addressing it demands concrete concerted actions.

Canada needs to confront this evolving threat by closing gaps in policy and enforcement, strengthening legal protections, and ensuring that those targeted have access to meaningful support. It also means building trust with diaspora communities, whose voices are essential to a democracy. These efforts must be coordinated across government agencies and informed by transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights.

International collaboration is critical, something that the Canadian government has understood as throughout its presidency of the G7 in 2025. Authoritarian regimes operate across borders, and so must our response. Working closely with allies, particularly G7 partners, Canada can help set global standards, share intelligence, and develop tools to hold perpetrators accountable. Emerging technologies and new forms of interference will continue to challenge us, but with foresight and cooperation, these threats can be mitigated, if tech companies are also willing to play a role.

Ultimately, defending against transnational repression is about more than protecting individuals from harm. It is about preserving Canada's democratic integrity and ensuring that those who seek refuge and opportunity here can live free from fear. By acting decisively, Canada can reaffirm its commitment to human rights and demonstrate that authoritarian influence has no place in Canadian society.

## Recommendations

Preventing acts of transnational repression is complex. The challenges Canada faces are rooted in broader issues, including the influence of authoritarian regimes within democracies, lack of legal and policy frameworks, limited engagement between law enforcement and vulnerable communities, and poor coordination between agencies, and institutional fragmentation.

The recommendations that follow aim to reduce the capacity of foreign states to carry out transnational repression and to strengthen accountability for perpetrators. By closing opportunities for authoritarian actors to exploit Canadian institutions, we can better protect diaspora communities as well as Canadian democracy. Consistent enforcement and accountability will also raise the cost of these actions for those who attempt them.

### Canadian policy and law enforcement

Strengthening Canada's domestic legal and enforcement framework is essential to counter TNR effectively:

- **Define transnational repression:** Adopt an official definition across all government agencies and frame TNR as a threat to human rights and democracy.
- **Training and capacity building:** Ensure RCMP, Public Safety Canada, municipalities, and policymakers are trained to recognize

and respond to TNR; enhance RCMP capacity to investigate and lay charges.

- **Operationalize Bill C-70:** Implement criminal sanctions against foreign interference and sabotage and launch the Foreign Influence Transparency Registry as mandated by Bill C-70.
- **Information sharing and coordination:** Improve coordination between federal, provincial, and municipal governments and their respective police forces to protect vulnerable Canadians.
- **Sanctions and diplomatic measures:** Impose targeted sanctions on perpetrators and facilitators of TNR; expel foreign diplomats if credible evidence of involvement exists.
- **Public threat reporting:** Ensure sustained public reporting and attribution of known TNR campaigns by Canada's national security and intelligence community.

## Community engagement and resilience

Building trust and resilience within diaspora communities is critical to reducing vulnerability to TNR:

- **Protect and engage diaspora communities:** Establish long-term, trust-based engagement with communities known to be targets. Liaise with immigrant and settlement agencies, libraries, and school boards to enhance outreach.
- **Public awareness campaigns:** Communicate in multiple languages what TNR is, how to report it, and the consequences for perpetrators. Publicize concrete cases and outcomes to build awareness.
- **Strengthen civil society support:** Train and deploy experts to assist civil society groups facing spyware attacks; involve trusted organizations in prevention and response efforts.
- **Open-source intelligence and reporting tools:** Develop tools to identify and track individuals and governments threatening Canadians and create accessible reporting platforms.
- **Sectoral guidance:** Provide guidance to economic, academic, and research sectors to understand and mitigate TNR risks.

## International cooperation

Canada should work closely with G7 partners and like-minded democracies to develop coordinated responses to TNR. Key actions include:

- **High-risk target protection fund:** Establish a G7-funded emergency grant program to support journalists, activists, and NGOs facing digital threats. This fund would cover device audits, legal assistance, and secure communication tools.
- **AI-driven deepfake detection partnership:** Create a G7 research hub dedicated to developing and sharing real-time deepfake detection tools for social and mainstream media platforms.
- **Transnational repression watchlist:** Develop a unified G7 watchlist of officials and companies implicated in spyware abuse, accompanied by entry bans, asset freezes, and procurement restrictions.
- **Cross-border evidence protocols:** Harmonize standards for preserving digital forensics and streamline evidence-sharing to facilitate prosecutions across jurisdictions.
- **Public-private council on TNR:** Form a high-level council of G7 officials, technology leaders, civil society representatives, and cybersecurity experts to hold annual public hearings and guide policy development.
- **Adopt international principles:** Sign and implement the *Declaration on Principles to Combat Transnational Repression*, committing to coordinated action to address impunity and protect vulnerable individuals.

## Technology and corporate accountability

Technology companies play a critical role in preventing and mitigating TNR. Canada should adopt measures to ensure accountability and resilience:

- **Platform accountability mechanisms:** Develop regulatory frameworks to hold tech platforms and executives accountable for failing to mitigate harms, drawing on EU-style models.

- **Mandatory threat disclosure:** Require technology firms to notify authorities and targeted users of state-aligned hacking or spyware attacks, with penalties for non-compliance.
- **Adopt best practices against cognitive warfare:** Emulate Taiwan's four-pronged approach—identify, clarify, restrain, punish—and consider establishing a Cognitive Warfare Research Centre in Canada. 🌐

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