

Dispatch II



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Introduction: Refuse, Resist, and Redefine the Path Forward

At Just Futures Collaborative, we are increasingly concerned about the widespread fear and panic that is gripping our movements. The sweeping legal and policy changes (or intended changes) by the new US administration - with their impact felt across the United States and the world - make it difficult to suppress a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

Major shifts in the international development landscape and in the progressive private funding ecosystem are exacerbating our collective alarm. UN agencies, other member states, private funders, educational institutions and visible non-profit organizations are becoming more risk-averse and in some cases, preemptively capitulating to the US government's demands and to its political ethos.

For example, we were unnerved to read that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) - the UN agency tasked with the field of migration - proactively capitulated to the US administration's political agenda.¹ They have scrubbed their website of references to diversity, equity and inclusion, and highlighted their controversial "refugee return" policies and practices.

These actions were likely taken - among others - in the hopes that it will encourage US government funding to once again flow its way. It's clear that the IOM is suffering from the loss of US government funding. For example, they have recently laid off 3000 workers. But what is the lesson we have learned from our collective histories of other regimes similar to this one? Capitulating won't make this system work for us.

We are witnessing a historic high in the brutal criminalization of protest, dissent and activism, strengthened border and migration enforcement, increased targeting of migrant and refugee individuals and communities, while impunity is granted for genocide. Those in positions of power, whether they are government leaders, UN agency heads, donors or others should demonstrate moral courage, principled action and an organized and strategic refusal to succumb.

¹ Lynch, C. April 2025. "UN appeals fall flat in face of Trump's budget steamroller". Devex. <https://tinyurl.com/3drdtkra>

We offer the following examples to illustrate the wide-ranging impact of anti-gender and anti-democracy laws and policies now being advanced in many countries. On their face, such laws and policies are instituted with a pretense of “protection.” In reality, they frequently cause harm to individuals and communities, without providing much protection, or any at all.

Criminalization of migration and the nexus between the “war on terror” and the “war on drugs”

Regimes around the world, whether “democratic,” “authoritarian” or somewhere in between, are turning to more violent and sophisticated methods to patrol borders and expand systems for the incarceration of migrant peoples. This is leading to complex and long-lasting humanitarian crises in a wide range of locations.

Reports from human rights organizations demonstrate the emergence of harsher and more severely carceral immigration policies being implemented by several powerful and wealthy nations.

The horrific spectacle created by the US government’s decision to wage all-out war on migrant persons in the United States has caught the world’s attention. To be clear - the US has historically tussled with the issue of migration, often with highly carceral and punitive policies being implemented under numerous governments.

But the current regime is, once again, ramping it up, and there are some novel facets to their strategy. Those advocating for Palestinian rights and an end to the genocide,² and those working to provide support to immigrant communities (e.g. immigration lawyers³ - including, bizarrely, some US citizens⁴) are intensely being targeted. Those being targeted include many with legal status in the US.

2 Walters, J. April 2025. “Denied, detained, deported: the people targeted in Trump’s immigration crackdown”. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/28/trump-immigration-people-detained-deported-cases>

3 Wolf, R. March 2025. “Trump Is Trying to Deter Us From Representing Immigrants in Court. It Won’t Work”. Immigration Impact. <https://immigrationimpact.com/2025/03/28/trump-deter-us-from-representing-immigrants-in-court-it-wont-work/>

4 Luviano-Hurwitz, T. April 2025. “More US citizen immigration lawyers are being asked to leave the country”. NBC San Diego. <https://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/us-citizen-immigration-lawyers-being-asked-to-leave-country/3813464/>

The current US regime has created a spectacle by effectively abducting targeted persons and disappearing them, putting them into deportation proceedings with no due process. This is certainly how the mainstream global North media would write about these cases if other governments were sending masked agents in civilian clothing to accost someone on a street in broad daylight and take them away, leaving their loved ones with no information about their whereabouts.⁵

Severe policies are not limited to the US, however. Australia, for example, has new laws that expand its off-shore migrant detention system and seek prison terms for migrant persons - including asylum seekers - who are seen as resisting deportation.⁶ Across Europe, there are increasingly xenophobic and punitive approaches to immigrants and refugees coming to their borders.⁷

The current US regime is conducting punitive migrant policy implementation with a new twist. They recently abducted and unjustly deported over 200 immigrant men to a notorious maximum security prison in El Salvador⁸ - in a historic 6 million US dollar deal made between the presidents of the two countries.⁹ This demonstrated the current US administration's policy as it relates to persons (especially men) from Latin American countries who it can smear, without evidence or due process, as "drug traffickers", and now, as "terrorists."

While there has been widespread opposition to the unlawful detention of one of those men (he is married to a US citizen, and living in Maryland¹⁰), significantly less outrage has been expressed about the other 199. Is this because they were branded as "criminals", despite the fact that journalists and lawyers have found no criminal records in the case of over 70% of these men?¹¹

5 Offenhartz, J., McCormack, K. & Casey, M. March 2025. "Turkish student at Tufts University detained, video shows masked people handcuffing her". AP. <https://apnews.com/article/tufts-student-detained-massachusetts-immigration-6c3978da98a8d0f39ab311e092ffd892>

6 Hennessy, A. November 2024. "Australia Passes Harsh New Anti-Migration Laws". Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/11/28/australia-passes-harsh-new-anti-migration-laws>

7 Zanfrini, L. September 2024. "Europe and the Refugee Crisis: A Challenge to Our Civilization". United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/europe-and-refugee-crisis-challenge-our-civilization>

8 Al Jazeera. March 2025. "US deports over 200 Venezuelan immigrants to El Salvador despite court ban". Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/16/venezuelan-immigrants-deported-to-el-salvador-despite-us-court-ban>

9 Renteria, N. April 2025. "Inside Trump's \$6mn deportee deal with El Salvador mega-prison." Context, from the Thomson Reuters Foundation. <https://www.context.news/money-power-people/inside-trumps-6mn-deportee-deal-with-el-salvador-mega-prison>

10 Halpert, M. April 2025. "Who is the man in middle of Maryland deportation case?". BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20z63gr8mzo>

11 Vega, C. April 2025. "U.S. sent 238 migrants to Salvadoran mega-prison; documents indicate most have no apparent criminal records". CBS News.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-records-show-about-migrants-sent-to-salvadoran-prison-60-minutes-transcript/>

The current US regime's allegation that these 200 men are members of an international drug network is used to justify holding them in a mega-prison with windowless cells, called CECOT - or Terrorism Confinement Centre.¹² Thus, the destructive paradigms created by the so-called "war on terror" and so-called "war on drugs" have collided, with unimaginable impact on the lives of already marginalized persons, families and communities. The narrative of the urgency of removing "illegals" who are cast as "criminals" and "terrorists" legitimizes and garners support for inhumane and illegal policies and practices.

This is not an entirely unique example in the context of the seamless and intentional merging of the "war on terror" and "war on drugs". The pattern of misapplication of so-called counter-terrorism laws for the purposes of drug control is being seen across the world - from Sri Lanka in South Asia, to, more recently Ecuador in South America. The Ecuadorian president - known for his love of extremely harsh carceral and punitive policies - has asked the US president (with whom he has established close ties¹³) to declare armed Ecuadorian organizations as "terrorists".¹⁴

These "wars" have led to the unchecked militarization of law enforcement, which, in countries such as the United States has been taking place for decades.¹⁵ The US has since exported these strategies to other countries - across Latin America, South West Asia and North Africa, for example - through training programs and collaborations between law enforcement agencies. These programs promote "counter-insurgency" methods aligning with US foreign policy as necessary training for law enforcement.¹⁶

Alongside this is the growing use of advanced technology, such as facial recognition systems, purportedly to counter terrorism and drug trafficking but in practice being weaponized against human rights activists and dissenters.

The militarization of law enforcement and the weaponization of counter-terrorism and drug laws often criminalize, both *de jure* and *de facto*, communities already discriminated against and marginalized, such as racialized and/or ethno-religious minorities, migrant persons and others.

12 Reuters. April 2025. "Inside the El Salvador mega-prison holding US deportees". YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUirc1zJ398>

13 Shalal, A. & Valencia, A. March 2025. "Trump met with Ecuadorean President Noboa in Florida on Saturday". Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/trump-meet-ecuadorean-president-noboa-florida-saturday-2025-03-29/>

14 Alvarado, A., Culver, D. & Arvanitidis, B. March 2025. "Ecuador is preparing for US forces, plans show, as Noboa calls for help battling gangs". CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/29/americas/ecuador-trump-noboa-gang-intl-latam/index.html#:~:text=Noboa%20has%20also%20publicly%20asked,abroad%20in%20combatting%20the%20groups.>

15 Peisch, S. June 2020. "International Consequences of the Militarization of U.S. Policing". New Lines Institute. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/political-systems/international-consequences-of-the-militarization-of-u-s-policing/>

16 Ibid.

Retrenchment and repression in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: criminalization of activism, freedom of expression, association and assembly

The situation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) illustrates a particular and intense experience of rising authoritarianism, increased exploitation of marginalized groups and the harsh criminalization of protest, dissent and organizing - all against the backdrop of the major fissures created in our ecosystems by withdrawal of private and public funding.

An important part of the context for the current situation in EECA is the breakdown of the 20th century multilateralism model. This model promoted cooperation between states to solve global problems, where - while inequalities in power existed between those states - governments acceded to their responsibility to work together and share resources.

In recent years, civil society organizations (CSOs) across EECA have faced unprecedented challenges as authoritarian governments in the region scale up efforts to restrict civil society's space to operate. These restrictions are especially harsh in the fields of public health, human rights protection, and harm reduction services - areas that are critical for responding to HIV, supporting marginalized groups, and advancing evidence-based and rights-based drug and harm reduction policies.

While the region already struggles with insufficient state support for health and social services, the situation has been worsened by significant reductions in international donor funding. U.S. government funding - which once played a major role in supporting HIV prevention, promoting LGBTQI+ rights, and community-led harm reduction initiatives - has been significantly reduced or redirected, particularly since the new US administration has all but eliminated the US Agency for International Development (USAID). As a result, many local organizations that relied on this support have been forced to scale back or shut down completely.

Other bilateral donors and foundations have not stepped in to fill this gap. This has been particularly damaging for services aimed at providing for people who use drugs, LGBTQI+ individuals, and sex workers - communities already facing intense stigma and legal discrimination in their countries. Rather, many bilateral donors, including some of those that would previously have been likely to fund these services and advocacy, have themselves reduced their official development assistance (ODA).¹⁷

¹⁷ Miller, K. April 2025. "Opinion: Trump attack on US foundations would devastate global human rights." Devex. <https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-trump-attack-on-us-foundations-would-devastate-global-human-rights-109926>

Rather than stepping up to fund these critical issues, several EECA governments have adopted repressive strategies that effectively criminalize civil society work and activism. A growing trend in countries like Georgia is the introduction and enforcement of laws modeled after the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).¹⁸ These new laws in EECA require NGOs receiving foreign funding to register and report their activities under hostile and stigmatizing conditions. These laws are not about transparency - they are invoked to harass, control, and punish those who are critical of the state and its allies.

In several EECA countries (e.g. Russia, Kyrgyzstan¹⁹) laws banning so-called "LGBTQI+ propaganda" have been introduced or enforced with greater intensity. These laws prohibit public discussion or education about non-heteronormative sexual orientation and gender identity, particularly when aimed at young people. Under these conditions, simply providing affirming health information or organizing a community support group can become grounds for legal prosecution. This has a chilling effect on service providers and isolates LGBTQI+ people from the care and support they need.

Recent laws targeting so-called "drug propaganda" (for example, in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan²⁰) are also used to silence advocates and service-providers. These laws criminalize the sharing of scientific, health-based information about drug use and harm reduction, making it impossible for people who use drugs to access lifesaving advice.

The confluence of what states are doing at the global level, the regional level and at the country-level has a multi-layered impact on activists and movements in the region. While global funding cuts affect their ability to safeguard their organizations and keep doing the critical work they do, national governments have created a web of barriers that block civil society groups from registering, participating in decision-making, or accessing resources. They often do so by criminalizing the content of their work or the communities they support.

State and security services increasingly monitor, interfere with, and control civil society activities. NGOs are often branded as "foreign agents," cut off from local funding, and subjected to harassment - in some cases, international NGOs are labeled "undesirable organizations," making any collaboration with them legally risky, severing access to their support and resources.

¹⁸ FARA is a 1938 US law which directs all groups who can be defined as "foreign agents" to register with the Attorney General. The current US regime has also sought to make significant changes to FARA, seeking to decrease - not increase - FARA's enforcement mandate. Read more here: <https://www.reuters.com/legal/legalindustry/navigating-foreign-agents-registration-acts-shifting-sands-what-make-doj-s-new-2025-04-01/>

Where do we go from here?

The experiences we have briefly touched on here are not isolated; there are many more stories we could add. They illustrate a deliberate, coordinated approach to undermine movement organizations in their attempts to influence decisions that affect all of us and our ability to collectively forge a hopeful path forward.

They are implemented not only at the international and national levels but are increasingly enforced at local levels as well, increasing criminalization and squeezing out community-led solutions, while, at the same time, pushing evidence-based public health responses backward. These policies and practices are meant to incite widespread fear, alarm and panic among our communities and those who defend human rights, to discredit and ultimately to dismantle our movements.

Much of the time, these actors rely on criminalization to wear us down and divide us - harsher punishments, sudden abductions, expansion of legal definitions leading to more sweeping powers to criminalize, increasingly militarized law enforcement. What we learn from one context, can be helpful in others.

Despite this bleak picture, movements and civil society around the world continue to resist and persist. Organizations adapt by working underground, using encrypted tools, building solidarity across borders and sharing resources and solidarity. Their determination - and their strategies - are extraordinary.

No regime, in any country or community, should be permitted to topple long-standing institutions and processes put in place to solve our shared problems as a global population. We urge our leaders - within the UN, in national governments, and those in philanthropy and civil society - to collectivize and work in collaboration and solidarity. Together, they have the power to isolate those who seek to undermine the agenda of international cooperation.

19 Transgender Europe (TGEU). 2023. "Kyrgyzstan Passes Anti-LGBTI+ 'Propaganda' Law". TGEU.

<https://tgeu.org/kyrgyzstan-passes-anti-lgbti-propaganda-law/>

20 Eurasian Harm Reduction Association. 2020. "A review of legislative initiatives on the liability of drug-related advocacy (propaganda) in Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan during the second half of 2019 and early 2020 and possible risks for social programmes aimed at working with people who use drugs"

<https://harmreductioneurasia.org/drug-policy/hr-protection/a-review-of-propaganda>

For our movements: lessons on the narrative power of criminalization

Broadening our horizons to see the bigger structure of criminalization can help us build longer lasting strategies which can more effectively withstand challenges from the opposition. When we work together and drive forward analyses shaped by our diverse experiences, we are more easily able to identify and disrupt narratives that are designed to justify the incarceration and abuse of marginalized communities.

For example, movements should resist reinforcing “terror” narratives, and embrace - not sideline - movements working to reduce harm amongst substance users.

When we advance “terror” narratives - by demanding that those who harm our communities should be tried as “terrorists”, for example - we unwittingly empower authoritarian, fascist and exploitative regimes to target and criminalize racialized and marginalized groups by smearing them with the label “terrorist”. Thus anti-gender and anti-democracy actors get stronger. We allow for the label to be used in the prosecution of activists, rights defenders and ordinary people who stand up to powerful institutions and actors - as we have seen in the case of numerous people who have stood up to defend the right of the Palestinian people to be free.

When we sideline movements led by drug users, thinking, for example, that it will garner us legitimacy and respect, we reinforce the stigma attached to these communities. We make space for their criminalization and marginalization. We permit the use of the label of “drug user” or “drug trafficker” to be used in the justification of inhumane and unjust policies such as deportation, family separation, incarceration and torture.

We are better served by challenging and interrogating the paradigm of criminalization that tells us that some groups of people deserve to be punished and locked away - “for our own safety”. Our movements are better served when we make the connections between how so-called “counter-terror” laws are used, and how so-called “anti-drug trafficking laws” are used, to punish migrant persons, activists, or simply anyone challenging the status quo.

Finally, we are all better served when we chart the path to safety together, through listening to each other - by understanding that, because our struggles have emerged from the same unjust structures, we, therefore, must collectively dismantle them.