



Media Highlights 2024 Q1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

See the global reach of HRF's media coverage.

03

Explore HRF's 2023 television, radio, and podcast coverage.

04

Read about HRF's use of Bitcoin for human rights and civil liberties in Forbes.

08

Read a reflection from Ian Birrell on what is happening with Bitcoin in Africa today.

13

Read about the recent Chinese government-organized orchestrated visits to Xinjiang.

17

Read an HRF op-ed in the Hill on Taiwan's recent elections.

20

Read about the recent wave of repression in Belarus in an HRF op-ed.

24

By an HRF op-ed on the business of whitewashing authoritarian regimes.

28

Read an op-ed by Garry Kasparov on the murder of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

The Human Rights Foundation's (HRF) work is covered by top global media outlets, reaching millions of people worldwide

In this media booklet, you'll find some of the most noteworthy articles authored by or written about HRF in Q1 of 2024.

BY THE NUMBERS

41



Languages

21 Billion



Global Impressions

106



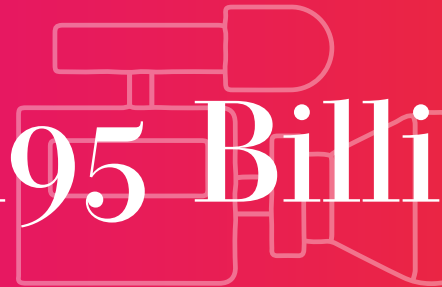
Countries

6.9k



Media Mentions

\$195 Billion



Earned Media Value

BROADCAST & TELEVISION



HRF's work is consistently featured in top media outlets around the world. Besides print and online formats, HRF regularly makes appearances on television, the radio, and podcasts. Here's a snapshot:

CNN

Jan. 14, 2024



On GPS: The power of North Korean brainwashing

WNYC

Feb. 28, 2024



On the Media: American Patriots Support...Vladimir Putin?

Bitcoin's Role In Human Rights And Global Empowerment

Outlet
Forbes

Author
Susie Violet Ward

Date
Jan. 2, 2024



Photo by Jason Koerner. GETTY IMAGES FOR BITCOIN MAGAZINE

In the unfolding story of bitcoin's global influence, the [Human Rights Foundation](#) stands out for championing bitcoin as a social change and empowerment tool. This narrative is not just about financial transactions; it's a story of resilience, hope, and human rights.

Bitcoin Dada: Catalyzing Change Through Bitcoin Education

[Bitcoin Dada](#), an initiative led by [Lorraine Marcel](#) and supported by the Human Rights Foundation, is a remarkable example of technological empowerment, reshaping conventional approaches. Its inception is not just a story of providing resources; it's a story of igniting change through financial literacy and liberation, especially in the African context of profound economic disparities.

Marcel's vision transcends the conventional boundaries of charity. Bitcoin Dada leverages the decentralized and accessible nature of bitcoin to foster financial independence among African women. This initiative is critical in regions where traditional banking is inaccessible or unreliable and where daily economic hardships occur. By introducing bitcoin as a tool, Bitcoin Dada addresses immediate needs and shapes a future where financial self-sufficiency is attainable.

The reach of Bitcoin Dada extends across the African continent, from Kenya to Nigeria, which has one of the highest bitcoin adoption rates. This widespread acceptance highlights the impact of bitcoin's potential in these communities. In Nigeria, bitcoin is increasingly seen not just as a speculative asset but a viable option for wealth storage, a testament to its growing acceptance and practical utility in everyday life.



BITCOIN DADA's 5th Cohort Graduation BITCOIN DADA

These initiatives are designed to demystify bitcoin and make it accessible to a demographic historically sidelined in the financial conver-

sation. Through these programs, Bitcoin Dada is breaking dependency cycles and opening doors to new opportunities.

This is more than an initiative; it's a movement. Through the lens of bitcoin, Bitcoin Dada is rewriting narratives, offering aid and a path to independence.

Win Ko Ko Aung: A Story of Survival

[Win Ko Ko Aung's](#) story is a powerful testament to bitcoin's role as a tool for freedom in the face of political oppression. Following the [military coup in Myanmar](#) in February 2021, Win Ko Ko Aung, a vocal advocate for democracy, found himself targeted and his assets frozen. As a result, he became a wanted person, with his fundamental rights and freedoms under immediate threat.

In this dire situation, bitcoin became a lifeline. With his traditional assets inaccessible, bitcoin provided Win Ko Ko Aung with a secure, unseizable means of financial control. This capability was crucial in facilitating his escape from Myanmar. It was bitcoin's decentralized and borderless nature that enabled him to convert his digital assets into local currency as he navigated the perilous journey to flee.

Win Ko Ko Aung's reliance on bitcoin during this critical time highlights its

significance beyond investment or speculation. It underlines its utility as essential support for individuals facing political and [financial oppression](#). In countries where those in power weaponize the financial system, bitcoin offers a way out to retain control over one's financial destiny.



NAYPYIDAW, MYANMAR - FEBRUARY 01: Military soldiers with tanks and police truck block the road near parliament in Naypyidaw this afternoon in Myanmar on February 1, 2021. Myanmar's military announced Monday that it has seized power and will rule the country for at least one year after detaining its top political leaders. Photo by Stringer/Anadolu Agency/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES

Win Ko Ko Aung's asylum in the United States was facilitated by his use of bitcoin. This speaks volumes about the digital currency's potential as a tool for preserving human rights and ensuring [financial sovereignty](#), even in the most challenging political climates.

Privacy and Security: The Core Developer's Focus

In the world of bitcoin development, an anonymous bitcoin core developer, funded by the Human Rights Foundation, plays a crucial role. With

over 20 years of software development experience, this developer focuses on crucial aspects of bitcoin's privacy and security, and has helped with the implementation of privacy related features.

A keen understanding of the delicate balance between innovation and stability marks the developer's approach to bitcoin's evolution. Their work involves writing code and navigating the complex process of community consensus, where changes must align with bitcoin's core principles. This process highlights the democratic nature of bitcoin's development, where changes are scrutinized and approved by a community of developers and users alike.

This developer's contributions are particularly significant in regions where financial privacy can mean the difference between freedom and oppression. By enhancing bitcoin's security features, they ensure that it remains a safe and effective tool for those living under authoritarian regimes.

The Human Rights Foundation's support for developers like this one reflects an understanding of bitcoin's broader potential as a tool for human rights. Their work on privacy and security enhancements is more than technical progress; it's a commitment to preserving bitcoin as

a decentralized, secure, and private means of financial empowerment.

Human Rights Foundation's Role and Future Vision

The Human Rights Foundation's support in this context is not just about funding technical advancements; it's about endorsing bitcoin as an instrument for human rights. By funding initiatives like Bitcoin Dada, supporting individuals like Win Ko Ko Aung, and backing development, the HRF fosters a global

environment where bitcoin is more than a currency – it's a lifeline, a tool for emancipation, and a shield against oppression.

As bitcoin continues to evolve, its role in championing freedom and civil liberties becomes more pronounced. The stories of Marcel Atieno, Win Ko Ko Aung, and the bitcoin core developer showcase this powerful narrative. They reveal a future where bitcoin is a part of the financial system and a key player in the global fight for human rights.

The African village mining Bitcoin

The cryptocurrency can be a liberating force

Outlet
Unherd

Author
**Michael Tobin and
Ian Birrell**

Date
Jan. 5, 2024



Ami Vitale/Getty Images)

Bondo is a scattered cluster of villages in a remote region of Malawi near the border with Mozambique. It sits in the foothills of Mount Mulanje, where residents rely on their feet for transport and a few crops to feed their families. Yet unlike in most places in this impoverished country, when night descends they can now switch on lights, stoves and televisions in their homes.

For electricity has arrived in Bondo. Three turbines were installed in a micro-hydro scheme exploiting the fertile region's rainfall. And the impact has been life-changing for the 1,800 homes so far connected to a mini-grid. Children can study after dark, so now have a better chance of passing the exams for secondary school rather than having to leave aged 11. Drugs and food can be stored in fridges, so villagers do not have to make the 12-mile trek to the hospital and can produce batches of food or drinks to sell at market. Cooking the evening meal is three times quicker – and far less destructive to the environment – without the need to collect firewood.

One group of women giggled when I asked if they had televisions and watched football in their homes. "Before, our husbands would say they were going off to watch football when they were really walking out with other women. Now they can no longer claim they are going off for football," Bertha told me. The senior chief told me they had never dreamed of having energy supplied to the villages, with a dozen maize mills, many small enterprises, schools, shops and churches also connected to the grid. "When you move around Bondo you see happy people – and that's because of electricity."

Yet the big surprise in Bondo is not simply the supply of energy to such an isolated community, in a country where only one in eight citizens has access to grid electricity and on a continent where almost half the 1.2 billion population still lack this life-changing supply. The real eye-opener is the stack of 32 computers inside the concrete pump shed. This innovative mini-grid – located more than two hours from Malawi's second city of Blantyre along bumpy roads and tracks that can become impassable in a torrential downpour – is mining Bitcoin to fund its operation.

It is a smart idea. The computers used to create valuable new Bitcoin tokens and validate transactions consume around the same amount of energy as a medium-sized country such as

Sweden would generate. Hence the stinging critique of how this cryptocurrency wastes the planet's precious resources. This initiative flips that narrative by using Bitcoin mining to fund energy in parts of Africa that are too poor or remote to merit connection to grids, but which do have plentiful supplies of potential power sources. Mining soaks up the excess energy of these renewable plants. And this delivers not just electricity but a powerful jolt to drive development in the local economy.

The concept comes from a Kenyan firm, Gridless, set up in 2022, whose backers include Twitter founder Jack Dorsey. There are four other sites in Kenya and Zambia and plans for scores more across the continent. Its aim is to demonstrate how Africa could play a central role in countering the conventional belief that Bitcoin, now 15 years old, is used simply for risky speculation and dodgy transactions. Instead, it backs those who claim it will lead to more inclusive financial systems as it usurps the control of dysfunctional governments and manipulative central banks.

It will also release the community from reliance on foreign handouts to survive. The Bondo power plants were built by Mount Mulanje Conservation Trust, a local group trying to protect the mountain region's unique biodiversity, and were initially supported by finance from aid and development

agencies – but now Bitcoin covers the running costs. This offers a commercial incentive that does not rely on altruism or subsidies to deliver power to remote regions, while exploiting energy waste at times of low use such as overnight.

Malawi, one of the world's poorest nations, provides a powerful case study in the failures of aid. As former development minister Rory Stewart said in a lecture at Yale, Britain gave £4.5 billion over half a century to this southern African country corroded by corruption and bad governance, yet it ended up "if anything, poorer than it was when we started".

"Bitcoin can prevent Bondo becoming the sort of white elephant that you see across Africa, built by aid groups and then abandoned," said Erik Hersman, chief executive of Gridless. He admits that he is "not a big fan" of the sector. "They come in with low-cost loans and grants to finance all these schemes that they say will pay their way in 30 years but the sums never add up. This is a new way to finance development."

Malawi also demonstrates another reason why there is rising interest in Bitcoin in Africa: people are seeking a safer home for their cash than local currencies. Prices rose sharply after its currency was devalued two months ago by 44% against the US dollar – the second decrease in value of the kwacha in 18 months. Many African countries on the continent have suffered also from catastrophic inflation,

while official currency conversion rates can be significantly lower than street rates.

One Kenyan entrepreneur told me she turned to the cryptocurrency after seeing her savings constantly eroded even in a country with lower than average inflation for the continent. "I was trying to save to buy a house but kept finding my sums declining. I wanted more stability so tried Bitcoin, and then found it had other uses," said Marcel Lorraine, founder of Bitcoin DADA. Her clients include a trader of alternative health products in a Nairobi street market, who found it much cheaper to use than changing currencies after being introduced to it by a Nigerian customer and is now hoping it will provide a stable platform for building her business to obtain a shop.

While Warren Buffet dismissed Bitcoin as "probably rat poison squared" and the economist Paul Krugman has compared it to a Ponzi scam fuelled by libertarian fantasies and "technobabble", devotees see it as a liberating force due to the decentralised design created by its mysterious and pseudonymous creator, Satoshi Nakamoto. BlackRock, the world's biggest asset manager, has even applied to launch a Bitcoin exchange-traded fund that may open up the market to the US wealth management industry.

Certainly Bitcoin, for all its fluctuations, can seem comparatively reliable if you live in Africa – or indeed

many other parts of the planet, from Argentina to Lebanon. "This is what I have seen everywhere," said Peter McCormack, who travels the world for a Bitcoin podcast. "Here is an alternative to gold and property for a middle class that has some money and patience, but is seeing expenses and costs rise while savings decline in value. And a strong middle class helps build a strong economy by driving consumer spending, reducing reliance on the state and driving innovation and entrepreneurship."

Bitcoin has also become a helpful tool for activists and journalists in dictatorships, since it makes it far harder to track funds.

In Togo, a West African state run by one despotic family since 1967, it is used to channel cash to opposition and civil society leaders despite the freezing of bank accounts. Bitcoin has been instrumental in delivering donations to Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation in Russia and the pro-democracy movements in Belarus and Myanmar.

Alex Gladstein, chief strategy officer for the Human Rights Foundation and author of a book arguing that Bitcoin offers freedom from archaic monetary systems and political strife, believes the cryptocurrency

is especially exciting for Africans, since they suffer "all kinds of financial repression". He points out there are 45 currencies on the continent – with 15 still controlled by France – with high transaction fees on conversion deals that are largely processed by Western firms with heavily-fluctuating rates. "Bitcoin provides an escape and an alternative for Africans while its use is less limited than some people think," he says. "Entrepreneurs there have figured out how people without the internet can use Bitcoin, which is frankly remarkable."

This agility is typical of the technological innovation exploding across Africa, driven by a young, rapidly growing and increasingly well-educated population. "The beautiful thing about Bitcoin is that it is a bottom-up technology and its adoption has been genuine at all levels," said one key figure at the second African Bitcoin Conference in Ghana at the end of last year.

Only time will tell if Satoshi's invention will turn out to be a bubble with bad consequences or, as optimists believe, a driver of profound change in the world. The fraud conviction of Sam Bankman-Fried, who ran one of the world's biggest cryptocurrency exchanges, and admission of money-laundering by the boss of another major exchange has hurt the reputation of cryptocurrencies for many in the West. But Bitcoin certainly seems

to offer something positive in societies scarred by autocracy, colonialism, military coups and woeful governance – as seen with those computers in a concrete shed in rural Malawi turning water into streams of cash to fund electricity.

Ian Birrell is an award-winning foreign reporter and columnist. He is also the founder, with Damon Albarn, of Africa Express.

Experts denounce trips to Xinjiang as ‘genocide tourism’

Outlet
Radio Free Asia

Author
Gulchehra Hoja

Date
Jan. 12, 2024



A delegation of diplomats and officials from the Arab League and its secretariat visit the old town of Kashgar in northwest China's Xinjiang region, May 31, 2023.

The Chinese government has thrown open the door for tourists to Xinjiang. Or at least those it deems worthy of an invite.

While officials previously let in diplomats, journalists and those considered “friends of China,” they are now presenting the restive far-western region as a tourist destination of sorts in a bid to remove some of the tarnish from China’s image as a human rights violator in the far-western region in the eyes of the international community.

Nearly 400 delegations and groups consisting of more than 4,300 people from various countries and international organizations visited the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 2023, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said at a [press conference on Jan. 5](#).

Visitors included government officials, diplomats, religious figures, experts, scholars, and journalists as well as ordinary travelers, he said. Unlike travel in the rest of China, however, visits remain by invitation only and visitors are led on government-sponsored tours.



Foreign envoys visit an exhibition on Xinjiang's anti-terrorism and de-radicalization work in Urumqi, capital of northwestern China's Xinjiang region, Aug. 4, 2023. (Zhao Chenjie/Xinhua via Getty Images)

These include trips to mosques and heritage sites “to see how Xinjiang’s traditional culture is protected,” Wang said. “They went to local factories, businesses and farms to learn about Xinjiang’s production and development, and visited ordinary households where they saw the happy life of people of various ethnic groups.”

“Seeing is believing,” he said. “People are not blind to the truth. For certain countries, they are comfortable telling lies about genocide and forced labor in Xinjiang.... Xinjiang will keep its door open to the world.”

The move comes as China gets ready for its fourth Universal Periodic Review, or UPR – a Human Rights Council mechanism that calls for each U.N. member state to undergo a peer review of its human rights records every 4.5 years. The review is scheduled to be held in Geneva, Switzerland, on Jan. 23.

Authorities have tightly controlled who enters Xinjiang, where harsh repression of Uyghurs and other Muslims in recent years has amounted to genocide and crimes against humanity,

according to the United States, the United Nations, the parliaments of other Western countries and human rights groups.

Authorities in Xinjiang have detained an estimated 1.8 million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims, destroyed thousands of mosques and banned the Uyghur language in schools and government offices. China has said that the “re-education camps” have been closed and has denied any policy to erase Uyghur culture.

A recent [CBS documentary](#) on China’s “rebranding” effort shows surveillance cameras and facial recognition devices monitoring Uyghurs. The name of the ancient town of Kashgar appears in Chinese as “Kashi” on signs and billboards, while the 15th-century Id Kah Mosque – closed to local Muslims since 2016 – has been [transformed](#) into a tourist attraction.

Through the scripted travel junkets, the Chinese government is spreading

a narrative that Uyghurs live happy lives to cover up Beijing's severe human rights violations in Xinjiang, experts on the region said. Foreign visitors, in turn, have perpetuated the narrative through photos and posts on their social media accounts.

Criticism from rights groups

The dissemination of propaganda and China's efforts to enhance the image of Xinjiang have sparked criticism from human rights groups.

Claudia Bennett, a legal and program officer at Human Rights Foundation, said the orchestrated visits conceal the harsh realities of forced family separations, arbitrary detentions of millions in concentration or forced labor camps, and thousands of Uyghurs living in exile and forcibly rendered stateless.

"In a strategic effort to legitimize its colonization of the Uyghur region, the Chinese Communist Party carefully organizes propagandist visits for diplomats, journalists and religious scholars," she told Radio Free Asia. "These

tours are designed to whitewash the CCP's gross human rights violations."

The U.S.-based Uyghur Human Rights Foundation, or UHRF, called the visits "genocide tourism" in a report issued last Aug. 30, saying that they help China conceal genocide and crimes against humanity occurring in Xinjiang.

Dolkun Isa, president of the World Uyghur Congress, took the criticism of the junkets a step further.

"Collaborating with China's propaganda equates to complicity in genocide – a grave crime," he said. "Humanity will not forget, and the Uyghur nation will not forget. Those involved will be held accountable before history."

Travel and excursion propaganda to portray life in Xinjiang as normal is part of "Beijing's current strategy," explained Adrian Zenz, an expert on China's policies in Xinjiang.

"They are showing Uyghurs and Uyghur culture, but not real and free people or culture, but a hollowed out version, a mummified version, like a CCP museum," said Zenz, director of China studies at the U.S.-based Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation.

With the U.N.'s UPR session on the horizon, there can be little doubt



Hector Dorbecker, counselor for economic-commercial and financial affairs at the Embassy of Mexico in Beijing, tries to play dutar, a long-necked two-stringed lute, in Jiayi village of Xinhe county in northwestern China's Xinjiang region, Aug. 2, 2023. (Zhao Chenjie/Xinhua via Getty Images)

that Beijing is touting the visits as a way to counter criticism of its policies in Xinjiang, said Sophie Richardson, former China director at Human Rights Watch.

The main problem with the UPR, however, is that there are no penalties for failing to comply or to correct abuses, Richardson added.

"Beijing has proven just how easy it is to manipulate the process to keep independent civil society, both inside and outside China, out of the process ... and to submit a national report that is breathtakingly dishonest in its claims to upholding human rights."

Taiwan's ruling party needs to double down on democracy

Outlet
Op-Ed
The Hill

Author
Joyce Ho

Date
Jan. 16, 2024



Democratic Progressive Party presidential candidate Lai Ching-te, center, who also goes by William, speaks to the media at a polling station in southern Taiwan's Tainan city on Saturday, Jan. 13, 2024. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

Taiwan's incumbent ruling party, the Democratic People's Party (DPP), may have been able [to clinch a victory](#) in a tight presidential race on Saturday, but it's much too early to bask in the win. The low margin of victory and loss of the majority in the legislature may suggest that DPP has lost the hearts and souls of many of the Taiwanese public.

While the DPP won 40.05 percent of the total vote, approximately 7 percentage points ahead of the opposition Kuomintang Party (KMT), it failed to secure an absolute majority in the 113-seat legislature. Here, the KMT saw the biggest uptake in its share of the body, winning 52 seats – one more than the DPP. Voter turnout was also the second-lowest since the 1996 election, with only 71.9 percent of eligible voters casting their ballots, according to [preliminary numbers](#) from Taiwan's Central Election Commission.

That the DPP was unable to win a majority is perhaps a symptom of its inability to inspire or resonate with the broader Taiwanese people, especially amid its corruption scandals, and #MeToo allegations.

This is not to diminish the accomplishments of the Taiwanese government during President Tsai Ing-wen's tenure. In fact, she and the DPP scored many landmark victories from the legalization of gay marriage to increased global diplomacy to pushing Taiwan onto the world stage (think then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's (D-Calif.) incendiary 2022 visit to Taiwan). She also buckled down on the party's stance on Taiwanese independence, which notably [remarked](#) that there's no need for formal pronouncements of its independence since it was "already independent."

Despite those successes, new President Lai Ching-te has his work cut out for him. The slim margins and rocky battle to secure the DPP's victory make it clear that the party can no longer ride on the coattails of its predecessors.

In the lead up to the election, Tsai and Lai were famously pictured together in a campaign ad, sitting together in the front of a vehicle. In the ad, Tsai [says](#): "Taiwan was not an easy car to drive. We faced many difficulties... but we were firmly on the road." But the DPP can't settle

for steadily driving the car ahead. Lai needs to steer the party onto a stronger hardline, rather than sliding into a dull and unexciting middle ground. He can do that by taking an even tougher stance on China instead of wavering on his position, now saying that he takes a pragmatic approach to Taiwan's independence and "has an affinity toward China as much as he loves Taiwan."

The DPP itself has also faltered along the way, particularly in its [friendships](#) with authoritarian regimes in the hunt for diplomatic relations.

Taiwan has always been heralded as a beacon of democracy, the exception to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) truism that democracy is not for the Chinese-speaking world. It needs to embrace that legacy with a straightforward and unabashed attitude. No more wishy-washy takes on Taiwanese independence. No more friendships with authoritarian "friends" that can be bought with Chinese money. No more attempts to placate the giant that refuses to back down.

The party needs to differentiate itself from the Beijing-friendly KMT which has managed to delude a portion of the Taiwanese people that an aggressive giant such as China can be placated by playing nice. But that is not how authoritarian regimes work. Authoritarian governments

never stay put, especially when the desired territory is of material or strategic importance; Russia and [Venezuela](#) are salient examples.

That doesn't mean that the DPP needs to take on the offensive and unduly provoke China. Rather, it needs to double down on its core value of democracy by opening channels of communication, as well as economic partnerships with other democratic partners, bolster civil society to allow foreign NGOs to establish footholds in Asia, and sup-

port activists and pro-democracy advocates in nearby authoritarian states through education scholarships or visiting opportunities.

Being a model of democracy means more than fashioning itself a model for others, it entails proactive leadership from initiating political dialogue to sending economic support to facilitate the emergence of new democracies in the area.

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Alexander Lukashenko's reign of terror continues in Belarus

Outlet
Op-Ed
The Hill

Author
Pavel Kutsevol

Date
Jan. 31, 2024



AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

On Tuesday, the Belarusian KGB descended on the apartments and offices of [at least 159 friends and family of political prisoners](#) in a "massive security raid." At least 100 people were interrogated and at least 26 were arrested on politically motivated charges.

Such political charges are standard fare in Belarus, ranging from petty hooliganism to "involvement in extremist groups" and "financing extremist activities." These are what the authoritarian regime of [Alexander Lukashenko](#) uses to crack down on the opposition.

Among those detained was Maryna Adamovich, the wife of Mikola Statkevich, who ran for president in 2010 and has since been in prison for doing so.

Barys Khamaida, a 76-year-old activist, has also been detained. Earlier this month, the KGB also [arrested mem-](#)

[bers of a musical band](#) whose song had become a 2020 protest anthem. The band members were forced to apologize on camera – a tactic intended to humiliate them.

That Lukashenko goes after the families of those who have dared to criticize his government underscores the lengths he will go to in order to eliminate any opposition to his rule.

And it gets worse. Political prisoners are beginning to die behind bars. Earlier this month, Vadzim Hrasko, a 50-year-old who was serving a three-year term for donating to opposition causes, became the fourth to die in custody, reportedly of pneumonia, in Vitebsk colony Number Three.

"Vadzim Khrasko is yet another political prisoner who died in a penal colony, due to inadequate medical care," Peter Stano, lead spokesperson for the external affairs of the European Union, wrote on X. "The regime is fully responsible for the health and safety of prisoners. The EU demands the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners."

In power since 1994, Lukashenko is one of the longest-running

dictators on the planet. His harsh and repressive methods include killings, kidnappings and the jailing of political opponents and independent journalists.

In 2018, Yuri Harauski, a member of the Belarusian security services, fled Belarus for the safe haven of Switzerland before admitting that he was a member of a secret death squad that carried out Lukashenko's killing orders.

Among those ordered dead by the Belarusian dictator was Yury Zacharanka, who had served as minister of internal affairs, former Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Hanchar and Hanchar's friend and businessman Anatoly Krasouski.

For years, the authorities had blocked any meaningful investigation into their loved ones' disappearances.

As for those fortunate enough to avoid prison or death at the hands of the Lukashenko regime, they are met with another punishment: exile. In 2020, after political novice Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya [defeated Lukashenko in a disputed and fraud-ridden presidential election](#), she was forced to flee the country for her safety.

"I had a couple of hours, but I could not pack anything, because I was so overstressed," [she said](#). "It was a shock. I was not prepared for this."

As that election approached, the government's response was becoming more and more violent. When the people took to the streets to protest against the blatantly rigged election results and demand Lukashenko's resignation, the government responded with the most violent reaction in its history.

In those first few days, thousands of people were arrested, many of whom were placed in detention centers and subjected to severe physical abuse. Protesters were met with riot police units, who indiscriminately used powerful stun grenades and non-lethal weapons [that might as well be lethal](#), resulting in deaths and numerous injuries among protesters, including broken ribs, deafness and broken limbs.

People who were transported to detention centers left fully covered in bruises and with harrowing stories about sadistic behavior by Lukashenko's police.

The word "[Okrestina](#)," a pre-trial detention center where detainees were subjected to the harshest treatment, has become known to every Belarusian.

But Lukashenko went even further than that. Unlike previously, when his repression campaigns were confined to Belarusian borders, this time he went after dissidents abroad. In May 2021, his regime forced a commer-

cial airliner flying from Greece to Lithuania to land in Minsk after it briefly crossed Belarusian airspace. Aboard was Belarusian opposition journalist Roman Protasevich, who was [promptly arrested](#). The boldness of this act of air piracy in the heart of Europe rocked the airline industry, leading many companies to reroute their flights.

That same year, Lukashenko, with support from Moscow, staged a migration crisis against Poland. His regime lured migrants from the Middle East and pushed them into the Polish border, causing a [major international crisis](#). Many of the migrants died as a result of being abandoned in the dead of winter. Lukashenko used them as pawns in his desire to take revenge on the European Union for imposing sanctions for his numerous crimes.

And of course, just a few months later, in February 2022, Lukashenko allowed Russian President Vladimir Putin to use Belarus as a staging ground for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which led to the deaths of tens of thousands and destruction which, according to some estimates, will take [\\$700 billion](#) to fix. The massacre in Bucha, which shocked the world, was committed by Russian units that were dispatched from Belarusian territory.

In 2023, Russia stationed nuclear weapons in Belarus, giving

Lukashenko a nuclear umbrella to protect his regime.

This trend – of both international crises and increasing domestic repression – continues. NAU, a Belarusian opposition group, has uncovered that Lukashenko's regime has been involved in forced transfer of Ukrainian children, [which is a war crime](#).

And yet still, the sanctions against him have been relatively lax. There are still loopholes in the sanctions against Lukashenko, as with those against Putin, allowing

both tyrants to profit and terrorize their populations.

Lukashenko is a menace not just at home, but abroad as well. How much more evil should he be allowed to unleash on the world before the world does something to stop him?

Pavel Kutseval is a policy officer at the Human Rights Foundation.

The American Consulting Firms That Live in Fear of Their Murderous Clients

Outlet
Op-Ed
The New Republic

Author
Casey Michel

Date
Feb. 13, 2024



Executives at top American consulting firms are sworn in during a Senate subcommittee hearing in Washington, D.C.

For years, America's most prominent consulting firms have been competing against one another to service the most heinous regimes on the planet, offering their efforts and advice for tyrants and kleptocrats looking to expand their reach and their repression. Even as investigators and officials have [targeted other, similarly nefarious elements](#) of America's foreign lobbying industry, these major consultancy organizations have largely avoided scrutiny.

That all changed last week, when congressional officials [held a hearing](#) examining these consulting groups specifically, which offered fresh revelations about how

dictatorships suddenly have a new tool to keep American officials, and the rest of us, in the dark about what these consulting groups are actually doing.

The hearing, hosted by the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, focused on how groups like McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, and Teneo were working for Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, better known as the Public Investment Fund, or PIF. Worth [nearly \\$800 billion](#), the PIF has overseen Saudi Arabia's recent spending splurge on everything from [sports](#) to [tech](#) to [telecoms](#).

Much of it has been predicated not only on the Saudi regime diversifying its oil-rich economy but also on laundering the dictatorship's image, battered as it is by things like the assassination of journalists and the jailing of women's rights protesters.

And much of that effort has, by all appearances, come with the help of American consulting groups, which have helped to steer Saudi efforts to whitewash the country's reputation.

There's only one problem. As senators discovered while grilling the witnesses, these consultants claimed they couldn't reveal what, precisely, they're actually doing on behalf of the Saudi regime, or even how much money they're making in the process. Mind you, they all claimed to want to reveal what they were doing and that they wanted to comply with senators' subpoenas for information—but they couldn't do so because of a particular occupational hazard: threats from the Saudi regime itself.

Led by Democratic senator and PSI chair Senator Richard Blumenthal, the hearing centered on the consulting groups' lack of compliance with the committee's previous requests for documents about their work in Saudi Arabia. Over and over, the consultants claimed that, unfortunately, their Saudi work had to be kept secret, even from American legislators, because revealing it would contravene Saudi law.

[According to Rich Lesser](#), head of the Boston Consulting Group, his organization is "caught between two sovereigns," with Saudi officials being "explicit" that complying with subpoena requests is "a violation of Saudi law." McKinsey partner Bob Sternfels [said much the same](#), claiming that complying with congressional subpoenas "could result in civil or criminal penalties" in Saudi Arabia.

Teneo CEO Paul Keary—who claimed that Teneo is a "proud American company"—also pointed to Saudi threats as the reason his organization couldn't fully reveal its work for the Saudi regime.

It was the first time that legislators had actually held consultants' feet to the fire for their work on behalf of the world's dictators. But the entire hearing itself was, in some ways, a dull affair, with senators rephrasing their demands for documents and the consultants sputtering over and over again that they couldn't comply. Still, for those who sat through the hearing itself, the implications were clear:

Not only had American consulting groups injected themselves directly into some of the world's reprehensible regimes but, as Saudi Arabia illustrated, dictatorships could now prevent those American consulting companies from revealing what exactly they're doing, even after congressional demands. "You say you are [caught] between a rock and a hard place, but you have chosen sides," Blumenthal at one point said. "You have chosen the Saudi side, not the American side."

Pulling back, the implications of the companies' claims were shocking. For the first time, American organizations claimed they couldn't reveal the scope of their pro-dictatorial efforts because of threats

from those same dictatorships. It was an unprecedented defense for stymying efforts at foreign lobbying transparency—and one that could set a debilitating precedent moving forward.

This wasn't lost on legislators. As Blumenthal said, if the consultants' defense stands, it "would create a dangerous and unsupportable precedent—that American companies can shield commercial interactions with foreign governments that are directed towards the United States from oversight simply by choosing to have their contracts governed by foreign law."

It's unclear what, exactly, comes next. Blumenthal hinted at further moves to strengthen the [Foreign Agents Registration Act](#), or FARA, which forces foreign lobbyists—including consulting groups—to disclose their efforts on behalf of foreign regimes. Whatever the next step may be, it's obvious that these consulting groups have hit upon a new method for [dodging transparency requirements](#)—one that other foreign lobbyists, and other authoritarian regimes, will likely be eager to follow moving forward.

Then again, maybe this was inevitable. Even as legislators in recent years have focused on other prongs of America's [foreign lobbying nexus](#)—not least the roles that U.S. [public relations](#) and [law firms](#)

play in propping up dictatorships around the planet and [acting as their mouthpieces in Washington](#)—American consulting groups have largely escaped notice. This lack of focus on consultancies has given those regimes time to craft their own domestic legislation that will force consultancies to keep their work for those regimes secret.

Despite their sputtering defenses, there's little evidence these consulting groups ever thought twice about such arrangements. Groups like McKinsey, for instance, have been [working in Saudi Arabia for years](#), not only [opening doors](#) for Saudi officials in Washington but even going so far as to [identify critics of the Saudi regime](#)—all of whom the regime then targeted, arresting either the critics

or their family members. Even while they claimed they were “[horrified](#)” by the Saudis’ crackdown, that did little to dissuade McKinsey from partnering with the dictatorship’s sovereign wealth fund, expanding Saudi influence that much further in the process.

The details of that work, however, are still unknown. And it is only darkly ironic that it is now McKinsey that is facing a potential crackdown from the Saudi regime—and presenting a lesson in the perils, and the threats, of foreign lobbying for the rest of us.

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How Russians and the West Failed Navalny

The dissident might still be alive if his countrymen showed the same courage that Ukrainians have.

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A photo of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny at a makeshift memorial in Frankfurt, Germany, Feb. 16. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE / GETTY IMAGES

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was murdered in a prison north of the Arctic Circle on Friday. There is no need for semantic blame games when a political prisoner dies. There are no natural causes or accidents in the gulag. It's murder by dictatorship, as damning as if [Vladimir Putin](#) pulled the trigger himself.

Mr. Putin tried and failed to kill Navalny quickly and secretly with poison in 2020, and now he has murdered him slowly and publicly in prison. Navalny's only crime was to expose Mr. Putin and his mafia as the bandits they are, and to do it with charisma and humor.

Navalny and I disagreed on many things about the past and future of Russia, as he did with many in the broad anti-Putin coalition. But we agreed that Mr. Putin had to go, and that none of the disagreements among us would matter until that happened.

Now Alexei is dead, and with him the last gasp of Russian society that failed him, failed Russia and failed the world with its apathy.

He was a man of optimism and action in a country of nihilism and inaction, a tragic condition he shared with me and our colleague Boris Nemtsov, who returned to Russia only to be gunned down in the street in front of the Kremlin in 2015.

Mr. Putin killed Navalny, but there is blame enough to go around. First, we Russians who failed to match Alexei's courage and end Mr. Putin's dictatorship and war can't escape responsibility. Some of us tried, and he marched with us in numbers that seem a fantasy now. It wasn't enough.

Is it wrong to wonder what might have been? If we had been as brave as the Ukrainians were a few years later when they took to the streets and risked their lives to free themselves?

Perhaps the last, best chance was the huge demonstration in Moscow on Dec. 24, 2011, not long before the regime cracked down heavily on such actions. Navalny surely sensed the moment when he took his turn on the stage in front of tens of thousands of protesters.

"I can see that there are enough people here to seize the Kremlin and the White House"—the federal government headquarters—"right now. We are a peaceful force and will not do it now. But if these crooks and thieves try to go on cheating us, if they continue telling lies and stealing from us, we will take what belongs to us with our own hands!"

Would the people have followed us? Would the thousands of police have opened fire, or joined us? Would we now be free, or long dead? The regret of inaction is tenfold the regret of action.

Also deserving of blame are the Western politicians who treated Navalny's poisoning in 2020 and jailing the following year as just another negotiating point with Mr. Putin. Lots of talk, no action, more pointless peace talks and corrupt deals, more blood on their hands.

President Biden's threat in 2021 of "[devastating](#)" consequences should anything happen to Navalny in prison will now be put to the

excruciating test. After decades of crimes and aggression, Mr. Putin has crossed another bloody red line. He feels confident there will be no repercussions. If he's proved correct, his murderous confidence will increase.

Ukraine is the weak point in Mr. Putin's armor. Mr. Biden can't hide behind Republican obstruction of Ukraine aid, as reprehensible as it is. The White House doesn't need Congress to send Ukraine long-range artillery like ATACMS and fighter jets essential to protect civilians from Russia's incessant bombing.

Nor can Mr. Biden blame MAGA obstruction for failing to seize more than \$300 billion in Russian Central Bank assets and using them to aid Ukraine. Seizing and selling the luxury yachts and real estate in the West belonging to Mr. Putin and his oligarchs would also be a fitting tribute to Navalny, whose anticorruption campaigns exposed their looted riches.

But I'm afraid Western politicians prefer dissidents to be martyrs. They can leave flowers and say nice words while negotiating with the murderer. No one challenges such hypocrisy. Navalny was a fighter first and always, and unless Mr. Biden, Germany's Olaf Scholz and the rest are going to fight, they should keep

his name off their forked tongues.

We may also use this tragic moment to shame those who openly side with Mr. Putin, from Viktor Orbán and [Donald Trump](#) to propagandists like Tucker Carlson and amplifiers like [Elon Musk](#). But should we bother, when they can't be shamed?

Mr. Carlson was just in Moscow, where he had a fawning interview with Mr. Putin before producing a series of videos in which he gaped in awe at Russian supermarkets and subway stations. The parallels with Western communist sympathizers such as Walter Duranty are accurate. But this is more, and worse. It's a concrete campaign to promote Mr. Putin's bloodthirsty dictatorship, to normalize his regime and his war crimes. If Mr. Carlson were still in Moscow, he could gape at the amazingly low price of human life in Mr. Putin's dictatorship.

Why murder Navalny now? Mr. Putin obviously felt safe to finish the job, and, as a coward and bully, he is always most dangerous when he feels safe and triumphant. Consider why he feels that way, with American aid for Ukraine paralyzed by the GOP House, Mr. Biden feigning helplessness, and Mr. Trump leading the polls.

In discussions at the Munich Security Conference, an annual forum on in-

ternational security policy, Navalny's murder threatened to overshadow the daily deaths of innocent Ukrainians at the same hand. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the leaders of the free world are treading water while Ukrainians spill blood. If Mr. Biden and the rest of the free world really wish to strike a "devastating" blow against the killer in the Kremlin, they need only provide Ukrainian hands with the weapons they need to strike it.

The West seems intent on duplicating the apathy of Russians in the face of Mr. Putin's aggression and the results will be the same. He will grow bolder and the price of stopping him will keep going up. The risk to Ukraine, the Baltic states,

and Poland will rise along with the threat to other political prisoners like activist Vladimir Kara-Murza and Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich. Mr. Gershkovich was taken into custody in March on an allegation of espionage that he, the Journal and the U.S. government vehemently deny.

Alexei Navalny was a man of courage and action, and only courage and action can honor him now.

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