

# Unmasking GONGOS as Agents of Illiberalism

## A Case Study of the OSCE



By Sebastien Peyrouse

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European, Russian,  
and Eurasian Studies

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illiberalism  
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# Introduction

The sustainability of illiberalism hinges on the adeptness of authoritarian regimes to monitor, subvert, and quash dissenting voices, both domestically and internationally, while promoting their illiberal model worldwide, masquerading it as a beacon of political and social progress and of stability. This modus operandi has historical precedents, as exemplified by the Soviet Union and Mao's China, which aimed to export Communism as a counter to capitalist nations. Although global authoritarianism waned in the 1990s after the fall of the Communist bloc, it has seen a resurgence since the 2000s. Nations like Russia, China, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia have been at the forefront of reviving and amplifying illiberalism on the international front.<sup>1</sup>

To advance this agenda, autocratic powers have deployed a sophisticated array of strategies and instruments.<sup>2</sup> This has included the creation, or co-optation, and control of civil society organizations (CSOs), often termed government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). These entities mimic the appearance of civil society activism while operating under tight government control and direction.<sup>3</sup> They act like a contemporary iteration of the Soviet regime Agitprop,<sup>4</sup> disseminating state propaganda, feigning a commitment to democracy and human rights ideals, and silencing true independent civil society organizations and individuals.

GONGOs also assume a pivotal role in the foreign policy maneuvers of authoritarian regimes, employing what scholar Christopher Walker has termed "sharp power,"—a strategy designed to erode democratic institutions by targeting specific countries and organizations.<sup>5</sup> They have infiltrated international organizations that champion human rights and democracy, such as the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

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1 Larry Jay Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Christopher Walker, eds., *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy*, A Journal of Democracy Book (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Christopher Walker, "The New Containment: Undermining Democracy," *World Affairs* 178 (May–June 2015): 42–51; Rachel Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013); Christian Von Soest, "Democracy Prevention: The International Collaboration of Authoritarian Regimes," *European Journal of Political Research* 54, no. 4 (November 2015): 623–638; Luhrmann, Anna, and Staffan Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?" *Democratization* 26 (March 2019): 1095–1113; Thomas Ambrosio, "Constructing a Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion: Concepts, Dynamics, and Future Research: Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion," *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 4 (November 2010): 375–392.

2 Lee Morgenbesser, "The Menu of Autocratic Innovation," *Democratization* 27, no. 6 (August 2020): 1053–72; Maria J. Debre and Lee Morgenbesser, "Out of the Shadows: Autocratic Regimes, Election Observation and Legitimation," *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 3 (July 2017): 328–347; Christian Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (June 2007): 1–23; Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Arch Puddington, *Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2017); Fiona Shen-Bayh, "Strategies of Repression: Judicial and Extrajudicial Methods of Autocratic Survival," *World Politics* no. 70 (July 2018): 321–357; Johannes Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes," *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (January 2013): 13–38; Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak M. Brudny, eds., *Coloured Revolutions and Authoritarian Reactions*, (London: Routledge, 2014).

3 Moises Naim, "What Is a GONGO?," *Foreign Policy* (blog), October 13, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/13/what-is-a-gongo/>; Stephen W. Kleinschmit and Vickie Edwards, "Examining the Ethics of Government-Organized Nongovernmental Organizations (GONGOs)," *Public Integrity* 19, no. 5 (September, 2017): 529–546.

4 The Bolsheviks were pioneers in modern propaganda, honing their craft with the establishment of the Agitation and Propaganda Department (*Otdel agitatsii i propagandy*) within the Communist Party's Central Committee. As the cornerstone of Soviet agitprop, this department flourished during the New Economic Policy period from 1921 to 1928, transforming into a vast bureaucratic network with over 30 specialized subdepartments. These subdepartments oversaw a range of areas including the press, publishing, science, education, training, cinema, arts, theater, radio, and literature. By the mid-1920s, they were meticulously overseeing their domains. Initially focusing on the Soviet populace, Bolshevik propaganda quickly expanded to international audiences. Their strategy was twofold: propaganda to shape thought, and agitation to stir emotions and spur action. The Bolsheviks deemed any tactic—be it censorship, falsehoods, deceit, or fabricating realities—as acceptable in their quest to instill their ideology in the masses. See Marcel van Herpen, *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

5 William J. Dobson, Tarek E. Masoud, and Christopher Walker, eds., *Defending Democracy in an Age of Sharp Power*, A Journal of Democracy Book (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023); Christopher Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?", *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 9–23; Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power," *Foreign Affairs* (blog), November 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>.

(OSCE).<sup>6</sup> Joining these organizations in the 1990s was a move by former Communist states to secure domestic and international legitimacy. Yet, as these organizations have increasingly called out human rights abuses in authoritarian states, GONGOs have emerged as a preferred tool for whitewashing the reputations of these regimes, challenging the authority of international organizations, and pushing for more limited human rights standards.

The modus operandi of GONGOs has been conspicuously displayed through their involvement in OSCE human dimension events,<sup>7</sup> particularly the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM).<sup>8</sup> Since its inception in 1993, this 10-day forum is organized annually in Warsaw by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).<sup>9</sup> The HDIM provides a critical space for dialog among the 57 OSCE participating states and civil society organizations to review the broad spectrum of OSCE human rights commitments,<sup>10</sup> including democratic governance, elections, minority rights, rule of law, freedom of expression and media, freedom of religion, tolerance and non-discrimination, combating human trafficking, gender equality, migration, and international humanitarian law.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, decisions needed in order to be able to hold the HDIM were blocked by Russia in 2022, 2023, and 2024, prompting the creation of a replacement event under the auspices of the OSCE chairman-in-office as the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference (WHDC). The HDIM and WHDC in Warsaw are complemented by three Supplementary Human Dimension Meetings (SHDM) held each year in Vienna. These are one-and-a-half-day meetings, each dedicated to a single topic within the OSCE's mandate.

At these meetings, GONGOs have been instrumentalized to propagate authoritarian narratives. Claiming to voice the collective views of their population, they have employed simplistic narratives, emotional appeals, and repetitive messaging to bolster their respective governments' propaganda,<sup>12</sup> resonating with Hannah Arendt's assertion that information received from several sources fuels its credibility.<sup>13</sup> They have wielded a weaponized language style and rhetorical tools like hyperbole and whataboutism, alongside extensive disinformation campaigns to malign independent groups and individuals as 'disloyal' and to uphold a mythical conception of a homogenous nation-state. In so doing, they have supported their governments' endeavors to undermine the OSCE's ability to advance human rights, including freedoms of expression and assembly.

This paper scrutinizes the narrative and strategies of GONGOs within the OSCE, drawing insights from the proceedings of the 2018 and 2019 HDIMs, as well as the 2022, 2023, and 2024 WHDCs, and SHDMs in 2024 which the author attended.<sup>14</sup> It focuses on the prominent GONGO-contributing states during this period, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The first section delineates the concept of GONGOs and examines their multifaceted nature within the context of escalating authoritarianism. The following three sections delve into the narrative and tactics employed by GONGOs: the second section sheds light on how these organizations have utilized their narratives and tools to promote their respective governments' policies; the third section examines their response mechanisms in addressing criticisms leveled against their respective governments; and the fourth section scrutinizes their strategies for discrediting critical independent non-governmental

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6 Olivier de Frouville, "Domesticating Civil Society at the United Nations," in *NGOs in International Law*, eds. Pierre-Marie Dupuy and Luisa Vierucci (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2008).

7 The OSCE has a comprehensive concept of security with three intrinsic dimensions: political-military security; economic and environmental security; and human rights and democratization. Each is fundamental to lasting security. By joining the OSCE, all participating States commit to the principle that enduring security is unattainable without respect for human rights and the effective functioning of democratic institutions. These elements form the foundation of what the OSCE terms the "human dimension" of security. 8 Ambassador Daniel B. Baer, "Mind the GONGOs: How Government Organized NGOs Troll Europe's Largest Human Rights Conference," US Mission to the OSCE, September 30, 2016, <https://osce.usmission.gov/mind-gongos-government-organized-ngos-troll-europes-largest-human-rights-conference/>; Ron Synovitz, "Attack of the GONGOs: Government-Organized NGOs Flood Warsaw Meeting," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, sec. Features, September 30, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/attack-of-the-gongos-government-organized-ngos-flood-warsaw-meeting/30191944.html>.

9 The HDIM is held as part of the Review Conference in years when the OSCE holds a summit, and was not held in 2020 and 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

10 The OSCE uses the term "participating States" instead of "member states" to emphasize its distinctive approach and guiding principles. Unlike other international organizations, the OSCE is not based on a formal treaty; rather, it operates as a political process for security cooperation, relying on politically binding commitments rather than legally binding obligations. This terminology reflects the OSCE's focus on consensus-building and voluntary participation rather than legal membership.

11 OSCE, *Human Dimension Implementation Meeting*, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/9/20680.pdf>.

12 Celine-Marie Pascale, "The Weaponization of Language: Discourses of Rising Right-Wing Authoritarianism," *Current Sociology* 67, no. 6 (October 2019): 898–917.

13 Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967, quoted in Pascale, "The Weaponization of Language."

14 Due to the covid-19 pandemic, no meetings were organized in 2020 and 2021.

organizations (NGOs), and their efforts to challenge fundamental principles of universal human rights and question the OSCE's mandate and operational integrity.

This paper emphasizes the importance of addressing the growing global engagement and influence of GONGOs, acknowledging the significant threat they pose to international human rights and democratic standards. In alignment with Marlies Glasius,<sup>15</sup> it advocates for proactive measures to define, operationalize, classify, and scrutinize authoritarian and illiberal practices that are increasingly transcending national borders.

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<sup>15</sup> Marlies Glasius, "What Authoritarianism Is ... and Is Not: A Practice Perspective," *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (May 2018): 515–533.



# Identifying GONGOs and their Use amidst Rising Global Authoritarianism

The collapse of the Communist bloc in the early 1990s, followed by the color revolutions that swept through Ukraine in 2003, Georgia in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005, heralded a wave of global democratization. Freedom House reported a notable increase in the number of electoral democracies from 76 to 119, and of free countries from 65 to 89, between 1990 and 2008.<sup>1</sup> The Arab Spring, a series of widespread anti-government demonstrations that rippled across the Arab world, showed popular aspirations for democratic progression.

Nevertheless, the liberalization that was expected to accompany the democratic transitions within the former Soviet Union, North Africa, and the Middle East generally failed to materialize or have faced setbacks, except notably in the Baltics. Instead, the latter half of the 2000s saw a resurgence of authoritarianism that persisted in the ensuing decade. Several former Soviet countries retained their authoritarian governance framework, while others, such as Egypt and Tunisia, reverted to autocratic rule.<sup>2</sup>

Democracy in the OSCE region has significantly deteriorated.<sup>3</sup> In 2023, Freedom House labeled 11 of the 57 states as “partly free” and eight as “not free.” Russia, which was once only semi-authoritarian in the 1990s and 2000s, has since then dramatically shifted towards becoming a blatantly authoritarian state over the past 15 years. This deterioration is underscored by egregious violations of democratic norms and human rights, both domestically and internationally with its invasion of Ukraine. Other increasingly authoritarian regimes have systematically weakened democratic structures and restricted opposition, shrinking the space for independent NGOs. Russia’s 2012 “foreign agent” law, branding Western-funded NGOs as espionage agents,<sup>4</sup> has been copied as a model for similar repressive measures in other countries, intensifying the crackdown on civil society, particularly on human rights and environmental activists.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, through the systematic rigging of elections and the infringement of human rights, leaders in countries such as Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have succeeded in prolonging their tenure over the decades. Moreover, these regimes have adeptly harnessed nationalism, security concerns, and claims of economic progress to rationalize tightening their hold on power. By capitalizing on public fears, they have portrayed themselves as indispensable custodians of stability, safeguarding against both external and internal perils.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Electoral Democracies, 1989–2011,” in *Freedom in the World 2012: The Arab Uprisings and Their Global Repercussions*, Freedom House, pp. 28–29, [https://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FIW%202012%20Booklet\\_o.pdf](https://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FIW%202012%20Booklet_o.pdf).

2 Khan, Amna Mahmood, and Asif Salim, “Arab Spring Failure: A Case Study of Egypt and Syria,” *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)* 4, no. 1 (January–June, 2020): 44–53; Raymond Hinnebusch, *After the Arab Uprisings: Between Democratization, Counter-Revolution and State Failure* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017).

3 The OSCE is made up of 57 member states in Europe, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and North America.

4 Alexander Cooley, “Countering Democratic Norms,” in Diamond, Plattner, and Walker, eds., *Authoritarianism Goes Global*, p. 123.

5 Sebastian Peyrouse, “The Nexus of Environmental Issues, Poverty, and Political Authoritarianism in Central Asia,” *International Partnership for Human Rights*, 2022, <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IPHRCSP-CA-report-by-Sebastien-Peyrouse-ENG.pdf>.

6 Leah Gilbert and Payam Mohseni, “Disabling Dissent: The Colour Revolutions, Autocratic Linkages, and Civil Society Regulations in Hybrid Regimes,” *Contemporary Politics* 24, no. 4 (August, 2018): 454–480; Karrie J. Koesel and Valerie J. Bunce, “Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rulers,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 3 (September 2013): 753–768; Larry Diamond, “Authoritarian Learning: Lessons from the Colored Revolutions,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 2(2006), 215–222.

Yet, the stability of autocracies is not solely predicated on repression. Authoritarian regimes have cultivated a mix of formal and informal networks within civil society to exert control. Notably, they have established GONGOs or co-opted existing NGOs focused on service delivery, while simultaneously suppressing those involved in public discourse.<sup>7</sup> While not a novel concept, with historical antecedents dating back to the Soviet era,<sup>8</sup> GONGOs have proliferated over the past three decades. These entities, which may receive substantial political, logistical, and financial support from the government and its agencies, often benefit from privileges that shield them from the stringent administrative regulations that independent organizations grapple with, such as complex registration processes and political oppression.

Domestically, GONGOs frequently operate in sectors where state intervention is scant, such as education, health, women's rights, and environmental protection. Some skillfully co-opt nascent social groups and secure foreign funding by positioning themselves as pivotal contributors in these sectors.<sup>9</sup> To preserve their status and circumvent governmental reprisal, GONGOs align their activities with official policies, collaborate with the political establishment, exercise self-censorship on sensitive topics, and refrain from critiquing governmental conduct. Their operations typically promote the state's agenda through their websites. Many of them are very active on social media, or author articles in print media or on the Internet, echoing government disinformation.

At times, GONGOs directly target dissenting voices. For example, in Tajikistan, GONGOs have intruded into opposition party premises and staged protests near Western embassies, denouncing the former as agents of destabilization and the latter as sanctuaries for dissidents.<sup>10</sup> Some GONGOs have also domestically targeted activists or their relatives who have publicly denounced the government, particularly in international forums. In 2016, members of the Tajik GONGO Avangard orchestrated university assemblies, organized demonstrations at the OSCE office in Dushanbe, and harassed the families of individuals who had criticized Tajikistan's human rights record at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM).<sup>11</sup>

GONGOs have extended their influence beyond their respective national borders. Chinese GONGOs, for instance, have become increasingly conspicuous at the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) sessions of the UN Human Rights Council, where they support the government's stance and lobby against independent activists critical of China's human rights practices. Similarly, Cuba and Venezuela, at the Summit of the Americas in Panama, as well as Cambodia and Myanmar at the ASEAN Civil Society Conference, have deployed GONGOs to project an image of a thriving, unencumbered civil society, despite severe constraints and suppression.<sup>12</sup>

The annual OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw has also seen a significant presence of GONGOs, particularly since 2008, when Kazakhstan vied for the organization's chairmanship. Astana mobilized GONGOs to counter independent human rights reports and affirm the government's purported political reforms and compliance with OSCE commitments in order to promote its candidacy and overcome criticism of its human rights record. Since then, HDIMs, WHDCs and SHDMs have consistently featured GONGOs from various authoritarian states, including Azerbaijan, the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, albeit with evolving roles.

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7 David Lewis, "Civil Society and the Authoritarian State: Cooperation, Contestation and Discourse," *Journal of Civil Society* 9, no. 3 (September 2013): 325–340.

8 Beginning in the 1920s, including at the height of Stalinist political repression in the Soviet Union, the government created the "All-Russian Organization of the Deaf," which provided representation for deaf people. Lewis, "Civil Society and the Authoritarian State," p. 331.

9 Salam Kawakibi, "The Paradox of Government-Organized Civil Activism in Syria," in *Civil Society in Syria and Iran*, eds. Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), 169–186.

10 "Tajikistan's Imitation Civil Society," openDemocracy, October 5, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/tajikistan-s-imitation-civil-society/>.

11 "Predstaviteli Tadzhijskogo 'Avangarda' potrebovali ot ofisa OBSE v Dushanbe otveta na svoe obrashchenie," ASIA-Plus (news site), September 22, 2016, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/politics/20160922/231150>; " 'Avangard': pobornik nacional'nyh interesov ili instrument bor'by s oppozitsiej?," *Radio Ozodi*, October 16, 2020, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30896485.html>.

12 Kelly Gerard, "From the ASEAN People's Assembly to the ASEAN Civil Society Conference: The Boundaries of Civil Society Advocacy," *Contemporary Politics* 19, no. 4 (December 2013): 411–426; Christopher Walker, "Dealing with Authoritarian Resurgence," in *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy*, eds. Larry Jay Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Christopher Walker, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016): 216–233.

## GONGOs' Polymorphism

GONGOs are not a homogeneous entity. They encompass a wide range of organizational forms, including associations, think tanks, policy institutes, and media outlets, each with distinct goals and methods. To clarify the kinds of organizations addressed in this paper, the subsequent section delves into the various definitions and types of GONGOs.

GONGOs are commonly conceptualized as entities forged by the state, primarily to further the government's agenda, setting them apart from independent NGOs initiated by citizen groups without government affiliation. While NGOs traditionally strive to address societal concerns and may voice criticism of governmental policies, GONGOs are regarded with skepticism by many experts in civil society for presenting a respectable façade to paper over government shortcomings and create the illusion of democratic values.

This dichotomous framing of NGOs and GONGOs, however, fails to capture the full complexity of the phenomenon. Firstly, it overlooks the polymorphic nature of GONGOs, as highlighted by Lawrence Cumming, who has identified a spectrum of subcategories. These range from MONGO (my own NGO) to PONGO (parliamentary or personal NGO), and extend to various other forms such as FINGO (financially-interested NGO), GANGO (gap-filling NGO), DONGO (donor-organized NGO), DINGO (donor international NGO), BINGO (business-interest NGO), PANGO (party-affiliated NGO), and several others, each acronym reflecting a unique relationship with state or private interests.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, as David Lewis has suggested, civil society should not be viewed as wholly separate from the state nor solely as a bastion of resistance to political dominance. Instead, NGOs and state entities are entwined in a complex web of material transactions, interpersonal connections, and organizational linkages.<sup>14</sup> The interlacing of government-organized and autonomous entities often encompasses a diverse cohort of actors, from public agencies to private contractors, all potentially collaborating to discharge public functions. The classification of a civil society organization is fluid, contingent upon its personnel; the involvement of government officials can transform an NGO into a GONGO, while their departure can restore it to NGO status. Leadership transitions can precipitate the co-optation of independent NGOs, altering their trajectory from government critics to proponents, which may then draw public skepticism about their authenticity as NGOs. Funding dynamics also play a pivotal role, with some NGOs transforming into GONGOs upon receipt of state financial backing for specific projects. Furthermore, in authoritarian contexts, where civil liberties are curtailed and independent NGOs cannot develop or function, the demarcation between authentic NGOs and GONGOs becomes unclear, with genuine autonomy for NGOs being a rarity, as exemplified by countries like Turkmenistan.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, despite their affiliations with political powers, the roles of GONGOs transcend mere replication of state rhetoric, and their endeavors are not all inherently devoid of efficacy. GONGOs can partake in initiatives that garner political support and contribute to particular economic or social realms, fostering social cohesion.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, while the label "GONGO" insinuates a mere extension of governmental will, NGOs involved in aid work may propagate ideals akin to political and economic liberalization, mirroring the objectives of their home country governments. In addition, internationally active NGOs often engage with local governments, receiving logistical and legal facilitation in their host nations.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, the clear-cut delineation between independent NGOs, presumed to be vanguards of laudable causes like human rights, and GONGOs, perceived as enablers of questionable objectives, invites scrutiny. Some independent NGOs have been criticized for supporting undemocratic causes, fostering intolerance, or engaging in extremist activities, occasionally even linked to violence and criminal or terrorist networks.<sup>18</sup>

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13 Lawrence S. Cumming, "GONGOs," in *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, eds. Helmut K. Anheier, Stefan Toepler, and Regina List (New York: Springer, 2010): 779–782.

14 Lewis, p. 326.

15 Reza Hasmath, Timothy Hildebrandt, and Jennifer Y. J. Hsu, "Conceptualizing Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations," *Journal of Civil Society* 15, no. 3 (July 2019): 267–284.

16 Lawrence S. Cumming, "GONGOs," in *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, eds. Helmut K. Anheier and Stefan Toepler (Berlin: Springer, 2010).

17 Anna C. Vakil, "Confronting the Classification Problem: Toward a Taxonomy of NGOs," *World Development* 25, no. 12 (December 1997): 2057–70.

18 N. G. O. Monitor, "European-Funded NGOs Justify the Massacre of Israelis," NGO Monitor, updated October 15, 2023, <https://www.ngo-monitor.org/reports/european-funded-ngos-justify-the-massacre-of-israelis/>.

In light of the polymorphic nature of GONGOs and their multifarious endeavors, instruments, and goals, this paper delves into a broad spectrum of organizations, including associations, media outlets, and think tanks that have participated as civil society in OSCE meetings. Many GONGOs that have participated in the HDIM have exemplified the quintessential GONGO paradigm: entities established and/or funded by states and that unwaveringly promote government interests. However, the many and varying types of these organizations, reflected in their working methods, relationships with political authorities, and funding, are also represented at the OSCE meetings. Some GONGOs that were initially independent or critical of the government become co-opted and repurposed as tools of state propaganda. Other GONGOs have pursued a dual strategy, seeking international recognition and funding for their legitimate work while simultaneously promoting pro-government narratives that cast doubt on Western societies and question the universality of human rights. These organizations have reflected the pressures faced by civil society in authoritarian regimes, and many of them have been compelled to support the state narrative in order to be able to continue their operations, including through participation in global platforms. Some have worked as quasi-state entities that claim to create dialog between the state and civil society on policymaking, but primarily engage with government-friendly or non-controversial groups, which serves to marginalize independent NGOs and suppress authentic civic participation. Additionally, “ghost” GONGOs, which lack a real domestic presence, appear to have been created solely to disseminate state narratives in international forums, often without providing basic organizational details like a website when registering for international events.

All these types of GONGOs, are represented at most HDIM/WHDC/SHDM meetings in Warsaw and Vienna. Taking into account their multidimensionality - some may be explicitly state-funded or directed, while others may maintain a more ambiguous relationship with the state - this study scrutinizes these organizations as mouthpieces or tools of authoritarian regimes that wield disinformation to craft a favorable or idealized national image despite documented widespread violations of OSCE commitments,<sup>19</sup> dismiss criticism, attempt to discredit independent NGOs and individuals contesting their government’s narrative, and challenge the OSCE’s mandate and universal human rights standards. This paper does not presume to make definitive claims about the governance or funding of cited GONGOs. However, by examining statements and written contributions made during OSCE meetings and elucidating the role of these organizations, it aims to shed light on their function as cogs in the machinery of the authoritarian state, regardless of their funding sources or formal ties to the state, to “sustain a dominant discourse that not only legitimizes the existing regime but also renders political alternatives both politically and discursively implausible,” thereby conflating the state apparatus with the public domain of discourse and association.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Naim, “What Is a GONGO?”

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, “Civil Society and the Authoritarian State.”



# Painting a Rosy Picture: GONGOs’ Promotion of Autocracies’ Virtual Politics

Andrew Wilson has coined the term “virtual politics” to describe the illusion of a democratic process in post-Soviet political systems by using sophisticated techniques that mimic democracy, where entire political parties and opposition figures are fabricated—phantom entities without substance or genuine political power. This political technology is not about overt repression but rather about manipulating perceptions to maintain power, creating a semblance of democracy while controlling the political landscape. Virtual constructs are used to legitimize regimes, with the mass media and state-controlled civil society playing a crucial role in projecting these artificial creations and distorting the political narrative.<sup>1</sup> Authoritarian regimes extend these virtual politics beyond their borders, including by deploying GONGOs in international meetings. Claiming to represent their compatriots, GONGOs have employed democratic rhetoric to depict their governments as paragons of human rights and the rule of law, thereby aiming to reinforce their domestic and global legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

At the HDIM/WHDC, GONGOs have articulated their narrative to promote virtual politics and portray their countries in a positive light through three primary means: (1) firstly, they have claimed that their countries’ constitutional and legal frameworks align with international standards and human rights treaties; (2) secondly, they have issued broad, unsubstantiated claims intended to demonstrate their respective countries’ adherence to the rule of law and the human rights standards domestically; and (3) lastly, they utilize rhetorical devices, such as hyperbolic language, to highlight an alleged openness and diversity of media and civil society.

## Endorsing Constitutional Window Dressing

GONGOs have assumed a pivotal role in echoing authoritarian governments’ narratives that their constitutions are committed to democratic principles and human rights, in accordance with international law and OSCE commitments. Yet, as Henry Hale has posited, constitutions often act as epiphenomenal artifacts, exerting little influence on the core dynamics of regime behavior, which are overshadowed by informal political forces.<sup>3</sup> GONGOs’ portrayals have tried to paper over the fact that such constitutional frameworks are not enforced in reality, a phenomenon historically prevalent in autocracies, such as in the Soviet Union, where its 1936 constitution professed a commitment to universal suffrage, freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and fair trials, all against a backdrop of intense repression.<sup>4</sup>

At the HDIM, statements made by state-controlled media such as Crimea’s Millet Television and Radio Broadcasting Station (see box 17) have exemplified how authoritarian regimes instrumentalize portrayals of such constitutional façades. This media has promoted the Crimean constitution as a symbol of unity for the region’s populace to convey a sense of normalization following its annexation by

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1 Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

2 Seraphine F. Maerz, “Simulating Pluralism: The Language of Democracy in Hegemonic Authoritarianism,” *Political Research Exchange* 1, no. 1 (January 2019): 1–23.

3 Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*, Problems of International Politics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 63. See also: Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Problems of International Politics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

4 Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser, eds., *Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes*, Comparative Constitutional Law and Policy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Barry McLoughlin and Kevin McDermott, eds., *Stalin’s Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Russia (HDIM Working Session 3, 2018—hereinafter abbreviated as WS3, 2018).<sup>5</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the grave human rights violations, such as the suppression of freedom of expression and criminal charges for ill-defined offenses like “extremism” or spreading disinformation, documented by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM).<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, GONGOs have pointed to their constitutions to divert attention from other domestic laws that erode freedoms and stand in contradiction to their nations’ professed commitments to the OSCE and broader international norms. In Tajikistan, where the government enforces strict regulations on independent media and employs vague legal terms like “slandering” the President (Article 137 of the Criminal Code) and “insulting” officials (Article 330) to suppress dissent,<sup>7</sup> a GONGO named Khoma (see box 3) claimed that Article 13 of Tajikistan’s Constitution is consistent with Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (WS2, 2019), while the Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation (see box 4) has boasted about the country’s constitutional guarantee of press freedom, citing the supposed increase of new media outlets (WS1, 2019) and ignoring the repressive implementation of other laws.

GONGOs have also used constitutional amendments as a smokescreen to absolve their governments of manipulating electoral processes. The Azerbaijan Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (see box 8) has invoked constitutional provisions (WS1, 2018) to defend the calling of snap presidential elections in Azerbaijan in April 2018, which were boycotted by major opposition parties and characterized by the OSCE as lacking in pluralism.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the regional public organization Youth Society of Tajik Students in Saint Petersburg (see box 4) praised the elections in Tajikistan for their supposed adherence to international standards (WS3, 2019), despite Tajik President Emomali Rahmon’s use of constitutional amendments, such as abolishing presidential term limits in 2016 (Article 65 of the revised Constitution), to maintain his grip on power. In 2020, Rahmon won 90% of the vote in an election marked by severe restrictions on rights and freedoms and a lack of political pluralism.<sup>9</sup> In November 2022, President Rahmon celebrated 30 years in office, becoming one of the longest-serving leaders in the world.

## Asserting Exemplary Performance of Authoritarian Regimes

GONGOS also have worked to frame a narrative that claims their governments’ policies are aligned with international standards and are responsive to citizens’ expectations on fundamental rights, including political diversity, electoral integrity, and nondiscrimination. In so doing, they have sought to burnish the image of their regimes’ performance on human rights and enhance their perceived legitimacy.

The National Center for Human Rights in Kazakhstan has posited that the ombudsman’s role is to integrate international recommendations and provide a conduit for human rights concerns to reach state authorities (WS10, 2018). In a similar vein, the National Endowment for Prosperity has claimed that the political regime has not made cosmetic changes but rather the most serious and effective measures to eliminate super-presidential powers, including, it says, a significant expansion of parliamentary

<sup>5</sup> The links to the video recordings of all the working sessions mentioned in this work are available on the ODIHR/OSCE website: <https://www.osce.org/odih/hdim>.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, “Ten Years of Occupation by the Russian Federation: Human Rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol, Ukraine,” February 28, 2024, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/report/ten-years-of-crimea-occupation-by-the-russian-federation-human-rights-by-the-autonomous-republic-of-crimea-and-the-city-of-sevastopol-ukraine.pdf>; Council of Europe, “Human Rights Situation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol, Ukraine,” August 31, 2023, [https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680a6e10;Halya%20Coynash%20and%20Austin%20Charron,%20Russian-Occupied%20Crimea%20and%20the%20State%20of%20Exception:%20Repression,%20Persecution,%20and%20Human%20Rights%20Violations,%20Eurasian%20Geography%20and%20Economics%2060,%20no.%201%20\(January%202019\):%2028-53](https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680a6e10;Halya%20Coynash%20and%20Austin%20Charron,%20Russian-Occupied%20Crimea%20and%20the%20State%20of%20Exception:%20Repression,%20Persecution,%20and%20Human%20Rights%20Violations,%20Eurasian%20Geography%20and%20Economics%2060,%20no.%201%20(January%202019):%2028-53).

<sup>7</sup> Many reports and articles highlight a dire situation regarding the freedom of the press in Tajikistan. See, for example, Reporters Without Borders, “Tajikistan,” July 21, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/tajikistan>; Institute for War and Peace Reporting, “Tajikistan’s Turn of the Screw against Media,” <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajikistans-turn-screw-against-media>; “Tajikistan: Release Bloggers, Respect Media Freedom,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/22/tajikistan-release-bloggers-respect-media-freedom>; International Partnership for Human Rights, Article 19, “The Price of Silence vs. the Cost of Speaking Out: Media Freedom in Tajikistan,” July 2020, <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ENG-Media-Report-TJ.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “Republic of Azerbaijan Early Presidential Election, 11 April 2018, ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report,” [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/5/388580\\_1.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/5/388580_1.pdf); Richard Kauzlarich and David J. Kramer, “Azerbaijan’s Election Is a Farce,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), April 11, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/11/azerbaijans-election-is-a-farce/>.

<sup>9</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “Tajikistan Presidential Election 2020: OSCE/ODIHR Observation Mission Final Report,” <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/476863>.

powers (WS2, 2024). That is despite reports noting that, although more parties have entered the lower house of the parliament than in the previous term, none of them present real opposition to Tokayev.<sup>10</sup> Other GONGOS have made similar claims for Azerbaijan, emphasizing the importance of respect for democracy (“Gızilbash” Youth Education Public Union WS3, 2024) (see box 16), complete freedom for opposition parties (International Eurasia Press Fund WS6, 2023), engagement of human rights activists in the country (Center for Economic and Social Development, WS3, 2024), and lauding advancements in e-technologies as a testament to the government’s commitment to civil society engagement (Back to Karabakh WS6, 2023) (see box 16)—narratives that starkly contrast with widespread reports of human rights abuses within this country.<sup>11</sup> For Tajikistan, the Youth Society of Tajik Students in Saint Petersburg proclaimed the Tajikistani government’s protection of political rights, alluding to the existence of a multiparty system (WS3, 2019), despite the actual repression of any opposition political parties.<sup>12</sup> The 2020 legislative elections in Tajikistan saw the ruling party secure a majority, while nominal opposition parties, conforming to government policy, filled the remaining seats.<sup>13</sup> Uzbekistani GONGOS, such as the Central Asian Progress and Integration Forum (WS5, 2024; WS9, 2024) and the Karakalpak Branch of the Uzbekistan Children and Families Support Association (WS1, 2024; WS2, 2024) (see box 15), have asserted a normalization of the Karakalpakstan region following the 2022 protests, which they attributed to the alleged numerous reforms undertaken by President Mirziyoyev to promote social development. Despite numerous reports highlighting ongoing repression,<sup>14</sup> the representative of the Karakalpak branch of Uzbekistan Children and Families Support Association, has claimed that there is social and democratic development (WS1, 2024), including in the media sphere.

Furthermore, GONGOS have been instrumental in highlighting supposed nondiscrimination toward and freedoms of ethnic minorities, often in stark contrast with the lived experiences of these groups who face unequal treatment and marginalization. The Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan (see box 7) portrays that country as a beacon of diversity where 130 ethnic groups purportedly enjoy equal rights due to a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s leadership (WS8, 2023).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the Turkish Institute for Human Rights and Democracy heralds Türkiye as a paradigm of inter-ethnic coexistence, proposing it as a model for the European Union (WS4, 2023; WS5, 2023), a stance markedly at odds with the ongoing challenges faced by Kurdish and pro-Kurdish entities in exercising their rights to assembly and association, with numerous Kurdish-language organizations remaining closed since the 2016 coup attempt.<sup>16</sup>

A plethora of other Azerbaijani GONGOS, including the Human Rights Development Center (see box 6) (WS9, 2018; WS13, 2019), the Azerbaijan Journalists’ Network Public Union (WS7, 2024; WS9, 2024) (see box 16), Western Azerbaijan Community (WS6, 2023), Young Leaders Education-Training

10 Freedom House, “Kazakhstan,” *Freedom in the World 2024*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-world/2024>.

11 “Human Rights in Kazakhstan,” *Amnesty International*, 2023, [https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/kazakhstan/report-kazakhstan/#:~:text=Victim%20Compensation%20Fund,-Freedom%20of%20expression,Internet%20Advertising%20centered%20into%20force.](https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/kazakhstan/report-kazakhstan/#:~:text=Victim%20Compensation%20Fund,-Freedom%20of%20expression,Internet%20Advertising%20centered%20into%20force.;); “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Azerbaijan,” United States Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/azerbaijan/>; Human Rights Watch, “Azerbaijan: Events of 2022,” in *World Report 2023*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/azerbaijan>; “Azerbaijan 2023,” *Amnesty International*, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/azerbaijan/report-azerbaijan/>.

12 Although seven parties are officially registered, most are pro-government groups that do not pursue independent agendas, with the exception of the Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan, which forfeited its parliamentary representation in 2015 after boycotting the elections to protest against the harassment of its members by state officials.

13 The People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT), led by President Rahmon, won 47 of the 63 seats in the lower house of parliament while the remaining seats went to nominal opposition parties that conformed to government policy. Observations from election monitors, including the OSCE, underscored the absence of genuine competition and observed that the elections took place under the tight control of the ruling authorities. See “Tajikistan: Fraud-Ridden Election Hands Crushing Win to Ruling Party,” *Eurasianet*, March 2, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-fraud-ridden-election-hands-crushing-win-to-ruling-party>; “2020 Parliamentary Elections in Tajikistan: The Most Predictable and Smooth,” *CABAR.Asia*, March 13, 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/2020-parliamentary-elections-in-tajikistan-the-most-predictable-and-smooth>.

14 “Uzbekistan: 2 Years on, No Justice in Autonomous Republic,” *Human Rights Watch*, July 1, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/01/uzbekistan-2-years-no-justice-autonomous-republic>; “Uzbekistan: The slow death of journalism in Karakalpakstan,” *Reporters Without Borders*, <https://rsf.org/en/uzbekistan-slow-death-journalism-karakalpakstan>.

15 For a much more critical approach to the situation of ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan, see Aram Terzyan, “Minority Rights in Central Asia: Insights from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan,” *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, Institute for Research and European Studies - Bitola 7, no. 2 (June 2021): 103–115, <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA21720103t>.

16 “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Turkey (Türkiye),” United States Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/turkey/>. Steven Vo, “Status of Education and Minorities Rights in Turkey,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (blog), December 20, 2020, <https://gja.georgetown.edu/2020/12/20/status-of-education-and-minorities-rights-in-turkey/>; “Human Rights Violations Against Ethnic & Religious Minorities in Turkey, 2021,” *Turkish Democracy Project*, ACFrOgAx2YBZ-jbNBjxHDB-vYWhzykt-7DHofL...453tujLitKEIT8CK7oY4Krf9a57VULWNp9Fyk=-; Emre Turktut and Thomas Phillips, “Non-Discrimination, Minority Rights and Self-Determination: Turkey’s Post-Coup State of Emergency and the Position of Turkey’s Kurds,” in *Human Rights in Turkey: Assaults on Human Dignity*, eds. Hasan Aydin and Winston Langley, vol. 15, *Philosophy and Politics—Critical Explorations* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2021): 109–129.

and Development Public Union (WS9, 2024) (see box 16), and Back to Karabakh (WS8, 2023), have depicted Azerbaijan as a paragon of interethnic relations and minority rights, including for Armenians (WS6, 2023; WS8, 2023; WS8, 2024). Yet reports on the experiences of the Talysh, Lezgin, displaced Meskhetian Turks, and Kurds, along with limited anti-discrimination efforts and persistent hate speech against Armenians, belie claims of harmonious interethnic relations.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Russian GONGOs such as the Regional Bulgarian National-Cultural Autonomy of the Republic of Crimea named after Paisii Hilendarsky (see box 10) (WS8, 2018) and the Luys Charitable Cultural and Educational Fund (WS10, 2018; WS14, 2019) have asserted that Russian governance in Russian-controlled Crimea respects all ethnicities and languages, which contrasted with the plethora of reports detailing the targeting and discrimination faced by various minority groups, particularly Crimean Tatars, since the 2014 illegal annexation.<sup>18</sup> In Uzbekistan, while there are credible reports documenting repression of the Karakalpak people in their namesake region, the Social Support, Legal Promotion, and Monitoring Center “Noila” in the Navoi region issued a statement with distinctly Soviet undertones,<sup>19</sup> emphasizing supposed friendship among various ethnic groups, including Karakalpaks, with a harmonious blend of cultures and religions, and asserting that everyone is treated equally under the law (WS3, 2024).

GONGOs have also emphasized so-called religious freedom and respect for religious minorities in their home countries, components of the OSCE’s mandate. The Akjavyk Center for Human Rights Studies has proclaimed that tolerance, including religious tolerance, is a cornerstone of Kazakhstani society (WS13, 2019), reinforcing the state’s self-portrayal as a paragon of interfaith harmony, reminiscent of its longstanding tradition of hosting the government-sponsored World Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions since 2003.<sup>20</sup> The term “traditional,” however, thinly veils the substantial discrepancy between Kazakhstan’s professed tolerance and the reality of its religious diversity. The freedom to hold beliefs and practice religion is heavily regulated and tightly controlled by the state, with religious liberty promoted in a selective manner, supporting “traditional” religions such as Islam and Russian Orthodoxy, while frequently obstructing the religious practices of several minority groups, including Protestant denominations like Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, and Pentecostals, despite their long-established presence in Central Asia dating back to the 19th century.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the restrictions and retaliations against independent NGOs that advocate for participatory governance and public accountability in some countries, GONGOs have portrayed an image of a vibrant and unrestricted civil society. The Institute of Young Democrats (WS4, 2019), the Azerbaijani Student Youth Organizations Union (WS1, 2022) (see box 9), the Legal Analysis and Research Public Union (WS9, 2024) (see box 16), the For Social Welfare of Citizens Public Union (see box 16) (WS2, 2024), and the Center for Economic and Social Development (WS1, 2024; WS3, 2024) (see box 16) have claimed robust civil society participation in Azerbaijan. The latter has even stated that the engagement of CSOs in elections in Azerbaijan should serve as a model for the entire world (WS2,

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17 European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, “Report on Azerbaijan” (sixth monitoring cycle), June 21, 2023, <https://rm.coe.int/sixth-report-on-azerbaijan/1680ab9c35>; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Refworld: World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples—Azerbaijan,” Refworld, March 2018, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4954ce0aa.html>; “Experts of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Commend Azerbaijan on Its Regional Legal Counselling Centres, Ask Questions about the Conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh Region and the Baku Multiculturalism Centre,” Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, accessed August 16, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2022/08/experts-committee-elimination-racial-discrimination-commend-azerbaijan-its-regional>.

18 Council of Europe, “Human Rights Situation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol, Ukraine,” May 4, 2022, <https://rm.coe.int/human-rights-situation-in-the-autonomous-republic-of-crimea/1680a66483>; United Nations General Assembly, “Situation of Human Rights in the Temporarily Occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol, Ukraine,” May 26, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/05b9b516-ace8-4bae-8db5-f2edd8e7a97d/G2310115.pdf>; International Partnership for Human Rights, “Fighting Terrorism or Terrorising Activism? Persecution of Civic Activists in Crimea,” May 21, 2019, <https://www.iphonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Crimea-report-new-full-lr.pdf>.

19 The Soviet regime’s concept of “friendship of peoples” promoted the idea of harmonious coexistence among ethnic groups, positioning the USSR as a model of unity and equality among its diverse nationalities. Officially, this policy emphasized brotherhood, mutual respect, and equality among all Soviet citizens, supposedly ensuring that ethnic minorities enjoyed cultural rights and recognition. In practice, however, this idealized harmony concealed systemic discrimination and control. Ethnic minorities faced limited political and civil rights and were subject to centralized policies that often suppressed expressions of national identity or autonomy. The regime’s approach to minority culture led to a “folklorization” of ethnic identities, reducing cultural expression to a series of state-approved, sanitized performances and festivals. These events, devoid of political significance, allowed the Soviet state to promote the appearance of multicultural inclusion while curtailing any potential dissent or demands for greater autonomy among ethnic minorities. This ultimately served as a mechanism for maintaining control over diverse populations rather than fostering genuine equality or cultural freedom.

20 Olimpiada Usanova, “Russia’s ‘Traditional Values’ and Domestic Violence,” *Kennan Cable*, no. 53, June 2020, [https://www.wilson-center.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KI\\_200622\\_cable%2053\\_v1\\_0.pdf](https://www.wilson-center.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KI_200622_cable%2053_v1_0.pdf); Yulia Gorbunova, “‘I Could Kill You and No One Would Stop Me,’” *Human Rights Watch*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/10/25/i-could-kill-you-and-no-one-would-stop-me/weak-state-response-domestic-violence>.

21 “Kazakhstan: Religious Freedom Survey, June 2022,” *Forum 18 News Service*, [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2753](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2753); Sebastien Peyrouse, “Examining Kazakhstan’s Religious Contradiction,” *Eurasianet*, November 12, 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/examining-kazakhstans-religious-contradiction>.

2024).<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the Society of Disabled People of Uzbekistan (see box 16) has claimed significant progress in the development of civil society, allegedly evidenced by Uzbekistan's election to a seat on the UN Council for Human Rights (WS6, 2023). In Kazakhstan, the Information Resource Center has pointed to the engagement of civil society, underscoring its role in the decision-making process and advocacy for public interests (WS10, 2018). This narrative mirrors the government's use of official bodies to simulate civil engagement, such as the National Council of Public Trust, established in 2019. Nevertheless, independent NGOs have encountered substantial barriers to participation, significantly curtailing their involvement in decision-making.<sup>23</sup> The dominance of government-aligned voices within these forums has led to the systematic exclusion or disregard of critical civil society viewpoints.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, a tactic used by several GONGOs is to assert the supposed economic and social progress of the country or one of its regions. For example, the Uzbekistani GONGO Jas Pikir presented figures on economic investment in the Karakalpak region, assured openness there to foreign companies, and praised the growth of foreign trade (WS3, 2024). Similarly, other GONGOs such as the Karakalpak Branch of the Uzbekistan Children and Families Support Association (WS3, 2024), and the Social Support, Legal Promotion and Monitoring Center "Noila" in the Navoi region (WS7, 2024) echoed this message by focusing on Uzbekistani government regional investments in the social sector, including support to and tax benefits specifically for vulnerable populations. These two GONGOs issued off-topic statements to emphasize this so-called economic and social development, in an apparent attempt to divert attention from human rights criticism.

### Hyperbolizing the Narrative

Some GONGOs have employed hyperbolic rhetoric to highlight their statements by magnifying the significance or insignificance of matters.<sup>25</sup> This strategic embellishment serves to accentuate their assertions and construct an edifice of purported liberty so compelling as to appear unassailable. A notable example is the use of inflated, although unsubstantiated, figures—typically in the hundreds or thousands. The Russian Peace Foundation,<sup>26</sup> for instance, claimed the existence of thousands of media outlets to assert a strong freedom of expression in Russia (WS1, 2019), a claim starkly at odds with the stringent control over the media throughout the country, even prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>27</sup> In a similar vein, the GONGO Social Support, Legal Promotion, and Monitoring Center "Noila" in the Navoi region claimed that thousands of CSOs are working on human rights issues (WS7, 2024) in Uzbekistan, although in reality the vast majority of these so-called CSOs are affiliated with the government as the country's registration process makes it extremely difficult for independent CSOs to gain approval.<sup>28</sup> The GONGO National Endowment for Prosperity makes a similar claim regarding Kazakhstan, stating that there are 23,000 CSOs in the country, even though more than three-quarters of them are considered GONGOs (WS7, 2024).<sup>29</sup>

22 For over 20 years, repression against civil society has continued to intensify in Azerbaijan. See for example, Zohrab Ismayil and Ramute Remezaite, "Shrinking Space for Civil Society in Azerbaijan: Tackling Restrictive Laws, Criminal Prosecution, and Tax Penalties," *Caucasus Civil Initiatives Center*, July 13, 2016 <https://www.caucasusinitiative.org/en/researchs/2>.

23 "Kazakhstan 2023," Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/kazakhstan/report-kazakhstan/>. Colin Knox and Sholpan Yessimova, "State-Society Relations: NGOs in Kazakhstan," *Journal of Civil Society* 11, no. 3 (July 2015): 300–316.

24 Sebastien Peyrouse, "How Foreign Funders Should Strengthen Their Support for Civil Society: A Case Study of USAID in Kazakhstan," *PONARS Policy Memo*, no. 256, October 2023, [https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Peppm\\_856\\_Peyrouse\\_October2023.pdf](https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Peppm_856_Peyrouse_October2023.pdf); "BTI 2022 Kazakhstan Country Report," Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index 2022, accessed November 19, 2023, [https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country\\_report\\_2022\\_KAZ.pdf](https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2022_KAZ.pdf).

25 Jeanne Fahnestock, *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

26 On this GONGO and other Russian GONGOs, see Olga Shorina, "NGOs as a Tool For Russia's Projection of Influence," n.d., <https://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/01/GONGO.pdf>.

27 Scott Gehlbach, Tetyana Lokot, and Anton Shirikov, "The Russian Media," in *Russian Politics Today*, ed. Susanne A. Wengle (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 390–407; Tom Paskhalis, Bryn Rosenfeld, and Katerina Tertychnaya, "Independent Media under Pressure: Evidence from Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38, no. 3 (May 2022): 155–174.

28 Matvienko I. "Uzbekistan has 10,000 NGOs, but what do they do?" *Open Democracy*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/uzbekistan-has-10000-ngos-what-do-they-do/>; "Uzbekistan: shrinking civil society threatens project outcomes," *Bankwatch Network*, May 10, 2022, [https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022-05-10\\_EBRD-issue-paper\\_shrinking-civil-society-Uzbekistan.pdf](https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022-05-10_EBRD-issue-paper_shrinking-civil-society-Uzbekistan.pdf); Dilmurad Yusupov and Oybek Isakov, "Why is it Difficult to Open an NGO in Uzbekistan?," *CABAR.asia*, January 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/why-is-it-difficult-to-open-an-ngo-in-uzbekistan/>; "Uzbekistan: Registration Barriers for Independent Groups," *Human Rights Watch*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/07/uzbekistan-registration-barriers-independent-groups>.

29 Sebastien Peyrouse, "How Foreign Funders Should Strengthen Their Support for Civil Society: A Case Study of USAID in Kazakhstan," *Ponars Memo*, no. 856, October 23, 2023, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/how-foreign-funders-should-strengthen-their-support-for-civil-society-a-case-study-of-usaid-in-kazakhstan/#:~:text=Foreign%20funders%20must%20overcome%20local,censorship%20or%20fear%20of%20retaliation.>

GONGOS' hyperbolic claims may contradict the official—and often also unreliable—statistics released by the governments they represent. The Reformist Youths Public Union has reported that there are no fewer than 5,000 media outlets in Azerbaijan,<sup>30</sup> a figure that inflates the official count of 3,500 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>31</sup> While impressive if true, both of these numbers starkly contrast with the on-the-ground context. Azerbaijan's media environment is widely acknowledged as one of the most restrictive in the world, marked by heavy governmental oversight and the systematic stifling of independent and dissenting voices.<sup>32</sup>

Overall, GONGOs have constructed and disseminated narratives that align with the interests of their governments, with the explicit aim of engendering broad-based endorsement of these perspectives, including among Western stakeholders.<sup>33</sup> Their narratives mirror the research undertaken by Seraphine Maerz, which spans 22 countries and delineates a significant dichotomy between democratic societies and their authoritarian counterparts, which frequently inflate the portrayal of their democratic procedures, employing these as a veneer to project an illusory semblance of democratic governance.<sup>34</sup> Maerz' findings have been palpable at the HDIM/WHDC, where independent CSOs have been engaged in assiduous efforts to bring to light human rights violations occurring across a spectrum of countries, including in their own. In stark juxtaposition, GONGOs representing authoritarian states such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have crafted and propagated a seemingly flawless depiction of the state of human rights within their respective territories.

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30 See Gulsel Safarova, "Freedom of Expression, Media and Information in Azerbaijan," Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, September 16, 2019, working session 1, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/431642?download=true>.

31 Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, <http://www.mfa.gov.az/en/content/110> (page accessed on April 4, 2024 but no longer available).

32 Journalists who challenge the government or its policies face an array of repressive measures, including legal action, harassment, intimidation, surveillance, censorship, and imprisonment on spurious charges. See "Azerbaijan's President Offers Placating Words in Response to RSF's Criticism," *Reporters Without Borders*, September 29, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/azerbaijan-s-president-offers-placating-words-response-rsf-s-criticism>; "Azerbaijan," RSF, October 12, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/azerbaijan>. See also Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2024*, "Azerbaijan," <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/nations-transit/2024>; Freedom House, "Azerbaijan," European Country of Origin Information Network, April 11, 2024, <https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/2107349.html>.

33 Wilson, *Virtual Politics*, p. 45.

34 Maerz, "Simulating Pluralism."

# Defensive Strategy: Countering Criticism at the Meetings

GONGOs' narrative strategies have extended beyond merely projecting an excessively positive image. Within the framework of international organizations and events, civil society organizations and opposition figures encounter less censorship and repression than in their home countries and can—relatively more safely—highlight obstacles and repression they endure in their home countries. In response to criticisms directed at their respective governments, GONGOs have assumed a key role in countering these independent voices with competing narratives.

The counter-narratives articulated by GONGOs encompass three distinct dimensions: (1) blatant denial of criticisms raised against their government, including mass repression and illegal military engagements; (2) rationalization or relativization of formal and informal restrictions under the guise of legal stipulations or the current economic situation; and (3) deployment of whataboutism to deflect from their governments' despotic actions by alluding to purportedly analogous, albeit often unverified, conduct within other OSCE member states, particularly those levying criticisms.

## Denying “Unwarranted and Uninformed Criticism”

At the HDIM, most GONGOs have adopted a stance of categorical denial when faced with critiques related to fundamental human rights advocated by the OSCE, such as democratic elections, media freedom, and religious liberty. They have attempted to invalidate these critiques by claiming, purportedly on behalf of civil society and the populace, that their actual experiences have starkly diverged from the depictions in critical reports and statements made by independent CSOs.

GONGOs' defensive posture is especially pronounced in their rebuttals to accusations of rigged or non-competitive elections, as reported in numerous human rights reports including those from ODIHR, and raised repeatedly at HDIM by independent CSOs as well as delegations from participating states. Beyond manipulating constitutions to allow presidents to be perpetually reelected, autocratic regimes have organized controlled elections, reminiscent of the Soviet era, when citizens were compelled to partake in a process offering no real choice beyond the single Communist Party, making for a ceremonial façade of democracy. Contemporary authoritarian regimes have refined this tactic by replacing the single-party system with surrogate parties, creating an illusion of pluralism, thereby crafting a semblance of democratic legitimacy.<sup>1</sup>

Ostensively speaking on behalf of civil society, GONGOs assert before the OSCE HDIM audience that citizens have participated in fair elections, freely choosing their president or parliament. The Public Chamber of the Republic of Crimea (WS3, 2018), the Luys Charitable Cultural and Educational Fund (WS8, 2018), and the Regional Bulgarian National-Cultural Autonomy of the Republic of Crimea named after Paisii Hilendarsky (WS3, 2019) refuted a plethora of reports' disparagement of the so-

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<sup>1</sup> In a manner akin to Bolshevik/Soviet traditions, these elections are meticulously orchestrated to dominate the electoral competition and thus entrench power. Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel, “Identity, Procedures and Performance: How Authoritarian Regimes Legitimize Their Rule,” *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 3 (July 2017): 287–305; Marcus Tannenberget al., “Claiming the Right to Rule: Regime Legitimation Strategies from 1900 to 2019,” *European Political Science Review* 13, no. 1 (February 2021): 77–94; Andreas Schedler, ed., *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006); Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism*, Oxford Studies in Democratization (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Andreas Schedler, “The Menu of Manipulation,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 36–50; Carl Knutsen, Håvard Nygård, and Tore Wig, “Autocratic Elections: Stabilizing Tool or Force for Change?” *World Politics* 69 (January 2017): 98–143; Megan Hauser, *Electoral Strategies under Authoritarianism: Evidence from the Former Soviet Union, Russian, Eurasian, and Eastern European Politics* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2019).

called referendum held in Crimea after its illegal annexation by Russia, asserting that the referendum was actually legal and fair.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Young Society of Tajik Students in Saint Petersburg dismissed criticism of the 2015 elections in Tajikistan, including the OSCE's assessment, which highlighted significant restrictions on the right to run for office, limitations on freedom of expression and assembly, restrictions on media access, and instances of multiple voting and ballot box stuffing, which all undermined the integrity of the electoral process.<sup>3</sup> In response to such reports and statements raised at the HDIM, GONGOs have argued that false information had been circulated, claimed that people were free to choose their government in elections held according to international standards, and employed dismissive rhetoric, labeling critics as self-interest groups that do not accept international standards (Youth Society of Tajik Students in Saint-Petersburg, WS3, 2019).

GONGOs have also been particularly active in responding to criticism regarding their governments' restrictions on freedom of the media and independent journalists. For Tajikistan, the GONGOs Sadoqat (see box 3) (WS5, 2019) and the Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation have claimed that a multitude of media outlets operate with complete freedom of expression. Additionally, the GONGO Khoma has touted Tajikistan as a paragon of media diversity in the region (WS2, 2019) despite increasingly significant restrictions over the past 10 years.<sup>4</sup> Concerning Uzbekistan, amidst the crescendo of domestic and international criticism concerning the lack of free expression and press, the Public Foundation for Support and Development of National Mass Media (see box 11) has cited Uzbekistan's engagement with global entities and the media's participatory role in legislative development as hallmarks of progress (WS3, 2023). In the case of Azerbaijan, various NGOs and reports have highlighted the stringent state control of the majority of media platforms, which predominantly amplify governmental perspectives on political, economic, and social matters, while independent journalists in Azerbaijan often endure harassment, blackmail, and even incarceration.<sup>5</sup> In a rebuttal to these accusations, the Azerbaijan Press Council (see box 5) (WS6, 2019) dismissed all concerns regarding media freedom, claiming that its organization, by including members from both the government and opposition media, served as evidence of a robust and diverse media environment (WS2 and WS3, 2019).

Overall, GONGOs have developed a reactive approach to criticisms on any sensitive issues potentially damaging to their country's image. In Turkmenistan, where the government has organized a forced labor system that mobilizes tens of thousands of public-sector workers, including children, to pick cotton,<sup>6</sup> a GONGO named Ynam (see box 4) expressed its "astonishment" (WS9, 2019) that there could have been accusations of child exploitation.

## Justifying Violent Repression and Illegal Military Actions, and Denying War Crimes

GONGOs have actively responded to international scrutiny of large-scale repression and military operations. At the 2023 and 2024 WHDC, Uzbekistani GONGOs endeavored to reshape the discourse surrounding the violent events in Karakalpakstan in July 2022, when civil unrest was ignited by proposed constitutional amendments perceived as a threat to the region's autonomy. Despite the retraction of these amendments by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the demonstrations in Nukus escalated into a

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2 The illegality of this referendum has been widely denounced, including by the United Nations General Assembly: "General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region," UN Press, March 27, 2014, <https://press.un.org/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>. See also Thomas D. Grant, "Annexation of Crimea," *American Journal of International Law* 109, no. 1 (January 2015): 68–95.

3 "Although Tajikistan's Parliamentary Elections Provided Some Political Alternatives, Campaign Space Was Restricted and a Fair Count Could Not Be Guaranteed, International Observers Say," March 2, 2015, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/143311>; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Republic of Tajikistan Parliamentary Elections 1 March 2015, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, [https://aceproject.org/ero-en/misc/tajikistan-final-report-parliamentary-election/at\\_download/file](https://aceproject.org/ero-en/misc/tajikistan-final-report-parliamentary-election/at_download/file).

4 "In Tajikistan, Independent Media Throttled by State Repression," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, January 4, 2024, <https://cpj.org/2024/01/in-tajikistan-independent-media-throttled-by-state-repression/>.

5 Miriam Limäs-Kollberg, "Being a Journalist in Azerbaijan Just Got Even Harder," *Civil Rights Defenders*, April 6, 2022, <https://crd.org/2022/04/06/being-a-journalist-in-azerbaijan-just-got-even-harder/>; Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, "Threats to Life and Safety of Journalists and Human Rights Defenders in Azerbaijan," March 23, 2023, <https://rm.coe.int/threats-to-life-and-safety-of-journalists-and-hr-defenders-in-azerbaij/1680aaaf3>; Maryna Zastavna, "Azerbaijan: Journalists Face Spurious Smuggling Charges," International Partnership for Human Rights, November 23, 2023, <https://www.iphronline.org/azerbaijan-journalists-face-spurious-smuggling-charges.html>.

6 See Cotton Campaign, "Leading the Fight against State-Imposed Forced Labor in the Cotton Fields of Turkmenistan," <https://www.cottoncampaign.org/turkmenistan/#supplychainrisks>; Turkmen.news, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, Cotton Campaign, "Time for Change: Forced Labor in Turkmenistan Cotton 2022," June 2023, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61855051fe9be0ff3428860/t/64834274d914c53c30fc4538/1686323839498/Forced\\_labor\\_Turkmenistan\\_2023\\_report+\\_LR.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61855051fe9be0ff3428860/t/64834274d914c53c30fc4538/1686323839498/Forced_labor_Turkmenistan_2023_report+_LR.pdf)



confrontation that was met with a forceful crackdown.<sup>7</sup> Human rights groups have documented how Uzbekistani security forces resorted to lethal tactics and disproportionate measures to quell the largely peaceful demonstrations.<sup>8</sup> In response to these reports, the GONGO Central Asian Progress and Integration claimed that the criticism directed at the situation in this region by independent NGOs was false, while Jas Pikir (WS5, 2023; WS6, 2024; WS9, 2024) (see box 6), the Karakalpak Branch of Uzbekistan Children and Families Support Association (WS8, 2024), and the Institute of Democracy and Human Rights (WS8, 2024) (see box 15) mirrored the Uzbekistani government's statements by depicting the demonstrators not as peaceful protestors but as violent insurrectionists, thereby conflating the actions of a few with those of the broader protest movement.

Many Russian GONGOs have been deployed to counter recurring criticisms regarding human rights abuses in Russian-occupied Crimea. Since 2014, Russian officials have enforced measures to stifle anti-Russian or pro-Ukrainian narratives within the region, including online.<sup>9</sup> Russian GONGOs and Russian state-controlled media have dismissed critical reports and statements. The Public Chamber of the Republic of Crimea lauded the existence of a free and democratic press in the region (WS3, 2018), a declaration echoed by *Krymskaya Gazeta* (WS1, 2019) and the Crimean News Agency (WS4, 2019) (see box 17) which refuted any censorship or any difficulty for journalists working in the region. Aiming to invalidate external reports highlighting severe restrictions on and violence against Ukrainian journalists, several GONGOs, including the Regional Bulgarian National-Cultural Autonomy of the Republic of Crimea named after Paisii Hilendarsky (WS1, 2019), have invited foreign press representatives to the region. Additionally, amidst allegations of land expropriations and other human rights abuses reported by the UN secretary-general, the GONGO known as the Regional Public Organization in Ukraine (see box 10) contended that minority rights in Crimea have been fully respected, emphasizing the region's trilingualism and developmental success as a model for others (WS12, 2019).

Additionally, Russian GONGOs have stepped into the role of defending the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine, amplifying its propaganda and rebutting criticisms from the West. For instance, the GONGO Information Group on Crimes against the Person (see box 13) and its spokesperson, Maksim Vilkov, known for his lobbying and the dissemination of disinformation in Western countries,<sup>10</sup> twisted concerns regarding the Azov Battalion's alleged affiliations with far-right and neo-Nazi organizations (WS12, 2019),<sup>11</sup> and claimed that Ukraine broadly celebrated the Nazi Galicia SS division (WS8, 2024), although it was condemned by the Ukrainian government, including by President Zelensky himself.<sup>12</sup> The GONGO reflected the Kremlin's narrative of the so-called "Nazification" of Ukraine, which has been used to justify Russia's invasion. As Russia decided to boycott the 2023 WHDC, the International Peacekeeping Movement Women's Dialogue (see box 12) came to the defense of Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime following accusations of human rights abuses in the conflict, arguing that recent legislative amendments reflected a commitment to prohibiting torture and aligning with international human rights standards that proscribe physical or psychological violence, including torture (WS7, 2023). This GONGO maintained that Russia strictly adhered to the Geneva Conventions by strategically avoiding the bombardment of urban and civilian areas, a restraint that the GONGO claimed actually

7 Lillis Joanna, "Karakalpakstan: Dazed, Confused and Angry after Deadly Turmoil," *Eurasianet*, July 7, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/karakalpakstan-dazed-confused-and-angry-after-deadly-turmoil>.

8 The confrontation resulted in at least 21 fatalities, including four law enforcement officers, and injuries to more than 270 people. Open Dialogue Foundation et al., "The Shooting of Peaceful Protesters in Karakalpakstan," Open Dialogue, August 3, 2022, [https://en.odfoundation.eu/content/uploads/2022/08/03.08.2022\\_karakalpakstan\\_eng\\_fin.pdf](https://en.odfoundation.eu/content/uploads/2022/08/03.08.2022_karakalpakstan_eng_fin.pdf); Ildar Daminov, "Karakalpak Protests Reflect the Shattered Promise of Mirziyoyev's 'New Uzbekistan,'" July 5, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/karakalpak-protests-reflect-the-shattered-promise-of-mirziyoyevs-new-uzbekistan/>.

9 The OSCE/ODIHR and the High Commissioner on National Minorities Human Rights Assessment of Crimea in 2015 found that the de facto authorities had drastically reduced access to independent media in Crimea through regulatory constraints and complex administrative processes. These measures have hindered the public's access to information, and have raised the specter of criminal penalties for those who voice opposition to Russia's annexation of Crimea. International Partnership for Human Rights, "Media Freedom in Crimea," 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/05b9b516-ace8-4bae-8db5-f2edd8e7a97d/G2310115.pdf>.

10 Nicolas Quenel, "Cette journaliste russe qui infiltrait 'Le Monde diplomatique' et 'L'Humanité,'" *Le Point*, February 22, 2024 [https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/cette-journaliste-russe-qui-infiltrait-le-monde-diplomatique-et-l-humanite-23-02-2024-2553207\\_23.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/cette-journaliste-russe-qui-infiltrait-le-monde-diplomatique-et-l-humanite-23-02-2024-2553207_23.php).

11 Founded in May 2014, the 12th Special Operations Brigade Azov is a unit of the National Guard of Ukraine, originally based in Mariupol, near the Sea of Azov, from which it takes its name. It has been controversial due to its early and allegedly ongoing associations with far-right groups and neo-Nazi ideology, as well as its use of symbols linked to Nazism. However, some argue that the regiment has evolved, moderating its far-right elements since becoming part of the National Guard in November 2014; see Massimo Introvigne, "The Azov Battalion: Is it really a 'Nazi' regiment?," *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, March 21, 2022, <https://hrwf.eu/russia-the-azov-battalion-is-it-really-a-nazi-regiment/>; Andreas Umland, "Irregular Militias and Radical Nationalism in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: The Prehistory and Emergence of the 'Azov' Battalion in 2014," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 105–31.

12 Naan Lipshiz, "Hundreds in Ukraine attend marches celebrating Nazi SS soldiers," *The Times of Israel*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hundreds-in-ukraine-attend-marches-celebrating-nazi-ss-soldiers/>.

compromised operational effectiveness and increased risks to Russian forces.<sup>13</sup> The GONGO's narrative extended to countering allegations regarding the abduction of Ukrainian children,<sup>14</sup> and tried to discredit the International Criminal Court by portraying it as an instrument of political interference, influenced by Western vested interests and propaganda campaigns (WS9, 2023). In addition to the GONGOs, the Kremlin has also been supported at OSCE meetings by some far-right CSOs based in Europe, such as Bürgerbewegung Pax Europa<sup>15</sup> (SHDM, May 2024) and Fundacja Swobod Obywatelskich im Andraeja Leppera<sup>16</sup> (SHDM, May 2024), which have echoed Russia's narrative, including about alleged restrictions on Russian media in the West.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of Azerbaijan's military intervention in Karabakh in 2023, Azerbaijani GONGOs actively portrayed this in a positive light.<sup>17</sup> The Turkish Institute for Democracy and Human Rights claimed it was the restoration of peace and dialog (see box 8) (WS2, 2023) and the GONGO Back to Karabakh touted the successful integration of the Armenian population (WS8, 2023), while the GONGO known as the International Eurasia Press Fund simultaneously tried to discredit Armenia by accusing it of supporting separatist movements (WS2, 2023) and the GONGO known as the Citizens' Labor Rights Protection League (see box 2) alleged the operation of illicit courts that had purportedly sentenced thousands in Karabakh (WS5, 2023).

### Relativizing Restrictions on Civil Society and Media Space in the Name of Legal or Economic Factors

Restrictions on civil society and media have occasionally been rationalized through legalistic and economic narratives. At the HDIM/WHDC, some GONGOs have conceded certain criticisms while countering that the governments in question were working to ameliorate these very concerns. For example, Kazakhstani GONGOs have projected an image of proactive engagement with the challenges faced by specific faith-based groups. The Union of Legal Entities, Union of Pentecostal Churches of Kazakhstan (WS7, 2018) and the Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith of Kazakhstan (WS5-2023) acknowledged registration challenges faced by some congregations while simultaneously claiming their

13 This statement stands in stark contrast to the multitude of reports on the destruction of countless civilian buildings by Russian military forces since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ukraine, "Civilian Casualty Update 28 August 2023," News, August 28, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/08/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-28-august-2023>.

14 Kaveh Khoshnood, Nathaniel A. Raymond, and Caitlin N. Howarth, et al., "Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-education and Adoption of Ukraine's Children," February 14, 2023, Yale School of Public Health, Humanitarian Research Lab,

15 The Andrzej Lepper Civic Freedom Foundation, registered in February 2024, aims to provide citizens of the Republic of Poland with access to independent information sources and promote constitutional values such as freedom of speech, the right to disseminate and obtain information, active and passive electoral rights, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and of conscience. It also upholds values derived from the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. However, despite its stated mission, its representative at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Tomasz Jankowski, circulates Russian disinformation through independent sources. He has been an active contributor to the Russian disinformation site Sputnik, where he has published several articles. He also serves as the secretary of the party Zmiana, meaning "change." This party views Russia as a natural ally of Poland and the European Union, harbors strong anti-American sentiment, and aligns with Vladimir Putin's political views. The leader of Zmiana, Mateusz Piskorski, denies Russian aggression against Ukraine, supports pro-Russian separatists, insists that the Crimean secession referendum was legitimate despite being declared illegal by the EU and UN, and opposes the Polish government's "confrontational" and "anti-Russian" policies. A political scientist told EU observer, "Russia's support for Ukrainian separatists is a natural response to a situation where compatriots are endangered by Ukrainian nationalists." For more details, see for example Paulina Pacula, "New Pro-Russia Party Emerges in Poland," March 23, 2015, *Parlementaire Monitor*, [16 The group presents itself as a "human rights organization" advocating for "freedom and democracy" against "Islamisation." It has actively lobbied at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe \(OSCE\), often represented by Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff, and has collaborated with the International Civil Liberties Alliance and the Center for Security Policy of Frank Gaffney. René Stadtkewitz has served as deputy chairman of the organization, while Conny Axel Meier holds the position of national secretary. In 2011, Meier delivered a speech at a conference in Strasbourg, France, organized by Stop Islamization of America and Stop Islamisation of Europe, alongside Robert Spencer and Roberta Moore of the Jewish Division of the English Defence League. The Bürgerbewegung Pax Europa has sought to associate itself with the anti-Nazi White Rose resistance movement, claiming its revival. During the 2012 international counter-jihad conference in Brussels, Meier compared German Muslims to members of the Nazi Party. He referenced a study revealing that half a million German Muslims openly supported Sharia over German law, a figure he equated to five times more than the number of Nazi Party members in 1928. Notably, one former member of the White Rose, Susanne Hirtzel, was actively involved in the BPE.](https://www.parlementairemonitor.nl/9353000/1/j9vrvj5epmje1ey0/vjsggqul0pxt?ctx=vgaclx1jzmo&tab=1; Anton Shekhovtsov, <i>The Rise and Fall of a Polish Agent of the Kremlin Influence: The Case of Janusz Niedźwiecki</i>, European Platform for Democratic Elections, n.d., https://thwthr.com/files/EPDE/RESSOURCES/2021/Publications/Anton%20Shekhovtsov%20-%20The%20Rise%20and%20Fall%20of%20a%20Polish%20Agent%20of%20the%20Kremlin%20Influence.pdf.</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

17 Several human rights organizations have investigated the situation in Karabakh, including the ethnic cleansing since Azerbaijan's military later intervention in this region in 2023. See, for example, "Why Are There No Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?" *International Partnership for Human Right, Freedom House* et al, November 2024, [https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/no-armenians-in-nk-ddf-fh\\_fact-finding\\_report\\_full\\_version.pdf](https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/no-armenians-in-nk-ddf-fh_fact-finding_report_full_version.pdf).

own unfettered religious freedom, thereby obfuscating the disparate treatment of various religious denominations.<sup>18</sup>

GONGOs also have utilized legal rationales to justify constraints on civil society. The Azerbaijan Press Council (WS6, 2019) contended that the non-registration of certain political entities was due to their alleged inability to provide necessary documentation, including the required 1,000 signatures. The GONGO's narrative veils the systematic manipulation of legal frameworks by the Azerbaijani authorities to suppress the opposition, as shown for example by the over two decades of denial of registration to the Azerbaijan Socialist Party, ostensibly on the grounds of incomplete paperwork.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, GONGOs have rationalized the challenges encountered by certain media outlets and NGOs by invoking economic justifications. In a session on "Fundamental Freedoms" (WS2, 2019), the GONGO called NGO Sociologist (see box 6) echoed the position of the Tajikistani government, attributing the shuttering of several newspapers since 2018 to dwindling readership rather than government coercion (WS5, 2019). Although the rise of television, the internet, and social media has indeed impacted the readership of print media, the decline of newspapers in Tajikistan has primarily resulted from the government's targeted campaign against independent media, as noted by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.<sup>20</sup>

Overall, the utilization of disinformation by GONGOs to deflect criticism concerning the diminution of media outlets has been a prevalent tactic. For Tajikistan, NGO Sociologist argued that the post-Soviet generation's purported difficulty in understanding Arabic terms, now allegedly common in Tajikistani newspapers, led to a decrease in readership and the closure of numerous newspapers (WS2, 2019), thereby concealing the deliberate suppression of independent media in the country. Notably, all the shuttered newspapers in Tajikistan were published in either Tajik or Russian, not Arabic.<sup>21</sup>

### Start by Cleaning Up Your Own Backyards! GONGOs' Use of Whataboutism

GONGOs have often intertwined disinformation with whataboutism, a rhetorical diversion that shifts critical discussions to unrelated topics or reciprocal accusations to elicit apathy and brand criticism as hypocritical.<sup>22</sup> Soviet propaganda extensively utilized this technique, for example by diverting attention from its gulag system by spotlighting the history of slavery in the United States. This strategic deflection was meant not only to absolve the Soviet regime of accountability but also positioned foreign criticism as steeped in double standards. Mirroring this, contemporary Russia has, since the mid-2000s, increasingly utilized whataboutism to counter Western criticisms.<sup>23</sup> A stark illustration occurred during the 2007 G8 press conference, where President Putin, claiming to be an "absolute and pure democrat," concurrently castigated the United States for alleged torture and EU member states for the supposed violent suppression of demonstrators.<sup>24</sup>

GONGOs have also used this technique at the OSCE HDIM/WHDC. For example, a Russian GONGO based in Ukraine, the Co-ordination Center for Freedom of Expression, invoked Julian Assange's incarceration to question the United States' moral high ground in criticizing journalistic suppression abroad (WS4, 2019). In a similar vein, the Regional Bulgarian National-Cultural Autonomy equated

18 "Kazakhstan: Religious Freedom Survey, June 2022," *Forum 18*, June 23, 2022, [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2753](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2753); Office of International Religious Freedom, "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Kazakhstan," US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kazakhstan/>.

19 Heydar Isayev, "Azerbaijan Cultivates One-Way political 'Dialogue,'" *Eurasianet*, November 12, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-cultivates-one-way-political-dialogue>.

20 "In Tajikistan, Independent Media Throttled by State Repression," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, January 4, 2024, <https://cpj.org/2024/01/in-tajikistan-independent-media-throttled-by-state-repression/>.

21 On the repression of media freedom in Tajikistan, see also Reporters Without Borders: <https://rsf.org/en/country/tajikistan>.

22 Tracy Bowell, "Whataboutisms: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," *Informal Logic* 43, no. 1 (May 2023): 91–112; Serghei Golunov, "External Interference Narratives in Russian and U.S. Politics: Conspiracy Theorizing Meets Whataboutism," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 512, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, February 27, 2018, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/external-interference-narratives-in-russian-and-u-s-politics-conspiracy-theorizing-meets-whataboutism/>.

23 Matthew Luxmoore, "Putin's Performance at Geneva Summit Seen as a Master Class in 'Whataboutism,'" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-biden-summit-whataboutism-russia-narrative/31313209.html>; Aleksandra Srdanovic, "2 Decades of Russian 'Whataboutism': A Partial Rundown," *Russia Matters* (blog), Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School of Government, October 21, 2021, <https://www.russiainmatters.org/blog/2-decades-russian-whataboutism-partial-rundown>; Daphne Skillen, *Freedom of Speech in Russia: Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin*, Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies 108 (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017).

24 Serghei Golunov, "The Kremlin's Compulsion for Whataboutisms: Western Experience in the Putin Regime's Political Rhetoric," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 252, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, June 14, 2013.

the annexation of Crimea with Germany's reunification and the Czechoslovak split (WS14, 2019), deliberately conflating military annexation with consensual political processes.

One of the most prominent examples of GONGOS' use of whataboutism, including at the HDIM, is RT (see box 17), formerly known as Russia Today, and its editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan.<sup>25</sup> They have repeatedly disseminated disinformation targeting Western countries, such as implicating French President Emmanuel Macron in the coronavirus pandemic, portraying him as an emblem of Western moral decay,<sup>26</sup> and denigrating democratic norms and institutions in the West while at the same time extolling Russia's alleged upstanding governance.<sup>27</sup> During the OSCE HDIM, RT has leveled accusations of human rights violations against France, alleging restrictions on RT journalists' access to the Élysée Palace (WS3, 2018; WS1 and WS2, 2019) and contrasting this with the purported openness that Russian authorities extend to French journalists, including access to the Duma (WS2, 2018).<sup>28</sup> Maksim Vilkov of the Information Group on Crimes against the Person (see box 13) echoed this narrative during a side event (SHDM, May 2024) with several other Putin proponents, citing restrictions on access to information in European countries. He also pointed to the alleged persecution in Europe of journalists who do not align with the general political stance of their country's authorities as a sign of a crisis of democracy in the region. Vilkov stated that many journalists have been imprisoned and tortured in European countries, that some have been killed or have disappeared, and that Russian media has been banned.

GONGOS' use of whataboutism often rests on unsubstantiated claims. For example, the Russian media organization Regnum (see box 17) reported numerous alleged cases in Europe of women separated against their will from their families under false claims of domestic violence (WS8, 2019), while the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation (see box 7) countered criticism of Russia's electoral processes by accusing many OSCE countries—without evidence—of violating established election standards (WS3, 2019). Furthermore, the Global Rights of Peaceful People International Platform claimed to have documented electoral irregularities in Germany's 2016 election (WS5, 2019), although the alleged evidence was not provided on its website.<sup>29</sup> At times, the interplay of disinformation and whataboutism by some GONGOS stemmed from the ignorance of the GONGO's representative. For example, the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation (WS3, 2019) lamented the derision aimed at Russian electoral processes by drawing a parallel to the lack of elections in Libya, mistakenly identifying it as an OSCE Partner state.<sup>30</sup>

Azerbaijani GONGOS' stances at the HDIM have offered other stark illustrations of how autocratic states wield whataboutism to push back against international criticism.<sup>31</sup> In response to the European Union's observations on antisemitism, the Azerbaijan Press Council asserted historical absence of such sentiments in Azerbaijan, while simultaneously highlighting overlooked antisemitic attitudes within Europe itself (WS7, 2019). Furthermore, the GONGO questioned why the United States, known for its propensity to criticize others, remains silent on the deaths of over 300 journalists following its military intervention in Iraq (WS4, 2019). By using large but unsubstantiated figures,<sup>32</sup> the GONGO shifts the focus, suggesting US involvement in these deaths and thereby eroding the credibility of Washington's criticisms.

Overall, GONGOS' use of whataboutism blends factual arguments and disinformation to generate doubt, confusion, and counter criticism from independent NGOs and other governments. In deflecting

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25 Sofya Glazunova et al., "Soft Power, Sharp Power? Exploring RT's Dual Role in Russia's Diplomatic Toolkit," *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no. 16 (December 2023): 3292–3317.

26 "French president to be the symbol of Western moral decay, which caused the coronavirus," EU vs Disinfo (blog), <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/french-president-is-the-symbol-of-western-moral-decay-which-caused-the-coronavirus/>.

27 Mikhail Zygar, "Putin's New Story About the War in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs* (blog), November 10, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-new-story-about-war-ukraine>.

28 While journalists' access to the Élysée Palace is by invitation only and RT was indeed not invited, its journalists could freely work and broadcast in France until their accreditation was withdrawn in 2022 after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. See "Disinfo: Sputnik and RT Situation in France Is Extremely Difficult and French Authorities Called to Boycott Those Media," EU VS DISINFO (BLOG), <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/sputnik-and-rt-situation-in-france-is-extremely-difficult-and-french-authorities-called-to-boycott-those-media/>.

29 See the GONGO's website: International Platform Global Rights of Peaceful People, <https://makrhe10.wixsite.com/gropp>.

30 The OSCE maintains special relations with 11 countries, which are known as Partners for Cooperation: Afghanistan, Algeria, Australia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and Tunisia.

31 Arzu Geybullayeva, "In the Crosshairs of Azerbaijan's Patriotic Trolls," *Open Democracy*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/azerbaijan-patriotic-trolls/>.

32 The Committee to Protect Journalists has identified 55 journalists killed in Afghanistan between 1992 and 2022: [https://cpj.org/data/killed/asia/afghanistan/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&cc\\_fips%5B%5D=AF&start\\_year=1992&end\\_year=2022&group\\_by=location](https://cpj.org/data/killed/asia/afghanistan/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&cc_fips%5B%5D=AF&start_year=1992&end_year=2022&group_by=location).

these criticisms, they strive to construct a narrative of moral parity, positing that their conduct is no less defensible than that of other OSCE participating states that voice objections to the authoritarian inclinations of Russia and its allies.



# Using GONGOs to Co-opt and Attack Independent Civil Society and International Organizations

Authoritarian regimes also use GONGOs to take over independent organizations, to attack the reputations of individuals and NGOs who are critical of the government, and to undermine the conduct of international events and challenge the principles of international organizations. All these stratagems have been evident at OSCE human dimension events.

## Simulating Freedom of Expression through Remnant and Cloned Media

Autocratic regimes have refined their 20th-century tactics of media control into more sophisticated strategies. Instead of only employing direct censorship and repression, they have crafted an illusion of liberty by co-opting once-independent media outlets. This method enables them to refute claims of societal and expressive constraints, to project an image of pluralism while retaining their grip on power.

The case of the radio station Ekho Moskvy, presented at the 2019 OSCE HDIM by the GONGO Russian Peace Foundation, illustrated Russia's calculated manipulation of media freedom. Founded in 1990, Ekho Moskvy was once heralded as a bastion of free speech poised to challenge established narratives. Yet, faced with increasing state oversight, the station began to make concessions to placate the government, which included allocating significant airtime to pro-Kremlin commentators and narratives, thereby watering down its independent voice. Ultimately, control of the station was transferred to Gazprom Media—a subsidiary of the state's energy giant—enabling the Kremlin to steer the editorial policy and overhaul its leadership.<sup>1</sup> Despite the gradual erosion of Ekho Moskvy's editorial independence, duplicated by the co-optation of other independent media entities, at the HDIM the Russian Peace Foundation lauded the station as a paragon of free media, dismissing external critiques as unfounded and the product of misinformed speculation (WS1, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, hoping to avoid the international attention that the outright shutdown of critical media outlets might provoke, authoritarian regimes have shifted to alternative tactics by establishing proxies to replicate these outlets. The new media entities, though mirroring their predecessors in form, are firmly ensconced in the dominion of the state or its affluent oligarchs, effectively purging dissenting voices and undermining editorial independence. In Azerbaijan, the case of the Real TV Channel, formerly known as ANS, illustrates this strategy. At the HDIM, the Azerbaijan Press Council portrayed the channel as an essential and independent commercial entity (WS5, 2019). ANS TV was originally

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1 "Dispatches: Russia's Independent Radio under Attack," *Human Rights Watch*, November 7, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/07/dispatches-russias-independent-radio-under-attack>; Maria Snegovaya, "Stifling The Public Sphere: Media and Civil Society in Russia," National Endowment for Democracy, International Forum for Democratic Studies, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Stifling-the-Public-Sphere-Media-Civil-Society-Russia-Forum-NED.pdf>; "Russian Ekho Moskvy Radio Director Fedutinov Dismissed," *BBC News*, February 18, 2014, Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26239715>; "Gazprom-Media to Change Director at Ekho Moskvy," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Russia, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ekho-moskvy-gazprom-media-change-director-general-dyomin/26910287.html>.

2 A plethora of reports denounce the decline in freedom of expression since Putin came to power, which has worsened even further since the invasion of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. See "Online and on All Fronts: Russia's Assault on Freedom of Expression," *Human Rights Watch*, 2017, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/russiafoe0717\\_web\\_2.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/russiafoe0717_web_2.pdf); Stephen H. Marcus and Marissa Kardon Weber, "Russia's Other War: The Fight over Freedom of Expression," *Jurist News*, August 1, 2023, Professional Commentary, <https://www.jurist.org/commentary/2023/08/marcus-kardon-weber-russia-freedom-of-expression/>; Maria Rosa Milanese, "Testing Democratic Standards in Russia: The Case of Freedom of Expression during Putin's Era—A Comparative Analysis of National and International Laws Regulating Freedom of Expression in Russia and Their Application in the Context of Media," 2021, <https://doi.org/10.25330/1289>.

among the few independent media outlets in Azerbaijan that addressed local issues, before facing shutdown threats after it announced plans to broadcast an interview with the late leader of the Gülen movement Fethullah Gülen.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently replaced by Real TV Channel, which purportedly continued under the original founder's leadership, the channel has been co-opted by political elites, repositioning it into a pro-government entity actively countering its critics.

GONGOs have also defended state-controlled entities and funds that autocrats employ to foster an illusion of freedom and autonomy. A notable example is the Aliyev Charity Fund in Azerbaijan, presided over by Mehriban Aliyeva, President Ilham Aliyev's wife. The Fund is instrumental in advancing Azerbaijan's "caviar diplomacy," aimed at bolstering the nation's global image by dispensing lavish gifts and sponsoring cultural and educational initiatives internationally via foreign organizations sympathetic to the regime.<sup>4</sup> Despite being marred by numerous corruption allegations and its implication in bribery scandals within the Council of Europe,<sup>5</sup> the Azerbaijan Press Council has leveraged forums like the OSCE HDIM to whitewash the Fund's reputation, extolling its contributions to infrastructure projects like school renovations, and concluding that this Fund should not be criticized but encouraged (WS6, 2019).

### In the Name of Security and Stability: GONGOs on the Attack

Authoritarian regimes craft a façade of democracy by orchestrating projects that lack genuine representation and accountability.<sup>6</sup> Behind this façade, political entities and civil society groups are reduced to mere proxies, conforming to the rigid paradigms dictated by the ruling powers. Deviation from or opposition to these paradigms is met with punitive measures, vilification, and dehumanization. Opponents are maligned as traitors, foreign operatives, terrorists, and/or agents of destabilization threatening the state's integrity.<sup>7</sup>

GONGOs have largely replicated this strategy at OSCE meetings. They have vilified independent journalists and opposition figures, including those participating in the meetings, with pejoratives like "corrupt," "criminals," or "terrorists," aiming, supposedly in the name of civil society, to bolster claims that their national delegations might otherwise find challenging to present credibly. For instance, during Russia's 2019 campaign against journalists in Crimea, the editor of state-controlled media outlet *Krymskaya Gazeta* echoed the Kremlin's and Russian GONGOs' rhetoric by denouncing the detained journalists as terrorists, purportedly estranged from true journalism (WS2, 2019). Similarly, the Reformist Youth Public Union (see box 9) claimed that certain individuals in Azerbaijan hid their illegal activities under the guise of journalistic work (WS2, 2018), while the Azerbaijan Press Council contested the authenticity of imprisoned journalists in Azerbaijan, alleging that they secured their accreditation through dubious means (WS2, 2018). Concerning Tajikistan, the exodus of journalists and activists, driven by harassment and intimidation, was portrayed by the Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation as an attempt by these individuals to evade the legal consequences of violating the country's laws (WS5, 2019).

In 2024, Uzbekistan apparently mobilized numerous GONGOs to discredit critical voices expressed during the meeting concerning human rights in the country. One GONGO, the NGO Central Asian Progress and Integration Forum (WS4, 2024), echoed the government's narrative, claiming significant development of civil society in the country and vehemently attacking a representative from the

3 "Azerbaijan's ANS: Death of a TV Station," *Eurasianet*, July 19, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbajjans-ans-death-of-a-tv-station>.

4 "European Values Bought and Sold: An Exploration into Azerbaijan's Sophisticated System of Projecting Its International Influence, Buying Western Politicians and Capturing Intergovernmental Organisations," Freedom Files Analytical Centre, March 2017, [https://civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/az\\_lobbying\\_corruption\\_report\\_10\\_march\\_2017\\_public\\_version\\_color\\_1.pdf](https://civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/az_lobbying_corruption_report_10_march_2017_public_version_color_1.pdf).

5 Gerald Knaus, "Europe and Azerbaijan: The End of Shame," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (July 2015): 5–18; "Caviar Diplomacy—How Azerbaijan Silenced the Council of Europe," *European Stability Initiative*, May 24, 2012, <https://www.esiweb.org/publications/caviar-diplomacy-how-azerbaijan-silenced-council-europe/>; "Caviar Diplomacy: Why Every European Should Care," *European Stability Initiative*, October 6, 2023, <https://www.esiweb.org/proposals/caviar-diplomacy>.

6 Wilson, *Virtual Politics*, p. 30.

7 An extensive literature has been produced on how authoritarian regimes have prevented the expression of opposition voices and activities. In the case of Russia, see William Zimmermann, *Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin*, 3rd printing, and 1st paperback printing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Samuel A. Greene, *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2014); Graeme B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010). In the case of Azerbaijan, see Jody LaPorte, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Political Opposition and Hegemonic Authoritarianism in Azerbaijan," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 4 (July 2015): 339–366.



opposition movement Erkin O'zbekiston, which was referred to as a "so-called NGO."<sup>8</sup> These attacks were continued by the president of the Society of Disabled People in Uzbekistan (see box 14), who leveled corruption charges against the Erkin O'zbekiston representative without concrete evidence and claimed that his criticism of the government unjustly tarnished the nation's image (WS6, 2023).

Two other Uzbekistani GONGOs, Jas Pikir (WS8, 2024) and the Social Support, Legal Promotion, and Monitoring Center "Noila" in the Navoi region (WS5, 2024), also launched aggressive and targeted attacks against several activists present who had denounced the human rights situation in the Karakalpakstan region. They accused the activists of living on Western funds and of having obtained asylum in Europe to escape their criminal responsibilities in Uzbekistan while pursuing their alleged destructive objectives.

### Case Study: The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan

GONGOs' efforts to discredit dissenters have been vividly illustrated at the HDIM/WHDC/HDM by a vilification campaign against the two main opposition parties in Tajikistan: Group24 and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), some of whose members have attended the meeting.

The IRPT originally was officially recognized and permitted by the government as part of the 1997 peace agreement. This accord mandated the integration of 30% of the United Tajik Opposition, which included the Islamic opposition, into various levels of Tajikistan's executive branch, including ministries, departments, local governance, and judicial and law enforcement agencies. The government's commitment to this pluralistic integration was, however, short-lived. The IRPT, which had shifted its focus under Muhiddin Kabiri's leadership towards advocating for democratic reform with a reduced emphasis on religious doctrine, lost its parliamentary representation in the 2015 elections, which were noted by the OSCE for their lack of competitiveness.<sup>9</sup> The party's increasing appeal, particularly among the younger population, prompted the government to engage in electoral interference, culminating in its banning in 2015.<sup>10</sup>

Since then, many GONGOs have promulgated the Tajikistani government's narrative at the OSCE, using disinformation, revisionist history, and conspiracy theories to discredit the IRPT and related groups and instead to paint a portrait of a government besieged by unjust criticism and conspiracies. These narratives appeared to have been crafted to undermine any notion that viable alternatives to the current regime might exist, insinuating that any change in leadership would entail grave risks and untenable costs. They have been particularly instrumental in framing the IRPT as the cornerstone of a conspiratorial narrative that portrayed the government not as an oppressor, but as a beleaguered victim striving to protect the nation's stability and integrity.

Tajikistani GONGOs' statements have systematically refuted criticisms levied by opposition groups concerning governmental corruption and the state's failures in fostering socioeconomic progress, while simultaneously directing similar accusations towards these critics. The Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation and the Somoniyon Tajik Cultural Center in Kazakhstan (see box 4) (WS9, 2019 and WS13, 2019) posited that the IRPT was a major catalyst for a surge in Tajik emigration, conspicuously ignoring the broader socioeconomic context: since the 2000s, the push factors for migration have predominantly been the state's inability to provide adequate employment and social welfare, affecting a substantial segment of the population. As highlighted by John Heathershaw, the government has leveraged migration, alongside a shadow economy rooted in corrupt privatization and land reforms, as well as the misappropriation of international aid, to maintain its grip on the country.<sup>11</sup>

GONGOs have exploited the pervasive fear of terrorism to resonate with public anxieties. They have used disinformation to link the IRPT with Islamist extremism, casting it at the HDIM as a threat to Tajikistan and international security. The Association of Tajiks in Kazakhstan (WS4, 2019) accused members of the opposition, including those from the IRPT, of being criminals and terrorists, thus

8 Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2024, "Uzbekistan," <https://freedomhouse.org/country/uzbekistan/nations-transit/2024>; Irina Matvienko, "Uzbekistan has 10,000 NGOs, but what do they do?" *Open Democracy*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/uzbekistan-has-10000-ngos-what-do-they-do/>.

9 See "Republic of Tajikistan Parliamentary Elections 1 March 2015 OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report," OSCE/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Warsaw, May 15, 2015, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/6/158081.pdf>.

10 Tim Epenhans, "Virtual Politics, Islamism and Authoritarian Inertia in Post-Conflict Tajikistan," in *The Effects of Rebel Parties on Governance, Democracy and Stability after Civil Wars*, eds., John Ishiyama and Gyda M. Sindre (New York: Routledge, 2022): 238–253.

11 John Heathershaw, "Tajikistan's Virtual Politics of Peace," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (September 2009): 1315–1336.

justifying the denial of the party's registration in Tajikistan. Similarly, the Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation levied accusations of visa fraud against IRPT members who sought entry into Europe (WS9, 2019), painting a picture of deceit to align with a broader portrayal of the party as criminally inclined. Echoing the Tajikistan delegation's statements at the HDIM (WS6, 2019), which have attributed a series of violent incidents within Tajikistan to the IRPT—including the murder of four UN workers in 1998 and a coup attempt in 2015 allegedly backed by the IRPT, despite the party's denial and lack of evidence from political authorities—the Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation accused the party's leader, Muhiddin Kabiri, who has regularly attended the HDIM, of being involved in several of these attacks (WS15, 2019). These GONGOs argued that such acts reflected the IRPT's alleged goal of establishing an Islamic regime in Tajikistan (NGO Sociologist WS7, 2019) and used these allegations to decry the IRPT's participation in the HDIM. Despite claims by the GONGO Musoidat (see box 6) (WS11, 2019) that banning the IRPT in Tajikistan was a legal decision by the judiciary and the Supreme Court, the allegations levied against the party regarding terrorist activities stemmed from the Tajikistani security services—a known instrument of oppression under President Rahmon's regime. Additionally, the legitimacy of these allegations is further undermined by the lack of an independent judiciary in Tajikistan, as evidenced by Rahmon's direct appointment of judges and pervasive reports of judicial malfeasance, including evidence of tampering, coercion, torture, and reprisals against defense attorneys who represented opposition figures, including IRPT leaders.<sup>12</sup>

In a similar vein, Tajikistan's government has rewritten the history of its civil war (1992–1997), assigning full blame to the IRPT. This historical revisionism was prominently on display at the OSCE HDIM, where multiple Tajikistani GONGOs such as the Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation (WS7, 2018), the regional public organization Youth Society of Tajik Students in Saint Petersburg (WS7 2019), the Association of Tajiks in Kazakhstan (WS9 2019), the Somoniyon Tajik Cultural Center in Kazakhstan (WS4 and WS5, 2018 and WS13 2019), and NGO Sociologist (WS15 2019) have echoed and amplified the government's narratives aimed at blaming the IRPT for the civil war,<sup>13</sup> omitting the complex interplay of clan and network rivalries, economic contests, sociopolitical factors, and other disparities that fueled the conflict, and erasing the complexities of Tajikistan's recent history.<sup>14</sup> As noted by scholar Tim Epkenhans, the deliberate exclusion of the IRPT and the aggressive campaign of defamation against it have severely constricted public discourse in Tajikistani society. This suppression extends to critical discussions on the legacy of the civil war, the transformative processes that followed, and the prevailing sociopolitical challenges facing the nation. This strategy, while temporarily consolidating power, puts at risk the very long-term stability and peace it claims to secure, creating a brittle façade of unity that could ultimately unravel, and exposing the underlying fissures within society.<sup>15</sup>

## GONGOs as Tools of Autocracies' Sharp Power: Challenging the OSCE

Beyond discrediting critics and the opposition, GONGOs have played a pivotal role in bolstering the sharp power strategies of autocracies. Introduced by Christopher Walker,<sup>16</sup> the notion of sharp power encompasses a range of tactics aimed at undermining the independence and integrity of autonomous institutions, including international organizations.<sup>17</sup> Russia, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan have launched sustained efforts to challenge the mandate and activities of the OSCE, including the regulations governing NGO participation in the HDIM. These efforts are strategically designed to weaken the

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12 *Neither Check nor Balance: The Judiciary in Tajikistan*, International Court of Justice Mission Report, December 2020, [https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Neither-Check-nor-Balance\\_Tajikistan\\_MR\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Neither-Check-nor-Balance_Tajikistan_MR_ENG.pdf); See also "Tajikistan," BTI Transformation Index, 2024, Bertelsmann Stiftung, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country/TJK#pos16>; *Neither-Check-nor-Balance\_Tajikistan\_MR\_ENG.pdf* (icj.org); "Their Last Stand? How Human Rights Defenders are Being Squeezed Out in Tajikistan," The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, July 2019, [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/report\\_tajikistan\\_eng\\_web.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/report_tajikistan_eng_web.pdf).

13 "Kabiri—koronavirus XXI veka": kak goskanaly v Tadzhikestane rasskazali pro grazhdanskuyu vojnu," *Novyi reporter*, July 1, 2020, <https://newreporter.org/2020/07/01/kabiri-koronavirus-xxi-veka-kak-goskanaly-v-tadzhikestane-rasskazali-pro-grazhdanskuyu-voynu/>; Catherine Putz, "20 Years Later, Tajikistan Rewrites Civil War History," June 28, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/20-years-later-tajikistan-rewrites-civil-war-history/>; Bakhtiyor Sobiri, "The Long Echo of Tajikistan's Civil War," *OpenDemocracy*, June 23, 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/long-echo-of-tajikistan-s-civil-war/>.

14 Many publications have analyzed this conflict and dismissed such a dichotomy, which is nowadays almost exclusively instrumentalized by the Tajikistani authorities for political purposes. See, for example, Tim Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Kirill Nourzhanov, Christian Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*, Asian Studies Series Monograph 5 (Canberra: Australian National University E Press, 2013).

15 *Ibid.*

16 Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?"

17 Frouville, "Domesticating Civil Society at the United Nations."

HDIM's capacity to act as a forum for open dialog and to question the OSCE/ODIHR's dedication to upholding fundamental human rights.

At the HDIM, GONGOs have proven instrumental in intensifying these campaigns through several tactics. First, they disrupt meetings by taking up time and space, which marginalizes independent entities, and challenge the legitimacy of independent NGOs by labeling some of them as terrorist organizations. Furthermore, they compromise the integrity of discussions by openly contesting the core principles of the OSCE, effectively attempting to reshape the narrative and structure within these international platforms. Through these calculated interventions, GONGOs have served as key actors in the broader strategy of autocracies to exert control over international discourse, thereby extending their domestic agendas onto the global stage and diluting the efficacy of international governance mechanisms.

### **Efforts to Regulate NGO Participation in OSCE Events**

The tactics deployed by GONGOs reflect the strategic maneuvers of authoritarian regimes, advocating for the implementation of stringent systems to scrutinize or curtail the participation of independent NGOs at the HDIM. Such proposals pose a covert threat to the very ethos of HDIM/WHDC, which is to nurture an environment of inclusivity and freedom of expression, essential for the unfettered discourse that underpins the OSCE's dedication to human rights and democratic principles.

The 1992 Helsinki Document's Chapter IV, paragraph 16, outlines the criteria for NGO participation in OSCE events. It specifies only that "persons or organizations that resort to the use of violence or publicly condone terrorism or the use of violence" should be barred from OSCE meetings. No other grounds for exclusion are mentioned in the OSCE regulations, and there is no expressly outlined procedure for enforcing this rule. Although the decision has traditionally fallen to the chairman-in-office, some states have pushed for a formal vetting process to potentially block unfavorable NGOs. For example, Russia, with its lack of judicial independence and history of using prejudiced legal actions to suppress NGOs and journalists, has suggested prohibiting individuals with criminal records from OSCE events. Additionally, Russia wants to restrict attendance to only NGOs that are legally registered in their countries of origin. This stance mirrors the restrictive measures implemented by other authoritarian regimes, which enforce stringent registration requirements for NGOs, effectively excluding those that criticize the government. These proposed measures, cloaked under the guise of law and order, subtly undermine civil society's capacity to challenge or even question state policies, thereby reinforcing authoritarian control while ostensibly implementing regulatory frameworks.

The push by certain states to veto the participation of specific NGOs has escalated in recent years. In 2016, both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan walked out of the HDIM in protest of the presence of NGOs from their respective countries of which they did not approve. Likewise, since 2018, Türkiye has consistently boycotted the HDIM, rejecting the inclusion of any NGO it deems "terrorist," primarily those with purported links to Fethullah Gülen. GONGOs have mirrored their regimes' efforts by advocating for vetting mechanisms to control NGO participation. The Society of Disabled People of Uzbekistan (WS6, 2023; WS6, 2024), the Association of Tajiks in Kazakhstan (WS4, 2019), and the Azeri Reformist Youth Public Union (WS9, 2019) have demanded the exclusion of certain NGOs from the HDIM, branding them as corrupt, terrorist, or extremist organizations.

Building on their participation in the WHDC, certain GONGOs have published articles to portray the OSCE/ODIHR as an organization harboring criminals. For example, the founder and president of the GONGO National Endowment for Prosperity, Usen Suleimen, in an online article called on ODIHR not to become "an international NGO [that] attracts anyone it wants: corrupt officials, fugitive oligarchs, thieves and criminals, who use the human rights agenda to promote extremist ideas and make money."<sup>18</sup> He accused the conference organizers of having "made changes to the order of business, pushing our statements to the end, which did not allow us to be heard" and giving other "quasi-human rights activists" and "extremist structures" earlier speaking slots, which supposedly allowed them to "pour dirt on everything."<sup>19</sup> Suleimen concluded that "we system human rights defenders on introduction of international standards into political culture of Kazakhstan were actually pushed out and replaced

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<sup>18</sup> Usen Suleimen, "OSCE/ODIHR Warsaw Conference: Double standards have not been abolished," *National Endowment for Prosperity*, October 19, 2024, <https://nepfund.org/tpost/x5b57de621-osceodihr-warsaw-conference-double-stand>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*.

by paid voices of people who do not even live in the country, but work in the interests of criminal oligopoly.”<sup>20</sup>

### Using Up Space at the OSCE Meetings

At previous HDIMs, GONGOs have strategically utilized the limited speaking slots available during working sessions to run out the clock. ODIHR allowed a maximum of 50 statements, which if reached, resulted in a decrease in the time allotted to each speaker from 5 minutes to a mere 1 or 2 minutes. At the WHDC, this initial list was limited to 40 speakers and additional speakers were only given the floor if time allowed. The result was that not everyone could speak in sessions that cover contentious topics and elicit strong criticism of authoritarian regimes, such as democratic elections, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly. During pre-covid HDIMs, government representatives from Russia assisted their GONGOs in cutting the speaker registration line, thus pushing independent NGOs further back in the speaking order or even preventing them from being among the first 50 able to deliver their statements.<sup>21</sup>

The strategy of taking up space also resulted in GONGOs making off-topic statements during sessions, sometimes necessitating the moderator’s intervention. For example, in a session on democratic institutions, the GONGOs Western Azerbaijan Community (WS6, 2023) and the Turkish Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (WS2, 2023) delivered statements to disparage the Armenian diaspora, accusing it of supporting terrorism against Turkish interests, and commended the Azerbaijani government’s policy in Karabakh, leading the moderator to request a return to the session’s topic (WS5, 2023).

The complicity of GONGOs with government delegations has been particularly evident when the latter have repeatedly attempted to obstruct statements from opposition NGOs by interrupting with points of order, claiming the statements are off-topic, while remaining conspicuously silent when their own GONGOs make off-topic statements that align with their government’s narrative. During a session on the rule of law (WS10, 2019), the delegation of Tajikistan repeatedly interrupted statements from opposition NGOs, but remained silent during the GONGO Association of Tajiks in Kazakhstan’s off-topic statement denigrating the opposition.<sup>22</sup>

GONGOs may attempt to counteract changes in HDIM/WHDC regulations that could negatively affect their delegations’ interests. In 2022, 2023, and 2024, the WHDC ruled that official delegations could no longer orally claim their right of response at the end of sessions, a departure from previous norms. During this period, various GONGOs (International Eurasia Press Fund – WS4, 2023; Western Azerbaijan Community, WS8, 2024; Turkish Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, WS4, 2023 and the latter’s twin, Azerbaijan Institute for Democracy and Human Rights WS8, 2024), informally exercised Azerbaijan’s right of response during the working sessions, contesting criticisms made previously during the same session by independent NGOs and delegations from other participating states, particularly Armenia (WS5, 2024).

Finally, GONGOs’ obstructionist tactics have gone beyond merely taking up space and time. Verbal abuse against independent NGOs has been another disturbing aspect, prompting moderators to call for respect among participants, such as happened following the statement by the Association of Tajiks in Kazakhstan against the Tajik opposition parties Group 24 and IPRT (WS10-2019). In 2024, some Uzbekistani GONGOs produced and circulated a fake leaflet bearing the logo of the independent NGO Freedom of Eurasia in an apparent attempt to discredit information presented in the organization’s own reports.

### Challenging the Principles of the OSCE and Other International Organizations

GONGOs are part of the authoritarian toolkit used to challenge the core values of international organizations. They amplify the rhetoric of authoritarian leaders who seek to recast human rights and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Author’s personal observations.

<sup>22</sup> These persistent efforts to stifle independent voices are a blatant misuse of the meeting regulations. For instance, during the 2019 working session on hate crimes (WS14-2019), when the Tajik delegation interrupted the Tajik opposition movement Group 24 three times in a row, the Canadian delegation intervened to remind them that only the session moderator has the authority to determine whether a statement is off-topic.

democratic principles as alien constructs, ill-suited to the cultural backgrounds and historical legacies of their nations. This chorus, echoing the sentiments of figures like Putin or Chinese President Xi Jinping, proclaims the obsolescence of liberalism and frames the advocacy of democracy and human rights by Western entities as meddling in other countries' sovereign affairs.<sup>23</sup>

Within this narrative, democracy is not discarded but rather reimagined through lenses tinted with sovereignty and control—be it through the prism of “managed democracy” in Russia or the distinctively tailored “socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics.” These regimes assert their prerogative to safeguard national interests from external encroachment, crafting governance that, while echoing democratic nomenclature, either veers towards or even fully embraces authoritarianism. These bespoke models profess to uphold traditional values, positioning themselves as bulwarks against what they perceive as the corrosive influence of a biased universalism that challenges local moral codes, for example as exemplified in the contentious discourse surrounding LGBTQ rights.<sup>24</sup>

Putin's rhetoric, which has escalated since his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, casts Western values as decadent, including by equating them with the normalization of pedophilia.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, amidst the shadows of global terrorism, GONGOs have posited a dichotomy, and proposed a recalibration, between individual liberties and the imperatives of public security. This stance has called into question the universality of human rights, such as freedom of expression and assembly, suggesting a re-evaluation of their place in parts of the world where security concerns come first.

### Downgrading Freedom of Expression

In a clear departure from the founding principles of the OSCE,<sup>26</sup> certain participating states and their GONGOs have actively sought to diminish the value of freedom of expression, portraying it as an outdated and even hazardous notion that demands re-evaluation. At the HDIM, GONGOs have disparaged these rights as European notions of freedom of expression that have fostered the propagation of “hatred and intolerance” (Citizens' Labor Rights Protection League – WS2, 2019), and suggested that the current paradigm permits human rights defenders to champion unrestrained speech, heedless of its potential negative repercussions (Citizens' Labor Rights Protection League, WS4, 2019).

GONGOs have often based their arguments on the dangers of “fake news” and the perceived necessity for journalists to adopt a heightened sense of responsibility. This rhetoric has been leveraged by political authorities in countries like Russia, Azerbaijan, and some Central Asian states to suppress both offline and online expression and target independent NGOs. Kazakhstan, for instance, has integrated into its criminal code provisions against the “intentional spread of false information” and actions purportedly tarnishing the nation's international image—vaguely-defined laws that have been used to persecute HDIM NGO participants upon their return. Turkmenistan enforces a regime of systematic information suppression, while nations like Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have enacted vaguely-worded legislation that prohibits the dissemination of “false” information, fostering a milieu ripe for censorship and self-restraint, affecting even online discourse.<sup>27</sup>

Within this context, GONGOs at the HDIM have turned the discourse against opposition movements and media, branding them as vehicles of fake news that purportedly incite hatred, violence, violent regime change, and all forms of provocation (Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation, WS7, 2018; Citizens' Labour Rights Protection League, WS1, 2019). Based on these alleged threats, they have called for a re-examination of the term “journalist,” which, according to the Citizens' Labor Rights Protection League, is ill-defined within the OSCE framework (WS4, 2019). GONGOs and state-controlled media have argued that not all who disseminate information online should be deemed journalists (Crimean

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23 A. J. Nathan, “China's Challenge,” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015): 156–170.

24 Alexandra Novitskaya et al., “Unpacking ‘Traditional Values’ in Russia's Conservative Turn: Gender, Sexuality and the Soviet Legacy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 76, no. 2 (February 7, 2024): 173–197; Emil Edenborg, “Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia's Domestic and International Promotion of ‘Traditional Values,’” *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 2 (2023): 175–84.

25 Pauline Brault, “Poutine ressasse sa haine contre l'Occident un an après le début de l'invasion en Ukraine,” *Huffington Post*, February 22, 2023, [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/international/article/poutine-ressasse-sa-haine-contre-l-occident-un-an-apres-le-debut-de-l-invasion-en-ukraine\\_214350.html#:~:text=Poutine%20a%20ensuite%20encha%C3%A9n%C3%A9%20sur,saluant%20la%20%C2%AB%20r%C3%A9silience%20%C2%BB%20russe.](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/international/article/poutine-ressasse-sa-haine-contre-l-occident-un-an-apres-le-debut-de-l-invasion-en-ukraine_214350.html#:~:text=Poutine%20a%20ensuite%20encha%C3%A9n%C3%A9%20sur,saluant%20la%20%C2%AB%20r%C3%A9silience%20%C2%BB%20russe.)

26 See Mandate, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, <https://www.osce.org/fom/mandate#:~:text=The%20OSCE%20participating%20States%20consider,open%20society%20and%20accountable%20governments.>

27 “NGOs Urge the EU to Insist on More Space for Criticism in Central Asia, Document Key Trends ahead of Meeting,” *International Partnership for Human Rights*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.iphronline.org/ngos-urge-the-eu-to-insist-on-more-space-for-criticism-in-central-asia-document-key-trends-ahead-of-meeting.html>

News Agency, WS4, 2019), advocating for a more stringent regulation of information-sharing by, for example, requiring individuals who want to share opinions on social media to be officially accredited as journalists. This perspective has been echoed by other GONGOs, including the Union of Women of Russia (WS2, 2019) and the Institute of Young Democrats (WS6, 2019), who have argued for elevated standards of accountability for accredited journalists, ostensibly to shield the public from shock and outrage, all under the banner of security.

### Challenging the Principle of Freedom of Assembly

Authoritarian regimes have also sought to curtail the right to freedom of association and assembly, contravening not only OSCE commitments, but also the provisions enshrined in fundamental human rights texts such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 20), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 21), and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Article 11). Since 2012, Russia has introduced and enforced increasingly stringent legislation governing public demonstrations, often leading to brutal police crackdowns on unauthorized protests and the arrest of their participants.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in Azerbaijan, the right to peaceful assembly is heavily regulated under the guise of maintaining “public order and morals” and often enforced by police brutality and fines. Even authorized protests are typically relegated to remote areas to facilitate close surveillance, while in Kazakhstan, a protester was arrested for merely holding a blank placard on the street, highlighting the extreme measures these states will undertake to stifle opposition voices.<sup>29</sup>

GONGOs have been instrumental in promoting these restrictive state policies, portraying them as measures vital for national stability and security. They have lobbied for constraints on the freedom of assembly, often resorting to whataboutism to justify their stance. For instance, the international Platform Global Rights of Peaceful People criticized perceived Western hypocrisy, comparing France’s response to the violent Yellow Jackets demonstrators with Russia’s crackdown on peaceful protesters (WS6, 2019). While France’s handling of these demonstrators has sparked controversy, it did not involve outright prohibitions on protests or widespread detentions as was seen in Russia, where over 17,600 supporters of the late dissident Alexei Navalny were detained in just three days in 2021.<sup>30</sup> Other GONGOs have propagated conspiracy theories to cultivate a sense of doubt and urgency. The Russian state TV and radio company Krym claimed that the challenging situation in Crimea stemmed from foreign influence assaults (WS2, 2018), and the Citizens Labour Rights Protection League suggested that refugees in Europe harbored intentions of overthrowing the Tajikistani government if they could rally 10,000 demonstrators (WS6, 2019). These statements by GONGOs have argued for the OSCE to reconsider its principles on the right to peaceful assembly, reflecting a broader debate on the balance between civil liberties and state security.

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28 Kirill Rogov, “The Art of Coercion: Repressions and Repressiveness in Putin’s Russia,” *Russian Politics* 3.2 (June 2018): 151–174; Gerald M. Easter, “Policing Protest in Russia,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 54, no. 4 (December, 2021): 74–97.

29 Daniel Victor, “A Man in Kazakhstan Held Up a Blank Sign to See if He’d Be Detained. He Was,” *New York Times*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/09/world/asia/kazakhstan-protests-blank-sign.html>

30 “Vlasti vpervye nazvali chislo zaderzhannyh na zimnih akcijah za Naval’nogo,” *RBC.ru*, June 12, 2021, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/12/06/2021/60c3bfa99a794774c92495d2>.

# **Conclusion: The Imperative for Action: Exposing GONGOs and Protecting the Integrity of International Organizations**

GONGOs have emerged as a significant global force, acting as proxies of autocratic regimes. Their proliferation presents the illusion of a dynamic civil society while advancing agendas and narratives that align with the policies of their authoritarian governments. They can be regarded as a contemporary iteration of Agitprop, dating back to the Department for Agitation and Propaganda under the Soviet regime and updated by harnessing the capabilities of modern communication platforms, including the internet and social networks, to expand their reach. Exploiting the principles of freedom of expression and media in democratic societies—which are severely restricted in their own countries—they amplify their respective states’ assaults on liberal democratic values. GONGOs have adeptly infiltrated international organizations such as the United Nations and the OSCE, utilizing platforms such as the HDIM/WHDC to further their governments’ agendas, exert influence, and undermine the integrity of these institutions from within.

However, GONGOs are not a monolithic entity. They display a diverse array of structures and commitments. Some have risen to prominence with a strong online presence and active domestic engagement. Conversely, there are small-scale GONGOs, sometimes comprising only a handful of members or even a single individual, crafted to project the illusion of a robust civil society, particularly during international gatherings. Their objectives and actions differ significantly, from only directly echoing governmental agendas to also engaging in genuine development efforts.

The array of GONGOs at the HDIM showcases a spectrum of engagement levels. Some GONGOs are very vocal, delivering statements in various sessions, while others adopt a more reserved demeanor. The visibility of GONGOs also varies significantly by country: Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan have a conspicuous GONGO presence, in contrast to Turkmenistan’s more low-profile approach. The level of GONGO participation can evolve over time, shaped by both international and local developments. Notably, the number of Armenian GONGOs declined considerably in Armenia following the 2018 Revolution. While no Uzbekistani GONGOs were visible during the 2018 and 2019 HDIM sessions, the worsening human rights situation in Uzbekistan and subsequent international criticism led to a significant mobilization of these organizations in 2023 and especially in 2024. These shifts also often mirror the fluctuating currents of funding, which is contingent upon governmental priorities.

Regardless of their diversity, GONGOs at the HDIM are readily distinguishable from independent NGOs. While the latter champion human rights advancements and highlight pressing concerns, GONGOs inflate the role of democracy and democratic processes to craft a façade of diversity and bolster the image of their respective governments. They work to ensure that their manufactured versions of reality prevail and seek to sway Western actors to embrace their perspectives. GONGOs act as custodians of a simulated democracy in environments where freedoms are severely curtailed, and they undermine the critiques posed by independent NGOs, global assessments, and the input from delegations of OSCE participating states.

Moreover, GONGOs actively manufacture alleged threats of destabilization or terrorism. They purposefully sow confusion by accusing independent organizations and opposition groups of violent or terrorist ambitions, and are often backed by judicial systems in countries with weak or nonexistent separation of powers, such as Russia, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian republics. Overall, they encroach on the already limited domain of independent civil society organizations, eroding the diversity and inclusivity vital to meaningful discourse. In doing so, GONGOs become tools for simulating representation, thereby obstructing genuine dialog and participation.

The OSCE meetings underscore the imperative to address GONGOs as agents that promote domestic and global illiberal agendas. This scrutiny is crucial to understanding the governance mechanisms within autocratic states and to tackling the multifaceted challenges these entities present. It is also essential for preserving the integrity of global democratic discourse and for promoting genuine civil liberties across all nations. Regrettably, as Walker has pointed out, the pushback against democratic principles and human rights by authoritarian regimes has often been met with tepid or inadequate responses.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, history instructs us in the fragile nature of democracies, with the post-World War I era serving as a sobering reminder of how swiftly alternative norms can arise and gain global traction.

In this context, maintaining the OSCE's integrity and reputation as a bulwark of human rights and democracy is crucial. The HDIM/WHDC, as a key human rights review meeting, provides a rare international forum where independent civil society organizations, often marginalized within their own nations, can voice their concerns and issues directly to government representatives. It serves as a vital arena for sharing information, fostering engagement, and facilitating dialog between civil society and government representatives from participating states. Furthermore, the HDIM/WHDC provides NGOs with a valuable opportunity to conduct side events that enable in-depth discussions, knowledge-sharing, and the dissemination of information that might otherwise be suppressed or censored domestically.

The OSCE must maintain vigilance against having its meetings co-opted for political propaganda, ensuring it does not serve as an instrument of authoritarian governance or compromise its core values. The instrumentalization of the OSCE by autocratic leaders, as exemplified by Kazakhstan during its chairmanship in 2010, underscores the inherent risks. Kazakhstan capitalized on its OSCE chairmanship to bolster its global image with an extensive PR campaign and pledges of significant political reforms in line with OSCE standards. Regrettably, these promises remain largely unfulfilled.

An effective response to GONGOs requires a comprehensive and proactive strategy. This entails not only identifying GONGOs and their attempts to undermine the fundamental objectives of the HDIM and the OSCE, but also countering their disinformation campaigns and exposing their strategic misuse of language.

Trying to somehow ban GONGOs would undermine OSCE principles and cause collateral damage. It also would be incorrect to cast GONGOs as uniformly detrimental agents of disinformation or idealize independent NGOs as infallible purveyors of truth. As this paper has shown, both GONGOs and NGOs display a range of attributes, with some GONGOs actively engaged in legitimate humanitarian and development work. Their critiques at forums like the HDIM/WHDC may raise valid points that merit attention. Furthermore, the concept of state-funded organizations is not unique to autocracies; many reputable institutions globally operate with government support. For instance, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) receive US government funding to advance democracy and human rights. These organizations commit to transparency, uphold their missions' integrity, and significantly contribute to democratic values and human rights, aligning with the OSCE's goals. At the same time, NGOs that received U.S. or other Western funding do not work at the direction of the funders.

Moreover, banning GONGOs based on the content of their statements would contravene the principles of free speech and expression, and conflict with OSCE regulations, which specifically only ban "persons or organizations that resort to the use of violence or publicly endorse terrorism or the use of violence." Political affiliations alone do not warrant the exclusion of GONGOs, as doing so would breach the principles of openness, inclusivity, and nondiscrimination underlying the OSCE's mandate, and start down a slippery slope of viewpoint discrimination or censorship. Such actions could set a dangerous

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?"



precedent that authoritarian regimes might exploit to exclude independent civil society organizations that they do not like. Decisions on whether a particular CSO falls afoul of OSCE participation rules are managed by the OSCE chairmanship. An authoritarian chair could potentially disqualify its own country's NGOs or those objected to by like-minded nations. This situation was observed during Kazakhstan's 2010 chairmanship, when several NGOs were not allowed into the human dimension segment of the Review Conference after objections from Turkmenistan and Russia. As the Civic Solidarity Platform has highlighted, excluding peaceful CSOs would undermine the core principle of free and equal participation in OSCE events and could lead to arbitrary, biased, and politically-charged decisions that restrict access for groups and individuals that are critical of government policies or that raise sensitive topics.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the motives and strategies employed by authoritarian governments and their affiliated GONGOs, rigorous and critical analysis of authoritarian rhetoric is crucial. Democratic countries must enhance collaboration among themselves and with independent civil society organizations to collect and share accurate and timely information about GONGOs.

One practical step would be to form a dedicated working group of independent NGOs, experts, and researchers well-versed in OSCE issues. This group would scrutinize, fact-check, and analyze GONGOs' statements and activities at OSCE events, and investigate their operations and government connections to expose them. By distinguishing between genuine independent organizations and those serving governmental narratives, the group would reveal discrepancies between proclaimed objectives and actual actions, challenging the façade of legitimacy these organizations project. Illuminating GONGOs' inner workings and manipulative tactics, the group could present its findings to international stakeholders, policymakers, and the public, thereby allowing them to be informed about the GONGOs with which they may interact.

The working group's endeavors could culminate in an annual report detailing its observations and identifications, to be shared with OSCE delegations and civil society stakeholders. This report would serve as a comprehensive exposé, showing the manipulative tactics employed by GONGOs and the disparity between their rhetoric and actual practices. Beyond raising awareness, the report would furnish essential information, enabling decision-makers and civil society representatives to act knowledgeably and decisively. Additionally, this initiative should extend beyond the OSCE, with similar reports for other international forums involving GONGOs, such as UN conferences, to foster a global network that promotes transparency and genuine dialog.

Effectively countering GONGOs also necessitates responses during OSCE meetings. Firstly, participating states should call out GONGOs during these meetings, thereby signaling to their patron states that such subterfuge is transparent and unacceptable. WHDC organizers should bring back states' right to an oral reply, which could be used for this purpose. Secondly, the onus is on moderators to exercise vigilant oversight, ensuring that GONGOs adhere to the agenda topics and do not monopolize time with tangential or irrelevant commentary or act as proxies for a right of reply to criticism—a privilege that is explicitly reserved for official delegations. Moderators should also react when GONGOs personally attack NGOs during their statements; disagreeing with the views of another participant is fine, but claiming the person is a criminal, threatening them with jail or deportation, and/or revealing their private personal information are unacceptable. Such pre-emptive actions are essential to preserving the integrity of the meeting sessions within the OSCE framework.

Addressing the influence of GONGOs requires a concerted effort from democracies worldwide, grounded in thorough research, informed policy, and a commitment to democratic principles and human rights. Neglecting this imperative could undermine the very foundation of democratic rule and the values that sustain open societies. It is crucial to maintain the OSCE's role as a defender of human rights and democracy. Through a thoughtful approach, combating disinformation, encouraging dialogue, and emphasizing the universality of human rights, the global community can adeptly tackle the challenges posed by GONGOs. Such collective action is vital to protecting the tenets of democracy and securing the rights and freedoms of individuals globally.

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<sup>2</sup> "Ensuring Unhindered NGO Access to OSCE Events: A Need for a Transparent, Predictable, and Rule-of-law Based Procedure for Implementing Paragraph 16," *Civic Solidarity Platform*, June 2020, [https://civicsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ngo\\_participation\\_in\\_osce\\_events\\_csp\\_discussion\\_paper\\_june\\_2020.pdf](https://civicsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ngo_participation_in_osce_events_csp_discussion_paper_june_2020.pdf)

Below, I present a selection of GONGOs that have participated in OSCE human dimension meetings between 2018 and 2024. This list is not exhaustive and is not intended to establish a typology of GONGOs; instead, it highlights the diversity of these entities, showcasing the range of their structures and objectives, both within the context of their own countries and beyond, including at the OSCE and other international platforms.

### Box 1: The GONGO Paradigm

GONGOs embody a range of definitions and can experience shifts in status, which can make it challenging to categorize certain CSOs as either GONGOs or NGOs. Nevertheless, a significant number of CSOs fit the full GONGO paradigm: established and funded by the state, aligning exclusively with state interests, and acting as government mouthpieces from their inception.

#### *Russian Peace Foundation*

The Russian Peace Foundation is one such entity, evolving from the Soviet Peace Foundation founded in 1961. It presents itself as an international public foundation dedicated to promoting peace, reconciliation, democracy, and human rights. It provides support to the elderly, orphans, and people with disabilities, and is involved in educational and humanitarian projects, as well as promoting the Russian language and culture abroad. Operating in 47 regions of Russia and with representatives in Germany, France, Finland, Liechtenstein, the USA, Georgia, Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, and other countries, it brings together scholars, cultural figures, veterans, youth, religious groups, and volunteers.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to its regular humanitarian work, the Russian Peace Foundation remains closely tethered to the Russian government's interests. The chairman of the board of the Foundation, Leonid Slutsky, is a member of the State Duma and head of the right-wing populist and ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy until his death in April 2022. Slutsky and the Russian Peace Foundation maintain ties with Kremlin-affiliated networks that connect with foreign extremist political movements, both far-right and far-left, particularly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Foundation facilitates funding and visits to Russia for leaders of these groups, including the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party.<sup>4</sup> It also participates in the Kremlin's practice of inviting European officials to observe elections, creating a favorable image of Russia upon their return. The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project has reported that the Foundation worked with European Parliament members and local politicians, covering their expenses for the 2017 elections with a budget exceeding €68,000, in a clear conflict of interest.<sup>5</sup>

At the HDIM, the Russian Peace Foundation has staunchly defended what it calls "freedom of the press" in Russia, while discrediting critics by suggesting their reports are baseless rumors (WS1-2019 and WS2-2019), and has occasionally deviated from the topic handoff session to the point of being reproached by the moderator (WS10-2018).

#### *Information Resource Center*

The Information Resource Center in Kazakhstan exemplifies a common category of GONGOs that mimic civil society while being led by individuals with strong ties to the ruling party or government officials. This GONGO was established in 2005 by Alтынay Kobeyeva, a prominent figure within the Political Council of the ruling party Nur Otan,<sup>6</sup> led by former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who presided over Kazakhstan for nearly three decades, until 2019. The organization was renamed Amanat in 2022. Kobeyeva's contributions include founding the nonprofit organization Support Center-Astana in 2008 and serving in various capacities, such as on the NGO Council of Almalinsky district and as

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3 See the Russian Peace Foundation website: <https://peacefound.ru/#:~:text=%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9%20%D0%A4%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B4%20%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%20-%20%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%B8%D0%B7>

4 Catherine Belton, Souad Mekhennet, and Shane Harris, "Kremlin Tries to Build Antiwar Coalition in Germany, Documents Show," *Washington Post*, April 21, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/21/germany-russia-interference-afd-wagenknecht/>.

5 Martin Laine, Cecilia Anesi, Lorenzo Bagnoli, and Tatiana Tkachenko, "Kremlin-Linked Group Arranged Payments to European Politicians to Support Russia's Annexation of Crimea," Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/kremlin-linked-group-arranged-payments-to-european-politicians-to-support-russias-annexation-of-crimea>.

6 See "Kobeeva Alтынay Ormankalievna," *Zakon.kz*, [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=33884430](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=33884430)

secretary of the Public Council of Almaty from March 2016 until May 2022.<sup>7</sup> These entities are tightly connected to the government, thereby extending their reach and influence. Independent CSOs have criticized them as tools for shaping the narrative and creating an illusion of participatory governance. CSOs have raised concerns about their own contributions being consistently overlooked, casting doubt on their legitimacy and prompting the withdrawal of them.<sup>8</sup> At the HDIM, the Information Resource Center lauds the development of civil society, noting its “maturity that now enables it to participate in today’s decision-making process” (WS10, 2018).

### *The National Endowment for Prosperity*

This GONGO reflects the evolving use of such organizations by an authoritarian state like Kazakhstan. Over the years, the government has shifted from sending a large number of GONGOS to international forums to a smaller group of organizations led by individuals trusted by the regime, some of whom have had long careers within the system. The National Endowment for Prosperity is one such example, headed by Usen Suleimen, a diplomat who held high-ranking positions, including Ambassador-at-Large for Human Rights, before founding his GONGO in 2023.

On its website, the National Endowment for Prosperity promotes the concept of “constructive criticism,” echoing a notion frequently employed by non-democratic regimes to undermine and discredit independent civil society organizations and activists. By labeling opponents’ criticisms as “untrue” or “non-constructive,” these regimes craft a narrative that only views aligning with their interests are legitimate. This strategy enables them to dismiss dissenting voices that challenge their authority or expose corruption and human rights abuses, all while maintaining an illusion of openness to feedback.

This GONGO, which claims to represent genuine democratic forces,<sup>9</sup> has positioned itself as a champion of the official Kazakhstani government’s narrative on the so-called liberalization of the regime, saying “The political system of Kazakhstan is steadily evolving. Throughout the three decades of our independence, we have followed the path of democratization and strengthening the sphere of human rights protection.”<sup>10</sup>

At the WHDC, Suleimen participated in numerous sessions to lavish praise on the government. He contributed to the demonization of opponents, asserting that “Often, individuals who have committed ordinary crimes try to escape punishment by giving their deeds a political coloring and making themselves look like victims of the regime. But in fact, they are ordinary criminals” (WS6, 2024). Additionally, he attacked both local and international NGOs, labeling them as grant eaters which make “flashy presentations” there, “inventing humanitarian crises, political prisoners, political refugees and political persecution.” Suleimen described the WHDC meeting as “the chorus of paid and unconstructive criticism from the ‘devourers’ of foreign democratic budgets, who have long ago seized and turned the human rights agenda into a “cold weapon.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Box 2: A Dual Strategy of Disinformation and Western Appeal**

In their quest for funding and global recognition, certain GONGOS have honed a two-pronged approach designed to garner international support and financial aid while simultaneously acting as proxies for autocrats. They have launched sophisticated charm offensives to captivate Western donors and foundations with their humanitarian and development projects, while constructing narratives that exalt their governments, label dissent as treachery, depict Western societies as duplicitous, and question the universality of human rights. This raises the question of the funding practices of Western organizations and governments, which allocate resources to support the universal foundations of human rights but sometimes end up financing organizations that actually undermine those very principles.

7 See “Altynay Kobeyeva,” *Centrasia.org*, <https://centrasia.org/person.php>.

8 Author’s Interviews with civil society activists in Kazakhstan. Bertelsmann Transformation Index, “Kazakhstan Country Report 2024,” <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/KAZ>.

9 Usen Suleimen, “OSCE/ODIHR Warsaw Conference: Double standards have not been abolished.”

10 See the GONGO’s website: <https://nepfund.org/en>.

11 Usen Suleimen, “OSCE/ODIHR Warsaw Conference: Double standards have not been abolished.”

*Citizens' Labor Rights Protection League*

One prominent example of such a GONGO is the Citizens' Labor Rights Protection League in Azerbaijan, which touts its extensive partnerships or connections with Western entities and funders, including the Open Society Institute, the Eurasia Foundation, USAID, Counterpart International, the OSCE, the Helsinki Foundation on Human Rights (Poland) and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and several Western embassies including those of the US, UK, Norway.<sup>12</sup> This GONGO reflects the Azerbaijani government's approach to tightly managing civil society by creating supervisory structures and placing trusted individuals in leadership roles. It was co-founded in 1997 by Sahib Mammadov, who continues to serve as its Executive Committee chairman. Mammadov began his political career in the 1990s as head of the executive branch for the Yasamal region. In 1993, he was appointed by the President of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, to oversee the Department for Labor with the Territorial Administration of the Presidential Administration. He has since joined several government committees, including the Public Councils under the State Migration Service, the State Agency for Citizen Service and Innovation, and the Civil Service Commission, all under the supervision of the president.<sup>13</sup>

At the HDIM, Mammadov has promoted the Azerbaijani government's narrative by engaging in conspiratorial rhetoric. He has accused Western European nations—specifically France, Germany, and Belgium—of funding freedom of expression initiatives as part of alleged foreign security service plots to incite violent regime change and conflicts in other countries (WS1-2019). Additionally, he has supported the efforts of Azerbaijan to redefine the role of a journalist, advocating for restrictive criteria and licensing that would suppress independent media in favor of state-sanctioned outlets (WS2, 2019; WS4, 2019).

*The International Eurasia Press Fund*

According to its official website, the International Eurasia Press Fund (IEPF) is an autonomous international NGO founded by journalists from various nations and registered in Azerbaijan since 1992. Its work encompasses media and civil society development, community development, refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) support, peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and educational initiatives. It has established several partnerships, including with US government entities such as the Department of State.<sup>14</sup> IEPF is also a member of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and the International Press Institute. IEPF's status as a special consultative member of the NGO division within the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) enables it to participate in international conferences and meetings convened by the UN General Assembly, to deliver oral and brief written statements, appoint representatives to ECOSOC meetings, and engage in consultations with UN Secretariat officials on matters concerning NGOs. These activities are conducted with a perspective that aligns with the Azerbaijani government's authoritarian stance. Additionally, the IEPF acts as a conduit among various Azerbaijani NGOs and supports the funding of other state-controlled organizations such as the Press Council of Azerbaijan and the Forum of National Nongovernmental Organizations of Azerbaijan.

Despite severe restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly in Azerbaijan, IEPF claims to have made significant contributions to the development of media and civil society. The GONGO's alleged mission to "save Azerbaijani journalism from politics" and to promote fairness and impartiality in media coverage<sup>15</sup> aligns with the government's intention to exert control over journalism for security reasons. At the HDIM/WHDC, the Fund has echoed the government narrative on political freedom in Azerbaijan (WS5-2023), while criticizing Armenia by claiming it lacks media freedom (WS2-2023). It endorsed the Azerbaijani government's discourse on stabilization and normalization in the Karabakh region, assuring that the participation of Armenians in the Karabakh government will be guaranteed (WS1-2023), while in fact virtually all Armenians have been expelled from Karabakh.<sup>16</sup> One of the Fund's representatives, Orxan Amashov, also highlights the alleged risks associated with freedom of expression. He urges the audience to recognize the potential power wielded by a single person through

12 See the GONGO's website [http://labourrights-az.org/en/?page\\_id=23](http://labourrights-az.org/en/?page_id=23).

13 "Sahib Mamedov," *Peoples.ru*, [https://www.peoples.ru/state/statesmen/sahib\\_mamedov/](https://www.peoples.ru/state/statesmen/sahib_mamedov/).

14 See International Eurasia Press Fund, "Partners," <https://iepf-ngo.org/en/partners>.

15 See "General Information," IEPF website, <https://iepf-ngo.org/en/about-us/22>.

16 "Why Are There No Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?" *International Partnership for Human Right*, Freedom House et al, November 2024, [https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/no-armenians-in-nk-ddf-fh\\_fact-finding\\_report\\_full\\_version.pdf](https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/no-armenians-in-nk-ddf-fh_fact-finding_report_full_version.pdf).

their engagement on social media and, consequently, the need to regulate freedom of expression and those involved in social networks (SHDIM, May 2024).

### Box 3: Forced Allegiance to Autocracy

Several organizations epitomize the quandaries faced by international supporters when partnering with CSOs in authoritarian settings. Despite striving to maintain a degree of autonomy, many must maintain links to governmental agendas and are obligated to disseminate government-approved narratives when abroad.

#### *Khoma*

Khoma stands as a striking example of the obstacles that local civil society organizations have confronted working within authoritarian regimes. With the stated mission of promoting the professional development of media in the country, Khoma has launched various initiatives aimed at enhancing educational opportunities and promoting economic journalism and digital broadcasting.<sup>17</sup> Notably, Khoma played a pivotal role in contributing to the decriminalization of libel and slander within the country during the late 2000s and early 2010s.<sup>18</sup> It has worked to align media legislation with international standards, provide essential training to budding journalists, and establish a support and training center for media professionals.<sup>19</sup> Recognized for its impactful work, Khoma has engaged in projects supported by a wide array of international organizations, including USAID, Internews, the European Union, UNDP, UNDEF, UNAIDS, OSCE, and the UK's DFID. Moreover, it has cultivated partnerships with the embassies of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, furthering its mission and reach.<sup>20</sup>

Like a majority of CSOs in Tajikistan, Khoma must operate with the approval of the government. It is a member of the Public Council under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, whose official task is to act as a bridge between the president and CSOs, contributing to the development of state policies, overseeing human rights issues, and promoting civic education and patriotism. In practice, local CSOs have viewed it as a supervisory body that controls civil society, shaping discussions to ensure that they conform with government policies.

Against the backdrop of escalating authoritarianism in the 2010s and 2020s, Khoma has likely faced pressure to support government directives in order to continue its operations. This alignment often involves parroting official narratives, both within the country and on international platforms, including through its participation in global forums. Very active at the HDIM, Khoma has nonetheless conveyed government disinformation: minimizing real issues by depicting Tajikistan as a beacon of media diversity in the region, emphasizing the responsibility of journalists for their reporting, and maligning opposition and foreign entities by labeling them as terrorist organizations (WS2, 2019; WS11, 2019).

#### *Sadoqat*

Sadoqat, established in 2000, is a CSO focused on fostering development, particularly in rural areas, albeit under the government's oversight. Over the course of more than two decades, Sadoqat has conducted approximately 25 projects, including on empowerment of women and youth, reproductive health, promotion of healthy lifestyles among youth, enhancement of English language proficiency, and support for educational and health institutions. Sadoqat has worked with a diverse range of international partners, including the embassies of Germany and the United States, as well as with major global organizations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the World Bank. Additionally, it has worked alongside development agencies like the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and Terre des Hommes, furthering its impact and outreach.<sup>21</sup>

17 See "O nas," Khoma website, <https://khoma.tj/web/index.html>.

18 Obshtvennaya organizatsiya 'Khoma,' Internews-Network, "Dekriminalizatsiya klevety I oskorbleniya—vazhnyi shag dlya razvitiya demokratii v obshchestve," Materialy mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii (Dushanbe: 2008), <http://www.khoma.tj/khoma/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/dicdiminiliasia.pdf>.

19 United States Agency for International Development, "Celebrating World Press Freedom Day," USAID website, n.d., <https://www.usaid.gov/tajikistan/news/celebrating-world-press-freedom-day>.

20 "Patnëry," Khoma website, July 3, 2018, <https://www.khoma.tj/khoma/ru/2018/07/03/%d0%bf%d0%bo%d1%80%d1%82%d0%bd%d1%91%d1%80%d1%8b/>.

21 "About NGO SADOQAT," Sadoqat website, <https://sadoqat.weebly.com/about-us.html>.

Yet, during the HDIM sessions, Sadoqat has amplified political rhetoric unrelated to its foundational goals, including denigrating the opposition. Kamoljon Samiev, who represented Sadoqat at the HDIM even though he is notably absent from the organization's official website and any of its documented projects, criticized HDIM participants who expressed criticism of the Tajikistani government, accusing them of tarnishing the country's reputation (WS5, 2019). Furthermore, Samiev, positioning himself as a former IRPT member, denounced the party as a terrorist organization and parroted government conspiracy theories, suggesting the IRPT aimed to infiltrate the state and stir up social unrest. His statements at the HDIM have been widely circulated by Tajikistani authorities and state-controlled media, bolstering the government's claims that it is combating terrorism and acknowledging the alleged threats facing Tajikistan.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Ynam (Trust)*

In the highly authoritarian context of Turkmenistan, establishing an independent nongovernmental organization is nearly impossible. The state's strict regulation and surveillance are crafted to quell any dissent or opposition. As a result, there is no truly independent civil society organization and any organization active inside Turkmenistan must have the approval of the government to participate in international forums, or else face severe reprisals.

Ynam is an example of the dynamics of civil society in this country. Officially registered by the government, this organization offers pro bono counsel on societal matters and engages in the fight against human trafficking.<sup>23</sup> Akin to most registered CSOs in Turkmenistan, Ynam operates without state funding or backing, a stark contrast to the situation in other authoritarian countries in the region like Kazakhstan, where the government subsidizes civil society. In Turkmenistan's strictly authoritarian milieu, CSOs must align with the state's narrative, at times even supporting the president's cult of personality. This leaves CSOs with scant alternatives, necessitating a focus on non-controversial topics or adopting perspectives that align with the government's policies.

Representatives from registered CSOs are significantly restricted in their participation in international events without prior approval from the administration. Ynam is an illustration of a CSO coerced into conformity with official directives. During HDIM sessions, it has championed and advocated the government's standpoint, although with a focus on its anti-human trafficking endeavors, and countered allegations of forced labor in the cotton fields (WS9, 2019), which was reported by others at the meeting and has been substantiated in various international reports.<sup>24</sup>

#### **Box 4: Tajikistani GONGOs as Autocracies' Tools for Monitoring the Diaspora**

GONGOs play a crucial role in enabling autocracies to manage their diasporas. These organizations disseminate government-endorsed propaganda, surveil and pressure dissidents, cultivate support and allegiance, and undermine legitimate civil society groups.

The Tajik government vigilantly monitors its migrant labor and student populations abroad, aware of their vulnerability to opposition rhetoric and activism. In any given year, hundreds of thousands of Tajiks are working abroad (587,000 in 2020), and tens of thousands of young Tajiks pursue their studies abroad (27,000 in 2021),<sup>25</sup> mostly in Russia—a potential conduit for opposition influence and therefore a security risk. To mitigate perceived threats, GONGOs such as the Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation, the Youth Society of Tajik Students in Saint Petersburg, and the Somoniyon Tajik Cultural Center in Kazakhstan act as governmental proxies. These GONGOs claim to protect the Tajik diaspora's interests by promoting national culture and values through cultural and educational events like festivals, concerts, exhibitions, seminars, and training sessions, thereby cultivating a favorable image of Tajikistan among the Russian populace and officials. Additionally, they offer legal and social support to Tajik migrants and students in Russia.

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22 "Vystuplenie Samieva Kamoldzhona—Obshhestvo 'Sadokat,'" <http://vahdat.tj/navid/121-vystuplenie-samieva-kamoldzhona-obshchestvo-sadokat.html>; "Vystuplenie predstavitelja OO Sadokat Samieva Kamoldzhona," September 19, 2019, *Makomoti ichroiayati makhalii khokimiyati davlatii nokhiyai Sakhrizuz* <http://www.shahrituz.tj/node/465>.

23 "O nas," Ynam, <http://www.ynam.info/about/>.

24 Turkmen.news, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, Cotton Campaign, "Time for Change: Forced Labor in Turkmenistan Cotton 2022."

25 "Migration Data in Central Asia," Migration Data Portal, updated May 9, 2024, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/central-asia>.

These organizations also serve the Tajik government's agenda of preventing Tajik youth in Russia from engaging with opposition movements. During the HDIM, these three GONGOs have echoed the Tajik delegation by utilizing various authoritarian rhetorical tactics such as disinformation, conspiracy theories, and victimization. Firstly, they bolstered the government's reputation by asserting that the state and its constitution ensure civil society development and media freedom (Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation, WS1, 2019). They responded to criticism by questioning the analysis and facts of detractors (Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation, WS1, 2019) and attempted to undermine independent journalists by accusing them of legal breaches and of fleeing to Europe to escape prosecution (Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation, WS1, 2019). Moreover, they have demonized the opposition, attributing to it various crimes and responsibility for the civil war and the continuing emigration since then (Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation, WS15, 2019). Notably, some statements from GONGOs like the Somoniyon Tajik Cultural Center, which claimed to possess proof that the IRPT and other groups operated networks in Western Europe for terrorist recruitment (WS11, 2019), mirrored those typically associated with security services, exposing a striking discrepancy between its stated cultural mission and the rhetoric it employs at international forums.

The statements issued by these GONGOs at the HDIM have also been broadcast on multiple Tajik government channels to the local populace, giving the impression that they received international attention and validation while also emphasizing the alleged terrorist threat that the opposition in Tajikistan represented.

### **Box 5: Authoritarian Co-optation—From Relative Autonomy to Acting as the Mouthpiece of a President**

Authoritarian regimes sometimes co-opt independent structures, including those previously critical of the government, and transform them into propagandists for state agendas. Once co-opted, these entities typically receive privileges and financial incentives, securing their allegiance to the regime and effectively muting any criticism from them domestically.

Originally founded to promote journalistic integrity and having criticized the regime for violations of media freedom,<sup>26</sup> the Azerbaijan Press Council has increasingly come under governmental sway and evolved into a proponent of the regime.<sup>27</sup> This shift was underscored in 2010 when the Press Council honored President Aliyev with the title “Friend of Journalists,” signaling its transition to being a mouthpiece of the state. The Press Council has also been accused by independent civil society of working with the government to blacklist dissenting media outlets.<sup>28</sup> The dangers of challenging the Press Council were vividly illustrated in 2018 when Ikran Rahimov, the editor-in-chief of the independent website Realliq, was arrested after publishing an editorial that criticized corruption within the former.<sup>29</sup>

The Azerbaijan Press Council has now become a prominent GONGO, actively attacking the opposition and promoting President Aliyev's authoritarian policies in international forums. At the HDIM, Azar Hasrat—a journalist previously known for his somewhat critical stance against the government—fervently advocated for the government's interests. Hasrat's vociferous statements at the meetings resonate with then US Ambassador to the OSCE Dan Baer's observation that GONGOs' speaking volume overcompensated for their simplistic rhetoric.<sup>30</sup> Hasrat accused Azerbaijani dissident Emin Huseynov of secretly recording HDIM proceedings (WS4-2019), despite the sessions being officially recorded and streamed live anyway. Hasrat used the HDIM as a platform to disseminate disinformation he published in Azerbaijan<sup>31</sup> glorifying the regime and disparaging any form of criticism, including regarding a lack of press freedom. He further attempted to discredit incarcerated journalists by challenging their professional credentials, and advanced conspiracy theories about the West by criticizing European

26 “Azerbaijan: Media under Growing Pressure as Election Nears,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 24, 2007, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1076695.html>.

27 I would like to thank Mr. Emin Huseynov (Climate Observers Partnership) for providing information on Azerbaijani GONGOs.

28 “Running Scared: Azerbaijan's Silenced Voices,” *Article 19*, 2012, <https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/3003/12-03-26-azerbaijan.pdf>.

29 “Jailed Azerbaijani Journalist Ikram Rahimov to Appeal Sentence,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, August 27, 2019, <https://cpj.org/2019/08/jailed-azerbaijani-journalist-ikram-rahimov-to-app/>.

30 Daniel B. Baer, “Mind the GONGOs: How Government Organized NGOs Troll Europe's Largest Human Rights Conference,” US Mission to the OSCE, September 30, 2016, <https://osce.usmission.gov/mind-gongos-government-organized-ngos-troll-europes-largest-human-rights-conference/>.

31 “Azer Hasret: Ali Kerimli i ego nemnogochislennyye storonniki sami ponimajut, chto issjakli,” *Trend News Agency*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.trend.az/other/commentary/3136446.html>.

countries for granting asylum to individuals he labeled as criminals.

### **Box 6: Ghost GONGOs—Fictitious Organizations Created for HDIM/WHDC and Other International Meetings**

Certain governments have created organizations specifically to dispatch trusted spokespeople to disseminate autocratic state narratives on international platforms. These organizations often lack a genuine presence or activity in their home countries and typically do not provide a website address when registering with international forums like the HDIM, nor do they seem to have one.

#### *Musoidat*

Four notable examples from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan illustrate this. For instance, the purported Tajik NGO Musoidat and its delegate, Rahim Karimov, are not found on any media platforms. This GONGO appears to be an instrument used to penetrate the HDIM and parrot President Rahmon's narrative, portraying the state as a target of terrorist threats and seeking to undermine opposing voices and entities.

#### *Public Organization Sociologist*

The NGO Public Organization Sociologist serves as an example of how authoritarian regimes instrumentalize academic figures, appointing them as representatives of ostensibly independent NGOs to parrot state narratives on international platforms. At the HDIM, Rustam Haydarov, presented as a representative of this NGO—which lacks any visibility in Tajikistan—is actually the deputy director of the A. Bakhovaddinov Institute of Philosophy, Political Science, and Law at the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan. A longtime proponent of the Tajik government, Haydarov has regularly reiterated state propaganda, praised President Rahmon's policies as pivotal for guiding Tajiks through the complexities of modern geopolitics and geoconomics, and offered strategies to address societal challenges amid globalization.<sup>32</sup> He has lauded Rahmon for his “constructive ideas” on international water management, claiming they bolster not only Tajikistan's but also Central Asia's international standing,<sup>33</sup> while actively discrediting opposition groups, notably the IRPT.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Jas Pikir*

Uzbekistan also has sent apparent “ghost” organizations to the WHDC, such as Jas Pikir,<sup>35</sup> which, according to its representative, was based in Karakalpakstan but had no Internet presence and did not list a website on the HDIM participant list. The organization participated in 2023 and 2024 and justified repression in Karakalpakstan by citing alleged violence on the part of protesters and therefore the need to maintain stability, thereby generalizing the violence that was actually perpetrated by only a few protesters to all of them as a whole (WS5, 2023; WS8, 2023). Its representative, Kallibek Shamuratov, was particularly active in spreading disinformation about the situation in Karakalpakstan, claiming, among other things, that there is complete freedom of expression in the region and that journalists and bloggers are able to work freely (WS3, 2024).

#### *Human Rights Development Center*

Similarly, the so-called Human Rights Development Center in Azerbaijan has been another example of this practice. Represented by Vugar Ahmadov at the HDIM, it does not appear to have a website or substantive activities in Azerbaijan. Ahmadov is the project manager of the Azerbaijani-American

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32 “Rustam Hajdarov: Ocherednoe Poslanie Prezidenta Tadzhhikistana v slozhnyh geopoliticheskikh i geoekonomicheskikh usloviyah sovremennogo mira javljaetsja putevodnym dokumentom,” *Khovar* (news agency), December 23, 2021, <https://khovar.tj/rus/2021/12/rustam-hajdarov-ocherednoe-poslanie-prezidenta-tadzhhikistana-v-slozhnyh-geopoliticheskikh-i-geoekonomicheskikh-usloviyah-sovremennogo-mira-yavlyaetsya-putevodnym-dokumentom/>.

33 “Rustam Hajdarov, politolog: ‘Jemomali Rahmon svoimi konstruktivnymi idejami v sfere mezhdunarodnogo vodopol'zovanija povysil mezhdunarodnyj imidzh ne tol'ko Tadzhhikistana, no i vsej Central'noj Azii,’” *Khovar* (news agency), March 30, 2018, <https://khovar.tj/rus/2018/03/rustam-hajdarov-politolog-emosali-rahmon-svoimi-konstruktivnymi-idejami-v-sfere-mezhdunarodnogo-vodopolzovaniya-povysil-mezhdunarodnyj-imidzh-ne-tolko-tadzhhikistana-no-i-vsej-tsentralnoj-azii/>.

34 Rustam Hajdarov, “R.Hajdarov: Vzaimodejstvie religii i gosudarstva v Tadzhhikistane—problemy i perspektivy,” *Centrasia.org*, April 13, 2012, <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1334298300>.

35 I wish to thank Mr. Hasanboy Burkhanov, founder of Erkin Uzbekistan, for providing me with information on several Uzbekistani GONGOs.



Youth Association, an organization that has a Facebook page with only a few posts per year, with nothing posted between August 2023 and May 2024, and the website it lists on Facebook is not functional.<sup>36</sup>

### Box 7: State-Civil Society Consortiums

Authoritarian regimes sometimes obscure the distinction between state apparatus and civil society, both domestically and internationally, by utilizing ostensibly independent yet in reality quasi-state organizations or platforms that purport to foster dialog between the government and civil society entities. However, such structures may either have little real influence or predominantly interact with government-affiliated or uncontroversial organizations, excluding most independent NGOs or those critical of the government.

#### *The Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation*

The Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation serves as a prime example of state mechanisms designed to simulate civil society engagement.<sup>37</sup> Established by Putin, it consists of 126 appointees from diverse social and professional backgrounds, tasked with safeguarding citizens' rights, nurturing civil society, scrutinizing federal legislation, and monitoring government activities. Amidst Russia's oppressive political environment, the Chamber offers a rare forum for activists to voice their opinions to officials. However, it is hampered by a lack of resources and authority to drive substantial change. While the government promotes interaction with the Chamber as an alternative to direct governmental contact, such involvement is largely advisory and ineffective in influencing policymaking. Many independent organizations dismiss the Chamber as a veneer for reinforcing executive dominance and opt out of participation.<sup>38</sup>

Alexander Malkevitch, one of its representatives at the HDIM, is deeply entrenched in pro-government propagandistic endeavors and disinformation. Serving as the general director of the Sankt Peterburg TV channel and the first deputy chairman of the Commission for the Development of the Information Society, Media, and Mass Communications in the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, he established the USAREally website, headquartered in Moscow and funded by the Federal News Agency and linked to the Internet Research Agency,<sup>39</sup> which was indicted by Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III for meddling in the 2016 US presidential election. Malkevitch's actions led to his inclusion on the US sanctions list for attempted election interference.<sup>40</sup> He has been vocal in supporting Putin's portrayal of the military actions in Ukraine as a "special operation" for de-Nazification, refuting any ambitions of occupation. His public backing of the conflict has resulted in the imposition of Western sanctions against him.<sup>41</sup>

#### *The Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan*

The Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan serves as an umbrella NGO covering over 3,000 Kazakhstani nonprofit organizations. Headquartered in Astana, it boasts 17 independently registered regional offices spanning Kazakhstan's 14 regions and three largest cities. Its stated mission is to cultivate collaborative relationships among civil society, businesses, international entities, and governmental institutions within Kazakhstan. Additionally, it endeavors to support the development of the nonprofit sector and assist the activities of public councils.<sup>42</sup> Since September 2020, Banu Nurgazyeva has chaired the organization and has represented it at the WHDC. Notably, Nurgazyeva has held prominent positions in the Ministry of Culture and Information and the central office of the Nur Otan party, and she has

36 Human Rights Development Center Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100070280105029>.

37 "Missiya obshhestvennoy palaty Rossii," Obshhestvennaya palata Rossiyskoy Federatsii <https://www.oprf.ru/en/about/>.

38 Saskia Brechenmacher, "Civil Society under Assault: Repression and Responses in Russia, Egypt, and Ethiopia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 18, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2017/05/civil-society-under-assault-repression-and-responses-in-russia-egypt-and-ethiopia?lang=en>.

39 Neil MacFarquhar, "Inside the Russian Troll Factory: Zombies and a Breakneck Pace," *New York Times*, February 18, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/world/europe/russia-troll-factory.html>.

40 Matt Apuzzo and Sharon LaFraniere, "13 Russians Indicted as Mueller Reveals Effort to Aid Trump Campaign," *New York Times*, February 16, 2018, sec. US, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/us/politics/russians-indicted-mueller-election-interference.html>. Kevin Roose, "Is a New Russian Meddling Tactic Hiding in Plain Sight?" *New York Times*, September 25, 2018, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/25/technology/usareally-russian-news-site-propaganda.html>.

41 "Alexander Alexandrovich Malkevich," Open Sanctions website, September 14, 2024-<https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/Q4279423/>.

42 "About us," Civil Alliance of Kazakhstan website, <https://civilalliance.kz/en/about/>.

been actively involved in local politics, serving as deputy governor of Mangystau region from 2014 to 2017.<sup>43</sup>

The Civil Alliance has faced criticism for allegedly serving as an instrument of political conformity, exerting control over NGOs and aligning closely with the Ministry of Information and Social Development.<sup>44</sup> The inaugural Civic Forum, convened by the government-affiliated NGO Civil Alliance in Astana in October 2003, was marked by President Nazarbayev's call for fortified government-citizen relations. In a controversial move in 2015, the Civil Alliance introduced the "Rules for Providing Information by CSOs," which imposed stringent reporting requirements and restrictive funding procedures on NGOs. At the HDIM/WHDC, the Civil Alliance testifies to the absence of any discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, or otherwise, resulting from efforts to "build this unity with our president" (WS7, 2023).

### **Box 8: Serving a Transnational Authoritarian Brotherhood**

The two entities named the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, one in Azerbaijan and the other in Türkiye, are distinct in their geographical roots but unified by their leadership under Ahmad Shahidov. Shahidov has represented the Azerbaijani institute at OSCE human dimension meetings for several years, including at the May 2024 SHDM. In 2022, Shahidov assumed the role of director of the Turkish Institute for Democracy and Human Rights. While representing the Turkish institute at the April 2024 SHDM, he praised what he called "peace between our two peoples" (that is, between Azerbaijanis and Armenians), following Azerbaijan's military intervention in Karabakh.

The official aim of the Azerbaijani GONGO is to promote human rights, democracy, and freedom in the Republic of Azerbaijan, to protect civil rights, and to advance the interests of the Republic of Azerbaijan and its citizens in international organizations. The Azerbaijani Institute for Democracy and Human Rights proclaims on its website that it has "the right of representation in a number of international organizations," including the OSCE,<sup>45</sup> a right that is by no means a privilege but is actually granted to any NGO that does not advocate violence or terrorism. The Turkish institute's official aim is to promote human rights, democracy, and freedoms in the Republic of Turkey and advocate for the interests of the Republic of Turkey and its citizens in international organizations.<sup>46</sup> The Turkish institute has highlighted on its website its involvement with global entities such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the UN, participating in worldwide human rights forums.

Each year, during the HDIM, Shahidov has disseminated disinformation concerning practices of both the Azerbaijani and Turkish governments. For example, he has presented Türkiye as a model of press freedom, in stark contrast to numerous reports to the contrary and the number of imprisoned journalists. While Azerbaijan has faced criticism in international reports for a lack of political rights, Shahidov attributed this not to repression of the opposition or the inability to register genuine opposition parties—claiming, based on his personal experience, that there are no issues in this regard—but rather to a lack of public interest, as voter turnout has been low in recent elections (WS2, 2024). He has also echoed Azerbaijan's criticism against Armenia while downplaying Azerbaijan's invasion of Karabakh.

Shahidov and his GONGOs exemplify a tactic widely employed by numerous other GONGOs, combining whataboutism and conspiracy theories, enabled by either an unintentional or deliberate ignorance of the OSCE's mandate. At the SHDIM in Vienna in April 2024, he criticized the statements of Western participating states that condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine but fail to mention the situation in Gaza. He asserted that "the reason is clear because the U.S. and the UK are supporting Israel," suggesting a deliberate intention by these two countries to overlook the dire circumstances of the victims of the Israeli intervention in Gaza. However, as the session moderator felt compelled to clarify for him, the Middle East is a region that does not fall within the OSCE's geographical scope of work, which is limited to the territory of its participating and observer states. Nevertheless, he raised the issue again during the first session of WHDC 2024, lamenting that probably no one would mention Gaza during this meeting. Shahidov's GONGOs are also among the many trying to discredit independent NGOs, even

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43 "Banu Nurgazyeva," *Centrasia.org*, <https://centrasia.org/person.php>.

44 Colleen Wood, "Going Viral during a Pandemic: Civil Society and Social Media in Kazakhstan" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2022), <https://scholar.archive.org/work/tggw7kju3nfmrcvawk7nml4v7i/access/wayback/https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/mo01-a648/download>.

45 "About Us," Azerbaijani Institute for Democracy and Human Rights website, [https://aidhr.org/?page\\_id=2](https://aidhr.org/?page_id=2).

46 See the GONGO's website: [https://tidhr.org/en/?page\\_id=2](https://tidhr.org/en/?page_id=2).

going so far as to request that the U.S. State Department conduct an investigation into the funding of Freedom House, claiming that potential corruption explains its supposedly biased approach (WS8, 2024). Finally, Shahidov has repeatedly used his statements to respond to criticisms made in previous statements during the same session or earlier sessions, defending the government. This has led him to produce off-topic remarks, prompting moderators to intervene and remind him of the session rules (WS5, 2024).

### Box 9: Youth GONGOS

Authoritarian regimes have strategically deployed youth-oriented GONGOs for both domestic and international objectives. Domestically, these organizations act as channels for political indoctrination, molding the views of the young to reflect the regime's ideology. This is often depicted through carefully orchestrated events, rallies, and media campaigns that present a unified and spirited youth front, echoing the state's narrative of advancement and well-being. Internationally, these regimes showcase GONGOs as the voice of the youth, seeking to enhance their credibility and rally global support for their policies.

#### *The Institute of Young Democrats*

The Azeri Institute of Young Democrats encapsulates the dual nature of GONGOs. While it engages in serious activities, notably championing women's rights and combating domestic violence,<sup>47</sup> it concurrently employs rhetoric to undermine democratic institutions like the OSCE. At the HDIM, the Institute dispatched delegates, including Yegana Hajiyeva, who challenged the credibility of ODIHR.<sup>48</sup>

#### *Reformist Youth Public Union*

Similarly, the Reformist Youth Public Union, established with the Azerbaijani government, promotes the state's perspective. Its leader, Farid Shahbazli, claimed to represent at both domestic forums and the HDIM the youth involvement in a "democratic and favorable election environment in Azerbaijan,"<sup>49</sup> where the government allegedly does not impose any restriction on civil society (WS6, 2019).

#### *The Student Youth Organizations Union*

The Azerbaijani Student Youth Organizations Union was established on November 20, 2009. According to its website, its mission is to assist high schools in their development, advocate for student interests, and facilitate student involvement in the sociopolitical, cultural, social, and economic spheres. The Union encompasses 101 public and private high schools. This GONGO is one of many Azerbaijani CSOs that have been pressured and co-opted by the government. Besides its legitimate domestic activities, it also has disseminated Azerbaijani government propaganda abroad. Its Secretary-General Ordukhan Gahramanzade has claimed that Azerbaijan has made significant progress on developing a free civil society and improving human rights (WS2, 2022), despite reports on the overall climate of restriction and repression. The GONGO has also echoed the Azerbaijani government's foreign policy attacks on countries perceived as pro-Armenian, such as France.<sup>50</sup>

### Box 10: GONGOS Justify the Annexation of Crimea

The Kremlin has been known to utilize GONGOs to promote its geopolitical agenda and legitimize its actions on the international stage. Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, GONGOs have played a role in orchestrating a narrative of Russia's historical ties to and cultural affinity with Crimea, and framing the intervention as a necessary step to

47 "Gadzhieva: administrativnye organy i shkoly dolzhny borot'sja protiv rannih brakov vmeste," *Sputnik.news*, January 31, 2020, <https://az.sputniknews.ru/20200131/Traditsii-silnee-prava-problem-rannikh-brakov-423012513.html?ysclid=lk9y14smf4600618650>; Egyana Gadzhieva, Bol'shaja chast' protivorechij v sem'e voznikaet iz-za social'nyh problem, *Sputnik*, September 3, 2020, <https://az.sputniknews.ru/20200903/ugolovnaya-otvetstvennost-bytovogo-nasiliya-424820730.html?ysclid=lk9y52ow70767571492>.

48 "OSCE Has Never Demonstrated Unbiased Stance on Azerbaijan—Political Scientist," *News.az*, December 2, 2022, <https://news.az/news/osce-has-never-demonstrated-unbiased-stance-on-azerbaijan-political-scientist>.

49 Farid Shahbazli: "There's a Democratic and Favourable Election Environment in Azerbaijan," *Baltic Times*, April 3, 2018, [https://www.baltictimes.com/farid\\_shahbazli\\_\\_\\_there\\_s\\_a\\_democratic\\_and\\_favourable\\_election\\_environment\\_in\\_azerbaijan\\_/](https://www.baltictimes.com/farid_shahbazli___there_s_a_democratic_and_favourable_election_environment_in_azerbaijan_/).

50 "NAM Official: France Pursuing Policy of Linguistic Discrimination against Corsica," *Caliber.az*, March 15, 2023, <https://caliber.az/en/post/152712/>.

protect ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers from alleged persecution—essentially an international rationale for the Kremlin’s moves.

### *The Regional Public Organization in Ukraine*

Notably, the Regional Public Organization in Ukraine has perpetuated the narrative that Crimea rightfully belongs to Russia, framing the 2014 annexation as a legitimate historical reunification. This organization’s name harkens back to the 1654 Pereiaslav Agreement, wherein the Cossack Hetmanate aligned with the Russian tsar for protection against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Anastasia Sergeevna Gridchina, who represented the organization at the HDIM, is a known proponent of Russian propaganda in Crimea. She has boasted extensive connections with the Russian government, and previously served as chief of staff of the Southern Territorial District of the Young Guard of the ruling political part, United Russia. She has held the position of editor-in-chief at the Crimea Today news agency since 2019, and is a member of the regional public organization Russian Community of Crimea. Since 2022, she has been chairing the Council of the Regional National-Cultural Autonomy of Ukrainians of the Republic of Crimea, known as the Ukrainian Community of Crimea.<sup>51</sup> At the HDIM, she has reiterated the narrative found on the organization’s website, using historical references to justify Russia’s claim to Crimea and depicting Ukraine as a hostile foreign entity. She maintained that the 2014 referendum in Crimea was a transparent expression of the people’s will to rejoin Russia and argued that the region has seen improvements in security and human rights under Russian governance (WS12, 2019).

### *Regional Bulgarian National-Cultural Autonomy of the Republic of Crimea named after Paisii Hilendarsky*

Additionally, the Kremlin has employed a tactic reminiscent of the Soviet era, promoting a so-called “friendship of peoples” to give credit to its ethnic minorities policies that, in practice, offer only nominal rights to minorities while suppressing those who deviate from the prescribed narrative. GONGOs claiming to represent ethnic minorities, such as Regional Bulgarian National-Cultural Autonomy of the Republic of Crimea named after Paisii Hilendarsky, have been instrumental in this approach. They have justified the unlawful annexation of Crimea by claiming to protect the alleged freedoms of these ethnic groups which they claim are under threat.

This GONGO is represented at the HDIM by Ivan Abasher, who has been a member of the Civic Chamber of the Republic of Crimea since 2014 and was elected to the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation in 2014, 2017, and 2020.<sup>52</sup> Abasher has argued that ethnic minorities in Crimea faced threats from Ukraine until 2014. He linked the conflict in Ukraine to the West’s hostility towards Orthodox Christians and claimed that public activists are collaborating to oppose the damaging conduct of hostile neighboring nations.<sup>53</sup> At the HDIM, he justified the annexation of Crimea, arguing that “we Crimeans, through democratic means, decided to hold a referendum, and we have rejoined the Russian Federation” (WS10, 2018; WS3, 2019). He claimed that the situation was normalized and full multiculturalism has been ensured (WS14, 2019), while negative opinions about the Russian administration in this region stem from a lack of knowledge about the situation (WS8, 2018).

### **Box 11: “Independent” Media Funds**

In addition to media outlets like RT and Sputnik, authoritarian regimes have set up so-called independent media funds. These funds claim to bridge the state-media gap and promote media freedom and favorable conditions. However, some are actually state-controlled and act as government proxies, promoting an illusion of media freedom on global platforms. The Azerbaijan Press Council (see box 5) is one such example.

In 2019, Uzbekistan established a fund for the support and development of national mass media. Its stated objective is to support the development of the media sphere, provide material support, promote

51 “Gridchina Anastasiya Sergeevna,” Gosudarstvennyy Sovet Respubliki Krym, <http://crimea.gov.ru/deputy/401>.

52 “Abazher Ivan Ivanovich—Gosudarstvennoe kazennoe uchrezhdenie Respubliki Krym ‘Apparat Obshchestvennoj palaty Respubliki Krym,’” <https://opcrimea.ru/struktura/sostav/chleny-obshchestvennoj-palaty/abazher-ivan-ivanovich.html>.

53 “Obshchestvennik iz Kryma prizval k ukrepleniju sotrudnichestva respubliki s Jugroj,” *UgraNews.ru*, October 14, 2022, [https://ugra-news.ru/article/obshchestvennik\\_iz\\_kryma\\_prizval\\_k\\_ukrepleniyu\\_sotrudnichestva\\_respubliki\\_s\\_yugroy/](https://ugra-news.ru/article/obshchestvennik_iz_kryma_prizval_k_ukrepleniyu_sotrudnichestva_respubliki_s_yugroy/).

the rights of media representatives, and unite and protect journalists and bloggers.<sup>54</sup> Registered with the Uzbekistani Ministry of Justice as a non-governmental nonprofit organization, its director openly parrots the government's narrative, praising Uzbekistan's alleged dedication to press freedom and expression, the alleged participation of media in drafting new laws (WS3, 2023) despite of the government's tightening grip on the media as documented in various human rights reports.<sup>55</sup>

### Box 12: Denying War Crimes

The Women's Dialogue International Peacekeeping Movement, commonly known simply as Women's Dialogue, says it is committed to fostering peace, tolerance, and social welfare. Established by Elena Semerikova, a prominent figure in the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation and influential in shaping government-aligned civil society, the group initially had regional status in 2003 before expanding to the national level within a year. Its goals are to enhance international cooperation, patriotic education, and peacekeeping efforts, as well as to combat violence against vulnerable populations and provide social support for families and individuals. Additionally, the organization plays a key role in directing the narrative and activities of civil society groups, in accordance with government-approved guidelines.

Semerikova and her organization have actively countered international criticism of the Russian government, especially since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. They have attempted to downplay reports of Russian abductions of Ukrainian children, and have criticized the International Criminal Court (ICC) for issuing arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova. This GONGO has appealed to African and Latin American nations to reject the ICC's ruling and proposed restricting commerce with states that endorse the arrest warrants. Furthermore, it has urged Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to collaborate with signatories of the Rome Statute to repudiate the ICC's decision.<sup>56</sup>

At the WHDC, while Russia faced criticism for war crimes and acts of torture in occupied Ukraine, the Women's Dialogue International Peacekeeping Movement has promoted Russia's alleged commitment to fight torture. Among other arguments, it cited the adoption of a new definition of torture under Russian legislation in 2022, taken directly from the 1984 UN Convention against Torture, aimed at more effective responses to torture, while attempting to obscure the numerous accusations of war crimes leveled against Russia. It concluded that "it is evident that there is a systematic approach by the Russian leadership, the law enforcement system, civil society organizations, and society as a whole to the eradication of torture" (WS6, 2023).

### Box 13: Echoing the Kremlin's Narrative on an Alleged Crisis of Democracy and Political Repression in the European Union

The Information Group on Crimes against the Person was created in 2014 by the Historical Memory Foundation, which was established in 2008, and which aims to circulate a revisionist Russian version of history, including efforts to rehabilitate the Soviet regime and its occupation of the Baltic states. The Information Group on Crimes against the Person purports to document crimes in Ukraine allegedly committed during the "crisis" caused by the confrontation between the government and the opposition, which the GONGO has claimed led to a lack of Ukrainian law enforcement.<sup>57</sup>

The website of the Information Group on Crimes against the Person currently listed on social networks like VKontakte is non-functional, and no new address was provided during its participation in the 2024 SHDM and 2024 WHDC. Kremlin propagandist Maksim Vilkov has represented the organization at OSCE meetings and dismissed the situation in Ukraine by falsely claiming systematic persecution of Russians and the alleged "Nazification" of the country (WS8, 2024). He has disseminated Kremlin propaganda about the alleged persecution of Russian-speakers in Donbas by Ukrainians at the UN

54 See "About Foundation," Public Foundation for Support and Development of National Mass Media website, <https://www.massmedia.uz/en/pages/about>.

55 "Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Uzbekistan: 44th Session of the UN Universal Periodic Review," *Human Rights Watch*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/05/submission-universal-periodic-review-uzbekistan>.

56 "Zhenskij dialog' obvinil MUS v ignorirovanii prava detej na zhizn,'" March 22, 2023, <https://antifashistcom.livejournal.com/8818178.html?ysclid=loixgas6mk96699842>.

57 Al'ona Nesterenko, "Pravozahist' po-kremlivs'ki: khto takij Maksim Vilkov, yakij vipravdovue vynu proti Ukraini," *Institut Masovoi Informatsii*, June 27, 2023, <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/pravozahyst-po-kremlivsky-hto-takij-maksym-vilkov-yakij-vypravdovuyevynu-proty-ukrayiny-153687>.

in Geneva and at the OSCE.<sup>58</sup> Vilkov has also promoted a Russian propaganda public fund, Verum, at the HDIM and frequently appears in Russian media outlets such as Zvezda, a Russian state-owned nationwide TV network run by the Russian Ministry of Defense, under his organization's label.

This GONGO also illustrates a tactic of autocratic regimes such as Russia and China of employing Westerners to endorse and circulate their narratives. In his side event at the SHDIM in May 2024 on "Restrictions of the Right to Access Information in Europe as a Factor in the Crisis on European Democratic Institutions," Vilkov featured John Varoli, an American citizen and former journalist who wrote for the New York Times, International Herald Tribune, and other newspapers, and now appears to be spreading Kremlin propaganda. Varoli has called on Moscow to "vigorously conduct a criminal case that goes after the real perpetrators [of terrorism]—both the decision makers in U.S. and European capitals who provide weapons and financing to Kiev's totalitarian regime."<sup>59</sup>

### **Box 14: Disaggregating a Single GONGO into Multiple Branches to simulate Civil Society Diversity**

The Association of Disabled People of Uzbekistan, founded in 2018, acts as an umbrella organization for 31 NGOs working within the disability sector. Its core mission is to enhance collaboration among these organizations, championing the rights of people with disabilities and promoting inclusivity in society.

The Society of Disabled People of Uzbekistan is often seen as a mechanism for the Uzbek government to craft an image of a vibrant civil society. This involves downplaying the presence of independent organizations and multiplying a single GONGO into many branches, thereby artificially boosting the count of active NGOs in the nation. Despite official claims of 10,000 active NGOs, many are simply offshoots of a handful of CSOs. For instance, the Society of Disabled People of Uzbekistan has created about 150 branches nationwide, each considered an independent NGO. Similarly, entities like the Mahalla Foundation, Red Crescent Society of Uzbekistan, Women's Committee of Uzbekistan, and Youth Union of Uzbekistan have extensive networks of branches. Yet truly independent NGOs remain rare, with the landscape largely monopolized by GONGOs. This GONGO is utilized at the WHDC to disparage, including through unsubstantiated accusations of corruption, the critical statements made by independent CSOs (WS6, 2023) and to echo the Uzbekistani government's requests to exclude these organizations from the meeting (WS6, 2024).

### **Box 15: Repairing the Façade—Mobilizing GONGOs in Response to Widespread Criticism in Uzbekistan**

While few Uzbekistani GONGOs had engaged in the WHDC in the second half of the 2010s, the years 2023 and especially 2024 demonstrate the ability of an authoritarian regime like Uzbekistan to mobilize numerous GONGOs in response to widespread criticism. Initially, the election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016 raised hopes for democratization, and some reforms followed, particularly concerning freedom of expression and the release of several political prisoners, including those jailed for religious reasons. Over the past few years, however, there has been backsliding, with violent repression of protesters in Karakalpakstan in 2022. Facing escalating criticism from local and international organizations, Uzbekistani GONGOs became more active in the OSCE, both in terms of the number of GONGOs participating and their activities countering and discrediting independent CSOs that had reported on the deteriorating human rights situation.

#### *Karakalpak branch of the Uzbekistan Children and Families Support Association*

This GONGO is headquartered in Tashkent with a branch in Karakalpakstan, but it lacks a website or information on its activities. At the WHDC, Azat Bekjanov, the representative from the Karakalpak branch, promoted government-positive narratives about Uzbekistan's economic and social engagement in Karakalpakstan. He claimed that the 2022 unrest in the region was caused by "false information and provocation" and dismissed concerns raised by independent NGOs who had criticized the region's conditions. Additionally, Bekjanov verbally attacked an independent activist by revealing her full

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58 Quenel, "Cette journaliste russe qui infiltrait 'Le Monde diplomatique' et 'L'Humanité'."

59 John Varoli, "Russia Must Lead a Global Effort to Fight US Terrorism," Substack page, June 24, 2024, <https://john365.substack.com/p/russia-must-lead-a-global-effort>. For many other articles of the same ilk, see <https://john365.substack.com/>.

name—she had concealed her identity for safety reasons—during a statement in a main session (WS9, 2024).

#### *Central Asian Progress and Integration Forum*

Founded in 2023, the organization has no official website and appears only briefly on social media, listing a page on X as its web presence. Although it was active with numerous reposts following its creation in 2023, its last posts, as of October 2024, date back only to February 2024. It claims to conduct political-economic research, develop conflict prevention and resolution strategies, support civic initiatives, and promote the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

No significant online activity has been recorded, either from the organization or its representative at the WHDC, Shahnoza Almosova. Almosova countered criticism of Uzbekistan’s actions in Karakalpakstan, claiming that the statements voiced at the WHDC were biased, discrediting exiled activists for supposedly being disconnected from the “realities on the ground,” and targeting international NGOs like the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, accusing them of “not even knowing where Karakalpakstan is, yet continuing to spread disinformation about Karakalpakstan and Uzbek authorities” (WS9, 2024). This GONGO organized a side event at the 2024 WHDC that included the Uzbekistani Ombudsman and echoed propaganda praising the development of civil society in the country.

#### *Institute of Democracy and Human Rights*

The Institute began operations in March 2015 and presents itself as a non-governmental, non-profit organization, established as a voluntary public association. Its stated aim is promoting democratic principles in governance and society, advocating human rights protection and awareness, and supporting the consistent adherence to democratic values in the management of government bodies and other organizations. The Institute is chaired by Sayora Khodjaeva, who also represented it at the WHDC.<sup>60</sup>

The Institute of Democracy and Human Rights acted as an overt spokesperson for the government at the 2024 WHDC, delivering verbal rebuttals to criticisms raised by independent NGOs against Uzbekistan. In these responses, it systematically refuted each criticism, disparaged opposition figures “living 10,000 miles away in Europe,” and condemned the Karakalpakstan protesters as violent (WS9, 2024). Khodjaeva publicly denied leading a GONGO, citing her organization’s funding from the United States and EU as evidence to the contrary.

#### *Social Support, Legal Promotion and Monitoring Center “Noila” in the Navoi Region*

This organization, which has no online presence, is led by Mansurjon Xamidov. He, too, has a minimal digital footprint, with only one article promoting civil society development in Uzbekistan. He gave vehement statements at the 2024 WHDC, sometimes resorting to aggressive verbal attacks accusing independent activists of exploiting Western funds to evade legal responsibilities in Uzbekistan and carry out criminal activities (WS5, 2024).

### **Box 16: Controlling the Narrative—Azerbaijani GONGOs and the Karabakh Conflict**

Following Azerbaijan’s 2023 military intervention in Karabakh and accusations of its pushing out ethnic Armenians and even ethnic cleansing, the country’s use of GONGOs increased at the WHDC. The vast majority of Azerbaijani GONGOs present in 2024, such as the Azerbaijan Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (see box 8) and the International Eurasia Press Fund (see box 2), addressed the issue of Karabakh and other topics. However, several primarily focused on Karabakh at the WHDC.

#### *For Social Welfare of Citizens Public Union*

The organization claims to address social issues affecting refugees, displaced people, individuals with disabilities, and low-income communities through work including poverty alleviation, women’s empowerment, and peacebuilding. It has focused on Karabakh and was involved in a 2022 project, funded by the State Support Agency for Non-Governmental Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan,

<sup>60</sup> “O nas,” *Institut Demokratii i prav Cheloveka*, <https://dihi.uz/>.

aimed at “supporting the social needs of the families of martyrs from the First Karabakh War and the Patriotic War.”

Although listed on the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs website, this organization’s website is non-functional, and no alternative site is referenced elsewhere. This GONGO and its representative, Nadima Rahimli—who presents herself as the deputy chair of the organization—appear primarily in connection with their WHDC interventions during sessions and side events. It falls into the category of GONGOs with minimal visibility and apparent inactivity, maintained largely to inflate the statistics of Azerbaijani CSOs and to participate in international meetings such as those of the ODIHR.

#### *Western Azerbaijan Community*

The Western Azerbaijan Community is the legal successor of the “Azerbaijan Refugee Society Association,” which had operated since 1989. It describes itself as an organization that gathers and preserves facts and documents related to the problems of West Azerbaijani refugees and the circumstances of Azerbaijani families who became refugees between 1987 and 1991.<sup>61</sup> This GONGO has been particularly active at the WHDC in responding to statements from the Armenian delegation, arguing that the latter spreads falsehoods by claiming Armenians were expelled from Karabakh, asserting instead that they left the territory voluntarily (WS8, 2024). The alignment between this GONGO and the government is further underscored by the Azerbaijani delegation’s closing statement (WS11, 2024), in which it called for attention to this GONGO’s message.

#### *“Gızilbash” Youth Education Public Union*

This organization claims to focus on promoting patriotism and citizenship among youth, addressing the challenges faced by young people in regional areas, and tackling educational, health, and social issues affecting them. It has actively echoed the Azerbaijani government’s narrative on Karabakh, justifying the military intervention, stating, “Given that thousands of people were driven from their homes, we decided to resolve this on our own” (WS1, 2024). It has also argued that Western media have a biased, double-standard approach to the issue in this region (WS3, 2024).

#### *Back to Karabakh*

Organizations like Back to Karabakh have many features of a ghost GONGOs. It lacks a website and has only a largely inactive Facebook page, with the most recent post dating back to June 2023, and the one before that to May 2021. Led by Gulmammad Mammadov, this GONGO primarily serves to justify the Azerbaijani government’s purported commitment to the development of the region and Azerbaijan as a whole.

#### *Center for Economic and Social Development*

The Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD) presents itself as a leading independent economic think tank in Azerbaijan with a mission to conduct research and analysis on socioeconomic issues to “positively influence the public policy decision-making process.”<sup>62</sup> At the WHDC, it has promoted what it described as a free civil society in Azerbaijan (WS1, 2024; WS2, 2024) despite the considerable restrictions imposed on CSOs in the country.<sup>63</sup>

The Center has organized side events structured to disseminate government messaging and avoid addressing sensitive questions that might harm the country’s image. In 2024, on the eve of COP29, a side event under the auspices of the CESD and another GONGO, the For Social Welfare of Citizens’ Public Union, sought to highlight Azerbaijan’s commitment to combating climate change, calling for international cooperation among governments, international organizations, and civil society. This appeal was made despite Azerbaijan’s repression of civil society, particularly organizations focused on

61 “General Information,” *Western Azerbaijan Community*, <https://westaz.org/en/%C4%B0CMA/umumi-melumat>

62 Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD)

63 “‘We Try to Stay Invisible’: Azerbaijan’s Escalating Crackdown on Critics and Civil Society,” *Human Rights Watch*, 2024, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2024/10/azerbaijan1024web\\_1.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2024/10/azerbaijan1024web_1.pdf); “COP29: States must press Azerbaijani authorities to end assault on civil society,” *Amnesty International*, October 8, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/cop29-azerbaijan-end-assault-on-civil-society/>.



environmental issues.<sup>64</sup> In keeping with the practices of many GONGOs aiming to avoid contradictions, the event featured a limited Q&A session and speakers who included the Azerbaijani Ambassador to the OSCE and the Azerbaijani Ambassador to Poland, both of whom reiterated Azerbaijan's official stance on environmental responsibility. The latter posed a question to the speaker that seemed prearranged, as the speaker responded by reading from his computer.

#### *Legal Analysis and Research Public Union*

Established in 2012 in Baku, the Legal Analysis and Research Public Union (LAR) says it is a think tank that engages in uniting legal experts from different organizations and institutions in Azerbaijan. It is a member of the Azerbaijan Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and of the UN Global Compact initiative.<sup>65</sup> The mission of this GONGO is “analyzing and researching to build a legal state in Azerbaijan.” It has engaged with several international organizations, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and is represented at the WhatsApp platform of the UNODC to foster partnership in crime prevention and criminal justice issues. At the WHDC, the LAR illustrates how GONGOs use facts to craft misleading narratives. For example, it cited the real exodus of Azerbaijanis from Karabakh during Armenia's 1990s takeover to claim that Yerevan continues to persecute ethnic minorities in Armenia (WS9, 2024).

#### *Young Leaders Education-Training and Development Public Union*

The Young Leaders Education, Training, and Development Public Union was established in November 1999 in Ganja. Its website, [ganca.az](http://ganca.az), appears to be non-functional and its Facebook page features only a few posts spaced several months apart; there are no mentions of any activities, just statements made at the WHDC. These statements attacked Armenia, labeling it as the only monoethnic state in the region, and denied all criticisms raised at the WHDC regarding the mistreatment of Armenians living in Karabakh (WS9, 2024).

#### *Azerbaijan Journalists' Network Public Union*

Founded in 2012, the Azerbaijan Journalists' Network (AJN) claims to be a non-governmental organization aimed at promoting high standards of ethical and objective journalism in Azerbaijan. The AJN says it organizes training sessions, workshops, and seminars to enhance journalists' skills and capabilities. His statements at the WHDC have focused on promoting the return of Azerbaijani IDPs from Karabakh (WS8, 2024) and lamenting the disinformation allegedly spread by the Armenian delegation and NGOs. He asserts that Armenia seeks to provoke unrest in Azerbaijan by exploiting minorities and criticizes the WHDC, claiming its main purpose is to disseminate disinformation (WS9, 2024).

### **Box 17: State-Controlled Media Propagating GONGOs' Deceptive Press Freedom Narrative**

RT (formerly Russia Today), Sputnik, and Regnum stand out as conduits for Kremlin-driven propaganda and disinformation. These outlets, which have widespread international presence and significant state funding, were originally conceived to enhance Russia's global image and counteract unfavorable Western media portrayals. However, they have since morphed into more assertive outlets. Employing tactics like selective reporting, making unsubstantiated claims, and disseminating conspiracy theories and emotive content, they have advanced Kremlin-aligned perspectives and amplified divisive and controversial reporting on human rights, democratic processes, electoral integrity, and relations with Ukraine, the European Union, and the United States.

RT, Sputnik, and Regnum have established vast operational networks, broadcasting in various languages across numerous regions. They reach a global audience through television channels, websites, social media, and collaborations with local media. Their impact is amplified by connections with entities within the Russian disinformation system, including Kremlin-affiliated proxy sites and social media manipulators like bots and trolls that boost their messaging or fabricate accounts. Additionally, they engage in cyber-enabled disinformation tactics, such as hacking and leaking sensitive data. These

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Crude Accountability, “Azerbaijan: Human Rights in the Spotlight during COP29 Pre-Talks in Bonn,” no date, <https://crudeaccountability.org/azerbaijan-human-rights-cop29-bonn/>.

<sup>65</sup> <https://larpuaz.com/>

outlets also liaise with groups that share the Kremlin's objectives, including marginal or extremist factions, populist or nationalist parties, and anti-establishment or anti-Western movements.<sup>66</sup> Notably, they have presented controversial figures like Holocaust denier Ryan Dawson and far-right activists including Manuel Ochsreiter<sup>67</sup> as legitimate sources.

Some of their staff, like RT's editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, have become prominent propagandist figures for President Putin. Simonyan has described RT as an "information weapon" deployed during "critical moments" and "war." She claims to have provided expertise to the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Select Committee, delivered speeches at prominent forums including the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Westminster Media Forum, the Global Editors Network, and the Oxford Union, and provided insights to leading international news outlets like Forbes, the BBC, and the New York Times.<sup>68</sup>

The work of RT and Sputnik abroad reflects the Kremlin's strategy of sharp power and hybrid warfare, which involves exploiting the freedom of expression guaranteed abroad—but denied in their own country—to disseminate disinformation campaigns. These have led several OSCE countries to ban these two media outlets following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, these media outlets are used by Russia beyond their primary function of producing and disseminating information. They are employed to spread disinformation on international platforms, echoing and reinforcing the narrative of GONGOs. Both Sputnik and RT have been previously active at the HDIM, denouncing pressure they claimed their journalists faced in several European countries, claiming to have been censored in many of these countries for refusing to follow the dominant narrative of their governments, and equating, for example, press freedom in Lithuania to that of the Soviet regime (WS3, 2018; WS4, 2019).

At the HDIM, Russia has showcased several Crimean media entities, such as the Millet Crimean Tatar Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, *Krymskaya Gazeta*, and the Crimean News Agency. These outlets, established post-2014 following the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, have echoed the disinformation propagated by RT, Regnum, and Sputnik. Millet has been active for years at the OSCE, for example, participating in side events at the SHDMs in November 2020 to try to demonstrate a so-called normalized situation in Crimea.<sup>70</sup> *Krymskaya Gazeta* was founded by Crimea's Russian-backed Ministry of Internal Policy, Information, and Communications. Despite its 2016 registration with Roskomnadzor, Russia's Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, it had been receiving Russian government funds since 2015 (29.2 million rubles in 2015 alone).<sup>71</sup> The newspaper, funded by the Russian-appointed administration, has disseminated official Russian government narratives, detailed Crimean officials' activities, and featured interviews with Russian government figures. Maria Volkonskaya, a Crimean journalist and the director of the newspaper, has represented the journal at the HDIM, where she rationalized the annexation of Crimea and cast it in a favorable light, emphasizing Crimea's purported unity and press freedom (WS1, 2019) and discredited opposition journalists she labeled as terrorists (WS2, 2019).

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66 Jim Rutenberg, "RT, Sputnik and Russia's New Theory of War," *New York Times*, September 13, 2017, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/magazine/rt-sputnik-and-russias-new-theory-of-war.html>; Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," *RAND Corporation*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>; Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money," n.d.; Peter Pomerantsev, "The Kremlin's Information War," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (October 2015): 40–50.

67 Kacper Rekawek, ed., *Russia and the Far-Right: Insights from Ten European Countries* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2024).


68 Anna Belkina, *World Forum for Democracy*, [https://www.coe.int/en/web/world-forum-democracy/speakers-2019/-/asset\\_publisher/JTQ3V5aITS07/content/belkina-anna?inheritRedirect=false](https://www.coe.int/en/web/world-forum-democracy/speakers-2019/-/asset_publisher/JTQ3V5aITS07/content/belkina-anna?inheritRedirect=false); Steven Erlanger, "Russia's RT Network: Is It More BBC or K.G.B.?", *New York Times*, March 8, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/world/europe/russias-rt-network-is-it-more-bbc-or-kgb.html>.

69 Foo Yun Chee, "EU bans RT, Sputnik over Ukraine disinformation," *Reuters*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-bans-rt-sputnik-banned-over-ukraine-disinformation-2022-03-02/>.

70 I wish to thank here Ms. Olesya Tsybulko and Prof. Borys Babin (Association for the Reintegration of Ukraine) for providing information on Russian GONGOs engaged in OSCE meetings. On the religious situation in Crimea, see "CRIMEA: Religious Freedom Survey, September 2022," *Forum 18*, September 22, 2022, [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2774](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2774).

71 "Rossijskaja propaganda v lichz: hozjaeva krymskih gazet," *Krymr.com*, June 25, 2016, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/27879631.html>.





Over the past two decades, Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs) have proliferated in autocratic regimes, posing significant threats to global democratic governance. These entities, disguised as independent civil society groups, can serve as extensions of state power, disseminating propaganda, undermining human rights institutions, and entrenching authoritarian control at both domestic and international levels.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has become a key target for GONGOs, particularly at its human dimension meetings, including the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM), the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference (WHDC), and the Supplementary Human Dimension Meetings (SHDMs). GONGOs utilize disinformation, whataboutism, and other manipulative tactics to amplify authoritarian narratives, dismiss criticism as illegitimate or Western interference, and discredit independent organizations and activists. Their actions promote an authoritarian worldview that challenges fundamental principles such as freedom of expression and association. Reflecting the illiberal agendas of regimes like Russia and China, GONGOs aim to reshape governance norms while stifling genuine civil society voices.

By infiltrating institutions like the OSCE, GONGOs erode the democratic values and cooperative principles foundational to these forums, undermining their integrity and purpose. For international organizations and democratic governments, the rise of GONGOs poses a clear and serious danger. Countering their influence requires proactive strategies to expose their agendas and preserve the OSCE's role as a platform for open dialogue and independent civil society engagement. For many CSOs, OSCE meetings remain one of the few spaces to directly engage with governmental representatives. Safeguarding these democratic platforms demands coordinated efforts, transparency, and a resolute commitment to upholding universal human rights and democratic principles.

