



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

## UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

### Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression

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## PRESENTATION OF THE THEMATIC REPORT

**Ms. Irene KHAN, Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression**

The SR introduces her new thematic report on **freedom of expression and elections in the digital age**. The report acknowledges the vital role of freedom of expression in ensuring free and fair elections. It notes that rising authoritarian trends, polarised politics in backsliding democracies, **social media platforms awash with hate speech and disinformation**, and a media sector too weak to debunk the lies have endangered both freedom of expression and the right to vote. The threats must be addressed urgently for the sake of democracy as well as human rights. The SR explains briefly the four key concerns outlined in the report.

First, **authoritarian governments** determined to hold on to power and populist politicians eager to win elections at all costs are manipulating information to destroy their political opponents, restrict voter participation, disrupt the electoral process and delegitimise electoral results, vilifying minorities and marginalised groups, smearing women politicians, discrediting independent journalists and human rights defenders, targeting electoral officials and observers,



while worrying trends in many recent elections. **Public officials and politicians** bear significant responsibility for the degradation of the information environment as they weaponize their own freedom of expression to attack vulnerable groups and to claim that incitement to violence is censorship of lawful speech. **Advocacy of hatred to incite violence**, increasingly evident on campaign trails and social media platforms, is prohibited under international law even when it masquerades as political speech.

Second, **digital technology and social media platforms** have taken the **threat to a new level**, enabling and amplifying disinformation and hate speech as never before. At a time of rising hate and lies and political violence, the SR is alarmed to see large social media platforms and search engines **backsliding on their commitments to electoral integrity**, safety, transparency and risk management. The largest platforms have radically scaled down staff and resources and rolled back key policies with no apparent human rights due diligence. Although economic considerations and the rise of generative AI played a major part in their decisions, political and ideological considerations have also figured prominently. There is fear of more backsliding by platforms, given the policy position taken by their home country, the current US administration, on freedom of expression.

Third, the **decline of media freedom** is concerning. Journalists covering elections have been violently attacked. Public officials have sought to **discredit independent media** as liars, traitors or foreign agents. In some countries, independent media is effectively non-existent because of total state control of the media sector. In some others, the media has been captured by actors aligned with states or other powerful interests. The **concentration of media ownership** in some countries has led to heavily partisan coverage of elections that undercuts public trust in credible journalism and encourages divisive political debate. As readers and audiences shift to digital platforms, business and financial problems of the media outlets make them more vulnerable to closure or capture, reducing media diversity and pluralism.

Fourth, while some states have adopted **good electoral information practises** based on freedom of expression, some others have disrupted the internet, blocked websites, sponsored disinformation, attacked independent media and fact-checkers, and criminalised legitimate political expression under the guise of fighting disinformation.

The SR continues by highlighting five points.

- For states, **undermining freedom of expression** in the name of fighting disinformation is short-sighted and counterproductive. Freedom of expression is vital to healthy democratic discourse. That does not mean that states cannot restrict harmful manipulation of information, but that any such restriction must scrupulously respect the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality and legitimate objectives set out in international human rights
- The **backsliding of social media platforms** on commitment to human rights and electoral integrity should ring an alarm bell for states and the international community. Smart social regulation is needed, not to control content, but to enforce compliance of companies with their human rights obligations, including due diligence.



- **Companies** should ensure that their policies and programmes are globally consistent, fair and aligned with their international obligations under the UN guiding principles.
- **Democracy** needs a healthy legacy media alongside a trustworthy online environment to ensure a diverse and vibrant electoral information system. The decline of media freedom, independence, diversity and pluralism should be addressed urgently.
- **Multi-faceted, multi-stakeholder strategies** grounded in human rights and combining a range of legal and non-legal measures are the most effective way to fight disinformation and other forms of information manipulation.

### PRESENTATION OF THE COUNTRY VISIT REPORT

Presenting the report on her visit to **Zambia** carried out in January 2025, the SR is grateful to the government for the invitation and for giving her full access, including at the highest level, and for its constructive engagement on her recommendations. The current government came to power on a **platform of change** promising to uphold human rights and carry out legal and institutional changes. Some important steps have been taken. At the national level, the government has introduced some legal reforms. At the international level, it has displayed a concrete willingness to engage with the UN human rights system.

As the country moves towards elections, there is a need to **accelerate the pace of reforms** and ensure appropriate safeguards for human rights. In particular, she encourages the government to adopt the Public Gathering Bill, operationalise the Access to Information Act, and clarify the recently adopted Cybercrimes and Cybersecurity Acts to ensure that the new laws are fully aligned with international standards. The SR hopes the government will continue with the **progress of legal and institutional reforms** in close consultation with civil society to create a healthy, open environment for information and expression.

Turning to her visit to **the Philippines** carried out in January last year, the SR thanks the government for the invitation and for facilitating opportunities to meet with the authorities, civil society and journalists across the country. The SR is deeply impressed with the **vibrancy and dynamism of civil society** and the diverse media landscape of the Philippines - **tolerance, openness and diversity**.

However, she expresses concern at the **practise of red tagging**, which impacts some human rights defenders, social activists and those critical of the government. Although the government has clarified that it does not condone such a practise, individuals claim that it happens. The Supreme Court decision in May 2024 declared that red tagging is a threat to a person's right to life, liberty or security. The government should now act on that decision and eliminate the practise totally to turn the page decisively on the past.

The SR is also concerned by the **slow pace of judicial procedures**, prolonged pretrial detention, the refusal to grant bail when there is no risk of flight and extremely slow disposal of cases makes a travesty of justice equating the innocent with the guilty. She hopes the government will address this problem with urgency. The ongoing **impunity regarding the killings of journalists** must end. While some progress has been made in a few cases, there is great need for bolder efforts to ensure accountability. The SR hopes the government will continue with more significant legal, policy and institutional changes to demonstrate its commitment to freedom of expression.



## REPLIES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

On how to support the **safety of journalists** and **strengthen media**, there are a number of ways to do it. First of all, it is about **ending impunity for crimes** against journalists. Journalism is not a crime, and the state has to be much more responsive to protecting journalists, but also following up when they are attacked. Secondly, **political leaders** are actually tarnishing the reputation of journalists, attacking them with false claims of being liars and foreign agents and so on, which actually enhances their insecurity. That is then seen as an excuse to attack the journalists. Thirdly, and most importantly, governments together with the UNHRC and UNESCO need very seriously to look at how to strengthen the media sector, which is an essential one.

**News is not a commercial commodity.** It is actually a human right, and therefore states need to see how to strengthen it against certain unfavourable financial trends, but also against the way in which digital technology is coming into this area. There have been some questions about companies. On how to **strengthen companies**, first of all, governments need to make sure, through smart regulation, that companies are complying with the human rights standards in accordance with the UN guiding principles. In the context of transparency, that is extremely important, **algorithmic transparency**. The Digital Services Act, for example, includes provisions on that, requiring companies to have that algorithmic transparency. The SR also calls for access to researchers who can actually use the data to measure the performance of companies.

On **legal and non-legal means to address disinformation**, law is only one tool in the toolbox, and it should be kept, particularly criminal law should be kept, for the most egregious cases. Beyond that, there is a lot more that can be done, as for instance **smart social media regulation**. Digital media and information literacy is extremely important, and so is independent fact-checking. One of that aspects of independent fact-checking is free media - encouraging free, diverse, independent media is also important. In the context of elections, the SR mentions one good practise, namely **pre-election stress tests** carried out by a number of companies with governments in Europe before the European elections last year. It is a good thing to sit down with companies, get them to look at public systems, and figure out where states might be attacked. This is also very relevant for **foreign interference in elections**.

With regard to how protect **young people, first-time voters**, who are particularly susceptible to disinformation, the SR stresses that digital media information literacy is an extremely important area of study for young people. They are skilled, they have digital skills, but not necessarily digital literacy. We also need to look at **influencers**, who tend to influence young minds much more, and some of them have millions of followers, but they have no obligation to truth, no obligation to even admit if they have any affiliations with others or if they are receiving money from someone else to push a particular agenda. This is an area where some rules should be developed, both for self-regulation but also by companies to check what to do.

**Argentina** was worried about indirect censorship and a single narrative developing. Certainly that is an issue for worry, but at the same time the SR does not think it is appropriate that freedom of expression be treated as an absolute right. International law defines freedom of expression as a **very broad right**, but it does **require prohibition** when advocacy of hatred becomes incitement





to violence. It is extremely important that governments recognise incitement not as a right, but as a threat to human right.

Turning to **Gaza**, the SR produced a report for the UNGA last year, and hopes that all those who are supporting freedom of expression will also look at that report and will discuss with the SR how we can strengthen the right of those who wish to protest on what is happening in Gaza.

On how to **measure progress**, there are international processes such as the UPR, our SRs' country visits, and treaty body reports. These are external ways of measuring progress, and civil society's contribution helps ensure that we get a full picture of what is happening from all stakeholders. The SR would encourage civil society to engage with all those processes.

In closing, the SR recalls that this is a difficult, complex area requiring a **multi-stakeholder dialogue**. The UNHRC should seize the opportunity to invite digital platforms as well, so that there can be truly a multi-stakeholder discussion about how to protect freedom of expression, one of the most valuable rights, a bridging right on which many other rights depend, how do we jointly work together to strengthen it and **make digital technology a boon** rather than a threat.

#### **VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CHILE AND THE PHILIPPINES AS CONCERNED COUNTRIES**

The delegation of **Zambia** welcomes the report of the SR and expresses sincere appreciation for her visit to Zambia this year. The visit undertaken at the invitation of the government reflects the principled and voluntary commitment to engage constructively with United Nations human rights mechanisms. The invitation was extended with full knowledge of the challenges that exist. It was not born out of obligation but of conviction, a recognition that engagement, even when difficult, is essential for advancing a rights-centred and inclusive society.

The government remains committed to a process of reform that strengthens democratic institutions and promotes civic participation. Zambia remains committed to the full realisation of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. At the same time, Zambia underscore the importance of ensuring that this right is exercised with due responsibility, particularly in a context where a painful legacy of political violence and civil intolerance is still fresh in public memory. The proliferation of misinformation, especially when politically orchestrated, poses serious risks to social cohesion and institutional integrity.

Zambia appreciates that the report reflects key reforms undertaken in restoring democratic space and legal protections for civil liberties since assuming office in 2021. However, while acknowledging this notable progress, the report misses an opportunity to extol the significant strides undertaken to expand civic space, combat misinformation and strengthen the rule of law. It presents an overly cautious and at times one-sided narrative which may be attributable to the brevity of the visit which is empirically impossible to accurately ascertain any growing trends. This cautious approach risks obscuring the repressive political context pre-August 2021 and the tremendous progress achieved post the 2021 elections.

The surge in disinformation is orchestrated by political actors seeking to destabilise national unity. The report acknowledges this threat but stops short of crediting government's proactive stance in mitigating these risks. In fact, following the publication of this report, a private media outlet in Zambia published an article yesterday with an inaccurate headline that the United



Nations Human Rights Council finds Zambia guilty of human rights violations. Disinformation in Zambia has moved beyond ordinary rumour-mongering into the realm of deliberate incitement with intention and potential to provoke ethnic violence or reprisals and societal fragmentation. Assertions of a shrinking space or growing trend of rights violations do not reflect the current lived reality in Zambia. Instead, the data shows that Zambia's civic and democratic space is expanding. Civil society is increasingly engaged in policy making. Community media is thriving in rural areas and diverse views are expressed freely across platforms.

The application of the provisions of the penal code are grounded in due process and high evidentiary standards. Prosecutions are undertaken without regard to political affiliation. In addition, the offences referred to in the report curb the dangers of misinformation and deliberate falsehoods which, when weaponised, have serious implications for national unity, public safety and institutional trust. Further, the cyber laws enacted following consultation with civil society organisations aim to protect citizens, particularly women, youth and minority groups, from online exploitation and cyber bullying and are not used as instruments of repression. The offences under these laws are not crafted in broad and vague language but clearly articulate the offences with sufficient legal precision. The assertion that these laws could chew expression discounts the critical need to carefully balance digital freedom and digital responsibility and public safety.

Zambia acknowledges the resource-intensive nature of fully implementing some of the recommendations in the report. However, like many developing nations, Zambia is confronted with complex challenges of public debt, worsened by climate change, illicit financial flows and tax-based erosion. These systemic issues limit the fiscal space necessary for human rights programming and broader sustainable development. In closing, Zambia welcomes some of the recommendations in the report and reaffirms its commitment to ongoing dialogue and constructive collaboration, including technical assistance to advance a more open, informed and inclusive democratic society.

The delegation of the **Philippines** states the country has a deep tradition of open and constructive engagement with the United Nations in the field of human rights. Over the past eight decades since the establishment of the UN, the Philippines has been an active player in international human rights regime building, convinced of the transformative power of multilateralism, of cooperation, dialogue and fair scrutiny from the outside. In this spirit, the Philippines opened to the SR the doors of the government in good faith, from the office of the President to the Supreme Court and local government units. The Philippines enabled unimpeded engagement by the SR with journalists and other media practitioners, civil society actors, in particular human rights defenders, and the UN country team in Manila.

The Philippines welcomes the SR's acknowledgement of its vibrant, dynamic civil society and media sector, active in all regions of our vast and diverse archipelago. It deeply values the plurality of voices. The Philippines' robust and inclusive civic and media space did not emerge by happenstance. It is a result of the Filipino people's unwavering commitment to democracy and the rule of law, finding expression in our progressive constitution, laws, policies and programmes. It is also a product of the struggles valiantly fought by our people at various junctures of its history. The right to freedom of expression, so vital to democracy, is constitutionally protected. There are



functioning mechanisms to safeguard it. These include the Independent Commission on Human Rights, Presidential Task Force and Media Security, and Media Security Vanguard Programme.

Just last week, on June 12, the Philippines celebrated its 127th year as an independent republic, the first and oldest in Asia. It has come a long way, but this is not to say there are no challenges. The Philippines, like others, are a work in progress as a nation and as a democracy. Where improvement is needed, the Philippines changes and pursues reforms. The country is strengthening its legislative framework to better promote and protect the rights of media practitioners. The legislature is working on three important bills, the Media Workers' Welfare Bill, Journalist Protection Act and Magna Carta for workers in the media and news sector.

Where help is needed, the Philippines seeks and accepts help. In July last year, the Philippines successfully concluded a three-year technical cooperation programme with the UN on human rights. To sustain progress, the Philippines established the Special Committee on Human Rights Coordination, headed by the Office of the President. Consistent with its participatory approach to governance, this body will work with all stakeholders, including civil society organisations, the Commission on Human Rights, and international partners within and outside our borders, in order to ensure that programmes are holistic and effective, benefiting from the insights and support of many.

When it is time to stand on its own, the Philippines takes responsibility and forge ahead. In December 2024, it launched the fourth iteration of the Philippines Human Rights Plan. It was crafted through a multi-stakeholder and consultative process involving 485 civil society organisations and over 500 individual grassroots stakeholders across the country. The plan is a call for action for a human rights-based governance and a blueprint for forging concrete, cost-effective, collaborative initiatives with partners within and beyond its shores. It is an expression of the country's collective will to take full ownership of its national human rights agenda.

Nation-building and governance are complex processes where meaningful progress is incremental. The role of UN human rights mechanisms is to accompany duty-bearers in this journey with their consent, while giving space for domestic institutions to do their work. UN human rights mechanisms can be most effective when they serve as platforms for genuine dialogue and cooperation in full respect of state sovereignty and national agency. Multilateralism is in deep crisis just when the world needs it most. There is a palpable deficit of trust and legitimacy in our institutions. Fairness, objectivity, due diligence, and international law should govern the engagement between sovereign duty-bearers and mandate holders. This is imperative if we are to restore trust and maintain the integrity of the whole system.

## INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE

### Views Expressed by State Delegations

**Argentina**, for the first time in its history, has a President who won the elections advocating for freedom of expression online. This freedom is essential to build democracy, ensuring allowing a candidate without a party or business support to obtain the post. Freedom of expression is deeply rooted in Argentina's identity, one of the pillars of its national constitution, strengthened in 1984 by the incorporation of international human rights institutions in its legal order. In each electoral



process, freedom of expression has been unlimited. The current President was subject of criticism and insulting claims without any attempt at censorship. This ensures that the same freedom is guaranteed for all, including the right to response. Argentina is concerned at the rise in forms of indirect censorship, including from civil society and groups that seek to impose a single form of discourse. Freedom of expression is built on pluralism, open debate, and vigorous exchange of ideas. That is the only way to strengthen freedom, not by restricting.

**Austria on behalf of the Group of Friends on the Safety of Journalists** draws the Council's attention to the fact that during elections, journalists face mounting challenges that threaten the safety and undermine the public's right to information. Key threats include physical violence, online harassment, arbitrary detention, censorship and restrictions on access to polling sites and political events. In many cases, governments or political actors use legal and extra-legal means to intimidate journalists, particularly those reporting on corruption, voter suppression or electoral fraud. Journalists must not be at such risk when carrying out their work, including during elections. These actions not only endanger journalists, but also have a chilling effect on free press and public discourse. When media professionals are silenced or hindered, citizens are deprived of impartial and timely information necessary to make informed choices at the ballot box. This erosion of press freedom during elections weakens democratic processes and can fuel disinformation and distrust. Ensuring journalists' safety throughout the entire electoral cycle is therefore essential to protecting the integrity of elections and upholding the right to freedom of expression and access to information for all.

**Bangladesh** reaffirms its commitment to the right of freedom of opinion and expression as articulated in article 19 ICCPR. It equally underscores that the exercise of this right entails duties and responsibilities and that lawful, necessary and proportionate restrictions may be applied in line with international human rights law to safeguard national security, public order and the rights of others. Bangladesh concurs that disinformation, incitement to hatred and malicious use of digital platforms during electoral periods pose significant threats to democratic process. At the same time, it emphasises that responses to such challenges must avoid politicisation, uphold sovereign legal frameworks and maintain respect for the diversity of political and legal systems. Bangladesh remains committed to extending institutional safeguards for free, fair and participatory elections while fostering media pluralism, digital literacy and responsible online engagement. In closing, Bangladesh encourages the SR to engage in constructive dialogue with states and other stakeholders on this particular thematic issue in a context-specific manner.

**Botswana** is committed to the promotion and protection of human rights and the rule of law, including the fundamental right to freedom of expression both online and offline. As an established democracy, Botswana recognises the critical role that freedom of expression plays in ensuring transparent, inclusive, and credible elections in the digital age. The Constitution of Botswana guarantees freedom of expression under Section 12, which also extends to digital platforms. It is for this reason that Botswana maintains a vibrant and independent media landscape, which allows journalists and citizens to freely express opinions, including during election periods. The government supports the enabling environment for press freedom and is therefore committed to expanding digital access and fostering open digital spaces. In that regard, efforts are underway to bridge the digital divide, particularly in rural areas, to promote inclusivity to all citizens.





**Cambodia** recognises the importance of promoting and protecting the right to freedom of opinion and expression and understands that it has a great impact on all aspects of elections, especially in the current era where information could be spread faster and more widely through digital platforms. Cambodia has taken various actions to continue ensuring this right through allowing media outlets to operate without censorship and ensuring access to information among all citizens. This is evidenced by the fact that Cambodia has over 2,000 digital and traditional media outlets and more than 10,000 journalists. Cambodia has 18 million internet subscribers with 4G mobile network coverage on more than 80 percent of our land. While upholding the spirit of international obligations and Cambodia's domestic laws, we need to balance between ensuring that the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression of an individual or a group does not adversely affect the rights of others and that it shall be exercised in accordance with the law in place. Cambodia looks forward to learning from the best practises in dealing with unprofessional media outlets and fighting against the spread of fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech.

**Canada on behalf of the core group on freedom of opinion and expression** comprising the Netherlands, value the SR's mandate and all efforts to safeguard freedom of opinion and expression as a bedrock of democracy. These efforts enable individuals to enjoy a plethora of other human rights and freedoms, including the right to vote and partake in the conduct of public affairs that shape their country. Digital technologies available today create new possibilities for public engagement and for the democratisation of the expression of ideas and opinions online. Disinformation, hate speech, and manipulated information can be amplified through digital technology. This undermines election integrity and erodes trust in democratic processes and institutions. Therefore, adequate steps based on human rights standards should be taken to foster societal trust and promote and protect human rights online. They share the concerns expressed in the report about the threat to independent media during elections.

**China** notes the SR's concern regarding the impact of digital technology on human rights. Our government is greatly attached to freedom of expression and values the monitoring role played by the media and citizens. China has over 5,000 information media with over a billion internet users. Citizens can freely express their opinions and make suggestions regarding the government's performance on platforms within the context of the constitution and the law. There are certain gratuitous attacks made by China by Western media which ignore the difficulties in their own countries. China invites such countries to reflect and to stop violating human rights and interfering in others' affairs under the guise of freedom of expression. China hopes that the SR will be wary of unreliable information and work equitably.

**Costa Rica** expresses its great concern over the increased threats on freedom of expression in electoral contexts. This is by state actors and non-state actors. As a country with a long democratic tradition and with a firm commitment to the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, Costa Rica rejects practises such as censorship of free press, attacks on electoral observers and the use of the digital space to manipulate electoral process with algorithmic manipulation, disinformation and the use of influencers. This undermines the public trust and twists the public debate and undermines the citizens' right to receive timely accurate information. Costa Rica is ever more concerned over the use of new technologies such as AI when it comes to generating and disseminating false information, manipulated data. This can escalate disinformation quickly



and on a massive scale. This directly affects the integrity of the democratic process. Given these challenges, is it necessary that states take on the responsibilities of ensuring a digital environment that is transparent, fair and people-focused. This requires a regulatory framework that is clear and that promotes algorithmic transparency, ensuring accountability in digital platforms, strengthening the active participation of civil society.

**Cote d'Ivoire** takes note of the SR's report which references the adoption of a restrictive law on associations in Cote d'Ivoire before the presidential election in 2025 and would like to make the following observations. Law 2034-368 on Civil society Organisations looks at the modernisation of the legal framework for CSOs and allows for, in Article 22, the dissolution of these associations only when there is a grave threat to the state and public order. This decision is a felony made by the Council of Ministers and is under the oversight of the Council of State and must be addressed otherwise through the courts. This text is thus not against the provisions of article 22.2 ICCPR which allows for the exercise of the right to freedom of association to be restricted as set forth by law when it is in the interest of national security, public safety, public order, public health or public morality or rights or freedoms of others. Cote d'Ivoire remains fully attached to the rule of law and respect for human rights and remain available for constructive dialogue with these mechanisms. The country is awaiting the visit of the SR authorised by the government for April 2025.

**Czechia** states that freedom of expression is the backbone of any democratic society. But today, this freedom is under attack through foreign propaganda, AI-generated fakes, and coordinated efforts to mislead and to divide. These are deliberate attempts to undermine the values that we stand for. Young people, though digitally fluent, are especially vulnerable. Instead of being informed, they are being manipulated. As facts are devalued and debate distorted, free expression gives way to control. Václav Havel taught us that freedom of expression demands truth and responsibility. We must resist comforting lies and choose to live in truth, even when it is harder to hear. This is why independent media and journalists are so important right now. They provide us with truthful and unbiased information, but those are being silenced.

The **Democratic Republic of the Congo** shares the belief that a regulatory framework and system allows for free elections in the traditional and digital media favours a broader free and equitable electoral process. It is important to note that all restrictions on freedom of expression and opinion that come during electoral periods should necessarily be done legally in order to protect public order and good morals. For the DRC, the right to the freedom of opinion and expression has a constitutional value. It is also the subject of numerous legal and regulatory texts. To conclude, the DRC calls for strengthened cooperation between the states, UN mechanisms for human rights, and digital companies that are essential to create a respectful digital environment, an environment respectful of human rights.

**El Salvador** reiterates its firm commitment to the promotion and protection of free expression as being essential for democratic life, accountability, and political freedom. This is fully enshrined in its constitution and is backed by normative frameworks that do so without discrimination. As during its fourth UPR review, El Salvador has pushed for reforms in public information and the participation of citizens. In the context of the February 2004 elections, these guarantees were fully enforced, including for opposition parties, civil society, and the press. This was in a free, safe, and open context. More than 3,000 organisations or 3,000 observers from 81 organisations



backed the process as transparent and in step with legislation. Further, there are accessible mechanisms for reporting possible irregularities. El Salvador will continue to cooperate with international human rights mechanisms and will provide verified information with context on progress made in line with regard to free speech.

**Estonia on behalf of 49 countries composing the Media Freedom Coalition** highlights the vital role of the freedoms of opinion and expression in the context of elections as crucial to democratic participation, transparency, accountability and electoral credibility. Growing attempts to suppress independent media, restrict freedom of expression and spread disinformation and information manipulation around electoral processes, particularly through social media, are of deep concern to coalition members. We urge all states to ensure that journalists, media workers and civil society can operate freely and safely before, during and after elections. This includes refraining from internet and digital platform shutdowns, arbitrary detention, censorship, manipulation and other means, including undue restrictions to state authorities that restrict pluralistic discourse and free flow of information. The coalition members assure their full support to the SR's mandate and her crucial work. We call for the protection of media independence and diversity and stress the need for digital platforms to be transparent and accountable in handling electoral content. The Coalition reaffirms its commitment to defending media freedom and upholding freedom of expression as a cornerstone of free and fair elections.

**Ethiopia**, as country undergoing democratic transformation, Ethiopia firmly upholds the right to freedom of expression as enshrined in our constitution and international obligations. Ethiopia recognises that a free, open, and informed public sphere is essential to ensuring credible elections and strengthening democratic legitimacy. In the digital age, Ethiopia is working to harness the benefits of technology while safeguarding the integrity of its information ecosystem. Ethiopia is enhancing digital literacy, countering harmful disinformation through lawful and proportionate measures, and strengthening the independence and capacity of our media sector. At the same time, it stresses that freedom of expression must be exercised responsibly and not be used to incite violence, propagate hate speech, or undermine social cohesion. Its electoral board and relevant institutions are committed to transparency, impartiality, and inclusivity, ensuring that every voice counts and every vote is respected. In conclusion, Ethiopia supports balanced, rights-based approaches to digital governance and calls for global cooperation to ensure that digital platforms uphold human rights while respecting the sovereignty of states.

**Finland on behalf of the Nordic-Baltic countries** stresses that freedom of opinion and expression is a fundamental pillar of democracy. Similarly, elections are key democratic milestones that help hold governments accountable. The challenge today is how to harness the positive impacts of digital technologies to elections, while keeping the negative ones at bay. Increased possibilities to seek, receive, and transmit information and ideas can make electoral processes more open, increase transparency around candidates, and engage voters. However, the use of disinformation that undermines the legitimacy and integrity of elections remains a major concern. Hate speech spread on digital platforms, targeting especially women and girls, minorities and journalists, can silence important voices and discourage voters from casting their vote.



**Ghana on behalf of the African group** reaffirms its commitment to the right to freedom of opinion and expression as enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ICCPR. This right remains a cornerstone of open, inclusive and peaceful societies and must be exercised with due regard for national legislation, the right of others and public order. The African Union has taken concrete steps to address these issues. These include the 2022 ACHPR Resolution on Protection of Women Against Digital Violence in Africa and the 2024 Child Online Safety Policy, making Africa the first region with such a framework. The African group further encourages dialogue among all stakeholders, including states, digital platforms, civil society and regional institutions to foster a responsible use of communication and expression tools. Finally, we reiterate our willingness to engage in constructive cooperation with the mandate and with the principles of objectivity, non-selectivity and impartiality.

**Greece** believes the world is witnessing today a global shift in how political discourse unfolds, one increasingly shaped by algorithms, disinformation, and online intimidation. These developments pose serious risks not only to the fairness of elections, but also to freedom of expression itself, particularly for marginalised voices. Greece is particularly concerned at the use of disinformation to distort electoral outcomes, erode public trust, and deepen societal visions. Online harassment, often targeting women, vulnerable groups, and human rights defenders, intensifies during election periods. Freedom of expression is not a threat to electoral integrity. It is its foundation. Without access to diverse, accurate, and independent information, voters cannot make informed choices, and democracy itself is weakened. Therefore, Greece fully supports the SR's call for stronger transparency from digital platforms, effective protection for journalists and civic actors, both online and offline, and safeguards against digital censorship. Reinforcing protection of journalists in conflict zones is more urgent than ever. Countries need to reaffirm their commitments to this end and reinforce long-term accountability for those responsible for the deaths of journalists. Greece reaffirms its strong commitment to defending freedom of expression and reinforcing the human rights dimension in the governance of digital spaces.

**Guatemala** shares the SR's concern over the challenges arising from fake news and manipulative narratives, in particular in electoral contexts. It agrees on the importance of ensuring that elections allow free expression of ideas and access to information. Guatemala has implemented measures to strengthen these rights during elections, including information campaigns, dialogues with civil society, and digital tools such as the elections app, which contribute to a significant support to the culture of peace and elections. However, there have been challenges such as hate speech and political violence. Guatemala reiterates its commitment to working with the special procedures and other international mechanisms to strengthen freedom of expression, overcome fake news, and protect all stakeholders involved in electoral processes.

The **Holy See** emphasizes that the right to freedom of expression is crucial as it enables people to share their views and opinions freely and to seek and receive information to support their decision-making during elections. Only informed individuals can make free choices. The use of new technologies in the digital age can contribute positively to freedom of expression during election periods, particularly the use of social media. However, just because digital technologies increase the possibilities of interconnection and dissemination of ideas, it does not follow that they promote freedom and democracy for all. It is evident that the exercise of freedom of



expression during election periods must be conducted in a manner that respects the inherent dignity of every person and aims at benefiting the common good. With the speed of spreading information often exceeding our capacity for reflection and judgement, there is a need to foster greater discernment, critical thinking and a sense of personal responsibility for the content created and the information shared in digital environments. It is also essential to cultivate digital environments that facilitate open and inclusive dialogue while safeguarding against attempts to censor, marginalise or cancel certain viewpoints, particularly those rooted in religious and moral convictions. Finally, in the digital age, there is an urgent need to recover the commitment to truth. Transparent and factual information is essential for safeguarding the legitimacy and integrity of democratic processes and only truth can unite and enable us to confront the challenges of our time more resolutely.

**India's** constitution guarantees freedom of opinion and expression as a fundamental right actively upheld by our independent judiciary. Elections and freedom of expression are mutually reinforcing pillars that we continuously nurture. The peaceful conduct of the 2024 general elections, the largest democratic exercise in history with nearly 970 million eligible voters underscores India's deep commitment to democratic values and human rights. Digital tools are transformative in enhancing citizen participation, transparency and legitimacy in elections. The Election Commission of India is a global leader in using ICTs for this purpose. Campaigns like Turning 18 and You Are The One engaged first-time voters and urban voters during the recently held general elections. The Verify Before You Amplify initiative empowered citizens to counter misinformation. The SeeVigil app enabled real-time reporting of electoral malpractices with over 424,000 complaints acted upon swiftly. It is hence surprising to note ill-informed references to India based on unverified reports that do not reflect the reality. Such remarks overlook the vibrant, diverse and resilient character of India's electoral processes and the vital role of its independent institutions in safeguarding democratic principles. India firmly rejects such unfounded insinuations and urges that future assessment be based on objective evidence-based analysis.

**Iraq** stresses that freedom of opinion and expression are at the centre of democracy. Freedom of expression allows for societies to consider the most important issues in our societies, seeking priorities of the citizenry and society, allowing for elections to elect the best candidates to tackle the challenge of a society. Emerging democracies do work to afford the greatest possible freedom of expression to this, providing or bringing access to information, electoral advertising, and even criticism of the government. Under Article 38 of the Constitution of Iraq, in line with the country's international commitments, including Article 19 ICCPR, Iraq does all it can to strengthen freedom of expression, including in the digital environment.

**Ireland** is strongly committed to the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of expression as an essential component of a healthy democracy. Ireland is deeply concerned by disinformation and hate speech in politically polarised contexts, as well as the decline of media freedom noted in your report. Ireland echoes the urgent need for attention to be given to attacks on journalists and the erosion of media independence. It notes with concern the SR's findings regarding the suppression of journalists and human rights defenders in the name of fighting disinformation and how digital technology and platforms have been used to enable and amplify such tactics. Ireland further condemns the highly visible ways in which disinformation and hate speech have been used to deter the participation of minorities and marginalised groups in



elections, especially women, religious minorities, LGBTIQ+ persons, and internally displaced persons. Ireland will continue to advocate for the promotion and protection of healthy and open information spaces as necessary prerequisites for safe, free, and fair elections.

**Kuwait** pays great attention to protecting elections in the digital environment and we exert efforts to do so. The country is working on developing the digital infrastructure and enhancing cybersecurity to ensure the integrity and transparency of elections, on which Kuwait passed one specific law and it also established the communications and IT regulatory authority. Kuwait developed official digital platforms to address fake news and digital disinformation through raising awareness on social media. The country cooperates with international organisations such as the ITU to exchange experiences. To conclude, Kuwait reaffirms its support for the mandate of the SR in shedding light on negative phenomena in order to avoid them, especially with regard to this information in the context of elections.

**Lebanon** thanks your report and recommendations. The rapid development of digital technologies, especially social media, has expanded civic engagement, but the downside has been the quick spread of disinformation, hate speech, and incitement, eroding citizens' informed decisions and electoral integrity. Lebanon agrees with the SR that freedom of expression and public confidence in electoral processes are key for sound democratic procedures, thus the urgent need for a human rights-based response to these growing threats despite complex challenges. In that regard, it is important to emphasise that states should aim at cooperating with each other and with private companies and civil society organisations to address information threats responsibly while fully respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms. There is an urgent need to protect women politicians and candidates, as well as other vulnerable groups from all forms of gender disinformation, online harassment, and intimidation in an electoral context. Finally, international cooperation and technical support are key, particularly for states with limited resources for fulfilling their roles, including strengthening legal and institutional safeguards, ensuring that digital platforms uphold their human rights responsibilities, and promoting media literacy.

**Lithuania on behalf of the Lublin Triangle States** also comprising Poland and Ukraine, states that advances in communications technology have been critical in enhancing access to information and promoting the free exchange of ideas during elections. However, these advancements have also been exploited by some states to interfere with democratic participation, undermine the integrative electoral processes and facilitate the spread of propaganda and disinformation. For many years, the group has observed increasing restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression, as well as other civil and political rights in Belarus where citizens are deprived of the right to democratically elect their leadership and any dissent is repressed. Total constraint of democratic freedoms at home has enabled Russian aggression abroad, especially the war of aggression against Ukraine. Freedom of opinion and expression and access to reliable information is vital for empowering citizens to shape their future freely by making informed decisions.

**Malawi** acknowledges that election integrity and information integrity are closely connected. As the report notes, free and fair elections require healthy, open information spaces in which accurate and independent information is easily accessible to the electorate. Malawi's Electronic



Transactions and Cybersecurity Act seeks to ensure that digital technologies and platforms are not enablers of disinformation, misinformation and hate speech. Disinformation and misinformation can undermine public trust in electoral processes. All key players to an electoral process such as the state, political parties, human rights defenders, the media, social media influencers have a critical role to play and as noted in the report, multifaceted, multi-stakeholder strategies grounded in human rights and combining a range of legal and illegal measures are the most effective way to fight disinformation and other forms of information manipulation. Malawi will be holding elections in September this year and freedom of expression and opinion lie at the heart of the process and progressive democracies.

**Moldova** continues to observe a transition trend from traditional media consumption to social media and messaging application. While digital technologies represent a great opportunity for the development, they may pose a significant challenge for democratic values. They can enable a tsunami of disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech, women and young voters being highly impacted. The backsliding of social media platforms on their commitments to safety and electoral integrity are deeply worrying trends. In this regard, efforts to tackle disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech are essential for protecting democracy. Such measures should be necessary, proportionate, and legally grounded, and carried out take into account the best international practises. Such radical means as total internet shutdowns are unacceptable. Moldova faced foreign interference during last year's constitutional referendum and presidential elections, raising significant concern about the potential for similar interferences in the upcoming parliamentary elections this year. Moldova is dedicated to promoting freedom of expression while actively combating disinformation in line with international commitments.

**Montenegro** stresses that freedom of opinion and expression is a vital tenet of vibrant democracy, and the transparent and credible election is an integral part. Without this freedom, there can be no free and fair election. Without it, other rights are also seriously compromised - the right to timely and accurate information, the right to make informed choices and decisions, the right to critical reflection and communication, the right to hold authorities accountable, and other related rights. Failure to uphold these freedoms also has chilling consequences for the information environment, including free and independent media that are essential to democracy. Without these freedoms, democracy falters, along with the safety, security, and well-being of citizens. Montenegro shares the SR's concern about the key vulnerabilities of the right to freedom of expression in electoral context. This is particularly in light of the alarming upsurge of information manipulation in politically polarised environments, its impact on individuals, institutions, and electoral processes, and the decline of traditional media. While electoral distortion and propaganda are not new phenomena, digital technologies and social media are increasingly becoming part of a game changer. They enable and amplify the erosion of the electoral information space, which in turn undermines electoral integrity and hinders the equal participation of all citizens in the democratic processes.

**Mozambique** reiterates its commitment to promoting and protecting the right to freedom of opinion and expression in line with principles enshrined in the international human rights instruments to which Mozambique is a state part. The country takes note of the SR's analysis and findings on the demonstrations that took place after the elections held in Mozambique in 2024. The government of Mozambique recognised the seriousness of these violent demonstrations,



which claimed human lives, destroyed essential economic infrastructures, looted public and private property, and threw thousands of people into unemployment, especially youth. Mozambique affirms its interest and willingness to carry out the necessary investigations by the competent authorities and treat all human rights violations with a view to holding the perpetrators accountable. In order to strengthen the protection of fundamental rights, measures are underway to enhance national mechanisms for the protection of journalists and human rights defenders with special attention to the protection of women and exercise of their right for freedom of expression in response to reports of gender-based violence. In closing, Mozambique reaffirms the willingness of its government to continue to cooperate constructively in international human rights mechanisms, including this mandate in the spirit of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

**Namibia** explains that article 21 of the Namibian Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression, as well as freedom of thought, conscience and belief, including academic freedom in institutions of higher learning. In addition, the Namibian Government has enacted the Access to Information Act and has well established autonomous media houses, including the media ombudsman, to ensure the independence of the press. Namibia believes that freedom of speech and expression, including freedom of the press, is an important tool to encourage civic participation in democratic processes, enhance transparency and accountability, and build public trust to further strengthen good governance.

The **Netherlands** welcomes her report and stresses that freedom of expression is an enabler for the enjoyment of all human rights and a cornerstone of democracy. It should be promoted and protected both online and offline. Without the right to freedom of expression, free and fair elections cannot proceed. Electoral integrity is put at serious risk and trust in democratic processes and institutions erode. Free, independent, diverse and pluralistic media online and offline play a vital role as a watchdog and fact checker throughout election cycles and hold persons in power to account. Democracy is in danger when journalists cannot do their vital work around election periods. Therefore, we are concerned about the significant levels of violence against journalists by state or non-state actors. It endangers independent reporting and can lead to self-censorship. The Netherlands condemns all forms of violence against journalists and calls upon all states to duly investigate crimes against journalists and bring perpetrators to justice as accountability for these crimes is key to their prevention.

**Niger** believes that the rights to freedom of assembly and association are pre-conditions for the holding of free, equitable and credible participatory elections. They allow to express opinions and hopes, and provide therefore for inclusive political dialogue. Niger is party to almost all regional and international legal instruments for the promotion and protection of human rights and it respects and protects the right to freedom of opinion and expression. In June 2022, it adopted a law rights and responsibilities of human rights defenders seeking to provide them with a safe environment that promotes their activities and protects them from aggressions reprisals or unjustified legal restrictions arising from their human rights defence activities. It has adopted laws to govern the media and promote free journalism. However, these also seek to prevent abuse, particularly hate speech and fake news.

**Paraguay** agrees that freedom of expression is crucial for exercising other rights, especially in electoral contexts. It allows parties and candidates to carry out campaigns and communicate



freely and also allows citizens to express their opinions and participate actively in democratic debate. Paraguay welcomes the recommendations presented and reaffirms its commitment to strengthening freedom of expression of the right to information digitally and in traditional ways in line with international human rights standards to ensure a fairer, more inclusive society. Paraguay recognises that digital technologies have increased access to electoral information but have also given rise to threats, including fake news, which affect public opinion and threaten to undermine the legitimacy of democratic processes. Paraguay believes these threats are one of the major challenges of the digital age with impacts that persist in the post-electoral period, giving rise to violence and weakening trust in the results. There is also the technological gap that comes with the adoption of electronic voting systems, especially in context of limited access to the internet and poor e-literacy.

**Poland** gives the voice to a Polish Youth Delegate, who belongs to a generation that does not just witness democracy in town halls or on television, but we live it every day online. The Youth Delegate sees the SR's report and mandate as both urgent and deeply relevant to today's realities. Digital platforms are indeed a double-edged sword. On one hand, there is a positive trend in Poland, a constantly increasing youth engagement in recent elections, but we also face what the report calls a tsunami of disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech, a wave that targets minorities and polarises debate, a wave creating a space where, unfortunately, fear goes viral faster than hope. Social media is only going to grow in influence. What young people need most is digital literacy training as part of formal education, along with systematic regulation of the digital environment that the report mentions, clear standards for AI, transparency for influencers, human rights due diligence from the private sector. If we want resilient democracies, we need citizens, especially young ones, who know how to question, verify, and challenge.

The **Russian Federation** notes that the SR, once again, has not managed to prepare an impartial, unprejudiced document on the sensitive and now politicised topic, including developing this topic of justifying rights violations in combating disinformation, ignoring the Western approach based on the UNESCO Guidelines and a coordinated line on removing any views that are different to the politically motivated content in the West. This paradigm is a serious undermining of the right to information and freedom of expression. This, in particular, affects the growing practise of limiting and prohibiting the activity of Russian media in the West, with a rise in aggressive censorship, blocking of broadcast, freezing of bank accounts and intimidation of journalists, including by special services. Ukraine, a supporter of the West, hiding the facts of reprisals of the Kiev regime against Russian journalists. This shows a brazen Russophobia, together with the practise of selective approaches and double standards.

The **Russian Federation on behalf of a group of countries** underlines that freedom of expression is one of the fundamental human rights enshrined in international human rights instruments. However, the exercise of this right faces the greatest number of challenges today. This occurs particularly in those states that prefer to present themselves as champions of the promotion and protection of human rights. Their total control over information is taken even more sophisticated forms. International obligations regarding freedom of expression, equal access to information, requests for journalists' rights and their safety, as well as the maintenance of media pluralism continues to be blatantly violated in favour of the bloc's military and political interests. This is especially evident in multiple cases of the application of double standards when assessing the

situation with press freedom around the world. These countries and their alliances continue to systematically exclude undesirable foreign media presence from their informational spaces. Discriminatory campaigns and targeted repressions against journalists include inter-ally expulsions, denial of access to events, inclusion in blacklists, freezing of bank accounts, intimidation and defamation, criminal prosecution, fines and harassment. All these unlawful actions are being justified under the contrived pretext of combating disinformation. All these egregious violations of the freedom of expression require a principled and impartial reaction by the human rights machinery, including the UNHRC and its SR on freedom of expression.

**Rwanda** commends Zambia's continued efforts to strengthen freedom of expression through legal and institutional measures. Rwanda underscores the importance of approaching such an assessment with an appreciation of national context and constructive dialogue. It also notes Zambia's commitment to ongoing reform and welcome the progress made towards strengthening rights and freedoms through national processes.

**Slovakia** notes with concern that as we are living in the digital age, we cannot allow the negative sides of technological development to prevail over the positive ones. According to your report, more than half of the voting population in the world was included in elections the previous year. Almost all of them were affected by disinformation, misinformation, or hate speech. And the result? The rise of polarised communities, which serves the further escalation and human rights violations. We must prevent the misuse of digital technologies by those who ignore the democratic processes, manipulate the information, and advocate hatred, discrimination, or even violence for their political gains. It should be our common goal to refrain from restricting freedom of expression, but at the same time, violence, hatred, and discrimination against women, vulnerable or marginalised groups, journalists, human rights defenders, or electoral officials are unacceptable. Slovakia expresses its commitment to continue with its support to freedom of expression. This topic remains among our human rights priorities. Slovakia considers the SR's seven key conclusions from the report as a solid basis for reflection and further action to address the challenges for freedom of expression in the digital age.

**Slovenia jointly with Austria, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland** stresses that the increasing digitalisation of election campaigns enables unprecedented levels of outreach and engagement, but at the same time raises concerns due to the upsurge of information manipulation, disinformation and hate speech. As the SR observes in her report, these trends are aggravated in politically polarised contexts. Some of the challenges faced are of a cross-border nature, such as the targeting of exiled opposition. There are growing attempts to limit their freedom of expression, including through oppressive practises. Our four countries are gravely concerned about the public distrust this creates and the negative impact on the freedom of expression and electoral rights of individuals.

The **State of Palestine** commends the SR's report and her efforts to expose the crackdown on freedom of expression, particularly voices that are being silenced precisely because they are standing against genocide, apartheid, and illegal occupation. It is of great concern that the same states that claim to defend freedom and human rights are leading or enabling the very censorship and repression they publicly condemn. In several Western countries, and particularly in the United States, freedom of expression and media are being systematically restricted when used





to support Palestinian rights. Peaceful protesters are arrested, students and faculty are suspended, journalists are fired, and entire movements are criminalised. All of this done under the pretext of combating disinformation and anti-Semitism. What is even more troubling is the active complicity of these states in facilitating the censorship by pressuring digital platforms to remove content, tolerating or encouraging hostile media environment. Some are even undermining their obligation under the Genocide Convention. Such practises do not protect electoral integrity. They erode public trust and delegitimise international solidarity movements that are crucial to democratic engagement. Palestine demands an end to the complicity of those governments that claim to defend human rights while enabling or committing acts of repression. If they are truly committed to preventing the preserving the international legal order and preventing atrocity crimes, they must protect, not punish, those who speak truth to power.

**Switzerland** shares the concern over the growing threats weighing on the freedom of expression and the trust in electoral processes. Free, equitable, and transparent elections are based on the freedom of expression and access to reliable information. These rights are made fragile by the manipulation of information, the increase of hate speech, and a slippage in independence media particularly worried about the use of disinformation, targeted disinformation, and cross-border repression as well as the growing cuts in internet during electoral periods. The report indicates that women are facing high levels of sexist violence and sexist disinformation and are excluded from the workplace and with the goal of excluding them from the workplace and public life. Switzerland calls for free access to the internet and effective measures to fight disinformation. It calls for promotion of an environment that leads to liberty, independence, pluralism, and diversity in media as well as safety for journalists.

**Tanzania** promotes the right to freedom of expression in line with its national and international human rights obligations. The Access to Information Act of 2015 facilitates public access to information. The Media Services Act of 2016 promotes professionalism and accountability in the media industry and the Cyber Crimes Act of 2015 ensures a safe online environment. The media landscape in Tanzania is thus diverse with numerous privately owned radio stations, TV stations and online platforms. There are also provisions in place for guaranteeing the enjoyment of this right by persons with disabilities. To uphold professionalism among journalists, the government has established a board for accrediting journalists, advising the government on education and training, promoting ethical conduct of journalists and fostering international partnerships. Despite its commitment to promoting the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Tanzania is concerned about the abuse of this right, especially on digital and social media platforms. Such abuses seriously erode the social and cultural norms of our country and even undermine national security. It must be curbed.

**Togo** underlines that the rise in fake news and hate speech in polarised political processes, the neglect by media platforms of their commitments, these are the main causes of vulnerability in freedom of expression during elections. To overcome this, Togo has established various institutions that work to bring about peaceful, free, transparent elections, including the Standing Framework for Dialogue and Cooperation, responsible through dialogue for creating stability and strengthening the national institutions around questions of national interests and democratic and republican principles, the Supreme Authority for Audiovisual and Communication, which guarantees freedom and protection of the press and other media, and the National Independent

Electoral Commission, responsible for organising and supervising elections. Synergies among all of these minimise fake news and promote freedom of opinion and expression to ensure free and fair elections in Togo.

**Uruguay** reiterates its commitment to the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This is essential for the effective enjoyment of all human rights, political participation, accountability, open dialogue and the holding of free, informed and transparent elections. Free and independent press play a democratic function that is crucial as they bring visibility to relevant matters, they promote diversity of voices and they facilitate citizen oversight. In particular, during electoral processes, the freedom of opinion and expression promotes, opens plural and safe civic space. Further, Uruguay recognises that the digital environment has broadened the opportunities for exercising this right. However, it has brought up new challenges such as disinformation, hate speech and manipulation spin. Uruguay underscores the need to have legal frameworks that are in step with international human rights standards and that ensure transparency and digital literacy. It further stresses the need of protecting journalists and electoral observers facing threats or stigma or violence and fostering a press environment that is free, independent and pluralistic.

#### Views Expressed by Intergovernmental Organizations and UN Agencies

The **European Union** states that freedom of expression and opinion, often described as the lifeblood of inclusive and democratic societies, is also fundamental to free and fair election processes. When the enjoyment of this right is threatened, electoral processes are threatened. When it flourishes, it allows citizens to debate, discuss, and make informed decisions on their choice of representatives. It allows independent media to play its crucial role of verifying facts, countering disinformation, and providing a platform for diverse political voices. It allows candidates and parties to campaign freely, and public trust in electoral processes and democratic institutions to grow. The EU shares the SR's deep concerns about the vulnerabilities highlighted in the thematic report, including the surge of information manipulation in politically polarised contexts. In certain cases, disinformation and online hate speech are deliberately used to distort electoral processes and undermine the enjoyment of fundamental rights. This is why the EU is implementing the Digital Services Act, which requires online platforms to mitigate systemic risks such as disinformation and hate speech, thereby promoting information integrity, democratic values, and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

**UNESCO** thanks the SR for her report and for mentioning UNESCO's efforts in this regard. Essential for democratic processes, UNESCO contributed to preserving electoral information integrity during the 2024 'super-election' cycle, especially in the context of the rapid expansion of digital technologies. UNESCO partnered with UNDP, the Electoral Assistance Division, and DPPA, and launched a multilingual, massive, open online course on freedom of expression, artificial intelligence, and elections, to outline the SR's report. UNESCO emphasises the need to strengthen collaboration with the SR to ensure that this report is presented to the Global Forum of Networks of Regulatory Authorities in their next meeting. As a central component of the broader strategy to implement UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms, the Global Forum will hold its annual assembly in the last quarter of the year. UNESCO will also promote a more coordinated and effective response to these complex European challenges.



### Views Expressed by National Human Rights Institutions

The **Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines** strongly condemns the continuous acts of red-tagging, vilification, labelling, and guilt-association perpetrated against journalists, educators, and other human rights defenders. Such acts, especially those committed and encouraged by state actors, pose a chilling effect on constitutionally protected forms of speech such as human rights advocacy and ethical journalism. The Commission reiterates the pivotal role that human rights defenders play in ensuring an environment of transparency and accountability that fosters a healthy democracy as well as culture of dialogue. Thus, the Commission joins the SR in her calls for the Philippine government to make significant legal, policy, and institutional changes to end the widespread practise of red-tagging, which threatens the people's right to life, liberty, security, and their fundamental right to freedom of expression and opinion. The Commission encourages the government to heed the recommendation of the SR to draw on the UN's capabilities and technical assistance to strengthen human rights and accountability mechanisms in the country. The Commission further hopes that the Philippine government would retain its standing invitation to Special Procedures which would bolster greater international engagement in the protection and promotion of human rights.

### Views Expressed by Non-Governmental Organizations

**Article 19** commends the SR for her report, which rightly shows how democratic elections are simply impossible without the right to freedom of expression and media freedom. However, as the SR notes, elections are information crisis points and highly vulnerable to censorship and information distortion. Government officials use elections to crack down on dissent and ramp up censorship worldwide. The key tactic is placing pressure on media outlets to restrict content or block accounts, often with threats of severe sanctions, including fines, advertising bans, bandwidth reductions, or even blocking of the entire platform. Often, the targeted content comes from journalists, political opposition, or other civil society actors. The largest online platforms play a pivotal role in both mitigating and exacerbating these challenges to free speech during elections. While platforms have significantly enhanced voters' ability to access information during elections, they have too often demonstrated that they are often more inclined to yield to government pressure rather than conduct thorough human rights impact assessments of their demands. At the same time, many information integrity issues stem from the systems and processes of online platforms, including flaws with content moderation and recommender systems. As the SR states, the backsliding of social media platforms on commitments to human rights and electoral integrity should ring an alarm bell that we ignore at our peril. Article 19 urges all states, political parties, and companies to fully implement the recommendations of the report, which put us on a path to ensuring healthy information ecosystems during elections.

**International PEN** emphasizes that free speech is the lifeblood of democracy. A free and independent press is an essential element of the right, and the journalists, writers, and publishers who do their work without fear nor favour are the core of an independent press. In recent years, there has been an escalation in the detention, harassment, and persecution of journalists and writers for their reports on local, national, and international events, including on elections. Hong Kong SAR, once a bastion of rights and freedoms in the Asia-Pacific is now emblematic of this trend. Independent newspapers such as Apple Daily that fearlessly sought out and reported on



the truth expose corruption and abuse of power has been shut down. Journalists have been prosecuted for sedition, for writing and publishing articles expressing opinions critical of the Chinese Communist Party. The father of the speaker is one of the people being prosecuted. His name is Sebastian Lai, and his father is Jimmy Lai. Jimmy Lai founded Apple Daily. He is a publisher, writer, and journalist who has been imprisoned in Hong Kong in solitary confinement for four and a half years. His latest trial under the draconian national security law makes clear that he is on trial because of his peaceful expression of opinions and for supporting democratic values. Now, at 77, he faces the rest of his life in prison for providing an essential service for the people of Hong Kong and for standing up for democracy. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has found that he is arbitrarily detained and that he has been targeted for excising his rights to freedom of expression. That the trial against him has been unfair. International Pen urges the SR and the UNHRC to raise his case.

The **International Council Supporting Fair Trials and Human Rights** shares the SR's concern over the shrinking space for freedom of expression and the continued targeting of the journalists in response of their tireless attempts of uncovering the truth. In the context of prolonged occupation, this notion rings ever more true. In occupied Western Sahara, the journalists, often working underground and with limited resources, are systematically being targeted by the state in response to their human rights and journalistic work. Their very profession has been criminalised under Moroccan penal code, forcing Sahrawi journalists to work under alarming conditions without any real means of protection, being targeted by means of intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrest, torture and arbitrary detention. The International Council calls on all states to ensure that journalists are protected and free to carry out their work without fears or reprisals. It further calls on OHCHR to address the criminalisation of Sahrawi journalists and ensure the permanent monitoring of the human rights situation in Western Sahara.

The **International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims** remains deeply concerned by increasing restrictions on peaceful protests and growing threats to freedom of expression in various contexts worldwide, including the recent protests in Kenya, Bangladesh, Peru and Georgia. Protests and public assemblies are essential forms of expression protected under Article 19 and 21 of the ICCPR. These rights are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Limiting protests, especially through excessive use of force or digital censorship, can amount to a violation of freedom of expression. The Rehabilitation Council calls for a significant shift in the way states and international mechanisms address the repression of protests. When excessive use of force is employed, a distinctive trauma is inflicted on protesters. In such cases, these acts may amount to torture or ill-treatment. It urges states to adopt a victim-centred approach to reparation and rehabilitation that acknowledges the physical, psychological and collective harms endured by those who exercise their right to freely express themselves.

The **Institute for Human Rights** remains gravely concerned about the severe restrictions on freedom of expression in Azerbaijan marked by a systematic crackdown on independent media and civil society. Currently, up to 40 journalists are imprisoned, including nine women. The authorities have targeted the country's most outspoken outlets, Abzas media, Toplum TV and Meydan TV, leaving them effectively dismantled with the majority of their staff behind bars. The Institute is particularly alarmed by the case of Iqbal Abilov, a researcher and editor of the only Talish-language newspaper. He faced 18 years in prison on baseless charges of high treason



simply for his peaceful human rights and media work defending the Talish minority in Azerbaijan. Equally troubling is the arrest of human rights defender Rufat Safarov, a recipient of the 2024 US Secretary of State Human Rights Defender Award. He is targeted for his critical position in defending human rights in Azerbaijan. The Institute urges the SR to call for immediate release of all imprisoned journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan and to press for urgent international accountability.

**Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) Asociación Civil** denounces that authoritarian leaders around the world using doxing, cyberbullying and other tools. Many are the victims of the president and others. They report publicly journalists for their reports. Those participating in public protests are repressed, their photos showing growing police violence. Further, the government makes it difficult to have access to public information or to evade a state oversight. Recently, it was known that the National Intelligence Plan has illegal monitoring of social conflicts and protests as well as other aspects, including the press and social media. These restrictions affect all of society, greatly limiting free expression and protest in Argentina. The Centre calls upon the SR to take a country visit and to look into the matter and that the international community urge Argentina to cease their authoritarian activities that violate human rights.

**Humanists International** thanks the SR for her report on her visit to the Philippines. Her findings that not enough is being done by the government to protect freedom of expression in the Philippines speaks to the experience of civil society. Despite the government's claims to the contrary, red tagging is frequently used to target human rights defenders, some as young as 18, as well as Indigenous activists. The free expression of indigenous people in the Philippines is threatened not only through red tagging, but also through arbitrary designations under the Anti-Terrorism Act. Many Indigenous leaders have been detained for acting on their legitimate right to protest against the destruction of their lands. Radio stations have been shut down, and the culture created by these measures has led to the extrajudicial killings of Indigenous leaders. The right to free artistic expression has also been targeted through killings and judicial crackdowns. Comedian Gold Dagal was murdered earlier this year during a performance, having previously received death threats for jokes about Christianity. Such actions have only been encouraged by laws criminalising expression, including the fact of blasphemy laws. These laws, based on notions of offence, have been used to prosecute drag performers and criticisms of religion. Humanists International calls on the Philippine government to repeal these draconian laws, which curtail free expression and contribute to the current culture of impunity for violence.

**Human Rights Foundation** welcomes the SR's report focused on elections. In the wider European region, the report's warnings are only too evident. State-sponsored manipulation is now a standard campaign tool. In Belarus and Russia, we have witnessed pro-government broadcasters label political opponents extremists to delegitimise them during an election period, mirroring the report's finding that officials in many states run disinformation campaigns to further entrench power. Across Azerbaijan, Georgia and Serbia, independent election monitors and journalists covering elections have faced physical attacks and slap-style lawsuits. For instance, in Azerbaijan, the continued imprisonment of Anar Mammadli, in part due to his election monitoring and reporting, clearly illustrates the personal cost of defending voters' rights, and the Foundation continues to call for his immediate release. In addition, some states use broad national security-related legislation to remove online accounts or news portals, giving them





foreign influence or extremism labels, tactics the special rapporteur says too often target voices critical of the incumbent and lack any independent oversight. The SR notes that online disinformation and smear campaigns against journalists and human rights defenders, especially women, skyrockets during elections, yet impunity persists.

**ILGA World** states that as LGBTI rights face global erosion, upholding our human right to freedom of opinion and expression is more vital than ever. ILGA World welcomes the SR's report on rising political disinformation, hate speech, social media platform safety backsliding, and declining integrity of traditional news media, all unfolding alongside and because of the rise of fascism, fundamentalisms, and anti-rights actors globally. The thematic report highlights challenges LGBTI persons face regarding how harmful speech targets and deters electoral participation, as well as information manipulation and free speech weaponization by politicians to attack and silence dissenting voices, including the prevalence of censorship allegations when opposing hate speech, including in so-called liberal democracies. This ramps up around elections, dehumanising those historically minoritized. In particular, trans, gender nonconforming, and intersex folk and sex workers are used as scapegoats in so-called culture wars. In consultation with Filipino LGBTI activists, ILGA World welcomes the SR's report and its focus on red-tagging, a practise that enables gender-based violence, criminalisation, surveillance, harassment, and even killings. LGBTI defenders and organisations are often falsely accused by state actors as members of the communist front, often without evidence, leading to arbitrary arrests and baseless terrorism charges. ILGA urges the government to adopt the report's recommendations.

**Amnesty International (AI)** welcomes the SR's report on her visit to the Philippines. AI has documented how the authorities increasingly use Facebook in red-tagging campaigns targeting young activists, including those who investigate alleged human rights violations by the military, police, and other government agencies. While exercising their right to freedom of expression and right to protest, these young human rights defenders (HRDs) have repeatedly faced intimidation and harassment from state actors, among them from the NTF ELCAC, which continues to operate under undeterred support and resources from the President's Office. Red-tagging has led to a climate of fear and self-censorship. AI agrees with the recommendations of the SR, who has called on the Philippines to embark on a more significant legal policy and institutional changes to demonstrate its commitment to freedom of expression. Reforms must include abolishing the NTF ELCAC, followed by prompt, independent, impartial, and transparent investigations into the practises, repealing the Antiterrorism Act, the Terrorism, Financing, Prevention, and Suppression Act, and a critical review of the provisions of the Cybercrime Act, especially on libel, and passing the Human Rights Defenders Protect Act as a step towards realising the work of HRDs.

## FACTS & FIGURES ON ID PARTICIPATION

**44** State Delegations

**2** Inter-Governmental Organizations and UN Agencies

**1** National Human Rights Institution

**10** Non-Governmental Organizations