



TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION OF EXILED JOURNALISTS IN GERMANY: A GROWING ISSUE



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INTRODUCTION

Whether it is a new wave of repression driving a regime further into authoritarianism or the initial targeted attacks on civil society, individuals in states descending into autocracy are repeatedly confronted with the existential question: Leave or stay? Certain professional groups, particularly journalists, are especially vulnerable, as they are often subjected to early pressures to conform. Large-scale crackdowns frequently result in critical voices fleeing the country. Notable examples include Turkey under President Erdoğan following the failed coup attempt in 2016 and Russia under Vladimir Putin, who has gradually consolidated power to transform the country into a dictatorship since 1999. In both cases, widespread arrests, professional bans, and acts of intimidation have triggered waves of emigration by regime-critical journalists and opposition figures. Numerous additional examples could be cited. However, even in exile, safety remains uncertain. The repressive mechanisms of authoritarian regimes extend beyond national borders, often manifesting through surveillance, intimidation, and direct attacks on dissidents abroad.

This publication is a chapter from the long-term study series Feindbild Journalist:in, which is published annually by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) and focuses on the state of press freedom in Germany. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the situation of exiled journalists and their experiences with transnational repression in Germany. It begins by examining the global rise of authoritarianism and the increasing pressure on journalists, which has become so intense that many media professionals are forced into exile. The publication then introduces the concept of transnational repression and the tools employed in this context. A number of cases of transnational repression in Germany are presented as examples, followed by testimonies from two exiled journalists who have shared their personal experiences of the phenomenon with ECPMF. This chapter has been translated from German into English and has been slightly adapted for this version.

**THE REPRESSIVE
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GLOBAL RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE INCREASE IN EXILED JOURNALISTS

A global trend toward authoritarianism is becoming increasingly evident. According to the Varieties of Democracy Project at the University of Gothenburg, the number of autocracies worldwide is on the rise: 71 percent of the global population now lives under autocratic rule, compared to 48 percent ten years ago. For the first time, there are more autocracies (91) than democracies (88). Freedom of speech, which has been one of the most heavily attacked democratic rights for over a decade, is particularly vulnerable to this global shift toward autocratisation. In 2024 alone, the situation regarding this right deteriorated in 44 countries, representing a quarter of all nations worldwide. At the same time, freedom of speech improved in only eight countries. Key setbacks related to this right include growing restrictions on media freedom and an increasing threat to journalists (Nord et al. 2025).

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that the number of media workers in exile has increased significantly. Programmes supporting journalists in exile, as well as activities designed to assist with their relocation, have experienced a substantial influx (Badr 2024, 2). An examination of global migration patterns of exile journalists reveals that Germany has become a prominent destination for journalists from various regions of the world (Badr 2024, 3). Upon arrival, journalists are confronted with a range of challenges. They have undergone profound personal and professional upheavals, often involving multiple relocations and accompanied by legal and professional uncertainties (Rodina and Dovbysh 2025, 2). Many journalists struggle with a lack of recognition for their expertise and its relevance, while also facing fundamental existential issues, such

as securing residence permits, maintaining limited or sporadic contact with their families, and finding accommodation. Although the majority of journalists report feeling safer in exile than in their home countries, threats from both state and non-state actors linked to their home countries continue to pose a real and persistent danger (Badr 2024).

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION: BACKGROUND AND TOOLS

Repression functions as a state control mechanism when state authorities seek to suppress divergent beliefs and activities that they perceive as threats to the political order. Through repressive measures, the government aims to intimidate or impose physical sanctions on individuals and groups in an effort to maintain control and suppress dissenting opinions (Davenport 2007, 2; Escribà-Folch 2013). Traditionally, repression is defined spatially and tied to a state's territorial jurisdiction. However, Lewis (2015, 141) argues that the clear distinction between domestic and foreign territories and thus the reference to state borders falls short in analysing the repressive mechanisms of current governments. In practice, cross-border social and economic flows undermine the effectiveness of state control mechanisms. As a result, the regulatory policies of authoritarian regimes frequently extend into transnational spaces. This challenges singular conceptions of sovereignty and requires a new understanding of the term "state space." To maintain regime stability, authoritarian states

implement extraterritorial security practices, extending their domestic control across borders into spaces inhabited by diaspora and exile communities. This phenomenon is known as transnational repression.

The strategies employed in transnational repression are diverse, encompassing a range of tools. The most commonly used method is surveillance, which can take many forms. For example, phone calls with relatives, friends, and family members in the home country are often intercepted. Rather than targeting specific dissidents abroad, autocratic regimes may opt to threaten or punish their family members within the country. Proxy repression involves the application, or threat, of physical or other sanctions against individuals within a state's territory in order to suppress a target person located outside that controlled area. In addition, authorities systematically track the activities of their citizens abroad, monitoring street demonstrations, protests, and even tracking mobile phone and internet usage through spyware. Exiles are also subjected to intimidation by their home regimes, which can take the form of both direct and indirect threats, as well as concrete acts of violence, including murder. The aim is to foster a climate of fear in which the affected individuals

are constantly on guard against potential threats and attacks, coupled with the targeted use of violence. Authoritarian regimes also employ various strategies to compel their citizens to return to their home country. One such method is extradition, often linked to intergovernmental migration diplomacy. The countries that execute the extradition may either be unaware that it constitutes forced transnational repression, or they may knowingly cooperate in it (Tsourapas 2021, 623–29).

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION IN GERMANY

Dissidents are also persecuted in Germany by the regimes they fled from and become targets of repression. One of the most high-profile cases occurred in 2019 when Russian intelligence officer Vadim Nikolayevich Krassikov assassinated Georgian citizen Selimchan Changosvili in broad daylight in Berlin's Kleiner Tiergarten with two shots to the head and back. Changosvili had fought as a commander of Chechen militias against

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Russia in two Chechen wars. Before the verdict was announced, Germany expelled two Russian diplomats due to suspected Russian involvement; after Krassikov's conviction, two more diplomats were expelled. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock described the assassination as a serious attack on Germany's national sovereignty and legal system. The harshness with which the German government responded to Chingizov's murder is remarkable, as even though other countries – including Rwanda, Turkey, Egypt, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and China – exert pressure on political opponents and dissidents on German soil, similar state reactions have usually been absent there. Criminal proceedings and diplomatic consequences in Germany typically only occur when cases of transnational repression are particularly high-profile or violent (Gorokhovskaia and Linzer 2022, 2).

While this high-profile case garnered significant attention, many dissidents – particularly those regarded by regimes in their home countries as the greatest threat to their authoritarian projects – are especially targeted by transnational repression. This includes influential opposition figures who continue their political activism against their home country's government abroad, former diplomats, military personnel, or intelligence officers with sensitive information who live in exile, and journalists who report on corruption, repression, and human rights violations from abroad.

“You Will Not Write” – Attack on a Turkish Exiled Journalist

Exiled journalists in Germany have recently become targets of transnational repression. One such example occurred in 2021 when Turkish journalist Erk Acarer was attacked and injured outside his apartment in Berlin-Neukölln by three men. According to the police, two assailants beat and kicked Acarer, while a third acted as a lookout. Acarer sustained head injuries and required medical treatment. He later stated on Twitter that he recognised his attackers, one of whom allegedly said during the assault: “You will not write.” Acarer attributed the attack to the Turkish government, and both he and his family were subsequently placed under police protection. Other journalists in Germany, including Can Dündar, saw the incident as a direct message from Turkish President Erdoğan to regime-critical journalists abroad, signaling that Turkey could “even attack a regime-critical journalist in Berlin” (Süßmann 2021). Shortly after the attack, several Turkish journalists living in exile were contacted by the German police and warned that they were on a death list, which had been circulated by a social media account linked to the Turkish government. The list included 55 journalists – all residing in Europe and North America – who had repeatedly criticized President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party.

Attempted Poisoning of a Russian Journalist

On 15 August 2023, the Russian investigative outlet The Insider reported on alleged poisoning attacks targeting Russian journalists and activists who had fled Russia following the start of the war of aggression against Ukraine. Among those affected was Elena Kostyuchenko.

A murder attempt on Kostyuchenko had already been planned in Mariupol in March 2022, which led her to cancel the trip. After receiving a warning from Dmitry Muratov, her editor-in-chief at Nowaja Gazeta, not to return to Russia, Kostyuchenko moved to Berlin. However, she was not safe in Germany either. All evidence points to the fact that she was poisoned on October 18 during a trip to Munich. Investigative platforms The Insider and Bellingcat had the symptoms assessed by doctors and chemists, including an expert from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. They concluded that the toxicological findings suggested acute liver and kidney damage, potentially caused by an organochlorine substance like dichloroethane. Kostyuchenko believes she may have absorbed the poison through her skin or orally – possibly during the train ride to Munich or while visiting a restaurant near the Ukrainian consulate. The list of poisoning attacks orchestrated by the Russian regime abroad is extensive, also affecting other journalists (Adler 2023).



Russian journalist Elena Kostyuchenko
picture alliance / TT NEWS AGENCY | Christine Olsson/TT

Inquiry into Suspected Intelligence Surveillance

After the editor-in-chief of the independent Russian news portal Protocol, Matvei Kurdyukov, and his colleague Sergey Podsytnik revealed that they had been surveilled during their stay in Germany, criminal investigations were launched in Germany. The journalists believe the surveillance is connected to their research on the production of Iranian Shahed drones in the special economic zone of Alabuga. This zone is jointly managed by the Russian government and the autonomous Republic of Tatarstan, which is part of the Russian Federation. What makes the situation particularly alarming is that underage students from Alabuga Polytechnic College are coerced into assembling drones without being paid for overtime, leaving them with little time for their studies. The students also reported being forced to participate in “patriotic” paintball games where they were required to shoot at targets marked with NATO symbols. In February 2024, both the EU and the US imposed sanctions on Alabuga.

The journalists initially contacted the German police on 3 March 2024, after noticing an unknown man following and observing them in their hostel. Despite receiving initial assurances, the police did not take further action at first. Following a physical attack on opposition politician Leonid Volkov on 13 March in Lithuania, Kurdyukov and Podsytnik reached out to the authorities once again. Podsytnik reported that they visited the police station in person on 14 March, where, after initial hesitation, the criminal police eventually became involved. They offered the journalists security advice and invited them to testify as witnesses in the ongoing criminal investigation (Council of Europe 2024).

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS FROM TWO EXILED JOURNALISTS

ECPMF spoke with two exiled journalists on this topic: Eren Yildiz, who fled from Turkey, and Omid Pouyandeh, who escaped from Iran.¹ Both were politically persecuted due to their reporting on their respective regimes. Pouyandeh had already spent time in prison for his activities in Iran, while Yildiz faced numerous politically motivated charges that would have almost certainly led to his imprisonment. The discussions focused on their experiences with transnational repression in Germany, shedding light on the ongoing challenges they face despite finding refuge in the country.

¹ Please note that names have been changed for security reasons to protect the identities of individuals involved.

While both feel significantly safer in Germany, especially because they do not fear imprisonment here, they both stated that they are still potentially not completely safe from their respective regimes in Germany. Pouyandeh explained:

“I have been living in Germany since 2015 and have been continuously working as a journalist, mainly focusing on Iran. The concern that repression or persecution could also be possible here has always been present.”

Although there have been no major incidents so far, the cases of other exiled journalists are proof of this concern. As previously mentioned, Turkey under President Erdoğan continues to persecute government-critical journalists, even in exile, including within Germany. Similarly, the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards has been active in Germany for over a decade. According to a response from the German federal government, Iranian intelligence operations “focus on combating opposition groups and individuals both domestically and abroad.” These efforts include surveillance of events and individuals. Additionally, cyber espionage activities targeting dissidents of the Iranian regime are also occurring in Germany (Deutscher Bundestag 2023).

Digital Repression

Both journalists are particularly impacted by what Pouyandeh describes as digital repression. This includes everything from hacking attacks on their personal email accounts to systematically orchestrated defamation and outright hate speech in the digital sphere. Pouyandeh stated:

“In the digital space, there are now quite systematic and sometimes large-scale hate speech attacks – against many opposition figures, but also against journalists. I am also regularly affected by this. It’s about an attempt to defame and discredit with a mixture of lies, half-truths, and decontextualisation.”

Social media accounts targeting exiled journalists often exploit real-life circumstances and events. For instance, Pouyandeh is defamed as working for “German state media” due to his frequent contributions to public broadcasters, or as being party-financed because he participated in panel discussions at events organised by political foundations. Yildiz, in particular, faces entirely fabricated defamations, with accusations linking him to various states and organizations: “I am accused of all sorts of connections, including with terrorist organisations, the PKK, Fethullah Gülen. I am said to be an agent of Germany, Iran, Israel, or the USA.”

It is challenging, if not impossible, to pinpoint exactly who is behind it. However, both journalists emphasised that it is always evident that there is a form of coordinated action. “You can see that it’s organised. The content is spread across hundreds of accounts simultaneously, with the same words and phrases,” said Yildiz. Additionally, he is publicly defamed by parts of the government or government-affiliated media based on unfounded accusations.

But insults and threats are also directly sent to the email addresses of exile journalists. Sometimes with detailed information, such as about their whereabouts, as Pouyandeh reported:

“I keep receiving emails with hints about where I am, for example, that I live in Berlin or that I used to live in Hamburg. These aren’t specific addresses; I don’t believe anyone has gone as far as finding those out. But they are insinuations that are meant to show: ‘We know where you are.’ Until about two years ago, I

regularly attended events or worked in Berlin for reporting – and that’s exactly when I would get messages like: ‘We know you’re in Berlin on that day.’ While it wasn’t really secret, as these were public appointments, the message was clear.”

“It’s these small things that keep happening and make you paranoid”

In general, Pouyandeh views these actions primarily as intimidation tactics, which are relatively easy to execute and do not necessarily lead to concrete actions. While the potential for actual harm is low, it remains a possibility. Nonetheless, he had already been warned by state authorities. After Pouyandeh and his colleagues published a documentary on the safety of the Iranian diaspora, he was contacted by the Criminal Investigation Department in Berlin. The conversation was vague, ultimately conveying that “there could be a danger,” which led to him receiving safety recommendations. He believes that there was no specific threat, as he would have been informed had there been one. Instead, he considers it more likely to have been a general awareness-raising measure.

Such measures, along with the awareness of real cases in Germany and all over Europe, repeatedly highlight that there is no true sense of security. This uncertainty weighs heavily on people in exile. Regarding the ongoing, diffuse threat, Pouyandeh stated:

“You don’t have to search for blood here. It’s not that the Iranian security apparatus would dare to kill someone in Berlin or generally in Germany – they don’t do that. It would be too risky, too conspicuous, it doesn’t make sense. No one is important enough right now that such a step would be strategically justified. Instead, it’s more like pinpricks: small, recurring incidents that make you paranoid over time.”

In their daily lives, both journalists frequently encounter situations where the otherwise diffuse sense of fear becomes distinctly palpable. For instance, they may observe two or three individuals standing next to their car for an unusually extended period, with a growing suspicion that these are the same individuals they have previously noticed. Alternatively, they experience the unmistakable sensation of being followed in public, often in a manner that is intentionally conspicuous. Additionally, they report feeling observed or scrutinised by strangers when leaving their homes. The challenge, however, lies in distinguishing between mere paranoia and actual incidents, a distinction that is often difficult, if not impossible, to make.

At the same time, there are tangible, presumably targeted incidents within the exile communities, such as break-ins where nothing is taken or even physical attacks, as previously described. The intent behind these actions, according to the journalists, is clear: to convey the message that “We are here. We won’t act immediately, but if we choose to, we can.” According to both journalists, this sentiment is pervasive within the exile community. “We – the politically active Iranians in Germany – cannot all be imagining things. Our apparent paranoia must have real foundations,” Pouyandeh explained, emphasising that there is likely some truth to these perceptions. These acts of intimidation, though limited in scope, have a profound and lasting impact, creating widespread fear and unease. Yildiz added:

“There is no relaxed atmosphere [within his exile community]. There are risks. As I said, a friend, a journalist, was attacked [here in Germany]. All of us think this can happen to us too. Being here [in Germany] protects us from being arrested, but it doesn’t protect us from any attacks.”



Targeted Restriction of Social Media Reach as a Tool of Transnational Repression

Another form of transnational repression described by Yildiz, and from which he himself has been directly affected, is the targeted restriction of the reach of exiled journalists on social media. Especially in countries where independent media can barely or no longer report freely, critical reporting largely takes place through platforms like X, TikTok, and other social networks. Although authoritarian regimes often attempt to block access to these platforms, social media – particularly when combined with VPN services – remains a crucial channel for disseminating critical information.

Yildiz, who primarily shares his journalistic work through X, became a target of the Turkish government, which succeeded in having his high-profile account blocked on the platform. Yildiz is far from an isolated case (SCF 2024). Numerous government-critical accounts across various social media platforms are now inaccessible from within Turkey. X, in particular, has faced significant criticism for these collaborations. Given that Elon Musk, the owner of X, has repeatedly come under fire for his proximity to authoritarian leaders and the promotion of far-right positions, this approach is not entirely unexpected.

Security Measures and Personal Considerations

Although both journalists face transnational repression in various forms and assume that severe outcomes are rather unlikely, yet still possible, they are determined not to let these threats hinder their work or dictate their lives entirely in accordance with security concerns. “I don’t want to base my daily life on potential risks,” Yildiz explained. He himself has not taken any special security precautions. Pouyandeh, on the other hand, mentioned in the conversation that he constantly considers his safety. The issue of security undoubtedly affects his social life:

“I’ve become very cautious when meeting new people – and this is despite the fact that exactly this is part of my job. As a journalist, you constantly enter new situations, have conversations, get contacted, or initiate contact yourself. I wouldn’t say I’ve given that up – I still do it. But with caution and with certain protection mechanisms that I’ve developed for myself over time.”

On the recommendation of the Criminal Investigation Department, Pouyandeh has taken steps to protect both himself and his surroundings. “The safety of my environment is even more important to me than my own; you don’t want to put anyone in danger, that would be even worse,” he emphasised during the conversation. Consequently, he avoids frequenting the hotspots of the Iranian community.

As an additional precaution, Pouyandeh has significantly limited his activities on social media. For instance, he refrains from posting content that could disclose his current location. Generally, he makes an effort to avoid revealing patterns in his daily routines, such as the cafés he regularly visits. He has also secured a disclosure ban from the registration office.

Furthermore, after his conversation with the Criminal Investigation Department, he was provided with a direct phone number to call in case of emergency. This was a source of reassurance, as he had often wondered how to respond in such situations. “It’s unlikely that the regular police station in the neighborhood would take it seriously,” Pouyandeh remarked. The regular police, he explained, cannot fully grasp his situation and thus cannot respond appropriately: “„They lack insight into the exile community and a clear understanding of the real threats it faces.” He now has a dedicated contact with officers who are well-acquainted with his specific circumstances. Additionally, the officers explicitly encouraged him to reach out to this contact, even if he is uncertain whether the situation truly constitutes a threat.

Lack of Awareness in Editorial Offices

Finally, Pouyandeh emphasised the crucial need for local editorial offices working with exiled journalists to become far more attuned to the security risks they face:

“This unfortunately hardly ever happens. Until December, I worked as a freelancer and collaborated with very different editorial offices. The only exception was a public broadcaster, where the issue of security was taken seriously – it was openly discussed, and there were concrete offers of support. However, that was the exception. I have never experienced anything like that with other editorial offices in Germany. Not once did I receive a signal like: “Let’s talk about this – you may be at risk.” Honestly, I find that quite problematic. Even now, where I am employed full-time at an editorial office, this topic has not been addressed so far.

Pouyandeh urges editorial offices to take this issue more seriously and engage more actively with the exile community. If exiled journalists are recruited for their valuable reporting, which “no one else can provide,” it is only fair, he argued, to address the issue of security as well. At the very least, there should be an open dialogue and a designated point of contact.

CONCLUSION

Repression against journalists does not cease with their flight into exile. Authoritarian regimes deploy targeted strategies to silence critical voices even beyond their borders, ensuring that their control extends into international spaces. Transnational repression manifests in various forms, including intimidation, surveillance, digital attacks, and, in some cases, even physical violence. The examples from Germany presented here demonstrate that these threats are not merely hypothetical but are part of the daily reality faced by many exiled journalists, especially in a time when authoritarianism is on the rise globally and civic space is shrinking at unprecedented levels.

Although Germany serves as a sanctuary for many media professionals, it is evident that security risks continue to follow them across borders. The often subtle but effective nature of these forms of repression – ranging from cyberattacks to psychological pressure – forces many journalists to adjust their daily lives, restrict their communications, and take significant security precautions. While some manage to continue

their work with minimal disruption, for others, the constant threat of violence or retaliation imposes a life of heightened vigilance and anxiety.

Moreover, despite Germany's reputation as a haven for exiled journalists, there remains a lack of institutional and media awareness regarding the specific risks these individuals face. To address this gap and strengthen Germany's response to transnational repression, it is useful to consider the policy recommendations from Freedom House (Gorokhovskaia and Linzer 2022), which has conducted an analysis of Germany's policy responses to this issue. To effectively tackle transnational repression, they recommend that it is crucial for the government to raise awareness within its institutions, particularly among officials who engage with vulnerable populations, such as law enforcement, migration officials, and foreign affairs representatives, including diplomatic staff. A comprehensive understanding of these risks must be integrated into national security priorities, recognising that threats to human rights posed by foreign states are also threats to Germany's institutions and agencies.

In addition, according to the report, there is a clear need for a review of existing laws and policies to improve mechanisms for holding foreign states accountable for engaging in transnational repression. This could include identifying and documenting transnational repression as a distinct issue in reports like the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution's annual report on the protection of the constitution and the Federal Foreign Office's human rights reports. Furthermore, responses to transnational repression should be distinct from policies targeting radicalization, terrorism, or foreign intelligence services, framing affected individuals as victims rather than security threats.

Furthermore, in addition to these policy changes, Germany's asylum system should be adapted to better protect individuals at risk of transnational repression. This includes reducing reliance on temporary forms of protection for asylum seekers and returning to a norm of granting full refugee status. Vulnerability to transnational repression should also be screened for early in the immigration and asylum process, with high-risk individuals provided additional protection, such as accommodation outside of refugee reception centers and digital security support.

Ultimately, as authoritarianism continues to rise globally, there is an urgent need for a coordinated response to protect the rights and safety of exiled journalists. In addition to state-level protections, an active, informed response from media institutions is essential. Only through a combination of government action, institutional awareness, and targeted protections can the international community ensure that the vital work of exiled journalists can continue free from the threat of transnational repression.

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Europäischen Zentrums für Presse- und Medienfreiheit

Menckestraße 27
04155 Leipzig
Germany

phone: 49 (0) 172 / 367 499 0

email: info@ecpmf.eu

web: www.ecpmf.eu



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