

Human Rights Centre Clinic

Investigating the Weaponisation of Travel Bans to Silence Dissent

Partner: [Index on Censorship](#)

About

Index on Censorship is a non-profit organisation that campaigns for and defends freedom of expression worldwide. It publishes work by censored writers and artists, promotes debate, and monitors threats to free speech. Index's vision is that everyone should be free to express themselves without fear of harm or persecution – no matter what their views. Index on Censorship publishes an award-winning quarterly magazine, devoted to protecting and promoting free expression. Since 1972, [Index on Censorship](#) has been reporting on free expression violations around the world, publishing banned writing, and shining a light on vital free expression issues through original and challenging commentary and analysis by some of the most influential voices in literature and journalism. Index advocates for changes in law and policy to ensure governments and businesses respect the fundamental right to free speech and fights censorship in journalism, the arts, and campaigning by supporting those affected and drawing attention to the challenges they face.

Project overview

The aim of the project is to bring accountability and scrutiny to an underreported practice – the rise of travel bans as a tool of censorship. Authoritarian regimes across the world are increasingly weaponising travel bans, not just to keep critics from leaving their countries, but to stop them from entering. This isolates dissidents, breaks solidarity across borders, and undermines global norms around mobility and human rights. It also leads to self-censorship, as people calculate the risk of critical speech in the context of travel plans.

In recent years, prominent journalists, human rights activists, writers, and artists have been denied entry into countries for reasons that appear politically motivated. Often, no formal charges are brought against these individuals. Instead, vague “national security” justifications or opaque blacklists are used to bar entry – silently, and often without due process. Places once regarded as relatively liberal are now part of

this troubling trend. The project will identify politically motivated travel bans, highlighting key case studies, gaps in protection, and proposals for reform to respond to this urgent issue.

The project will be supervised by [Martin Bright](#), Editor-at-Large at Index on Censorship and Senior Lecturer at the University of Essex. Martin has over 30 years' experience as a journalist, working for the Observer, the Guardian, and the New Statesman among others. He has worked on several high-profile freedom of expression cases often involving government secrecy. He broke the story of Iraq War whistleblower Katharine Gun, which was made into the movie Official Secrets (2019) starring Keira Knightley.

Students will also work with [Jemimah Steinfeld](#), the CEO of Index on Censorship. Jemimah has lived and worked in both Shanghai and Beijing where she has written on a wide range of topics, with a particular focus on youth culture, gender, and censorship. Jemimah has freelanced for various publications including the Guardian, the Independent, the Times, CNN, and Prospect.

Background

The weaponisation of travel bans to stifle dissent is on the rise. In this new reality, a greater number of countries are resorting to practices used by authoritarian regimes to stifle dissent. Index on Censorship has previously reported on the use of this tactic in countries including [China](#) and [India](#). More recently, however, the tactic has spread to places such as Hong Kong, Georgia, India, Israel, and the USA. For instance, Index on Censorship has [drawn attention](#) to the case of a French scientist being denied entry to the USA, allegedly due to his criticism of President Donald Trump, and of journalists being prevented from entering Georgia. The spread of travel bans poses a fundamental threat to the rights to free expression, association, and movement. Index on Censorship is therefore launching a new investigation to shine a light on this form of transnational repression, backed by data and first-hand accounts.

Project output

Index on Censorship will work with a project team from Essex Human Rights Centre Clinic to produce a report (totalling approximately 10,000-12,000 words) gathering recent patterns and data on travel bans and assessing the adequacy of the response of relevant international human rights frameworks. The research will focus on the USA, India, Hong Kong, Georgia, and Israel as countries where the use of travel bans has been increasingly detected. The report will address the following issues:

- Gathering data on individuals denied entry in the past five years for politically suspect reasons;
- Mapping which countries are issuing these bans and under what legal frameworks or informal arrangements;
- Detecting patterns in the use of travel bans over the past five years, including increased use in certain jurisdictions;
- Analysing how the issuance of these bans interferes with individuals' rights under international human rights law, in particular, the rights to freedom of expression, association, and freedom of movement;

- Assessing whether international human rights law, through its existing provisions and bodies, adequately upholds individual human rights in this context;
- Recommendations to address the identified gaps and strengthen the protection of affected individuals.

This research will support the creation by Index on Censorship of a database of politically motivated travel bans affecting activists, writers, artists, academics, and dissidents. The rise of travel bans as a tool of censorship is a quiet crisis. It isolates dissidents, breaks solidarity across borders, and undermines global norms around mobility and human rights. By exposing this tactic, Index on Censorship and the Essex Human Rights Centre Clinic aim to bring accountability and scrutiny to a practice that continues to worsen.

The team will submit a 1,000-2,000 word blog in May 2026.

Timeline

Phase 1: November – December 2025:

- Preliminary research, understanding the project and developing the report outline.
- Identifying a list of experts or advocates for interviews or questionnaires.
- Securing ethical approval, if necessary.
- Outline and bibliography to be submitted to the partner organisations for comments.

Phase 2: January – March 2026:

- Carrying out the interviews online.
- Research and data gathering.
- Submission of the first full draft to the partner.

Phase 3: April – June 2026:

- Revision and finalising the report.
- Blog for Index on Censorship, on their site or another platform, about the main findings of the project.
- Presentation of project to the partner organisation.

Initial reading

1. Jemimah Steinfeld, "The freedom to travel is becoming a privilege, not a right", <https://www.indexonensorship.org/2025/03/freedom-travel-becoming-privilege-not-right/>.
2. Pola Lem, "More foreign academics say they are denied entry to India", <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/08/12/foreign-academics-are-being-denied-entry-india>.
3. Heidi Ledford and Alexandra Witze, "'Anxiety is palpable': detention of researchers at US border spurs travel worries", <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-00859-w>.
4. Mithil Aggarwal, "Denied, deported, detained: U.S. border incidents have travelers thinking twice", <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-immigration-detained-visitors-border-search-device-visa-passport-rcna197736>.
5. Aleks Phillips and Ruth Comerford, "Two MPs 'astounded' after being denied entry to Israel", <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn9133z2v30o>.
6. Seb Starcevic, "2 MEPs denied entry to Israel", <https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-mep-europe-palestine-war-tel-aviv-aid-oct-7-hamas/>.
7. Committee to Protect Journalists, "Georgia increasingly blocks entry to Western journalists amid authoritarian turn", <https://cpj.org/2025/07/georgia-increasingly-blocks-entry-to-western-journalists-amid-authoritarian-turn/>.
8. Civil.ge, "Polish and French embassies warn their citizens of entry risks to Georgia", <https://civil.ge/archives/684352>.
9. International Federation of Journalists, "Hong Kong: Journalist's visa denied amid press freedom drop", <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/hong-kong-journalists-visa-denied-amid-press-freedom-drop>.
10. Al Jazeera, 'Press freedom group says representative denied entry to Hong Kong' <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/11/press-freedom-group-says-representative-denied-entry-to-hong-kong>.
11. BBC, 'UK 'concerned' as Hong Kong denies Benedict Rogers entry' <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-41586529>.

Focal point

- Jemimah Steinfeld, CEO, Index on Censorship, jemimah@indexonensorship.org and Martin Bright, Editor-at-Large, Index on Censorship and Senior Lecturer, University of Essex, martin.bright@essex.ac.uk

