

## Panel “Digital torture: practices of forced confessions videos”

Background paper

May 2023

Prepared by Access Now, Human Constanta, Safeguard Defenders, Justice for Iran

Growing authoritarianism continues to cause rule of law backsliding and human rights setbacks. According to [Freedom House Freedom in the World 2022](#), “the present threat to democracy is the product of 16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom.” All of these 16 years have been part of the digital era, suggesting that modern dictatorships are increasingly digital and eager to explore tech-based tools to curb fundamental freedoms.

### Belarus

[Digital authoritarianism](#) is taking many forms – from internet shutdowns to mass electronic surveillance. Another digital repression tool favored by dictators is the use of forced “confession videos,” televised or published online. In Belarus, the use of such videos is a relatively new phenomenon. Following the 2020 protests, security forces have been actively recording “confession videos” with political dissenters – coercing the detainees to admit crimes they never committed or reveal details of personal lives (e.g., outing of LGBTQ+ individuals). The videos would often be published on [Telegram](#) or put on [Youtube](#) as ads.

The detainees often experience degrading treatment before the videos are recorded – they are beaten up, electrocuted, intimidated. However, the videos themselves may well be a form of torture in and of themselves. Such digital torture is intentionally public and oriented at wide audiences to foster the atmosphere of fear among activists. The digital element of it is crucial to achieve the intimidating effect.

The script of all the videos is virtually identical. At the very beginning of the video, a group of security forces officers in full uniform abruptly and forcefully detain a person. Then there are fragments of how the security forces disembark the detainees from the official car and take them away in handcuffs, under escort and strongly bent, inside the police station. Then the detainee announces his personal data, confesses to political offenses before official charges are brought, and urges viewers not to commit the same actions, as well as to come to the police with a confession before it is too late. Videos often contain screenshots of critical comments left by detainees, as well as their photos from protest actions. Often videos contain very sensitive personal data of people: videos [are often accompanied](#) by the disclosure of medical secrets (detainees are forced to talk about psychiatric records, drug addiction, disability, *etc.*), place of

work, salary, and photos with sex toys of detainees are also often inserted into the video. The practice of publishing “confession videos” is expanding – in addition to pro-government Telegram channels that are their primary sources, such videos appear on the air of state TV channels and official messages of state agencies, and propagandists also buy targeted advertising on YouTube for the purpose of distributing them.

Many detainees, such as [detained anarchist Mikola Dziadok](#), often look severely beaten on videos, which indicates that detainees were tortured before shooting the video, and showcasing that on camera produces a more intimidating effect. Moreover, videos are often [accompanied](#) by insults and humiliating practices. On 6 October 2021, a video appeared on pro-government Telegram channel, where a young man with a white-red-white sticker on his forehead, a scarf of the same color on his neck, with the book "Revalutsia" in one hand and the coat of arms “Pahonia” in the other apologizes for participating in protests and calls to unsubscribe from “extremist chats.” On 8 October 2021, propagandists published a video in which a detainee with an oppositional sticker on his forehead, who had inverted glasses on the bridge of his nose and was given a mop in his hands, lists the Telegram channels to which he was subscribed. In June 2021, propagandist Grigory Azarenok published a “confession video” with a detainee who “insulted a deceased riot police officer” — the authors of the video put him in front of the door of the women's toilet.

There is a tendency to turn pro-government Telegram channels that publish confessional videos into full-fledged media – when editing such videos, advanced technologies are used (for example, chromakey), a professional presenter of conventional appearance was hired who comments on such videos, and separate “rubrics” of such videos also appear. Propagandists also create a whole network of similar channels in the regions, as well as duplicate them in several copies, which allows you to quickly restore the propaganda agenda in the case of blocking.

On 7 December 2022, a message [appeared](#) in pro-government channels that fewer confession videos would be published in the future, since such a format “has outlived its relevance.” At the same time, the Telegram channel of the security forces promised to continue demonstrating the detained Belarusians, but shift the focus “from the individual to specific acts and their interpretation.” However, there is no decrease in the number of such publications.

Some of the most resonant cases of digital torture through confession videos include:

- On 10 August 2020, in the midst of mass protests against election fraud, presidential candidate Svetlana Tsikhanauskaya was detained in the office of the head of the Central Election Commission of Belarus by KGB officers and [forced](#) to read out a prepared text on video, in which there were calls to the society not to go to protest actions and not to

resist the police. To force Svetlana to record such a video, the security forces used psychological pressure mentioning her political prisoner husband and her children.

- On 24 May 2021, after an emergency landing of a Ryanair plane, opposition Belarusian blogger Roman Protasevich and activist Sofia Sapiieha, were detained. In the evening of the same day, the pro-government Telegram channel [published](#) a video in which Protasevich says that he has no health problems, and adds “I continue to cooperate with the investigation and give confessions on the fact of organizing mass riots in the city of Minsk.” A similar video with Sapiieha was published the next day — in the video, she calls herself the editor of a Telegram channel dealing with the de-anonymization of Belarusian security forces.
- In March 2021, a video with detained representatives of the LGBTQ+ community [appeared](#) on the propaganda Telegram channel. Standing in front of the camera, the young man calls himself the administrator of the “extremist Telegram channel” and adds “I am gay.” In the mocking caption accompanying this video, it is said that “this f\*ggot called people to protests.”
- Another video [was published](#) on the same channel with a man who admits that he is a “supporter of non—traditional sexual orientation,” and then, under pressure, says “periodically — two or three times a year - I have sex with a man. I understand that this is immoral, I undertake to correct myself.” In the caption under this video it was said: “if you want to be a f\*ggot, good luck, we wish you painless anal cracks. Just don't act like a f\*ggot, and everything will be fine in your life”.
- On 17 November 2022, a resident of Minsk with a dark skin color [was detained](#). The “confession video” of the young man was accompanied by the security forces with a melody from the song “They killed a Negro.” The video file uploaded to the channel has the mocking name “BLM” — a reference to the American social movement Black Live Matters and protests against racism.
- On 7 October 2022, a video [was published](#) in pro-government sources in which a commentator who insulted the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov in messengers was forced to pronounce the motto “Akhmat is power!” on camera, meaning support for Kadyrov. On 3 November 2022, a resident of Mogilev [was detained](#) for criticizing the “special military operation” in TikTok – on a confession video he was forced to confess to supporting the Russian army and sing the military song “Victory Day.” On 27 December 2022, a resident of Minsk [was detained](#) for a video in TikTok in support of Ukraine – he was forced on camera to apologize to the “Slavic brothers” and apologize for “supporting fascist ideology.”
- On 21 March 2023, a video with the father of Denis Urbanovich, a member of the Kalinovskiy Regiment unit (part of the armed forces of Ukraine and consisting of Belarusian volunteers), [appeared](#) on pro-government sources, in which he asks his son to “capitulate” and “return home to serve ten years in prison.” In March 2023, GUBOPiK employees [recorded an appeal](#) from the parents of former officer Igor Chemyakin

(currently engaged in combat training of volunteers in Ukraine) in the style of a "penitential video" in which they, probably under pressure from the security forces, claim that their son is a "traitor" and "enemy" and they "will not be his regret if they have to meet on different sides."

## **China**

In China, the *output* of this practice, i.e., forced televised confessions before trial, or often even before formal arrest, is primarily a tool of political terror; using one victim to intimidate and silence the larger community they represent. The way state agents get people to accept recording them, uses a combination of *prolonged* torture and ill-treatment, as well as threats against family members - but also deception - with few victims even aware of their broadcast, because they are most often told its for internal use, for example, for judges to review, not that it is intended for a public TV broadcast. In Vietnam, there has been a similar pattern, but used less frequently, and with less sophistication, yet illustrative of how Vietnam is studying China and its digital authoritarianism practices and making adjustments to become more refined. More recently, in China, there has been a migration away from broadcasting via regular TV, to instead having State/Party controlled newspaper hosting webclips, or even police using their own social media accounts to disseminate them.

In general, these confession broadcast has worked, although less so more recently, as it has sown division in the community, as few people were aware of just how these were made, and therefore had a significant distrust of the victims once they've been released, making it hard for them to resume their work. Luckily, with wider discussions and dissemination of the reality behind these broadcasts, they are far less effective in this regard over the last few years, yet the political terror aspect is still shilling.

These are many ways to combat these broadcasts. Breaking through and making it clear to the target groups the reality behind them has been key in removing the stigma, and the consequences for the victims, within the human rights community in China, and certainly a reason we see far less of them over the most recent years (and most ongoing ones no longer targets human rights defenders). For a country like China, with international channels, there are also regulatory weapons to employ, in the countries where they are broadcast. Even when not broadcast via their English, French, etc. channels (which they are not anymore - just because of this), they are sometimes part of their international Chinese language stations, leaving continued opportunities to file complaints against such broadcasts. These complaints are largely responsible for stopping the international broadcast of them. However, as noted above, they can and do migrate to other solutions,

such as webclips, clips in social media, or IP-TV, for which there is no content regulation at all.

## **Iran**

In Iran the use of televised forced confessions, show trials, and defamatory programmes has been going on for 40 years since the very establishment of the Islamic Republic. Only in the last decade, the Iranian state TV broadcast at least 151 programmes containing the forced/false confessions of 355 individuals and defamatory content against at least 505 individuals. These programmes have been reposted on hundreds of websites and social media platforms making them almost impossible to remove.

The interviews and the evidence clearly indicate certain patterns in the methods of torture, and inhuman or degrading treatment, which reveal that these forms of ill-treatment are common and systematic procedures in obtaining forced confessions in Iran. These methods vary from physical torture – such as flogging, strappado or hanging by the hands, and electrocution – to psychological torture – such as long-term solitary confinement, mock executions, rape threats, and deliberate exposure of prisoners to poor prison condition – to tempting and deceiving the detainee in order to extract confessions on camera.

In a letter to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Zanyar and Loqman Moradi, two political prisoners who were then executed based on their forced/false confessions [described](#) instances of severe physical and mental torture they experienced: “They brought a bottle and said you must agree [to confess], and if you don’t, you must sit on this bottle. And they also threatened to rape me and said: ‘You choose! You either accept or this is your last choice.’ I had to accept because I couldn’t bear this type of torture, and I had severe bleeding and burns on my genitals and could no longer stand these brutal tortures.”

The whole process of recording the confession is scripted and staged from start to end. The victims are even forced to wear specific clothing and makeup in accordance with the scenario and their role. The similarities between victims’ accounts of the confessions being scripted and staged, the appearance of the detainee, the content of the confessions, and the false confessions which are knowingly imposed on the detainee, all indicate a systematic pattern of behavior.

The videos of forced/false confession pursue multiple goals, including: creating a chilling effect on civil society; silencing opposition voices and spinning the public discourse; justifying the suppression of dissidents and activists; creating an evidential basis for

criminalisation; meting out psychological torture; and promoting official narratives domestically and internationally.

The victims' accounts also indicate that the defamatory nature of broadcasting forced/false confession has such a suppressive impact on the victims that its damaging effect supersedes the impacts of the severe physical ill-treatment and impedes the healing process.

In many cases, where the state TV channels active abroad are not allowed to directly broadcast forced confessions, they use digital platforms as an alternative to broadcast such content using a legal loop which allows them to circumvent certain supervisions over satellite broadcast using internet broadcast instead.

While publishing these contents on digital platforms is and should be considered a form of psychological torture for the victims and must be removed promptly and efficiently, yet removing them without taking into consideration that these are valuable evidence of gross human rights violation is even a greater issue, which calls for a unified code of conduct and certain preparations towards preservation of these content as evidence accessible to the human rights defenders.