

Media Highlights 2024 Q3





The Human Rights Foundation's (HRF) work is covered by top global media outlets, reaching millions of people worldwide.

In this media booklet, you'll find some of the most noteworthy articles authored by or written about HRF in the third quarter of 2024.

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BY THE NUMBERS



31.8B

Global Impressions



9.02K

Media Mentions

57



Languages

129



Countries

\$169.8M



Earned Media Value

Yulia Navalnaya pledges to use US-based rights role to step up battle against Putin

Outlet
Reuters
Article

Author
Andrew Osborn

Date
July 1, 2024



Yulia Navalnaya, the widow of late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, speaks as she receives the 'Dresden 2024 Peace Prize' posthumously awarded to Navalny, in Dresden, Germany, May 12, 2024.

LONDON, July 1 (Reuters) - Yulia Navalnaya, widow of late Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny, said on Monday she would use a new role as chair of the U.S.-based Human Rights Foundation (HRF) to step up her husband's struggle against President Vladimir Putin.

The New York-based HRF said in a statement on Monday it had appointed Navalnaya to succeed former world chess champion and Kremlin critic Garry Kasparov as chair of the non-profit rights group, which provides humanitarian aid to Ukraine and runs campaigns against authoritarian leaders around the world.

Alexei Navalny, whom in life the Kremlin described as a dangerous U.S.-backed extremist, died aged 47 in an Arctic prison in February after being sentenced to long jail terms on fraud and extremism charges that he, the West

and his supporters said were politically-motivated.

Yulia Navalnaya, who is located outside Russia and had two children with Navalny, accused Putin of having him murdered. The Kremlin denied the allegation which it said was baseless.

Navalnaya said after her husband's death that she wanted to continue his work and has since met world leaders and suggested sanctions she believes would hasten the end of the current political system in Russia.

"As someone who has personally witnessed the threat dictatorships pose to our loved ones and the world at large, I am deeply honored to take on the role of Chair of the Human Rights Foundation," Navalnaya, 47, said in the HRF statement.

Writing on X in Russian, she said her appointment would allow the Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF) that her late husband founded to share

more widely its experience in conducting high-profile investigations and organizing the work of activists.

There were also plenty of ideas which the ACF could borrow from the U.S.-based foundation she would chair, she added.

"We will take on board everything that can be useful to fight Putin, to fight for the beautiful Russia of the future," said Navalnaya.

"The main thing for me is the continuation of Alexei's work. I believe that working with HRF can help me and the whole team to do that."

Authorities in Russia have not so far designated Navalnaya as a "foreign agent" - a tag they have used to try to stigmatise other opponents.

The Kremlin has also commented on her sparingly, while suggesting that her presence outside Russia means she is out of touch with Russians and the pulse of her own country, an idea she has dismissed.



Yulia Navalnaya, wife of late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, attends the Munich Security Conference (MSC), on the day it was announced he was killed. Munich, Germany Feb. 16, 2024.

Despots and oligarchs have many means to meddle in American politics

Outlet
The Economist
Article

Date
Sept. 5, 2024



Sen. Bob Menendez Photograph: new york times/redux/eyevine

As well as the colourful details of corruption on a grand scale—the gold bars, the cash stashed in boots and jackets—a particular point stood out during the conviction in July of Bob Menendez, then the senior Democratic senator for New Jersey, on charges including bribery and fraud. He was also found guilty of acting as a foreign agent, passing information to Egypt and Qatar and using his sway as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. (Mr Menendez maintains his innocence and has vowed to “aggressively” appeal all charges.) The industry of foreign influence in American politics had expanded into the top echelons of Congress.

Casey Michel, a journalist who leads the “combating kleptocracy programme” at the Human Rights Foundation, an NGO based in New York, sets out to chart the origins and extraordinary scale of that industry. Much of it is legal even though operating in the shadows. The “foreign-lobbying complex”, as he calls it, is not confined to actual lobbyists,



Photograph: getty images

but extends into well-known law firms, top universities, high-profile charitable foundations and think-tanks, and involves former lawmakers as well as retired senior military officers. Its business includes laundering the reputations and furthering the aims of some of the world's most ruthless regimes.

The participants are thoroughly bipartisan. Mr Michel identifies several path-breakers in the field, such as the late Bob Dole, a Republican Senate leader and presidential nominee: he became a prime example of a prom-



inent ex-lawmaker who "sold his reputation" to foreign bidders (in Dole's case including Oleg Deripaska, a notorious Russian oligarch). Mr Michel also writes about the Clintons, who, through their foundation, "welcomed all manner of kleptocratic, dictatorial wealth", including from Saudi Arabia,

Kuwait, the UAE and Oman. The foundation has also accepted mega-donations from Kazakh, Nigerian and Ukrainian billionaires.

Then there is Donald Trump, "surrounded by more covert foreign lobbyists than any US president before". Mr Michel's list includes Michael Flynn, briefly Mr Trump's national security adviser (before his resignation for lying to the FBI about conversations with Russia's ambassador), one of his foreign-policy advisers and the acting director of national intelligence.

Mr Michel highlights two key characters in the development of the foreign-lobbying complex. One, Ivy Lee, was a founder of the modern public-relations industry. After helping to polish the image of American business magnates including the Rockefellers he went abroad to tout for business in the 1920s and 1930s. His clients included Italy's dictator, Benito Mussolini, and IG Farben, a German chemical company that would later become infamous for supplying Zyklon B for the gas chambers used to murder millions in the Holocaust. Hearings by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1934 exposed Lee's work for the Nazis and led to the passage, four years later, of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), designed to bring this murky world into the light.

The other figure, whom Mr. Michel describes as a "consigliere for despots", will be familiar to followers of

American politics. Paul Manafort, like Lee, was a Washington operator who went on to cultivate business abroad, running influence operations for Russian oligarchs and pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine. In 2016 he became Mr Trump's campaign manager. When allegations emerged about secret payments he'd received from a Ukrainian autocrat, he resigned from the Trump campaign—though not before he'd shared campaign information with one of his foreign contacts, a Russian intelligence officer. In 2018 he pleaded guilty to failing to register his foreign-lobbying work and was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison. In 2020 President Trump pardoned him.



Photograph: getty images

At times, Mr Michel comes across as overzealous. He treats all authoritarian regimes as equally heinous (is the UAE really on a par with Russia or China?). He denigrates juries for acquitting people he thinks should have been convicted. He fails to explain why foreign money that may influence think-tanks, say, is necessarily worse than Americans' donations intended to exert sway. He can exaggerate people's roles and also the impact

of some of the lobbying efforts he describes.



Photograph: AFP

Still, this book is an eye-opening depiction of an industry that has largely defied efforts to keep it in check. FARA has too often been ignored—though in recent years there have been greater efforts with enforcement—and many of the activities Mr Casey describes fall outside FARA's scope anyway. Congress is considering proposals to widen the net. But who was said to be the main legislator helping to thwart them? Mr Menendez.

Can Nostr make Twitter's dreams come true?

Outlet
Reason
Article

Author
Alex Gladstein

Date
Aug. 13, 2024



Adani Samat

Virtually everyone agrees that social media is broken. On Facebook, X, Instagram, and TikTok, people fear out-of-control algorithms, fake news, state actor censorship, and propaganda. Google and Meta collect vast troves of personal information on their users and receive hundreds of thousands of requests every year from governments around the world to access that data. YouTube has become arguably "the most powerful media platform in the history of humanity," yet its algorithm is an ever-changing black box to the creators that populate the platform with videos. During the pandemic, federal officials were in contact with every major social media platform, coercing them to remove content.

The problem is centralized control. We can't trust companies to run our primary communications infrastructure. Government regulation only makes matters worse because it creates new legal barriers to entering the industry, which protects incumbent players and stifles innovation.

What if there were an alternative, not owned by Elon Musk,

Mark Zuckerberg, or the Chinese Communist Party? What if there were a way to control your own data to prevent companies from harvesting and monetizing it? What if you had granular control over what you see in your feed, with the freedom to choose your own algorithms? What if you owned your identity, which could be accessed seamlessly across different clients? That way, if you disapprove of the changes that Elon Musk brought to X, instead of closing your account you could take your handle and followers elsewhere.

That alternative exists. It's called "Notes and Other Stuff Transmitted by Relays"—or Nostr.

The Decentralized Solution

Invented by a pseudonymous programmer and overwhelmingly funded by grants from non-profit foundations, this decentralized, free, and open-source protocol has been quietly evolving for the past three years. Like bitcoin, Nostr is a community-run digital network highly resistant to censorship and corruption. It has 40,000 weekly active users and a growing ecosystem of clients and applications ranging from social media to long-form publishing to payments.

Nostr is only necessary because our existing internet is so broken.

Fifteen years ago, social media seemed destined to decentralize the world and give power back to

the people. In 2009, we watched as Arab Spring activists used Twitter and Facebook to organize, coordinate, and help topple several long-standing dictatorships. The promise was that these new social platforms, designed by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, could help liberate the masses.

It was intoxicating—but turned out to be a mirage. The Arab revolutions stalled out when brutal military regimes cracked down. These platforms became tools for spying and censoring their users. X and Facebook have helped journalists and human rights activists reach bigger audiences, but they haven't fulfilled their revolutionary promise.



Photograph: Oslo Freedom Forum

Jack Dorsey's Shift from Bluesky to Nostr

This was a major theme at the 2024 Oslo Freedom Forum, which is put on annually by the Human Rights Foundation, where I serve as chief strategy officer. At this conference for democracy and human rights, Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey told the audience that the problem was, actually, guys like him: The very fact

that Twitter, now X, has a CEO makes it a single point of failure. Governments routinely pressured Dorsey to censor content; once the company's offices in India were raided. Dorsey says that under the new Musk regime X complies with whatever governments want.

The X network is proprietary. Known as a "silo," this construct traps a user's identity, followers, and data. X also has the power to evict anyone from the platform and delete what they've written. Several years ago, when he was still running the company, Dorsey became convinced that Twitter should become an application instead, where users could post content to an open, ownerless network. This would make it similar to how bitcoin works, where you use an application called a wallet to interact with the network, but the network itself is neutral and open.

Building a non-proprietary architecture was Dorsey's original vision for Twitter, but over time the need to maximize revenue to build a business and serve shareholders undermined that goal.

Nevertheless, in 2021, Dorsey encouraged the creation of Bluesky—an initiative bootstrapped in-house to create that open neutral base layer. But after Musk bought the company, the managers of Bluesky were afraid they would run out of money and started raising funds from venture capitalists, which undermined the

vision of building an open platform. Dorsey grew disenchanted and left the Bluesky board.

At the conference in Oslo, Dorsey explained what happened next:

I asked a question: What open source initiatives should I be funding that would be helpful to the public internet? And people kept tweeting at me that I should be looking at Nostr. I found the GitHub that described it and it was 100 percent what we wanted from Bluesky, but it wasn't developed from a company. It was completely independent. Its paper diagnosed every single problem we saw and had. But did it in a grassroots and dead simple way, that felt like the early Twitter where any developer could get on and really feel it.

Escaping the 'Golden Prisons'

Nostr was created in 2020 by the pseudonymous Brazilian programmer fiatjaf, who describes it as "the simplest open protocol that is able to create a censorship-resistant global 'social' network once and for all."

Though nobody is in charge, Nostr works as promised and is thriving. "It is

the solution we've all been looking for," says Miljan Braticevic, founder of Primal, one of the two dozen plus clients now available for the Nostr protocol. "Nostr is not a Twitter competitor or a Mastodon competitor. This is the biggest misconception at the moment. That's just the tip of the iceberg. Nostr is nothing less than the foundation for the new internet. Meaning almost every conceivable app we have today will be built on Nostr."

Braticevic's prediction is echoed by at least a dozen other prominent developers. Martti Malmi, the first coder to work on bitcoin alongside Satoshi Nakamoto, is now a Nostr developer. In a recent talk, he said he had started to work on similar ideas around decentralized identity in 2019, only to come close to giving up. But then he found fiatjaf's invention, which he called a "godsend."

"Bitcoin is freedom of money, and Nostr is freedom of everything else," Malmi said. "I was there" in the earliest days of bitcoin, "and Nostr is even more intense."

For something that could be world-changing, Nostr is quite simple. To join, you sign up with a mobile or desktop client, which helps you to create a public and private key pair. The public key (or "npub") is used as your identifier, and you share it with clients and other users so that people can find your posts or pay you for your content. The private key ("nsec") is hidden

by the user, stored safely (just like a bitcoin seed phrase), and is your way to log in to different services. Unlike platforms like X or Facebook, no other information is required to set up and use Nostr.

This gives users a powerful range of sovereignty. You can use a client, for example, that has strong hate speech controls. Or you can choose one that doesn't have any at all. You can use a client with aggressive algorithms, just like the ones X uses today. Or you can use one without any algorithm at all. Today, when you log in to an app like Primal, you can sort your feed by what's the latest, by what's most popular, by what's most zapped, or by customized keywords. It's up to you.

Last month, the macroeconomist Lyn Alden, author of one of the best books on bitcoin, published a long essay about Nostr's potential:

[Nostr] is a simple set of foundational building blocks that, if widely adopted, could gradually reshape "the Web" as we know it. Instead of a separate set of siloed social ecosystems, we could gravitate toward a more interoperable set of ecosystems, with more of the power dispersed to the content creators and to the audience, and away from the middlemen corporations.

The Nostr network is constructed like a spiderweb that can morph and regenerate, making it almost impossible to censor. When you set up a client on Nostr (perhaps Primal or Damus on iOS, Amethyst on Android, or Coracle on the web), you choose from a variety of relays to connect to. This architecture ensures no single point of failure: If you are connected to seven or eight relays, and half of them choose to censor posts, your feed remains censorship-free, as your app will display the net sum of everything broadcast from each relay. If the Chinese government decides to attack your relays—as it did in 2023 when Damus launched on the Hong Kong and mainland app store—then more can be spun up. “The enemy,” said Damus creator Will Casarin, “is too numerous.”

Prominent bitcoin developer and educator Gigi—who switched to Nostr and deleted his X account—says that what helped it become so resilient is that it has zero exit cost. If the Chinese Communist Party bans YouTube, its domestic users lose everything. There’s no way to get back their profiles and followers. The same is true if a user voluntarily closes an account.

Gigi calls these corporate silos “golden prisons” with no escape. Nostr’s spider-like architecture makes escaping easy. If one client goes down, or you fail to connect to one relay, you just find another client or connect to another relay. You keep your posts,

photos, preferences, contacts, and even algorithms of choice. If you use X, you are an X creator. But if you use Primal, you aren’t a Primal creator, you are a Nostr creator.

Nostr’s Rise and Potential

Nostr had only a small handful of users until Dorsey joined and started promoting it at the end of 2022. Since then, the protocol has been on a slow but upward trajectory in terms of activity. Alongside Dorsey, Naval Ravikant and Edward Snowden have been some of the protocol’s biggest boosters. A lot of infrastructure is still raw, and there are weak points in the areas of privacy and security, but the pace of progress is dizzying. Social clients like Primal already look and feel nearly as good as X, but have completely different features.

“Bitcoin and Nostr combined together work like an international decentralized open-source Venmo,” Alden writes. Thanks to a “Nostr improvement protocol” (NIP-57) that developer Will Casarin helped invent, Nostr integrates seamlessly with bitcoin. Users can follow content creators and send them payments called “zaps.” They tend to be a few cents or dollars at most but have been as much as \$10,000.

Unlike X, users of Nostr clients don’t have to live in a particular country, fill out paperwork, or have a particular type of ID to send and receive money. They could be in Iran, Cuba, or the

U.S.—the system doesn't discriminate. Zaps might be tips for authors or podcasters, support for development projects, funds for campaigns, or just a sign of admiration or respect. These "tips" never really took off on X, but on Nostr, they are a way of life.

There are, of course, many other decentralized social network models besides Nostr, primarily coming in "federated" or "Web3" blockchain-based flavors. Mastodon is the most popular platform of the federated variety—the crown jewel of what people are now calling "The Fediverse"—but it is deeply flawed, according to developers like Gigi. "Switching to Mastodon or another federated service doesn't remove King Elon," he explains. "It just creates thousands of King Elons. You need their permission, and you can be deplatformed at any time."

The largest Web3 platform is Ethereum, and its community created an app called Farcaster, which is the most popular "decentralized social network" by a long shot. It's built on cryptocurrency and funded by tens of millions of dollars of Silicon Valley venture capital. But the protocol only has one popular app, and it might not survive if the creators quit or their business model fails. Farcaster has a very different feel than Nostr; its users are heavily focused on getting wealthy by chasing the next crypto token.

Although it interacts with bitcoin, Nostr isn't built on bitcoin or any other blockchain. Unlike Farcaster or other Web3 social projects, its users never have to use or support a digital currency, though many do. "Bitcoiners are very good at identifying technology that is complementary to bitcoin," according to the programmer Rockstar Developer. "Nostr is synergistic with bitcoin, but Farcaster is a silo that traps you into a dependency on crypto tokens. And we have a saying in Nostr: all your silos will be destroyed."

Decentralized computing networks depend on multiple parties being able to trust each other without the oversight of a central authority, which makes them notoriously difficult to scale. In its early years, bitcoin lacked the capacity to process more than a handful of transactions a second, and it has taken years of engineering work to add a decentralized payment network to bitcoin that could begin to scale the network to serve the entire world.

Nostr's developers had these challenges in mind, and came up with a simple and elegant design that will make scaling easier. As a monetary network, bitcoin needs to maintain a decentralized central ledger that everyone in the network agrees is correct so users don't try and spend the same money twice; but Nostr doesn't need system-wide agreement about what its users are

doing all the time everywhere on its network. Users just need to be up to date on the people and accounts they follow.

Today, some Nostr users in China use VPNs to reach international posts; others, Casarin speculates, use Nostr networks that are entirely enclosed within the Great Firewall, which is China's internet censorship system. In Japan, he points out, there are similar self-enclosed Nostr networks, intentionally isolated for cultural and language reasons. A fully synchronized global state is not possible, or even perhaps desirable, to achieve in Nostr. Its communities can sprout up anywhere and don't rely on each other.

Nostr, like the web, will rely on caching and indexing services to make it searchable and faster to access, which in theory brings some centralization risk. But Braticevic, the founder of Primal, has pointed out that Nostr is likely to end up with dozens or even hundreds of them, which will make the protocol sufficiently decentralized.

A Free Will Revolution

Earlier this year, I attended a small meeting with Dorsey and a dozen of the world's top human rights activists on the sidelines of the 2024 Oslo Freedom Forum. Participants ranged from Hotel Rwanda hero Paul Rusesabagina to the Iranian women's rights advocate Masih Alinejad to

Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy. There were dissidents and humanitarians from Tibet, Gaza, Lebanon, Bolivia, Uzbekistan, India, Uganda, Azerbaijan, and Iraq. Added up, the social media followers of all the people in the room exceeded 20 million.

After brief intros, Dorsey started to tell his story and explained the opportunity at hand. He began by talking about the original promise of Twitter, and how at the beginning, activists helped the platform go from a niche Silicon Valley audience to something truly global. "You're going to do the same thing for Nostr," he told them.

He talked about how X had failed and introduced the concept of Nostr. The activists were intrigued.

Dorsey cautioned patience: Create a profile on a Nostr client like Primal, and then go to your big traditional account on X or Facebook or Instagram. Make a post there, saying you'll continue to post there, but that you're also going to be over here on this new network. Maybe, he said, you can tell them you'll put out some special content there. "Only a small percentage of your following will come," he said, "but those are the most important. They will be committed. And the more you post, the more will come."

I see this as a revolution. In Oslo,

Dorsey said that the “free speech debate is a complete distraction. I think the debate should be about free will. We feel it right now because we are being programmed.” The algorithms used by platforms like X “know us better than we know ourselves,” Dorsey said.

In June, Dorsey gave a talk in Italy, where he distinguished today’s social networks as those “diminishing” us vs. those “enabling” us, such as Nostr. Nostr, he suggests, allows you to better control what you see. You decide what to consume. And you can connect directly with your following, both in terms of engagement and payments.

‘It is coming.’

Gigi, the bitcoin developer, reminds us that the currency of the modern internet is attention. Today’s big apps are harvesting our attention, so the outcome is all the platforms produce car crashes that we can’t look away from. But Nostr is integrated with a different currency—bitcoin—so we can build in a different way. “I don’t post very much on Nostr,” Gigi says. “I keep it simple, usually just posting a good morning and good night message. But people send me bitcoin, and it pays for my breakfast every day.”

This may seem far-fetched—connecting to and earning material sums from your followers without

dealing with any corporations or banks whatsoever—but Dorsey has said that the visceral experience that Gigi and thousands of others are beginning to have is more or less inevitable.

“It is coming. It’s just a matter of time and when we all decide to do it. When we all decide to remove these dependencies. Because,” Dorsey told the crowd in Italy, “we believe more in humanity than these companies and corrupt governments.”

Social media is how we speak, transact, and shape our identities. We can’t entrust our primary communication protocol to a handful of corruptible humans. And now we don’t have to.

Miami-based clothing company has a mission that goes beyond fashion

Outlet

Miami Herald

Article

Author

C. Isaiah Smalls II

Date

July 15, 2024



Congo Clothing Company

During his 2018 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Dr. Denis Mukwege described some of his first days at Panzi Hospital in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic Congo.

The very first patient: a rape survivor who had been shot in her genitals. Some time later: an 18-month-old girl who had been raped. After that: a 29-year-old woman who was taken hostage, tied to a tree and gang-raped daily after the massacre of her family. Such chilling descriptions offered only a brief glimpse into the every day horrors of the conflict that has claimed millions of lives in the DRC since 1996.

“Rape, massacres, torture, widespread insecurity and a flagrant lack of education create a spiral of unprecedented violence,” the hospital founder said in his Dec. 2018 speech, blaming the rebel factions that war over the country’s abundance of natural resources. “The human

cost of this perverted, organized chaos has been hundreds of thousands of women raped, over 4 million people displaced within the country and the loss of 6 million human lives. Imagine, the equivalent of the entire population of Denmark decimated."



Demonstrators gather to denounce the international community's silence in the face of the perpetual crisis in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and to show their support for the Congolese army and the pro-government armed group Wazalendo, in Goma, on Feb. 19, 2024 [Guerchom Ndebo/AFP]

Something about that speech spoke to Milain Fayulu. A DRC native and University Miami graduate, the then-27-year-old had long since known about his home country's ongoing conflict and always wanted to help. Many people would start a foundation. Or a GoFundMe. Or maybe even a host a charity auction. Fayulu founded Congo Clothing Company.

"With fashion, you can tell stories, you can engage people in a very subtle way," Fayulu said from the foyer of his Wynwood shop, surrounded by books about the DRC and vinyl records pasted on the walls. "More importantly, your clothes are a piece of who you are."

A sustainable clothing brand that started online and recently opened its first brick-and-mortar on the 100 block of Northwest 25th Street, the Congo Clothing Company aims to help the people most vulnerable to the grotesque violence in the Fayulu's home country: women. Each item – from socks to shirts to jackets – funds sewing classes for the women undergoing care at Panzi, which Mukwege founded in 1999. Since its incorporation in 2022, the clothing brand has helped dozens of women complete roughly 11,000 days of training, according to its 2023 data.

"Our resources go specifically to upskilling women because it's not enough to just give them money," said Fayulu, who wants to hit the 25,000 mark by the end of 2024.

How Congo Clothing Company helps women

The hospital prides itself on its four-pillar "Panzi Model" holistic care – medical, psychological, legal and socio-economic. Congo Clothing Company assists with the latter. Although the hospital provides all kinds of opportunities for job training, sewing classes happen to be the most popular at Panzi, according to Justin Irenge, the assistant coordinator for professional workshops at the hospital's corresponding foundation.

"It's in high demand because it's a practical skill that can generate revenue pretty quickly," Irenge said in

French through an interpreter, later calling the partnership with Congo Clothing Company “very beneficial.”

The ability to learn such a skill also helps mentally.

“There’s a psychologist on site that follows the women through these workshops and it’s very clear from their perspective that they can see mental improvements because they now have meaning, they have something that keeps them productive,” Irenge said.

The hospital’s website contains several testimonials of women who survived sexual violence and have been helped through their programs.

“Hope comes back,” Irenge added.

That restoration of hope is woven into the very fabric of the brand. The brand’s logo – two vertical straight lines with a zigzag line down the middle – references the geometric patterns of the famous textiles that originated in the 17th century Kuba Kingdom. Many of the best selling items, like the denim jacket, pants and “Wynwood” T shirt, feature these patterns as way to merge both Western and Congolese style, according to Fayulu.

“Philosophically, it also represents tortuous journeys of these women but they’re also between straight lines which speaks to a strong foundation

and if you keep moving forward, you’ll see a light at the end of the tunnel,” Fayulu said.

In just a short time, Congo Clothing Company has received some major cosigns. The brand itself was shaped as Fayulu pursued his master’s degree in political science at MIT, where he was accepted into its delta v accelerator, a rigorous entrepreneurship program. A vast majority of the companies that delta v produce, however, operate in the tech or health care space. What ultimately set Fayulu’s concept apart was the founder himself.

“We always say, ‘We pick you, we didn’t pick your project,’” said Bill Aulet, the managing director of the Martin Trust Center for MIT Entrepreneurship. Fayulu, particularly “stood out” because “he was super passionate,” Aulet said. “That means they’re doing something that’s meaningful to the world. We believe entrepreneurship at MIT is an ethical activity. You have to have a strong *raison d’être*.”

Even the Human Rights Foundation has taken notice of Congo Clothing Company. In February, the HRF solicited Fayulu for tote bags as the brand also has an in-house design team that can create branded apparel for other companies. The bags were such a hit that the HRF team flew Fayulu to its Oslo Freedom Forum in Norway where he set up a pop-up shop.

“When we collaborate with brands,

we really make sure that there's no ties to authoritarian regimes or even cotton from authoritarian regimes," said Claudia Bennett, the legal and program officer for HRF. Congo Clothing Company sources its clothes from Colombia, a country trying to revive its once booming cotton industry, where contractors must sign an agreement that promises, among many other things, ethical treatment of workers and fair wages. "People get oversaturated in this field with people asking them to donate for different causes but I think when you can get such a cool piece of clothing in conjunction with it, it's such a smart business idea but also meaningful."

'Give back in a way that's creative'

To Fayulu, Congo Clothing Company was his duty.

"It's not enough to just be here, do work, make some money," Fayulu said. "For me, it was like 'What can I do to give back in a way that's creative?'"

Although the clothes are currently made in Colombia, Fayulu hopes to eventually hire the women who benefited from the sewing classes his products funded. In the meantime, he wants to authentically grow the brand through sweat equity: walk inside the Wynwood shop and Fayulu himself is there, doing everything from interacting with customers to fixing the merchandise to working the register. Though the store does have

a manager, Fayulu, more often than not, is there by himself.

"I want to build my community myself and get the feedback from the customers," he said.

In the coming weeks, Fayulu plans to schedule events as he seeks to further expose his brand to Miami, a place he has lived on and off since 2014. As word spreads, he hopes Congo Clothing Company becomes a catalyst to help the country that birthed him.

"Every culture sells something world-wide that makes even people who have never even been there have some sort of affinity," he said. "Congo Clothing allows us to kind of plant our flag quite literally in Miami and say 'Hey, our culture is cool, too.'"

Authoritarian Qatar puts 2,000 cops and armoured cars on the streets of Paris

Outlet
Brussels Signal
Op-Ed

Author
Karim Zidan

Date
July 19, 2024



Demonstrators can take their pick, head smashed by French gendarmerie or by imported Qatari gendarmerie (Photo by Vincent Isore/IP3/Getty Images)

Two weeks before the Olympic Games are set to kick off in Paris, Qatari security forces, equipped with armoured vehicles and urban camouflage livery, arrived in the French capital to help "secure" the global event.

Qatari state media published photos of the security forces making their way through the streets of Paris, pausing to pose by the Arc de Triomphe and the Eiffel Tower. What, you may be wondering, are Qatari forces doing in the City of Love? Qatar and France are in an unhealthy relationship, and part of the promises the two made to each other and formalised in a signed agreement earlier this year was security cooperation.

As one Qatari state media report put it, "The tasks of this force are an extension of its tasks in maintaining security in Qatar, and it will continue with determination to implement what is asked of it with all efficiency and professionalism" and "stressed that the security expertise of the State of

Qatar has become a reference that can be used in major international events.”



Cutting through that noise, here is the real nugget. The strategic photo-ops in front of Paris’ most famous monuments are part of a broader public relations campaign that serves as a grand display of strength from a brutal authoritarian regime that has faced no repercussions for its numerous scandals and human rights abuses, including the exploitation of migrant workers in the lead-up to the 2022 World Cup, which it hosted.

Consider that again. A country that could not even keep the migrant workers building the infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup safe is now responsible for the security of athletes from all around the globe in Paris – a place that, one might argue, shouldn’t need such help from the Gulf.

So how, then, did France come to integrate Qatar into its plans for the Paris Games?

It began in February, when Qatar and France formed a strategic partnership that saw Doha commit to investing

€10bn into French start-ups and investment funds between 2024 and 2030. The agreement also included Qatar providing more than 2,000 security officials to support French officers during the Olympics. These officials would participate in foot patrols, counterterrorism, drone operations, explosive ordnance disposal, cybersecurity, and riot control.

The deal was hailed as a “mutual benefit of both countries.” France would get a much-needed economic boost from its resource-rich partner, while Qatar would get three things: to influence foreign policy, secure a prominent position on the global stage, and have a front-row seat at global events like the Olympic Games.



Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani poses alongside French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte Macron before a state dinner at the Elysee Palace as part of a two day state visit in Paris, France, Feb. 27, 2024. REUTERS/Sarah Meyssonnier

It is a strategy typical of Qatar’s foreign policy approach to the Western world, where the Gulf state spends billions on key assets that boost its influence on the diplomatic stage.

In France, for example, Qatar has purchased prime commercial real estate and various investment properties across the country. It has purchased cultural assets, such as French football club Paris Saint-Germain (PSG). And it has purchased a get-out-of-jail-free card. That is because its strategic investments in the West also mean that countries like France will ignore its various controversies, including its affiliation with Islamist extremist entities such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Perhaps one of the biggest controversies being swept under the rug by the French government and President Emmanuel Macron involves Qatar's alleged bribery of European lawmakers.

Several MEPs, including former vice president of the European Parliament, Greek politician Eva Kaili, have since been arrested on suspicion of accepting bribes to defend Qatari interests. Law enforcement authorities in Belgium, Italy, and Greece seized €1.5 million in cash (including some found in a suitcase) and confiscated computers and mobile phones as part of their investigation into a scheme aimed at influencing European Parliament decisions in favour of Qatar.

Macron faced significant criticism from the French public for his decision to attend the 2022 World Cup France-Argentina final in Qatar, which just so happened to coincide with the news of the aforementioned Qatar corruption scandal, known as QatarGate. It

remains unresolved and unpunished and is just one of many skeletons in the Qatari-French closet.

In another bit of chicanery, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, in 2017, faced a criminal investigation over allegations he accepted bribes to support Qatar's bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The former president was accused of offering his bid in exchange for several favours, including the purchase of a French energy and waste company, French fighter jets, and football club PSG (the team has been owned by a subsidiary of the Qatar Investment Authority since 2011, one year after Qatar was awarded the 2022 World Cup).

In 2021, Sarkozy was convicted of corruption in two separate criminal trials related to improper campaign contributions and was sentenced to three years in prison, with two years suspended. An appeals court upheld his sentence in February.

These scandals highlight Qatar's ability to purchase influence among some of the globe's most powerful figures. This form of cheque book diplomacy has been one of Qatar's most significant tools, allowing it to leverage its wealth and resources to secure power and diplomatic advantage.

The Qatari government continues to deny any accusations of misconduct, instead warning that its continued implication would "negatively affect"

the relationship between Qatar and the European Union.

Qatar's elevated role at the 2024 Paris Games marks the latest example of how the tiny Gulf state continues to use sports as a conduit to employ soft power.

Since hosting the 2022 World Cup, Qatar has held more than a dozen major championships on home soil, including the AFC Asian Cup (football), the Qatar Open (tennis), the Artistic Gymnastics World Cup 2024, and the Volleyball World Beach Tour Finals. Qatar is also closing in on a £800m (€950m) deal to host the Rugby Nations Championship for eight years, starting in 2026.

Doha's ongoing success in sports and diplomacy, despite a long record of human rights abuses, stems from lopsided relationships with countries such as France. Instead of finding itself in a political divorce court, Qatar now finds itself in a position where, apart from sending athletes to compete at the Olympic Games in Paris, the Gulf state gets to boast that its internal security forces helped keep people safe, which reinforces its influence and strengthens its diplomatic ties with Western nations.

These agreements allow Qatar to evade repercussions for its abuses by offering substantial financial incentives that silence its most vocal critics. In many ways, France has become

one of Qatar's biggest enablers, allowing the controversial regime to operate unchecked in exchange for monetary benefits.

This approach allows Qatar to present itself as an indispensable player in international events, further solidifying its seemingly inevitable presence in global affairs – a place it does not deserve.

Influencers and tourists serve as dictators’ communication teams

Outlet
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Op-Ed

Author
Claudia Bennett

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Tourists take photos near a tower at the International Grand Bazaar in Urumqi in western China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, as seen during a government-organized trip for foreign journalists on April 21, 2021. A prominent Uyghur scholar specializing in the study of her people's folklore and traditions has been sentenced to life in prison, according to a US-based foundation that works on human rights cases in China. Rahile Dawut was convicted on charges of endangering state security in December 2018 in a secret trial, the San Francisco-based Dui Hua Foundation said in a statement Thursday, Sept. 21, 2023. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

On X, one can find a verified Danny Haiphong (@Spiritof-Ho), allegedly a journalist, sharing his travels through the Uyghur region of China.

His video posts show us a “grand bazaar in Urumqi” where “thousands of people are shopping, living their lives in a beautiful, beautiful place.” A place where genocide, as in the human rights violations that are taking place at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party, occurs. But to hear Mr. Haiphong, the party lackey, tell it, these are only the abuses we’ve been told by “some Uyghur in the West somewhere.”

The particularly blood-boiling part of his video was this,

speaking of the bazaar jovially: "It's a beautiful place." But it's all produced by forced labor. And everyone has to go back to their camps after they have finished shopping.

What more could you expect from someone who is clearly doing the bidding of the Chinese Communist Party? It's a pity that more than 140,000 followers are listening to his garbage. But this is among dictators' favorite moves: using influencers and tourists to lie for them.

It's known that the Chinese Communist Party orchestrates visits to the Uyghur region to conceal the harsh realities of forced family separations, arbitrary detentions of millions in concentration or forced labor camps and thousands of Uyghurs living in exile and forcibly rendered stateless. Influencers, tourists and journalists parade around the region on tours, but they are not shown the whole truth.

This is a tactic dictators love. Influencers and "social media journalists" have visited such regions in China, Afghanistan, Iran, Cuba and Syria, to name a few. They have whitewashed the human rights abuses and presented these areas as open to tourism.

Of course, the Chinese Communist Party doesn't want to show the world the camps it so repeatedly denies exist, though anyone with internet access can find them. In August 2020, BuzzFeed News used satellite analysis

to show the full apparatus of Beijing's repression: There are nearly 400 high-security concentration camps for the nearly 2 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other Turkic-Muslim ethnic groups in the Uyghur region.

It's a pretty clever tactic if it weren't so appalling: Torture and imprison millions of people and hire influencers and other social media personalities to do the lie of a "beautiful, beautiful place."

It's not just the Chinese Communist Party, either. Earlier last week, Somali influencer Marian Abdi posted a photo with a member of Afghanistan's Taliban. If you don't know much about the Taliban, in a nutshell, they have oppressed and continue to oppress women. Recently, it prohibited women from speaking or showing their faces outside their homes.

So it's extra rich that Ms. Abdi, a solo female traveler, said visiting the war-torn country was a dream come true.

Doing Iran's bidding earlier this year was American porn actress Whitney Wright, who posted numerous selfies in front of the old U.S. Embassy while in a hijab, with more than a few strands of her hair showing. If she were Iranian, improperly wearing a hijab would be illegal. She likely would have ended up in detention, and perhaps even dead,

like Mahsa Amini in September 2022.

Influencers are the dictator's modern propaganda.

Whether these influencers know it or are willing to admit it, they are being used as tools to convince the world that the human rights abuses of the world's most devious tyrants aren't that bad.

An Instagram picture isn't worth the lives of those living under authoritarian regimes.

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