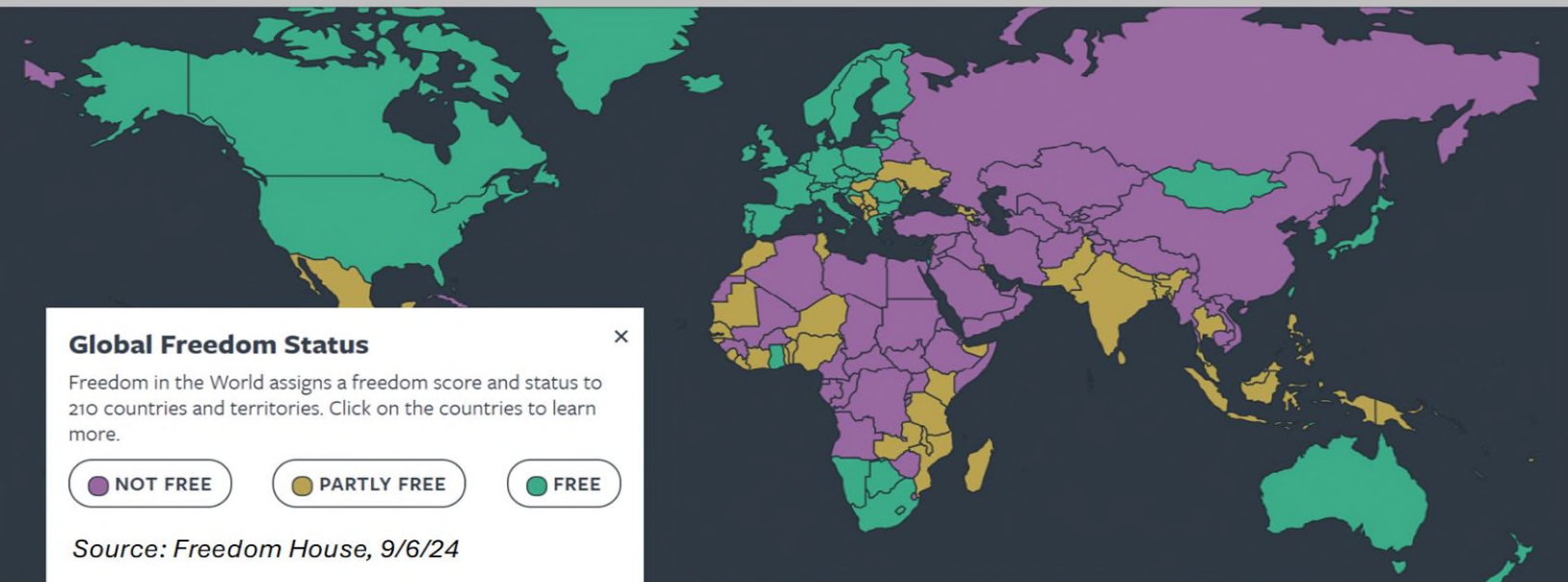


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Global Freedom Is Losing Ground



Democracy is in decline and freedom is waning across the globe.

- Global freedom declined for an 18th consecutive year in 2023 as political rights and civil liberties deteriorated in 52 countries, representing a fifth of the world's population. ([Freedom House](#), 9/4/24)
- The declines were both widespread and severe, eclipsing the improvements observed in 21 other countries. ([Freedom House](#), 9/4/24)
- Nearly 38 percent of the world's people now live in countries rated Not Free, 42 percent live in Partly Free countries, and only 20 percent live in Free countries – meaning that individuals who have the freedom to exercise their voting rights, voice their opinions, love freely, and practice their choice of religions are in the minority across the globe. ([Freedom House](#), 9/4/24)

Autocracies now outnumber democracies globally in developing and transitioning countries.

- According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index of developing and transition countries, there are now 63 democracies compared to 74 autocracies. ([Bertelsmann Stiftung](#), 3/18/24)
- The Bertelsmann Stiftung annual study, which is the most comprehensive of its kind, analyzes political transformation toward democracy, economic transformation and governmental action. All three of these categories are currently at an all-time low. ([Bertelsmann Stiftung](#), 3/18/24)
- On the international stage, democracies should build broad partnerships based on shared principles, and reaffirm the norms of sovereignty and self-determination that are being subverted by authoritarian aggression from China, Iran, Russia, and others.

“Global freedom took a big step backward in 2023 ... If democracies do not respond to these challenges, more of the global population will be denied fundamental liberties in the years ahead, ultimately affecting peace, prosperity, security, and freedom for everyone.”

- Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House (9/4/24)

Putin's Army Is Torturing, Raping And Killing Innocent Ukrainian Civilians



Russia – armed by its authoritarian partners in the region – is committing horrible human rights atrocities and war crimes against innocent Ukrainians.

With 70% of Ukraine's energy infrastructure already hit, and without further aid and support, 2 million Ukrainians may be forced to flee their homes by the winter, furthering the humanitarian and refugee crisis.

- According to the U.S. government, Iran is supplying Russia with ballistic missiles to use against Ukrainian civilians. ([Reuters](#), 9/10/24)
- As of February 2024, there have been more than 125,000 documented war crimes committed by Russia against Ukraine since their invasion in 2022. ([Foreign Policy](#), 2/22/24)
- A 2024 United Nations report verified that 10,600 Ukrainian civilians have been killed since the start of the war, and nearly 20,000 injured. They estimate that the actual number of casualties is much higher. ([United Nations](#), 2/21/24)
- Russian attacks have destroyed or damaged 1,072 educational facilities and 465 medical facilities in Ukraine. ([United Nations](#), 2/21/24)
- Russian and Russian-affiliated forces are committing horrible abuses against civilians in occupied areas of Ukraine, including sexual violence, enforced disappearances, summary executions of civilians and unlawful detention and torture. ([Human Rights Watch](#), 2024)
- Russia is committing systematic torture of Ukrainian prisoners of war in seven occupied locations in Ukraine as well as four locations in Russia. ([The New York Times](#), 3/15/24)
 - In 32 out of 48 Russian detention centers, Ukrainian prisoners faced torture, ill-treatment, forced labor and abhorrent detention conditions. ([Human Rights Watch](#), 2024)
 - During the eight-month occupation of the Ukrainian city of Kherson, the Russian government financed at least 20 torture centers. ([CNBC](#), 3/2/23)

“It is crucial to keep attention on the human rights situation in Ukraine ... every single figure we report has a human story behind it, often with dreadful suffering.”

- Danielle Bell, head of the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, 8/26/24

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Russia Is Kidnapping And Trafficking Innocent Ukrainian Children



Russia is forcibly removing Ukrainian children from their families and holding them in Russia against their will in an attempt to erase their Ukrainian identity.

- Since the start of the war, Russian forces have forcibly removed 20,000 Ukrainian children from their country without the consent of their families or guardians. ([Reuters](#), 6/15/24)
- Russia is trying to erase Ukrainian identity by placing kidnapped children in Russian schools and banishing Ukrainian language, history and literature from the curriculum. ([The Wall Street Journal](#), 6/20/23)
- Russia's removal of children is the largest-scale deportation of children in Europe since the Second World War. In some cases, Russian authorities are giving children new names to fully erase their Ukrainian identity. ([The Guardian](#), 2/4/24)
- The International Criminal Court issued a warrant for Vladimir Putin's arrest on war crimes charges related to his forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia. ([International Criminal Court](#), 3/17/23)
- Russia is forcing these trafficked Ukrainian children to film Russian propaganda, falsely claiming that Russians have rescued them. ([The New York Times](#), 6/2/24)

CNN: Russia's war machine is trying to turn Ukrainian teenagers into soldiers

"We now have examples of forcible mobilization of Ukrainian people. All Ukrainian teenagers held in Russia, when they turn 18, they are put on a (recruitment) list of Russian military"

- Ukraine's Human Rights Commissioner Dmytro Lubinets, 3/15/24

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Russia Persecuting And Torturing Religious Leaders And Destroying Churches In Ukraine



Ukrainian Christians are facing unimaginable religious persecution at the hands of Putin's army.

- Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Russian troops have damaged or destroyed at least 630 churches, prayer houses and other religious facilities in Ukraine. ([Institute for Religious Freedom](#), 3/29/24)
- The Russian military has also killed at least 39 priests, pastors and monks since the 2022 invasion, while imprisoning or torturing many others. Even more are missing or unaccounted for. ([Voice of America News](#), 3/14/24)
- Not only has Russia continued to persecute people of faith since their 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, they also do so within their own borders. ([Center for Strategic & International Studies](#), 2/29/24)
- Orthodox churches suffered the most damage from Russian aggression - at least 246 in total. Of these, the churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate) suffered the most – at least 187 were damaged. ([Institute for Religious Freedom](#), 3/29/24)
- The scale of destruction and looting of evangelical churches is extensive – at least 206 have been affected in total. ([Institute for Religious Freedom](#), 3/29/24)

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U.S. Christian communities are rallying behind their Ukrainian brothers and sisters.

- Southern Baptists have rallied around Ukraine in huge numbers. Southern Baptists have gifted \$10 million to *Send Relief*, the Southern Baptist compassion ministry, and \$2.9 million to the International Mission Board (IMB). ([Send Relief](#), 2/23/23)
- In April 2024 Christian leaders from across the United States co-authored a letter to U.S. Speaker of the House Mike Johnson urging him to consider the plight of Christians at the hands of Russia and reminding him that religious freedom is “a basic human right that must be protected everywhere.” ([American Faith Leaders Joint Letter to Speaker Johnson on Behalf of Ukrainian Christians](#), 4/17/24)
- “Russian forces have damaged and looted hundreds of houses of worship, and hundreds of congregations have been lost. They are murdering pastors and priests in cold blood; many have disappeared. We cannot stay silent in the face of this evil.” ([American Faith Leaders Joint Letter to Speaker Johnson on Behalf of Ukrainian Christians](#), 4/17/24)

“Seeing young moms and kids fleeing the country and their husbands and brothers are staying there to fight. Just the blatant invasion of it and the indiscriminate killing of people – it’s just horrible to watch. The bottom line is people should have a right to be free and live the way they want to live.”

- Rev. Angelo Frazier, pastor of Riverside Community Church, 9/24/23

U.S. Military Aid Helping Ukraine To Keep Russia From Advancing



U.S. military aid to Ukraine is a cost-effective investment.

- The United States has spent less than 0.5 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) in aid to Ukraine since Russia's invasion – but “Russia is now spending 40 percent of its government budget on defense, cannibalizing the rest of the productive economy to fund war after losing 50 percent of its military might over the last two years.” ([TIME](#), 2/14/24)
- In 2022, the United States spent just 5.6 percent of its military budget on Ukraine, yet Ukrainians diminished Putin's military capacity by half. ([Center for European Policy Analysis](#), 11/18/22)
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies are providing crucial complementary support to Ukraine, with the United States ranking eleventh in total aid to Ukraine among NATO countries when looking a percentage of each donor country's GDP. ([Statista](#), 8/6/24)

Most U.S. aid to Ukraine is invested in U.S. infrastructure.

- Most of the money in the U.S. Ukraine aid packages is spent in the United States, “paying for American factories and workers to produce the various weapons that are either shipped to Ukraine or that replenish the U.S. weapons stocks the Pentagon has drawn on during the war.” ([Council on Foreign Relations](#), 5/9/24)
- One analysis found “of the \$68 billion in military and related assistance Congress has approved since Russia invaded Ukraine, almost 90 percent is going to Americans” and funding defense manufacturing in more than 70 U.S. cities. ([The Washington Post](#), 11/29/23)
- U.S. military aid to Ukraine is “revitalizing manufacturing communities across the United States, creating good jobs here at home and restoring the United States' capacity to produce weapons for our national defense.” ([The Washington Post](#), 11/29/23)

America Can Help Ukraine Win By Providing Long-Range Missiles

“The addition of ground-launched long-range fires, especially the 300 km ATACMS, would enable Ukraine to strike enemy lines of communication and logistics hubs deep inside Russian-controlled territory, target and destroy major transit routes, and suppress Russian air defenses, thus also helping to alleviate threats against Ukrainian air.”

– [Atlantic Council](#), 5/13/24)

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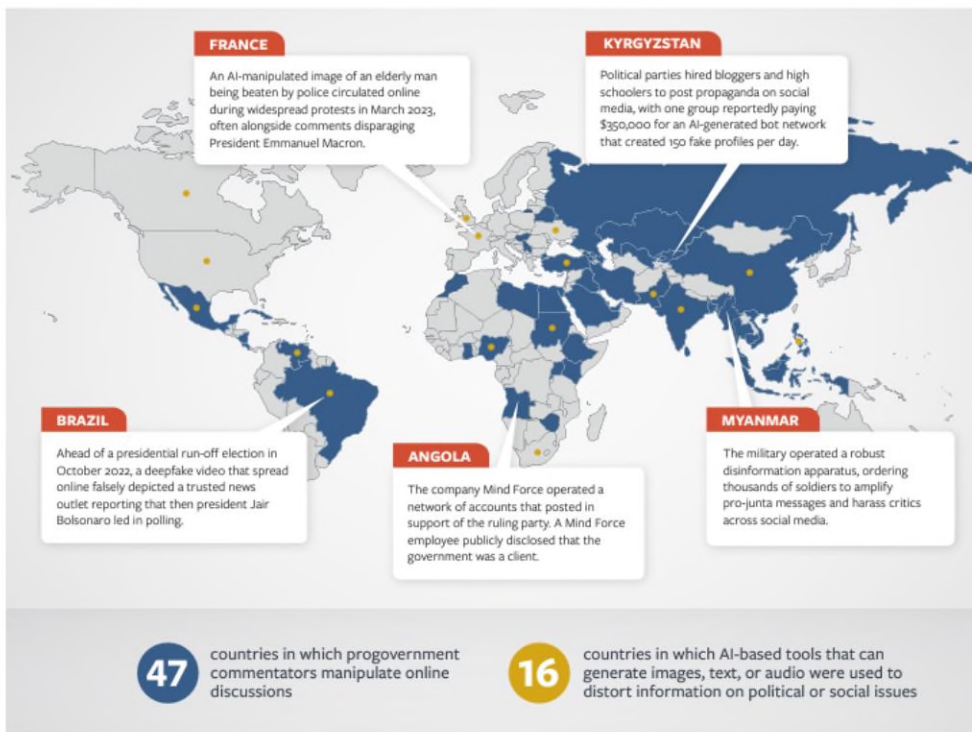
Emerging AI Technology Poses Growing Risk Of Global Misinformation And Manipulation

AI-Based Tools Are Being Weaponized Against Democratic Nations

There's no doubt that the progress humanity has made with artificial intelligence (AI) – when wielded properly and responsibly – will positively transform the lives of millions of people across the globe. Sadly, authoritarian regimes have used this new technology to manipulate and disseminate disinformation, leading to societal unrest and oppression. Humanity must be on guard and ensure new technology does not harm global democracy and freedom.

HARNESSING AI TO AUGMENT DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

Governments have long employed human commentators—whether state officials, hired contractors, or party loyalists—to covertly manipulate information online. Generative AI technology is slowly beginning to enhance such distortion campaigns.



At least 47 governments deployed commentators to manipulate online discussions in their favor during the coverage period, double the number from a decade ago. ([Freedom House](#), October 2023)

AI-based tools have quickly grown more sophisticated, accessible, and easy to use, spurring a concerning escalation of disinformation on the internet. Over the past year, disinformation campaigns have been launched in at least 16 countries to sow doubt, smear opponents, and influence public debate. ([Freedom House](#), October 2023)

Legal frameworks in at least 22 countries mandate or incentivize digital platforms to deploy machine learning to remove disfavored political, social and religious speech. ([Freedom House](#), October 2023)

- Human rights, digital freedom and democracy hang in the balance amid a competition between techno-autocracies and techno-democracies to control the future of the internet and technology.
- Authoritarian states are vying to spread their model of digital control around the world. China and Russia's “[no limits](#)” friendship rests on a foundation of shared authoritarian principles and stands in stark contrast to democracy and digital freedom.
- With technology becoming synonymous with geopolitical strength and the internet becoming increasingly intertwined into our everyday lives, the question humanity faces is which value set will lead in tech and AI development: free democracy or fascist authoritarianism.

“[Information warfare] is about to get worse, because you now have generative A.I. coming in, so you're going to get industrial-grade propaganda coming at you, and you won't be able to tell the difference from fact and fiction.” — Journalist and Nobel Prize Laureate Maria Ressa, 5/30/24

Russians Increasing Strikes On Innocent Ukraine Civilians And Vital Infrastructure



THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Russia's Bombardment of Ukraine Is More Lethal Than Ever

"Ukraine has intercepted fewer missiles as Russia increases attacks, fires more harder-to-hit weapons" ([The Wall Street Journal](#), 5/13/24)

The New York Times

Russia Maintains Punishing Pace Of Deadly Strikes On Ukrainian Cities

"... May was the deadliest month for civilians in Ukraine in a year, according to the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission." ([The New York Times](#), 6/30/24)

The Washington Post

Russia Strikes Energy Infrastructure Across Ukraine, Forcing Power Outages

"Russia launched its largest missile attack yet across Ukraine ... targets were power substations and gas compressor stations." ([The Washington Post](#), 8/26/24)

Ukraine desperately needs more air-defense systems to protect its people and vital infrastructure

While securing the delivery of F-16 fighter jets is crucial, **Ukraine is in desperate need of critical air defense systems including additional Patriot, NASAMS and IRIS-T systems along with sufficient SAMs.** These defenses are essential to establishing a robust shield against cruise and ballistic missile strikes deep within Ukrainian territory. We also encourage discussions on whether Russian missiles can be intercepted over Ukraine by systems based in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) neighbors. This approach mirrors the recent bilateral agreement between Ukraine and Poland, setting a precedent for regional cooperation.



Russians Bombing Churches In Ukraine; Abducting And Torturing Christian Leaders

Russia Attacks Christian Church on Easter Sunday

Russia attacks a Ukrainian Orthodox Church on Easter Sunday. Nikopol, Dnipropetrovsk.

(Photo: Telegraf)



Priest abducted, imprisoned

Ukrainian Orthodox Father Kostiantyn Maksymov. Abducted in May 2023 for resisting attempts to forcibly merge his church into the Russian Orthodox Church. Sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment.

(Photo: Centre for Civil Liberties)



Christian Pastor Tortured

Protestant Pastor Oleksandr Khomchenko. Beaten and tortured for praying for his country.

(Photo: Olexander Scherba)

National Review: Russia Is Persecuting Christian Churches in Occupied Ukraine

“Anyone who believes Russia is ‘protecting Christianity’ is ignoring the record of Russia’s treatment of Ukrainian churches.” *(National Review, 4/11/24)*

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Russian Attacks Are Killing Families & Destroying Vital Infrastructure

Russian Missile Kills Family

September 4, 2024. Daryna (18), Yaryna (21), Emilia (7) and Yevhenia (43) were killed by a Russian missile. Only Yaroslav, the father of the family, is now alive, a lone survivor of a Russian strike on their home in Lviv.

(Photo: Lviv City Administration)



Russia Bombs Ukraine's Largest Children's Hospital

July 8, 2024. Attack on Okhmatdyt Hospital in Kyiv, Ukraine's largest children's hospital. 340 children were evacuated. Two adults died and 16 were injured.

(Photo: The Associated Press, Reuters)



Russian missile attack on Ukraine's largest hospital complicates treatment of kids with cancer

"[A] Russian missile struck Ukraine's largest children's hospital this week, forcing the evacuation of dozens of its young patients battling cancer ... terrorizing families and severely impacting their children already battling life-threatening diseases." (The Associated Press, 7/11/24)

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Russians Increasing Bombardments and Drone Attacks on Civilian Areas

Recent Russian bombardment largest strike since full-scale invasion

August 26, 2024. Families seek shelter at metro stations. 127 missiles and 109 drones were fired against Ukraine during the night in the largest Russian attack since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022.

(Photos: Telegraf)



“At dawn on Aug. 26, residents of Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, and many other cities woke to the sound of a Russian aerial assault. Moscow had launched more than 200 missiles and drones that hit targets in 15 regions of Ukraine.” (The New York Times, 9/26/24)

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UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ISSUE UPDATE: RUSSIA'S RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS IN UKRAINE

July 2023

Excerpts: Russia's Targeting Ukrainian Religious Leaders



“Russian forces in Nova Kakhovka, Kherson, abducted **Evangelical deacon Anatoliy Prokopchuk** and his son Oleksandr Prokopchuk for unclear reasons. Days later, the two were found dead with signs of severe torture on their bodies in a forest near the city.”

- “Russian soldiers in Kherson abducted **OCU priest Sergey Chudinovich** after he refused to allow Russian soldiers to distribute aid at his church. Russian forces kept him in a cold basement without proper clothing and beat, strangled, and attempted to rape him with a baton until he agreed to cooperate with them.”
- “Russian forces detained **Crimean Tatar Imam Rustem Asanov** at a checkpoint in the Kherson region.” They kept him in a basement where they tightened the handcuffs on his hands to the point of physical pain, suffocated him until he lost consciousness, and beat him. After releasing Asanov, Russian forces raided his mosque and confiscated religious materials they deemed “extremist.”
- “UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine found that Russian soldiers in an unidentified region **stripped a priest** of his clothes, beat him, and ordered him to parade around naked in the streets of his village.”
- “Armed men in military uniform **abducted Baptist pastor Leonid Ponomaryov** and his wife Tatyana Ponomaryov from their home in Mariupol. Previously, Russian officials had reportedly claimed that the two had been involved in “extremist activity,” and military personnel searched and closed Ponomaryov’s church. A month later, the two were released.”
- “Russian forces in Berdyansk, Zaporizhzhia, detained **Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests Ivan Levitsky and Bohdan Geleta** and later claimed to have discovered explosives, weapons, and “extremist” materials at their church. They refuted these allegations... the priests’ whereabouts remain unknown.”
- “A tank fired on the office building of the **Roman Catholic charity Caritas Internationalis** in Mariupol, killing two of its employees and five others.”
- “Russian artillery struck the **UOC Svyatohirsk Lavra monastery** complex in the Donetsk region, killing two monks and a nun.”



Before-and-after images of a Catholic church in Kyselivka, Mykolayiv, following Russian shelling in May 2022. Source: Ukrainian Ministry of Defense.

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