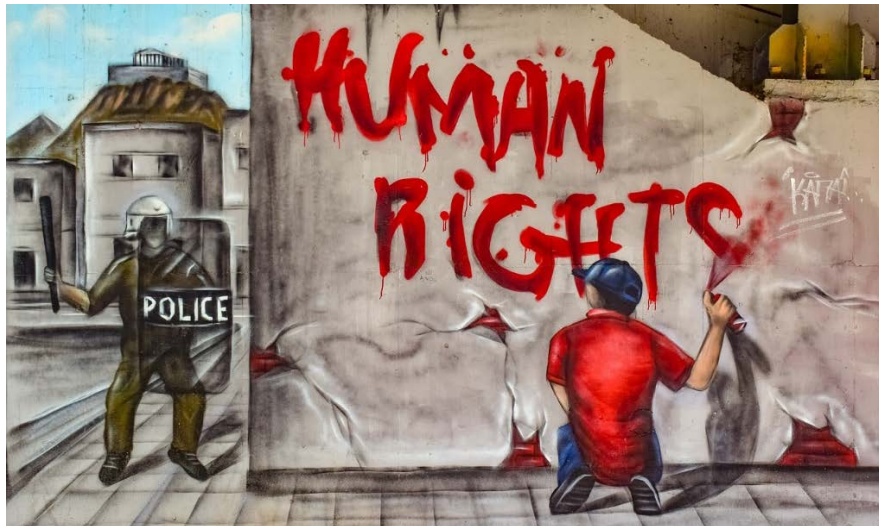


Synthesis

KOFF Roundtable: Rising Authoritarianism: Collective strategies to strengthen human rights



In December 2025, the Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding KOFF together with Amnesty International Switzerland hosted the Roundtable “*Authoritarianism: Collective strategies to strengthen human rights*”. In recent years, authoritarian policies and practices have been on the rise in many regions, restricting fundamental freedoms and undermining human rights at home and abroad. States’ non-adherence to international law has become more frequent, weakening the rules-based multilateral system. Massive budget cuts to foreign aid budgets, in particular in the United States under President Trump, coupled with the lack of political engagement and withdrawal of the US and other governments from institutions created to promote peace and human rights worldwide have created a political vacuum at the multilateral level and reduced the financial and human resources needed to uphold peace and human rights globally. In an increasing number of contexts, civil society faces shrinking space, with repression of dissenting voices. The rise of authoritarianism poses deep challenges to democratic societies and a risk for sustainable peace more broadly.

Against this backdrop, this roundtable provided a space to discuss the consequences of this recent rise in authoritarian tendencies in the US and worldwide on bilateral relations with democratic states and on the functioning of multilateral institutions designed to protect human rights. It also provided the opportunity to jointly explore different ways, states, including Switzerland, can navigate these challenges to continue protecting and strengthening human rights through their bilateral and multilateral engagements.

Speaker:

- **Amanda Klasing**, Director of Government Relations and Advocacy, Amnesty International USA
- **Michael Meier**, Head a.i. Human Rights Section, Swiss Mission in Geneva, FDFA

Moderation & Organization:

- **Cornelia Tobler**, Coordinator of the KOFF platform, KOFF/swisspeace
- **Lisa Salza**, Geographic Lead Americas/ Europe/ Central Asia for Amnesty International Switzerland



Summary

The two invited speakers shared their insights on the recent developments at the domestic level in the US and their implications for the multilateral system, in particular the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva. At the domestic level in the US, shrinking civic space has greatly intensified, with recent policy decisions, including the massive budget cuts, putting increasing pressure on human rights actors and civil society, especially those working on issues considered as contrary to the interest of the state. There have been concerning changes in official human rights reporting, increased political oversight, and the attempt to reframe human rights into an ideologically marked definition of “natural rights”, which risks undermining the principle of universality that underlines the multilateral system. These developments are also weakening the information environment with repercussions for human rights monitoring and prevention of atrocities. At the multilateral level, Switzerland’s renewed membership in the HRC and its current presidency for 2025 constitute an opportunity to uphold human rights protection, in a moment where the HRC finds itself in a highly challenging environment. In addition to the budgetary crisis, a declining societal consensus on the importance of human rights in Europe and other regions, and increased prioritization of security investments over human rights have influenced human rights policy of states. The US absence from the HRC and its unwillingness to engage in the UPR process poses a serious risk to human rights not only in the US but also elsewhere as this example could set a precedent for other countries. Looking ahead, Switzerland’s key role as a bridge-builder committed to the rule of law was highlighted, as well as the importance of an active role of civil society in Geneva, and the need to invest in human rights education, resist narratives that undermine the universality of human rights, contribute to protect the work of accountability mechanisms such as the ICC, and engage with the private sector to uphold respect for human rights.

Key Points

Human rights and civil society under increasing pressure in the US

At the domestic level, pressure on human rights and civil society in the US has been increasing with significant policy changes having effects both nationally and internationally. The abrupt dismantling of USAID together with massive cuts to additional foreign assistance administered by other federal departments, such as the Department of Labor, has threatened to collapse civil society in the humanitarian and human rights space around the world. A large number of organizations, especially those engaged in advocacy and dependent on public funding, have been facing mass layoffs and existential threats. Organizations serving marginalized populations, particularly LGBTQI+ communities, are disproportionately affected.

In addition to the severe and far-reaching consequences for humanitarian and development assistance worldwide, its implications for the human rights information environment are particularly concerning. Reduced funding for independent media abroad, humanitarian frontline work and civil society advocacy, is creating an important information gap on the human rights situation namely in those parts of the world where the space for civil society is shrinking drastically. As a result, capacities to monitor human rights abuses and prevent atrocities are eroding, with decision-makers not having the full picture anymore.

In parallel, the official human rights reporting by the US government has dramatically changed, with the removal of important sections (e.g. on discrimination and freedom of expression) and the subjection of all reports to political review. Reportedly, new instructions sent to embassies for drafting the 2024 reports have led to even more drastic changes. Of particular concern is the on-going normative shift in US policy language, including attempts to reframe “human rights” as “natural rights”, thereby undermining the principle of universality, underlying the multilateral system. New policy concepts such as “human flourishing” are further expected to be introduced soon, linking foreign assistance to adherence to ideological claims.



Aiming to advance this particular vision of rights, US foreign assistance is conditioned on adherence to this administration's executive orders. Conditioning of aid is expected to expand in furtherance of this ideological frame to this new definition. Issues considered "undesirable", in particular related to diversity, equity, inclusion and LGBTQI+ rights, have been restricted. On reproductive health issues these limitations are not only on US funds but also on organization's use of third-party funding. There are growing concerns that such conditionality could further extend to international organizations, including United Nations agencies. In parallel, a broad and imprecise definition of "foreign terrorist organizations" and expanded use of sanctions authorities are creating a chilling effect, particularly for organizations working with or supporting the ICC and those working on migration-related issues. Especially smaller organizations are lacking resources for costly legal processes. Overall, these developments and the consequent shrinking of civic space have been producing an environment of fear, legal uncertainty, and self-censorship, both within the US and beyond its borders.

Implications and recent dynamics at the Human Rights Council

Switzerland's presence in a structurally weak HRC

Since the beginning of this year and after a six-year absence, Switzerland is again one out of the 47 active members of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) for the 2025-2027 term, with the Swiss Ambassador also serving as the President of the Council in 2025. This leadership role has enhanced Switzerland's profile and convening power. However, the broader multilateral environment is deteriorating. Authoritarian trends are observed globally, including in countries traditionally considered liberal democracies. But linking the respect for human rights to a specific regime type risks narrowing the focus on civil and political rights, while excluding social, economic and cultural rights.

While human rights have faced pressure in previous times (e.g. during the Cold War or the "War on Terror"), the current moment is marked by a declining societal consensus, particularly in Western countries, that the respect of human rights is at the core of successful and thriving societies. In the past years, this shift has influenced national and multilateral policymaking.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine a perceived security threat has come back to the European continent, bringing countries to the conclusion that investments in national security would need to be prioritized over policies in development cooperation and human rights promotion at the domestic level and abroad. This has further weakened European countries' "leading" role to advance human rights at the bilateral and multilateral level, traditionally engaged in advocacy to secure the respect of human rights globally.

The absence of the US in the HRC

The US disengagement from the HRC - reinforcing patterns seen during the first Trump administration - has had significant repercussions on international human rights policy. Previously, US presence brought political weight and convening power, enabling coalition-building and political pressure on other states. Its absence has weakened these dynamics. With its soft power, the role and positions of the US can influence other countries' positions and the decisions taken at the HRC. Despite its non-membership, there seems to be still an influence behind scenes, with US positions continuing to shape discussions indirectly, including through NGOs closely aligned with the current administration (so called GONGOs) that actively lobby other delegations.

Another consequence of the disengagement by the US at the multilateral level is the severe budgetary crisis. The UN human rights pillar has long been underfunded, but current pressures are unprecedented. Budget negotiations have seen limited advocacy, with some states—including European countries—accepting or even welcoming budget cuts, which may then lead reduced attention to human rights issues. As a result, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva had to reduce activities by approximately 25%. Fewer staff are available to support the HRC,



reports are delayed or not written, meeting time is reduced. These constraints already affect day-to-day work and will be increased with the UN80 reform process initiated by the UN Secretary-General. UN Treaty Bodies have been particularly affected, struggling to conduct reviews and fulfil their mandates. While the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is less vulnerable due to broad state support, the non-participation of countries, such as the US, risks undermining its universality and could encourage further withdrawals.

Looking ahead: Switzerland's role

Against this backdrop, speakers and participants discussed possible strategies to uphold the respect of human rights. Switzerland as a small state committed to the rule of law has a particular interest and responsibility. At the multilateral level, a legalistic approach has proven effective, including efforts to push back against backlashes, such as on gender justice. Switzerland's traditional role as bridge-builder remains important in this context. As the multilateral system is increasingly shifting South and East, it is key that voices from these regions are heard – and that they assume greater responsibility within international fora, to ensure their legitimacy and support. In addition, civil society remains indispensable to Switzerland's engagement with the HRC. Without active civil society engagement, including organizations from the field coming to Geneva, effective multilateral diplomacy would not be possible. Ensuring funding, convening spaces, and travel support for civil society participation therefore needs to be a strategic priority. Human rights education and public awareness are also critical, as mobilization becomes difficult when societies no longer clearly understand what human rights entail. A domestic constituency advocating for Switzerland's role in actively promoting human rights at the international level is essential for sustained engagement at the multilateral level.

Looking ahead, it is also important to resist relativistic narratives that frame human rights as a colonial concept, strengthen support for human rights defenders globally, and maintain firm backing for international accountability institutions such as the ICC, in the face of sanctions or intimidation. Finally, human rights due diligence and engagement with the private sector were identified as possible avenues. Businesses and investors can act as change-makers by recognizing the business case for human rights and exerting pressure on governments and administrations through economic leverage.