

OSLO FREEDOM FORUM 2025 RECAP REPORT

MAY
26-28

IMAGINE

OSLO
FREEDOM
FORUM

Over the last 20 years, the world has witnessed a global democratic decline and a rise in authoritarianism. The Oslo Freedom Forum (OFF) offers an antidote by serving as a platform to power a freer future. The Forum unites human rights advocates and leaders from different walks of life from around the world to exchange valuable tools, knowledge, and resources in the struggle for individual liberties.

This year's theme, *Imagine*, sought to take another step toward seeing the world as it should be — not as it is. In authoritarian regimes, even the simple act of imagining a better future can be seen as a threat. Dictators fear this because meaningful change begins when people dare to envision something greater for themselves and future generations. What does the world look like, we asked, with no more tyranny?

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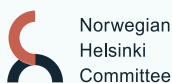
KINGSWAY
—CAPITAL—



ATLAS
NETWORK

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magic
mind



GLOBAL REACH

GLOBAL MEDIA COVERAGE

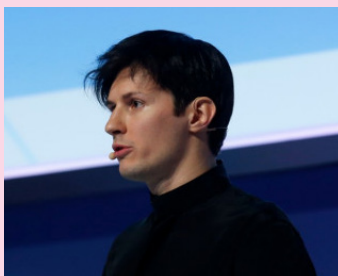
The Oslo Freedom Forum shapes global understanding of democracy and human rights issues through coverage in top-tier global outlets.

Kyiv Post



How to defeat dictatorships

By Jason Smart with Thor Halvorssen



THE BUSINESS STANDARD

French court blocks Telegram founder from Norway trip

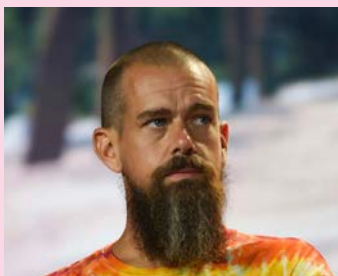
By AFP



INDEPENDENT

He spent three horrific years in a Doha jail, now Abdullah Ibhais wants justice from Qatar and Fifa

By Miguel Delaney



BUSINESS INSIDER

That new Jack Dorsey messaging app? He vibe-coded it

By Henry Chandonnet



FINANCIAL TIMES

OFF cited as a gathering place for Durov and other technologists

By Hannah Murphy in San Francisco, Leila Abboud in Paris and Ivan Levingston and Arash Massoudi in London



The Front Line of Freedom

By Ron Steslow with Hagar Chemali



France: la justice refuse de laisser le fondateur de Telegram, Pavel Durov, se rendre à Oslo

By Wire



Kara-Murzá pide la liberación de "más de 5.000 presos políticos" en Rusia y Bielorrusia

By Wire



INTEGRITY

Venâncio Mondlane "busca apoio internacional" para o projecto político ANAMALALA

By Staff Report



abc

Distinguen en Oslo al cubano Otero Alcántara con Premio Václav Havel a la Disidencia Creativa

By Wire



Chicago Tribune

East African governments turn up repression as the United States turns away

By Elizabeth Shackelford



THE FULLER PROJECT

Gendered Violence Under Authoritarian Rule: What I learned from women's rights defenders

By Melissa Mahtani



yle

Song's fourth attempt to defect from North Korea was successful

By Mika Mäkeläinen

NORWEGIAN MEDIA COVERAGE

The 2025 Oslo Freedom Forum and its keynote speakers received significant coverage in leading Norwegian media. With dozens of stories in the country's top media outlets, Norwegian coverage alone has garnered more than 91 million impressions. Explore some highlights.

NRK



VM-varsleren Abdullah Ibhais varsler søksmål mot Fifa

By Halvor Ekeland



VG

Nordkoreansk avhopper: TV-signalene reddet meg

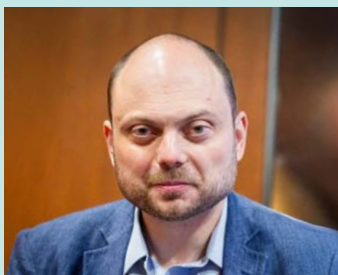
By Kim Yumi



BLIKK

Michelle Gurevich til Oslo

By Line Stensland Haglund



DNHelg

Slik hjalp Norge Putins største kritiker ut av straffekoloni

By Marie Melgard



E24 |

Historien om Oslo Freedom Forum: Faren fengslet, moren skutt – Jeg hadde ikke hørt om janteloven, sier Thor Halvorssen

By Torbjørn Røe Isaksen



VG

Telegram-grunnleggeren får ikke forlate Frankrike – Fått nei til å reise til Norge

By Emma Bø



2

Dette snakkes det ikke om

By Roy Kvatningen

2 Nyheter



Opening of OFF: Welcome boat tour, live at 1:05 p.m.

By Stål Kvalsnes



TV2 Play 21-Nyhetene: Vladimir Kara-Murza

By Jeanette Nyhammer Vik



Subjekt

**Vi hadde havnet i fengsel om vi
oppførte oss sånn**

By Mikkel Ihle Tande



NRK

**Kjent Putin-kritiker i Oslo: –
Vesten må prioritere to ting**

By Vilde Skorpen Wikan



Panorama

Et stadig mer autoritært styre

By Gunnar Zachrisen



A City Remembered: Hong Kong at the Oslo Freedom Forum

By Ka Man Mak

2



Han ble drept på grunn av meg

By Roy Kvatningen



Kim (29) planla å spise giftig mat om hun ble avslørt

By Thomas Paust

OFF IN THE NEWS

1.56

BILLION REACH

23

LANGUAGES

600

MENTIONS

39

COUNTRIES

6.99

MILLION VIEWS





VIDEO HITS

169

UNIQUE POSTS¹

1,313,926

VIDEO VIEWS¹

7,625

NEW FOLLOWERS¹

7.20%

AVG. ENGAGEMENT RATE²

¹ Across platforms (YouTube, Instagram, X, Facebook, LinkedIn)

² Above industry average of 6%

SOCIAL MEDIA HITS

558

UNIQUE POSTS

1,359,622

VIDEO VIEWS

8,528,165

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPRESSIONS

74,385

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENTS





Vladimir Kara-Murza · 2nd
Politician, author, historian, former prisoner
3w · Edited ·

...

Wonderful to be back at the [Oslo Freedom Forum \(OFF\)](#) after a three-year absence. "Davos for dissidents", as [The Economist](#) called it — a unique community bound together by the belief that nothing is more important than human life and human freedom.

(Video of our conversation in comments)



Global Magnitsky Justice Campaign @GMJCampaign · May 26 ·
@BillBrowder, @vkaramurza, @ekaramurza about to take the main stage at Oslo Freedom Forum @OsloFF to discuss the campaign to free Vladimir Kara-Murza #HRF #ImagineatOFF



Sir William Browder KCMG and 2 others

6 35 229 33K



Benedict Rogers 羅傑斯 @benedictrogers · May 29

...

"Mao's guilt" by the Gao Brothers

An important work of art exhibited at @OsloFreedomForum @OsloFF

One day the crimes which Mao and his #CCP descendants, including @Xijiang, have committed in #China and beyond will be judged and the perpetrators called to account.



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OSLO NORWAY

As a country consistently ranked as one of the freest in international indexes, and with a long-standing commitment to promoting democracy internationally, Norway is a fitting home for OFF.

Over the last 17 years, HRF has forged strong partnerships with Norwegian organizations and companies, gained support from local and national governments, and received coverage from top Norwegian media outlets.

2025 WELCOME TO NORWAY SPEECH



ANNE MAYOR OF OSLO LINDBOE

Anne Lindboe is a trained physician from the University of Oslo, specializing in pediatric medicine. Lindboe became mayor on Oct. 25, 2023, representing the Conservative Party. Previously holding roles at the Children's House in Oslo, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, and serving as the Children's Ombudsperson and director of the Private Kindergartens Association, she envisions Oslo to be the city that helps all children achieve their dreams.



STORIES OF IMPACT

OFF has a ripple effect, inspiring policy changes, greater awareness of human rights issues, alliances, and global solidarity for pro-democracy causes. Check out a few examples of the Forum's impact so far.



HONORING PRESS FREEDOM

On May 26, activists and journalists gathered to honor and celebrate those who risk everything for press freedom. Moderated by Hilde Sandvik, a prominent journalist and creator of the award-winning podcast “Norsken, svensken og dansken,” the evening included remarks from Norwegian photojournalist Nora Savosnick; Oscar- and Emmy-nominated documentarian and filmmaker Anders Hammer; and OFF mainstage speaker and independent Uyghur journalist Nyrola Elimä.

KARA-MURZAS TOGETHER

AT THE OSLO
FREEDOM FORUM

While Russian journalist and opposition leader Vladimir Kara-Murza had attended OFF multiple times, and his wife and Russian activist, Evgenia, attended when Vladimir was detained in a Siberian penal colony, OFF 2025 marked the first time they were able to attend together. Both Kara-Murzas met with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and granted interviews to Norwegian and global media.





FROM QATARI PRISON TO THE OFF STAGE

Less than two months after his release from a Qatari prison, Jordanian whistleblower and former FIFA World Cup media manager Abdullah Ibhais arrived at OFF. Arrested in 2021 and sentenced to three years for bribery, Ibhais became the focus of international attention. In December 2022, HRF — together with FairSquare and Ibhais' brother — submitted a petition to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which resulted in a favorable opinion. At OFF, Ibhais appeared on the main stage, joined the Sports & Dictators panel, and participated in a fireside conversation with HRF fellow Karim Zidan. He was also featured in media coverage highlighted above. (See p. 9)

AGATHER ATUHAIRE

UGANDAN
LAWYER

Weeks before the Forum, Ugandan lawyer, human rights activist, and OFF 2024 speaker Agather Atuhaire was arrested and detained for several days in Tanzania. During her detention, she was raped, tortured, and held incommunicado alongside Kenyan activist Boniface Mwangi. They were eventually dumped at the border. Despite this ordeal, Atuhaire chose to attend OFF, where she was scheduled to speak on the Freedom Tech track, saying she needed the community around her during this difficult time.





OSLO FREEDOM

CHORUS.COMMUNITY

A CENSORSHIP- RESISTANT SOCIAL APP

During OFF 2025, Jack Dorsey unveiled Chorus.Community, a new social platform built for activists, journalists, and organizers operating under surveillance or censorship.

Designed using permissionless technologies like Bitcoin and Nostr, Chorus helps users share updates, send voice notes, organize groups, and raise funds — all without email, phone number, or centralized approval. Unlike traditional social apps, Chorus can't easily be blocked or taken down. For human rights defenders working in closed societies, Chorus offers a secure, decentralized way to stay connected and coordinate.

VIBE CODING FOR ACTIVISTS

In a world-first moment, HRF taught vibe coding to the global human rights activist community in a hands-on workshop.

Vibe coding allows individuals to use AI-powered assistants to code without any coding experience. It is a paradigm-shifting technological moment where, finally, non-technical users can quickly build websites, apps, event tools, and other digital assets essential for nonprofit operations. HRF's AI for Individual Rights technical advisor Justin Moon taught activists and nonprofit leaders how to use these tools to quickly build digital assets like personal websites with ease. One highlight, which illustrates how approachable these tools are to use, was a seven-year-old boy with no coding experience creating (and fixing problems with) a website for his mother in a matter of minutes. Activists and freedom tech developers alike can use this new technology to supercharge their work and the advancement of human rights.





THEATER TALKS A SNAPSHOT



PAVEL CEO AND FOUNDER OF TELEGRAM DUROV

Pavel Durov is a technology entrepreneur known for championing digital privacy and freedom of expression. He is the founder and CEO of Telegram, a globally popular encrypted messaging platform designed to protect users' communications from surveillance. Before launching Telegram, Durov founded VKontakte (VK), which became Russia's largest and most influential social network. He spoke on the Oslo Freedom Forum stage with Human Rights Foundation CEO Thor Halvorssen.

EVGENIA & VLADIMIR KARA-MURZA

IN CONVERSATION WITH

SIR WILLIAM BROWDER

Russian opposition politician Vladimir Kara-Murza and his wife, activist Evgenia, joined Sir William Browder to discuss the personal and political costs of resisting the brutality of Vladimir Putin's dictatorship in Russia.





MARIA SARUNGI TANZANIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST AND JOURNALIST TSEHAI

Maria Sarungi Tsehai is a prominent Tanzanian human rights activist and journalist. She is the founder of the pro-democracy movements Change Tanzania and Shangazi Power and the director of independent Mwanzo TV. She has faced threats, physical intimidation, and censorship for exposing and campaigning against the authoritarianism of Tanzania's regime.

ENRIQUE DEL RISCO

CUBAN WRITER
AND PROFESSOR

Enrique Del Risco is a Cuban writer and professor at New York University. He began his academic career in Cuba, but the constant surveillance and censorship forced him to leave the island in the 1990s. He has since continued to denounce the dictatorship and has published several books detailing life under Cuba's totalitarian regime, including "Our Hunger in Havana," in which he recounts life in Cuba during the "Special Period," and "The Comrade Who Looks After Me," a book in which 50 Cuban writers discuss their relationship with the political police.





VENÂNCIO MONDLANE

MOZAMBICAN MAIN
OPPOSITION LEADER

Venâncio Mondlane is Mozambique's main opposition leader and is considered the legitimate winner of October's fraudulent presidential elections. Since then, he has led the country's largest-ever movement contesting election rigging. A writer, political analyst, and former lawmaker, he has inspired a popular people's movement seeking democratic change and a break from 50 years of rule of the governing FRELIMO party.

KIM NORTH KOREAN DEFECTOR AND YOUTUBE CONTENT CREATOR YUMI

Kim Yumi, a North Korean defector, was born and raised in Haeju, South Hwanghae Province, a coastal military area. Growing up near a naval base, she was able to secretly watch South Korean news programs and TV shows, thereby uncovering the vibrant, democratic society of South Korea. Yumi and her husband made the brave decision to escape North Korea and seek a better future. Now in Seoul, she is actively involved in raising awareness about the realities of life in North Korea, especially on her YouTube channel, “@김이혁TV-r5u김유미.”





PEDRO VENEZUELAN OPPOSITION CAMPAIGN LEADER URRUCHURTU

Pedro Urruchurtu was one of six top opposition campaign leaders who spent more than a year trapped inside the Argentinian embassy in Caracas, Venezuela, surrounded by armed security forces loyal to Nicolás Maduro. In this gripping and emotional talk — introduced by Human Rights Foundation CEO and Founder Thor Halvorssen — Urruchurtu recounted how he and his colleagues defied a dictatorship, ran a presidential campaign from diplomatic captivity, and ultimately escaped under the nose of a repressive regime. From smuggling Starlinks into Venezuela to launching “Operation Guacamaya,” Urruchurtu’s story is one of courage and hope in the face of tyranny.

AZZA ABO SYRIAN ARTIST AND ACTIVIST REBIEH

Azza Abo Rebieh is a Syrian artist born in Hama in 1980. During the Syrian Revolution, she created graffiti, led workshops with women, and organized puppet theater for children in rural villages. In 2015, she was detained by the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Following her release, her prison drawings were exhibited at “The Drawing Center” in New York. Her work explores memory, resistance, and survival and is held in collections including the British Museum and Institut du Monde Arabe.





DR. DANIEL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE MINDSIGHT INSTITUTE SIEGEL

Dr. Siegel is the founding co-director of the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center and executive director of the Mindsight Institute, which fosters insight, empathy, and integration. With numerous bestsellers and a professional series of textbooks, he's a leading voice in interpersonal neurobiology, shaping minds worldwide with wisdom and compassion.

JUDI REVER

CANADIAN JOURNALIST
AND AUTHOR

Judi Rever is a Canadian investigative reporter, distinguished as one of the few international journalists who witnessed — and extensively probed — the mass atrocities of Rwandan dictator Paul Kagame’s army in the Great Lakes of Africa. She is the author of “In Praise of Blood: The Crimes of the Rwandan Patriotic Front” and a thought leader on how the global economy’s need for cheap minerals to power technology keeps Kagame in power. The evidence Rever has uncovered challenges deep-rooted dogma on the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, and despite enduring numerous threats, she remains one of the most clear-eyed experts on Kagame’s crimes.



ANUEL ALCANTARA

ivist & Political Prisoner



PRIZES

THULANI MASEKO JUSTICE PRIZE 2025

The Maseko Prize recognizes courageous human rights lawyers who risk, or have risked, their lives to defend the rule of law and democracy.

On May 27, the Human Rights Foundation hosted the second Thulani Maseko Justice Prize Ceremony in the Oslo Konserthus. The Maseko Prize honors the late Swazi human rights lawyer, renowned democracy advocate, and former OFF speaker, Thulani Maseko, who was assassinated in his home on Jan. 21, 2023.

This year's Maseko Prize laureate is Rocío San Miguel, a Venezuelan lawyer, anti-corruption activist, human rights defender, and founder of the NGO Control Ciudadano, dedicated to the monitoring of the activities of armed and security forces. Her work has made her a long-time target of harassment and persecution by the regimes of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. San Miguel has been arbitrarily detained since Feb. 9, 2024, and was accused of terrorism in a sham process in which no evidence was ever provided, triggering worldwide condemnation and calls for her release from the UN and the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights.

THULANI MASEKO JUSTICE PRIZE

ABOUT THE PRIZE

Thulani Maseko was a remarkable human rights lawyer who pioneered public interest litigation in Swaziland. He was a true absolute monarch. Maseko dedicated his career to the peaceful struggle for democracy and to ensuring that dissidents and ordinary citizens facing persecution received independent legal representation.

On Jan. 21, 2023, Maseko was murdered when an assassin fired gunshots through an open window at his home as he watched television with his wife and two children. This came just hours after King Mswati II publicly threatened deadly violence against those who opposed his absolute rule — and then blamed Maseko's murder on "unknown criminals."

To honor his memory, HRF and the Thulani Maseko Foundation established the Thulani Maseko Justice Prize at the 2023 Oslo Freedom Forum. The prize honors human rights lawyers advancing justice in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes.



ROCÍO SAN MIGUEL

This year's laureate is Rocío San Miguel, a Venezuelan lawyer, human rights defender, and anti-corruption activist. In 2005, she founded Control Ciudadano, a nonprofit organization that monitors and exposes abuse, corruption, and widespread human rights violations perpetrated by the Venezuelan police and armed forces.

Ahead of Venezuela's 2024 presidential election, San Miguel was abducted and arbitrarily detained on fabricated charges of terrorism and conspiracy. The international community has strongly condemned her imprisonment, the denial of urgent medical treatment for a shoulder injury caused by torture — which is likely to result in a permanent disability — and the repeated delays in her trial.

Today, she remains unjustly imprisoned in El Helicóptero, one of the most infamous torture centers in the world.

HRF stands with all Venezuelans demanding her immediate release and honors San Miguel's extraordinary courage.

2023 LAUREATE
THULANI MASEKO

2024 LAUREATE
ALEXEI NAVALNY



VÁCLAV HAVEL INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR CREATIVE DISSENT

The Human Rights Foundation founded the *Václav Havel International Prize for Creative Dissent* in collaboration with Dagmar Havlová, widow of the late poet, playwright, philosopher, statesman, and former HRF chairman, Václav Havel, following his death in December 2011.

The Havel Prize celebrates those who, with bravery and ingenuity, unmask the lie of dictatorship by living in truth. For Václav Havel, living in truth meant an unwavering commitment to living according to one's belief in democracy and civil liberties. The Havel Prize was founded in 2012 to honor Havel for his lifelong dedication to promoting and protecting individual rights.

The 2025 Václav Havel Prize was presented by Irina Schoulgin-Nyoni, Ambassador for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden, a role she assumed in 2023. A career diplomat, she also served as Africa director at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and as Ambassador of Sweden to Mozambique.



AZZA ABO SYRIAN ARTIST AND ACTIVIST REBIEH

Azza Abo Rebieh is a Syrian artist whose fearless creative dissent during the Syrian Revolution led to her 2015 arrest and imprisonment in Damascus. In a crowded cell with 30 women at Adra Prison, she became a voice of hope and advocacy. Her defiant art — spanning graffiti, sculpture, film, and painting — confronts oppression and reconstructs narratives shattered by war. Her storytelling is an act of resistance, making her a vital voice in the struggle for justice and artistic freedom.



SASHA RUSSIAN ARTIST SKOCHILENKO

Sasha Skochilenko is a Russian artist, musician, poet, and former political prisoner. She was arrested in 2022 for distributing anti-war messages and sentenced in 2023 to seven years in prison under Russia's so-called "fake news" law. Skochilenko was released in 2024 as part of the Ankara prisoner exchange between the US and Russia. She lives in Germany, where she continues her artistic work, participating in exhibitions in Paris, Amsterdam, and London to showcase the drawings she created in prison. Beyond activism, she is the author of "A Book About Depression," which played a significant role in destigmatizing mental health issues in Russia.

LUIS MANUEL OTERO, CUBAN ARTIST AND PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST ALCANTARA

Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara is a Cuban artist, activist, and political prisoner, currently being held in Guanajay maximum-security prison. He is the founder of the San Isidro Movement, a collective of artists and dissidents that emerged in 2018 to challenge censorship and demand greater freedoms in Cuba. He gained international attention for his performance art and peaceful protests, including hunger strikes and symbolic acts of resistance. Otero Alcántara was arrested during Cuba's historic 2021 protests and sentenced to five years in prison, following a closed trial. In 2022, in response to a submission by HRF, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declared his imprisonment to be arbitrary and urged the Cuban regime to release him immediately. Due to his detention, Otero Alcántara recorded a heartfelt voice message from prison instead of his acceptance speech on stage.

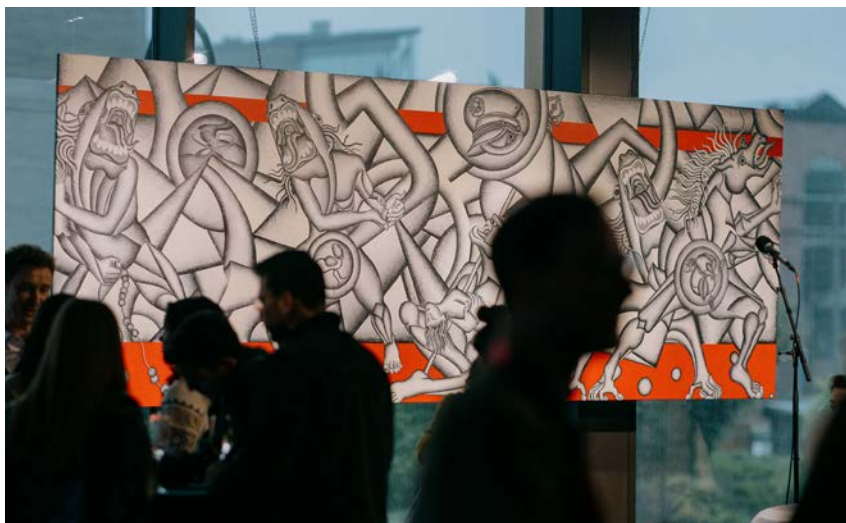




ART,
MUSIC,
& FILM
A SNAPSHOT

THE GUILTY WILL KNEEL

PRESENTED BY HRF'S
ART IN PROTEST PROGRAM



"The Guilty Will Kneel," a dissident art exhibition featuring artists from the Asia-Pacific, including Burma, China, Hong Kong, and Tibet, was held from May 16–30, in conjunction with the 2025 Oslo Freedom Forum. The exhibition confronted authoritarianism directly, without euphemism, serving as an indictment of oppressive regimes. At the same time, it reflected the unwavering resistance and defiance of the seven participating artists against authoritarian rule. Among them were Burmese artists Sai, K, and Ma; Chinese contemporary duo the Gao Brothers; Sanmu Chen; and Tenzing Rigdol. The exhibition was hosted at Atelie, a new venue partner for us in Oslo, marking our first collaboration and drawing more than 350 visitors throughout the two-week run.





KHALED DAWWA

The Throne, 2025

Syrian artist and dissident Khaled Dawwa created a massive sculpture of a toilet with dictators sitting on this “throne,” plagued by their greed and corruption. Dawwa invited guests to freely express their thoughts and feelings about authoritarianism by writing and drawing on his piece.

MUSIC AT OFF

Michelle Gurevich & Faisal Salah

Our main stage at OFF featured moving performances by two world-class musicians. Singer-songwriter Michelle Gurevich delivered a stirring solo performance of her compositions “Goodbye My Dictator” and “Love from a Distance” before being joined by guitarist Robin Thomson for a captivating rendition of “Kiss in Taksim Square.” London-based Somali artist Facesoul (Faisal Salah) moved the audience with the power of his voice and musical message.



FILM AT OFF

This year's Oslo Freedom Forum built upon the success of last year's film screenings, panels, and Q&As with two powerful screenings at Oslo's Cinemateket, which is run by the Norwegian Film Institute. We presented "The Seed of the Sacred Fig" (Cannes Special Jury Prize, directed by Mohammad Rasoulof), an Iranian film that centers on an investigating judge in the Revolutionary Court in Tehran as he grapples with paranoia while nationwide political protests unfold. The Sunday afternoon matinee captivated a full house.

We also screened "Wisdom of Happiness," featuring the Dalai Lama speaking directly to viewers and creating a sense of a private audience. The film shares his timeless wisdom on achieving inner peace and happiness for all. The screening included an introduction by Richard Gere and a post-film panel discussion with members of the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT).

Both films drew engaged, full audiences and continued our tradition of sparking meaningful dialogue and deepening community connection.



Per Elvestuen, director of the Oslo Freedom Forum in Norway, receives a gift from ICT.



Panel discussion following the film "Wisdom of Happiness" with (left to right) Tencho Gyatso, president of ICT; Chemi Lamo, campaigns director of Students for a Free Tibet and HRF Freedom Fellow; Jan Willem den Besten, ICT Europe board member; and Adam Kahan, HRF senior project manager and moderator.

COAT
ROOM

GARDEROBE 2



DAY 1
10:00 - 11:00
11:00 - 12:00
12:00 - 13:00
13:00 - 14:00
14:00 - 15:00
15:00 - 16:00
16:00 - 17:00
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22:00 - 23:00
23:00 - 24:00

AI FOR
ACTIVISTS

FINANCIAL
FREEDOM 101

FREEDOM
TECH USER
TESTING

INTERACTIVE PROGRAMMING A SNAPSHOT

Through panel discussions, fireside chats, and workshops, this year's interactive programming challenged participants to think more critically about the issues presented during theater talks, forge partnerships, and create practical, innovative solutions to advance freedom worldwide.

DAY 1 &
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MUNKEDAMSVEIEN 14

2 DAY 1 & 2 OSLO KONSERTHUS S KONS



ARE SANCTIONS AN EFFECTIVE POLICY TOOL?

OPEN  DEBATE

As authoritarian regimes expand their reach, democratic governments often turn to economic sanctions as a response. But are sanctions effective in deterring repression and changing regime behavior — or do they risk harming civilians while entrenching dictators? In this high-stakes debate, debaters argued in favor of and against the effectiveness of sanctions.

JOHN DONVAN, moderator-in-chief, Open to Debate

LEOPOLDO LÓPEZ, co-founder of the World Liberty Congress

ARTIE MCCONNELL, partner, BakerHostetler

DR. CHRIS SABATINI, senior research fellow for Latin America, US and the Americas Programme, Chatham House

ELIZABETH SHACKELFORD, senior policy director, the John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College



FROM HUB TO CRISIS: HONG KONG'S SHIFT

After the passage of the National Security Law and the second National Security Law, Article 23, and the issuance of bounties for 13 activists in exile, Hong Kong continues to cling to its image as an international hub. As international companies, journalists, and local NGOs flee due to the erosion of freedoms and autonomy, Hong Kong can no longer be considered the international financial hub it once was. Panelists discussed how these changes impact global businesses, the growing risks for for-profit and nonprofit entities operating in a repressive environment, and the moral imperative for leaders in all realms to prioritize human rights.

BENEDICT ROGERS (MODERATOR), senior director at Fortify Rights and co-founder and trustee of Hong Kong Watch

SAMUEL BICKETT, principal attorney and convenor, US Hong Kong Policy Roundtable

CHLOE CHEUNG, Hong Kong activist at the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation

CARMEN LAU, senior international advocacy associate at the Hong Kong Democracy Council



DEMOCRACY'S FUNDING CRISIS: HOW PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY CAN STEP IN

As authoritarian regimes tighten their grip worldwide and the US reevaluates its pro-democracy funding, the global movement for democracy faces a growing crisis: a severe funding shortfall. While autocrats pour billions into repression and propaganda, pro-democracy activists often operate with limited support. This timely panel brought together leaders in philanthropy and advocacy to discuss how funders can rise to the moment and scale resources to defend freedom around the world. Panelists charted a path toward smarter, bolder giving — highlighting how strategic philanthropy can empower high-impact democracy projects, how values-driven funding can help build resilient, open societies, and the funding challenges faced by frontline youth movements.

MARGARET HOOVER
(MODERATOR), host of PBS' "Firing Line"

PEMA DOMA, executive director of Students for a Free Tibet

DR. ÁLVARO SALAS, president of The Reynolds Foundation

DAMON WILSON, president and CEO of the National Endowment for Democracy

DR. GREGORY WOLCOTT, director of individual freedom and free markets at the John Templeton Foundation



ENGAGING UN BODIES TO FREE PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

Authoritarian regimes around the world imprison thousands of prisoners of conscience, often for their political beliefs or identities. State-controlled judicial systems provide little recourse for these prisoners. This panel explored UN bodies and mandates that could pave the way to justice for detainees.

ROBERTO GONZÁLEZ (MODERATOR), chief advocacy officer, Human Rights Foundation

SIRIKAN CHAROENSIRI, executive advisor and co-founder, Thai Lawyers for Human Rights

CAOILFHIONN GALLAGHER KC, international human rights lawyer

DR. MATTHEW GILLET, vice-chair on communications and former chair-rapporteur, UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention

VLADIMIR KARA-MURZA, Russian politician, author, documentary filmmaker, and former political prisoner

DR. GANNA YUDKIVSKA, chair-rapporteur, UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention



RESILIENCE-BUILDING FOR ACTIVISTS AND DISSIDENTS

Activists and dissidents face unique challenges as a result of their work, including trauma that may impact their physical health, personal relationships, and work. They may also experience ongoing exposure to threats to both their physical and mental well-being. This fireside began a dialogue on how to build resilience and find peace under such difficult circumstances.

ANNETTE KNOPP (MODERATOR), co-founder of the Blue Spirit retreat center in Nosara, Costa Rica

BESSEL VAN DER KOLK, researcher, founder of the Trauma Research Foundation, and New York Times best-selling author of "The Body Keeps the Score"

DR. DANIEL SIEGEL, executive director of the Mindsight Institute



SPORTS & DICTATORS: GULF MONARCHIES, RWANDA'S REPUTATION, AND THE GLOBAL GAME

Authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Rwanda continue to weaponize sports as both a political and economic tool. They grow their influence through sponsorships, acquisitions, event hosting, and infiltrating sports governing bodies. Panelists explored how sports both advance and resist authoritarianism, discussed the human rights abuses covered up by sports in authoritarian regimes, and analyzed how journalists, athletes, fans, and governing bodies can address the pressing challenges facing global sports in the years ahead.

KARIM ZIDAN (MODERATOR), sports & dictators fellow, Human Rights Foundation

MIGUEL DELANEY, chief football writer at The Independent, author of "States of Play: How Sportswashing Took Over Football"

ABDULLAH IBHAIS, 2022 FIFA World Cup prisoner

ANAÏSE KANIMBA, human rights activist, genocide survivor, and daughter of formerly detained "Hotel Rwanda" hero, Paul Rusesabagina

MICHAEL OTT, football activist and lawyer

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DARK WATERS: COMBATING HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES AT SEA

Criminal activity has flourished in the oceans. Human rights abuses often drive issues like environmental harm, overfishing, piracy, migration, human trafficking, and other illicit activities on the high seas. Traffickers may lure vulnerable individuals onto cargo or fishing vessels with false promises of employment. Migrants fleeing violent authoritarian regimes board dangerous vessels seeking shelter abroad. But those who suffer serious harm at sea often have no legal recourse. Victims of human rights abuses must rely on the jurisdiction of the state operating the vessel, which has no interest in investigating or prosecuting crimes or abuses. Authoritarian regimes often emerge as some of the worst offenders of rights at sea. This panel examined the various threats to human rights at sea, mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing compliance, and pathways to justice for survivors and victims.

DANIEL MURPHY, investigative researcher, advocate, and journalist

STEVEN HAINES, professor of public international law at the University of Greenwich

IRINI PAPANICOLOPULU, British Academy global professor of international law, SOAS University of London

MILKO SCHVARTZMAN, marine conservation campaigner



IN THE SHADOWS: GENDERED VIOLENCE UNDER AUTHORITARI- AN RULE

Authoritarian repression and armed conflict disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, such as women and LGBTQI+ individuals, subjecting them to additional forms of violence like threats of sexual violence, conflict-related sexual violence, online harassment, smear campaigns, and slut-shaming. This panel explored how women's rights defenders in Afghanistan, Sudan, Tigray, and Libya campaign against gender-based and conflict-related sexual violence while pursuing pathways to protection, accountability, and healing.

MELISSA MAHTANI
(MODERATOR), executive producer and journalist

SULAIMA ISHAQ ELKHALIFA SHARIF, Sudanese activist, head of the Combating Violence Against Women Unit

RITA KAH SAY, Tigrayan activist, author of "In Plain Sight: Sexual Violence in the Tigray Conflict"

FRIBA REZAYEE, Afghan women's rights activist

HAJER SHARIEF, Libyan human rights activist, co-founder of Together We Build It



Dictators and Dirty Money Live Podcast: Examining the Case of Bashar al-Assad

Experts explored how illicit finance supported Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and the lessons learned since his downfall about the relationship between dictators and illicit money, and how these insights apply to other authoritarian regimes.

CASEY MICHEL (MODERATOR), director of the Combating Kleptocracy program, Human Rights Foundation

ALAN HAJI, team lead for the case-building project at the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre

ERICA HANICHAK, deputy director of the FACT Coalition, former government relations director at Americans for a Free Syria



VENEZUELA: A CHALLENGE FOR DEMOCRATIC SOLIDARITY IN LATIN AMERICA

Besides the general challenges that democracy faces in the region, the Americas have failed to rise to the occasion when critical opportunities or crises emerged. The 11J protests in Cuba, the Nicaraguan crackdown of 2021, the Venezuelan elections in 2024, and the persecution of opposition members in Bolivia all mark defeats in defending democracy. With the struggle in Venezuela still ongoing, the region has an opportunity to fulfill the promise of the Democratic Charter and help bring about the democratic transition that the Venezuelan people demanded with their votes. What has been missing from the regional support strategy, and what can be done moving forward?

JAVIER EL-HAGE (MODERATOR), chief legal & policy officer, Human Rights Foundation

ANA CORINA SOSA MACHADO, HRF Freedom Fellow and daughter of Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado

JUAN JOSÉ MATARÍ, Spanish senator and president of the Senate Commission for Iberoamerican Affairs

HECTOR SCHAMIS, senior advisor to OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro, author, columnist, and professor of democracy, Georgetown University

AMBASSADOR TOMÁS PASCUAL RICKE, human rights director at Chile's Ministry of Foreign Affairs



THE PATH FORWARD IN THE MIDDLE EAST: DEMOCRACY OR DICTATORSHIP?

This panel brought together pro-democracy activists and advocates from Syria, Gaza, Iran, and the wider Middle East, who explored key developments shaping the region's geopolitical landscape. Panelists discussed democratic pathways forward, including state-building, strengthening civil society, and protecting minorities and human rights. The discussion also examined the evolving role of the international community in fostering stability and democratic progress.

HAGAR CHEMALI, former director for Syria and Lebanon at the White House National Security Council

AMMAR ABDULHAMID, parliamentarian and director of policy at the World Liberty Congress

AHMED ALKHATIB, director of Realign For Palestine and resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council

DR. LADAN BOROUMAND, honorary professor at the University of Parma, co-founder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran



DISRUPTING THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK: LESSONS FROM SERBIAN PROTESTS

Across Serbia, a powerful civic uprising is challenging authoritarianism with unexpected tools: radical empathy, disciplined nonviolence, and decentralized leadership. Sparked by tragedy and fueled by hope, this student-led movement has united farmers, teachers, and citizens from all walks of life in the fight for accountability and democratic renewal. In this fireside chat, the panel explored how Serbians are disrupting the authoritarian playbook — and what their movement reveals about the future of nonviolent resistance.

NIKOLA ILIĆ, founder & CEO
of ChangeLab

SRDJA POPOVIĆ, executive
director, Center for Applied
Nonviolent Action and
Strategies (CANVAS)



AI FOR HUMAN RIGHTS TRACK

HRF hosted the inaugural *AI for Human Rights Track* at the Oslo Freedom Forum.

The track focused on two overall points: how dictators use AI to repress their populations and how open-source AI agentic tools can be used to defend freedom and support human rights activists. On the first point, activists, freedom fighters, and political dissidents from around the world shared their experience and insight on how authoritarian governments such as China and Iran use AI tools to surveil and repress them, as well as how authoritarian regimes like the CCP are collaborating to share these tools of repression with each other. Next, developers and technologists took the stage to present the open-source and privacy-preserving AI solutions they've built to aid freedom fighters, along with their sense of how AI tools can best enhance dissidents' productivity and impact in the work they do. Finally, activists and educators joined a panel to discuss how artificial intelligence has already been aiding their work, from dubbing educational videos into different languages to predicting the movement of forest fires that the government otherwise suppresses information about.

HRF also hosted an AI for Activists workshop, where activists received hands-on training in the AI tools that could most greatly aid their work. Justin Moon, HRF's AI for Individual Rights technical advisor, walked activists through an introduction to best practices in working with LLMs like ChatGPT and more privacy-preserving tools and then taught activists how to vibe code a personal website in a matter of minutes.

FINANCIAL FREEDOM TRACK

HRF hosted the eighth annual OFF *Financial Freedom Track* at Rebel.

The track shed light on how digital tools are weaponized by authoritarian regimes and how they're harnessed by human rights defenders operating under dictatorships. From Bitcoin to end-to-end encryption, and from decentralized media like Nostr to privacy tools like more robust VPNs, the track highlighted the technologies and builders advancing unstoppable, censorship-resistant tools for digital freedom.

This year's lineup of speakers featured powerful presentations on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) financial repression of the Uyghur people, Uganda's crackdown on digital speech, the role of Nostr in protecting journalism, Bitcoin use by Ukrainian refugees, and how open-source tools are helping Venezuelans survive economic collapse. Additional talks explored the broader threats activists face (from surveillance to internet shutdowns) and why financial privacy is essential to those resisting authoritarian control.

HRF also hosted a Bitcoin 101 for Activists workshop. This hands-on workshop led by HRF's Nonprofit Bitcoin Adoption lead Anna Chekhovich and renowned Bitcoin educator BTC Sessions taught activists and nonprofit leaders how to use Bitcoin safely and effectively. Participants learned to set up their own Bitcoin wallets, practiced sending and receiving Bitcoin transactions, and explored hardware wallets. They learned to navigate financial repression and operate more securely in high-risk environments.



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EXPO

DAYS 1 & 2 HRF EXHIBITION

Located in the Oslo Konserthus on the first and second day, the HRF Exhibition featured interactive booths inspired by HRF's programs.



BOOK SIGNING LOUNGE

In the HRF Exhibition space, HRF hosted book-signing events with North Korean artist and defector Song Byeok, Venezuelan human rights advocate Lilian Tintori, and Chief Football Writer at The Independent Miguel Delaney.

CBDC TRACKER

Nick Anthony, HRF's CBDC Tracker fellow, explained the threats posed by central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) and showed attendees how to use the CBDC Tracker to assess global developments in CBDCs.





IMPACT LITIGATION

At the Impact Litigation booth, attendees were invited to learn about HRF's pro bono legal advocacy for prisoners of conscience, help solve a collaborative puzzle honoring the voices of political prisoners, and write letters of solidarity to HRF's clients who are currently detained.

On the third day of the Forum, HRF displayed the completed puzzle, revealing a beautiful mural of HRF's current clients, created by 2022 Havel Prize Laureate Mariia Loniuk. (See p. 90)



ONLINE ACTIVIST ACADEMY

Attendees previewed and registered for HRF's Online Activist Academy, a self-paced online course designed to help activists scale up their movements through lessons in fundraising, digital security, nonviolent movement building, media, and mental health.



WEAR YOUR VALUES

Attendees stepped into an immersive installation about a garment's supply chain — from harvesting raw materials, to manufacturing, to end of life — and learned about the human rights abuses that occur at each stage.



TIBETAN COMPASSION FLAGS

The International Campaign for Tibet partnered with HRF to create an interactive art installation with hundreds of Tibetan prayer flags. In line with this year's theme of "Imagine," attendees wrote wishes for the future on the flags, which Tibetans believe will spread throughout the world as the wind blows through the flags.

RAED FARES BANNER

In the Oslo Konserthus, HRF displayed a historic banner created by the late Syrian journalist and human rights activist Raed Fares. The banner paid tribute to Fares's tireless advocacy to free Syria from the brutal Assad dictatorship and amplified Syrians' current aspirations for a democratic future.

PEOPLES ALWAYS WIN OVER THEIR
TYRANTS. THE SYRIANS ARE NOT AN
EXCEPTION. WATCH YOUR STEPS
THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION- KAFRANBEL 8 2 13

OFF 2017 SPEAKER

URB

RAED FARES

1972 - 2018

"THERE IS NOTHING PRETTIER THAN A FLOWER THAT
DEFIES DEATH, CHAOS, AND DESTRUCTION, AND INSTEAD
BLOOMS AND RADIATES HOPE."



The late Raed Fares was one of Syria's most prominent human rights advocates and contemporary journalists. His work documented the brutal assault on civilians while offering promises who had endured more than 10 years of Assad regime. In 2011, he spearheaded a powerful revolution, calling 'watch your steps' because that threatened the regime's rule, and survival of the Syrian people.

While the regime cracked down on peaceful protesters, Fares remained undaunted, continuing to call for unity. In 2012, he founded Raed Fares, a 24-hour news network of activists, and the general uprising for Syria. In the face of the regime's brutal crackdown, he continued to provide support and protection to journalists, ensuring the world to hear the real voices and aspirations of the Syrian people.

One week later, on Nov. 23, 2018, Fares and fellow activist Humam Hamdani were assassinated by the Government of Damascus. His death left the world lost and silent. "Revolution is in the air, and it's time to fight," these words proved prophetic. Now, the Assad regime crumbled after a short but glorious, in October 2024.



Raed Fares' legacy is a testament to the struggles, resilience, and unyielding aspirations of the Syrian people.

Human Rights Foundation

DAY 3 HRF PARTNERS EXHIBITION

The third day of OFF, which took place at Rebel, featured exhibitions produced in collaboration with two of HRF's partners, who are doing innovative work to advance the human rights agenda.



UKRAINE VR EXHIBITION

Attendees tried out multiple VR experiences from Ukraine. Some were designed to teach about Russia's war in Ukraine, allowing users to experience destruction on the ground, while others were created to preserve Ukraine's cultural heritage during a period when it is difficult to access the country.





BALLOONS OF FREEDOM

In partnership with PEN International's North Korean Writers in Exile Center, HRF hoisted two 6-m balloons — the same ones the center uses to float pamphlets and flash drives with outside information into North Korea — from the ceiling at Rebel. Attendees learned about HRF's efforts to smuggle outside content into North Korea, breaking through Kim Jong-un's propaganda wall.

Thanks to this year's participants and attendees, human rights activists and civil society leaders took their rightful place in the spotlight to share their stories and speak out against the injustices committed by authoritarian regimes around the globe.

You can re-watch all theater talks at oslofreedomforum.com and on the OFF YouTube page.

Join us next year in Oslo, Norway, from June 1–3, 2026, for the 18th edition of the Oslo Freedom Forum!

THANK YOU

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