

## Call for Papers

### Decrypting Digital Authoritarianism: How the Use of the Internet Can Threaten Democracy and Human Rights

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies  
European University Institute  
Badia Fiesolana, Florence  
28-29 October 2024

#### Rationale

Authoritarian states are increasingly using the Internet in the ways that undermine its open, free, safe and secure character. In trying to understand these trends – their intensity and sophistication - we have seen growth in scholarship across disciplines that has scrutinised the adverse effects that certain uses of new technologies have on societal development, economic growth, human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy or international security. However, so far the debates about what an authoritarian use of the Internet means have been fragmented across behavioural sciences, computer sciences, economics, law or political science, to name just a few disciplines, yielding a partial picture. And most of the research has focused on the policy and political aspects of the use of the Internet leaving aside more technology-centred discussions about the various models of online censorship and information suppression, automated surveillance systems, and the use of information technologies for purposes of social control more broadly. There is also little research about how the up-to-date counter-practices and preventive/corrective tools are or could be deployed to counter digital authoritarianism trends. There is also a clear need for a continued and up-to-date empirical research that documents this phenomenon. With this conference, we want to address these lacuna by fostering an interdisciplinary dialogue.

#### Goals of the conference

The aim of the conference is to bring together leading scholars working on practices that could be defined as digital authoritarianism to (1) document such practices globally and empirically, (2) better understand their drivers and implications for different stakeholder groups and general democratisation/authoritarian trends, and (3) identify practices that are developed to counter digital authoritarianism.

The central questions that this international conference will address include:

1. **Conceptual:** What is digital authoritarianism and what is a digital authoritarian state? What are the key counter-practices? How do we distinguish between digital authoritarian practices and lawful or legitimate use of the Internet-enabled technologies by authoritarian regimes and beyond? What are the key concepts and practices and how have they evolved over time? What are the conceptual and methodological requirements to study this phenomenon?

2. **Practical:** What are the specific tools and mechanisms currently deployed by digital authoritarian regimes? What are the specific technological, behavioural, legal and other techniques deployed by digital authoritarians in fields such as: mass and targeted online censorship and information suppression, mass and targeted surveillance, mass and targeted online disinformation and manipulation, internet shutdowns, technical and violent attacks to dissidents, etc. What are the leading and most successful counter-practices in each field?
3. **Impact:** How are digital authoritarian practices evolving over time, in terms of extend and intensity? How to these practices impact specific stakeholder groups? How and to what extend are leading digital authoritarian technics and associated technologies being exported globally? Are digital authoritarian practices consolidating authoritarian regimes? What are the most successful techniques to this end? What are the most successful counter-practices?
4. **Governance:** How does digital authoritarianism impact global governance of the digital domain? What are the mechanism and tools used by digital authoritarian regimes to advance their vision of the world and shape global governance? How are digital authoritarian practices perceived and identified globally and what tools (e.g. diplomatic, financial, technological) do authoritarian regimes use to shape these perceptions and advance their visions? How do other actors influence and shape digital authoritarian regimes?

Papers developing in-depth, empirical perspectives, including relevant/representative case studies on the different digital authoritarian practices and counter-practices, are particularly welcome.

#### Format

Conference sessions will be organised in two specific formats: (1) panel sessions of maximum 4 papers (selected through the call for papers) and (2) roundtables with invited speakers.

The conference is technology-neutral, which means that it will address a broad range of issues rather than being restricted to a specific technical domain. It will examine, among others, arbitrary or unlawful surveillance, governance of platforms, internet shutdowns, protection of human rights online, foreign information manipulation and interference with democratic processes, or artificial intelligence.

Papers will be organised in two tracks:

- **Policy track** = papers that focus on the uses of digital tools and policies for social control. Papers submitted under this track should aim to improve our understanding of digital authoritarian practices, their impact on societies, and implications (e.g. different models of platform governance, cooperation between governments and private sector, etc.).
- **Technology track** = papers that focus on the operations and technology behind digital authoritarian practices. Papers accepted under this track should aim to explain the technological processes that enable or may enable digital authoritarian practices (e.g. social scoring systems, etc.).

Presenters are expected to deliver a short paper (4,000-5,000 words). Selected papers will be published as a chapter in an edited volume. Remaining submissions will be considered for publication as working papers.

The organisers will also produce an event report to offer concrete recommendations for the incoming European Union leadership following the 2024 elections.

### Submissions and timeline

The organisers invite submissions from scholars whose research explores the questions listed under the goals of the conference. Submissions from scholars based outside of Europe and the United States are particularly welcome. We will cover travel (economy class), a per diem to cover the cost of accommodation (up to 3 nights) and incidental expenses (per diem will be reduced by the cost of meals provided by the organisers).

To request additional information, please contact conference organisers: Prof. Stephanie Hofmann ([stephanie.hofmann@eui.eu](mailto:stephanie.hofmann@eui.eu)) and Prof. Patryk Pawlak ([patryk.pawlak@eui.eu](mailto:patryk.pawlak@eui.eu)).

If interested in attending the conference, please submit your abstract and a short bio through the online form by **29 March 2024**:

<https://rscas.eu/view-form/decrypting-digital-authoritarianism-how-the-use-of-the-internet-can-threaten-democracy-and-human-rights-call-for-papers/>

Selected authors will be informed by **19 April 2024** and are expected to submit a **draft paper by 18 October 2024**.