



Human Rights Hold the World Together

Why Intermediate Powers Must Defend Human Rights within the System the Great Powers Want to Ignore

Foreword by Oleksandra Matviichuk

Afterword by Odette McCarthy



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Foreword

Peace Cannot Rely on Great Powers Standing by International Norms

By Oleksandra Matviichuk

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2022 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

Great powers can prevent the worst from happening. They can equip the aggressed to defend itself against an aggressor. I would argue that permanent members of the Security Council even have a moral obligation to do so, when the violation of the Charter is obvious.

Yet, we live in an age of great power self-interest.

And, today, day after day, night after night, people in my country, Ukrainians, suffer the consequence of a distorted global order that allowed the Russian Federation to undertake a war of aggression at little cost for itself. I know what it means to wake up in the morning counting the dead and hoping for a less painful day than the previous one.

It is with that in mind that I contemplate the role of intermediary powers.



States of intermediary power must now affirm that they hold the power that lies in the rules of our multilateralism to hold perpetrators of their violations accountable and protect human life and dignity around the globe. This responsibility is great but it creates hope for us all.

Since 2014, my colleagues and I have documented what happens when rules are left without defenders: Russia committed crimes in Chechnya, in Georgia and in Syria, with no consequence as the international system was crackling already. Since his accession to power, Prime Minister and then President Vladimir Putin revived a sophisticated repressive machinery, targeting any dissenting voice and silencing any diverging opinion, with no consequence as the international community weighed human rights as less valuable than engagement with the Russian Federation. Putin and his cronies learned that they could act as they wished, domestically and abroad. The torture, the enforced disappearances, the deportation of Ukrainian children and the filtration camps we record today are the result of that lesson: human rights violations

and impunity are the engine of this conflict and war, and each moment of impunity makes the next war more likely, in Europe and beyond.

Great powers weigh this against their own interests; the arithmetic is harder for intermediate powers. A state of moderate size cannot protect its citizens from a stronger neighbour through force alone. Its protection is the rule that borders are not changed by force, that those who order atrocities will answer for them, and that an active civil society and a free media allow to question a ruler's acts and intention — and ultimately, citizens can replace a ruler whom they disagree with. When that all erodes, its citizens are the first to lose. For such a state, defending human rights and international law is a condition of survival.

Intermediate powers have shown what they can do: within the Council of Europe, dozens of states without a permanent seat on the Security Council laid the legal foundations for a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine. In March 2026, more than ninety states from every region pledged at the United Nations Human Rights Council to renew their commitment to a system grounded in the Charter and in international human rights law. These are the first steps of an order that does not wait for great powers to act.

This Notes from the Faultline Dispatch #2 lays out what the next steps are, at the heart of which is coherence. A state that condemns torture in Geneva should raise it with the partners on whom it depends for energy and trade. A state that speaks for human rights defenders should fund the institutions that protect them, at a time when the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights absorbs the deepest cuts of the three pillars of the United Nations. In political decisions, human rights must weigh as much as economic benefit or security.

People in Ukraine want peace, yet we know that sustainable peace is not the result of the absence of violent conflict. We also know what follows when an invaded country stops defending itself: occupation, and suffering that the world stops seeing. A durable peace requires justice, and justice requires states willing to insist on it when the powerful look away. This Dispatch offers the path towards ensuring that where the international community wants to build peace, it does so with the well-being of the concerned people at its heart.

To those voices that call for a United Nations — and more broadly an international community — to focus on the essential, and the essential being to stop wars, I respond that wars will be prevented and stopped when human rights, democracy and accountability are at the heart of the international rules-based system.

These years have taught me that ordinary people have more power than they believe. The Ukrainian people are proving that we can stand up to the might of a great power willing to impose itself through force. The same holds for intermediate powers: this Dispatch describes how they can use their power and show leadership to protect a system that ultimately protects their citizens and will have the adhesion of smaller countries, needing their leadership.

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View the full data set of the research on which this Dispatch rests at
<https://progresschange.org/faultline#Dispatch2>.

Context

Renewing Leadership for Human Rights in the Middle of a Lost Decade for Humanity

In January 2026, addressing the World Economic Forum in Davos, Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney described the present moment as a rupture, not a transition, the end of a comfortable fiction and the start of a harder reality.¹ His diagnoses in the Swiss mountains alerted those who rely on the rules-based international order: we are not only living an accelerated 'global realignment'², in which the great powers share more and more interests, including by ignoring the system that protects those rules, we also reached a 'global rupture'³.

Addressing the General Assembly in September 2026, Prime Minister Carney underlined how much intermediate powers matter in this context.⁴ And they are not powerless, he had already said in Davos; they retain the capacity to build an order that carries their values, amongst them respect for human rights, sustainable development, solidarity, and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.

A rules-based multilateralism protected such intermediary powers from the hunger of mighty powers since the Second World War. Over eighty years, states wrote a body of common rules setting out what every person is owed regardless of where they were born or who governs them. Additionally, such rules, amongst which codified international human rights law, are the closest thing the world has to an agreed account of what membership of humanity entails, and they are binding on the states that ratified them to the same standards. They go hand-in-hand with the understanding that negotiation should precede force, diplomacy set dealing between nations, and law define the global order.⁵

The image of President Donald Trump welcoming President Vladimir Putin in Anchorage, AK, in a new Munich 1938 or Yalta 1945,⁶ was symptomatic of the growing sense great powers have, that they do not need to abide by rules they have themselves developed and offered to adhere to. Similarly, President Trump welcomed President and Secretary General Xi Jinping with great honours in Washington, DC, on 23 September 2026, at the exact time world leaders were assembling in New York, NY, for the General Assembly.

Against this backdrop, intermediate powers carry a particular responsibility: their citizens have less protection when rules fall away, because a state without the capacity to impose has nothing to fall back on once great powers find themselves to agree on allowing standard do not need to apply anymore. Yet, the rules are the principal instrument through which states that are not amongst the great powers exercise influence beyond their weight, because a rule applies equally to the strong and binds them where force cannot. Intermediate powers are therefore not

custodians of a set of institutions, which is the role given to the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, yet, they are parties to an agreement about what human beings are owed and they have a size and a weight in the global order that matters enough, which also gives them a responsibility to lead when smaller states are facing an even harsher difficulty.⁷

The 'Perfect Storm' against Democracy and Human Rights

The global democratic backsliding at national levels⁸ is producing a pressure on the universal human rights system. Its cumulative effect produces a 'perfect storm'⁹.

Together, the postures of the United States of America, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China have removed the anchor that the system long relied upon, and have left a vacuum that no single power now fills. This is the triangulation that shapes the present moment, and it is the condition within which intermediate powers must now act:¹⁰

- The United States moved from selective engagement to withdrawal: In February 2025 it left the Human Rights Council, ended funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and ordered a review of its wider multilateral commitments. By January 2026 it had announced its departure from sixty-six international organisations¹¹, an approach that the International Crisis Group summarised as 'my way or the highway'¹². The state that once positioned itself, however inconsistently, as a leader within the human rights system has vacated that role;¹³
- Russia continues its war of aggression against Ukraine whilst using its seat to keep the Security Council deadlocked on the consequences. The result is a Security Council unable to act on some of the gravest violations before it, and a permanent member that treats the paralysis it creates itself as an instrument of its political engagement at the United Nations. The same logic of obstruction extends across the wider human rights agenda, where Moscow works to weaken scrutiny of itself and of its partners;¹⁴
- China has taken the opposite route to the United States:¹⁵ Rather than leaving the institutions, it works within them to reshape their meaning. Through sustained engagement at the Human Rights Council, it has advanced a framing built around state sovereignty, non-interference and development, expressed in the language of a community of shared future.¹⁶ Analysts warned that, absent a cross-regional coalition prepared to hold the universal standard, this approach accumulates the discourse power needed to redefine rights from the inside, turning cooperation into a shield against scrutiny.¹⁷

The UN80 reform, launched in this context in 2025, has fallen most heavily on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Member States adopted a 2026 budget cutting around 117 posts at the Office, close to one sixth of its establishment and deeper than the Secretary-General first proposed; the human rights pillar was reduced by a larger share than either the development or the peace and security pillars.¹⁸ The cuts compound a liquidity crisis: the Office received only 73 per cent of its approved budget in 2025, and by February 2026 it had received around one fifth of its 2026 budget, with no certainty about the next instalment.¹⁹

The High Commissioner has described the Office as operating in 'survival mode'²⁰.

Forty States, led by Chile and drawn from every region, warned that the cuts fall on the smallest and most overstretched of the three pillars, and recalled that a three-legged stool does not stand once one leg is removed.²¹ A cross-regional coalition of 90 States, led by Albania, issued a joint declaration at the UN Human Rights Council emphasising the critical need to defend multilateralism amidst escalating global conflicts and eroding respect for international law and human rights.²²

In other words, the defence of the human rights pillar has already produced the beginnings of the coalition of the willing for human rights.

Democracy as a Human Rights Obligation

Amongst those common rules is the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, alongside the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes that the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government, expressed in periodic and genuine elections by universal and equal suffrage. Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights makes the same claim binding. Every citizen has the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections; and to have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in their country.

The promotion of democracy is therefore one of the obligations that human rights leadership contains.

According to General Comment 25 of the United Nations Human Rights Committee, its enjoyment indeed depends on the full enjoyment of freedom of expression, of peaceful assembly and of association, because citizens cannot form opinions independently, or communicate them, without those freedoms. The Human Rights Committee treats free communication of information about public and political issues, and a press able to comment on public affairs without censorship, as conditions of the electoral right. It also treats participation as extending beyond the ballot, to consultation and to public debate.

The pressure on civic space and on independent media across the world is therefore pressure on the right to choose a government, and hence constitute a risk to stability and the rule of law which hold chosen governments accountable for their acts including in international affairs.

How Human Rights Protect Multilateralism

The relationship between human rights and multilateralism is usually stated in one direction: a functioning multilateral system protects human rights. The reverse holds with equal force, and it is the less examined argument. Multilateral institutions indeed rest on consent from the public, relying on the trust the organisations enjoy in the public.²³

- An organisation that visibly serves people retains the political permission its members need in order to fund it;
- An organisation that becomes a forum in which governments protect one another loses that permission, and with it its budget and its authority.

Support for multilateralism in donor states is already contested by movements that describe the United Nations as a club of governments answerable to no one²⁴, and the honest reply to that charge is the human rights pillar: the commissions of inquiry that establish what happened, the treaty bodies that review member states obligations and receive complaints from individuals, the Universal Periodic Review that subjects every state to the same examination on the same cycle, with until now only the United States withdrawing from it.²⁵

Furthermore, cooperation between states, which is an essence of multilateralism, depends on the expectation that commitments will be honoured and that the states that keep their commitments to their own citizens are the states that keep their commitments to each other. A government that suspends the rules at home when they become inconvenient is instructing its partners on what to expect from it abroad, in trade, in security and in the management of shared crises. The condition of a state's domestic institutions is therefore information about its reliability as a treaty partner, and the promotion of human rights is an investment in the reliability of the system rather than a charge upon it.²⁶

Reinvigorating the defence of democracy and human rights is even more important as we look towards the end of this decade: the 2025 Sustainable Development Goals Report indicate that of 137 measurable targets, only 20% are on track. Nearly two thirds of SDG targets are unlikely to be met by 2030. Progress on SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) is among the weakest: "none of the 23 targets under Sustainable Development Goal 16 are on track [and] 15 per cent of the Goal's targets are regressing." We are in the midst of what might well be a "lost decade for humanity."²⁷

In the middle of this lost decade for humanity, we offer a path for intermediary powers to not only say they wish to preserve the multilateral order, typically the Partners for Multilateralism launched in September 2026 by the European Union, Australia, Barbados, Brazil, Canada, India and Kenya, but to make multilateralism a tool to defend democracy and human rights, and indeed defend the very value of SDG 16, that gives multilateralism a reason to exist and its members a reason to trust one another.

To protect multilateralism from the assault by great powers, and defend their interests in an effective rules-based international order, intermediate powers need to show leadership in defending democracy and human rights. To do so, this Dispatch advances seven benchmarks, each can stand alone but all seven are interconnected.

Intermediate Power: A Status, Not a Certificate

Intermediate power is a description of position, not a judgement of conduct: the expression records that a state carries weight without holding the capacity to impose that a global power would have. Several states that fit the description are amongst those working hardest to hollow out universal human rights standards, at home and at the United Nations. Others maintain democratic institutions of high quality whilst conducting migration, arms transfer or trade policies that sit awkwardly with the rules they ask others to keep.

This confers an even greater responsibility to democratic intermediary powers: if the defence of universal rights could rely on all intermediate powers, it would be secure. It relies instead on the smaller number that will actually stand and which, through their combined leadership, are strong enough to resist larger states and inspirational for smaller states to join.

To identify the states most likely to take on such a leadership role with credibility, this Dispatch pairs 51 state's average score over the past five years on the Varieties of Democracy Liberal Democracy Index with its voluntary contributions to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, measured against its 2025 gross domestic product in the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook.

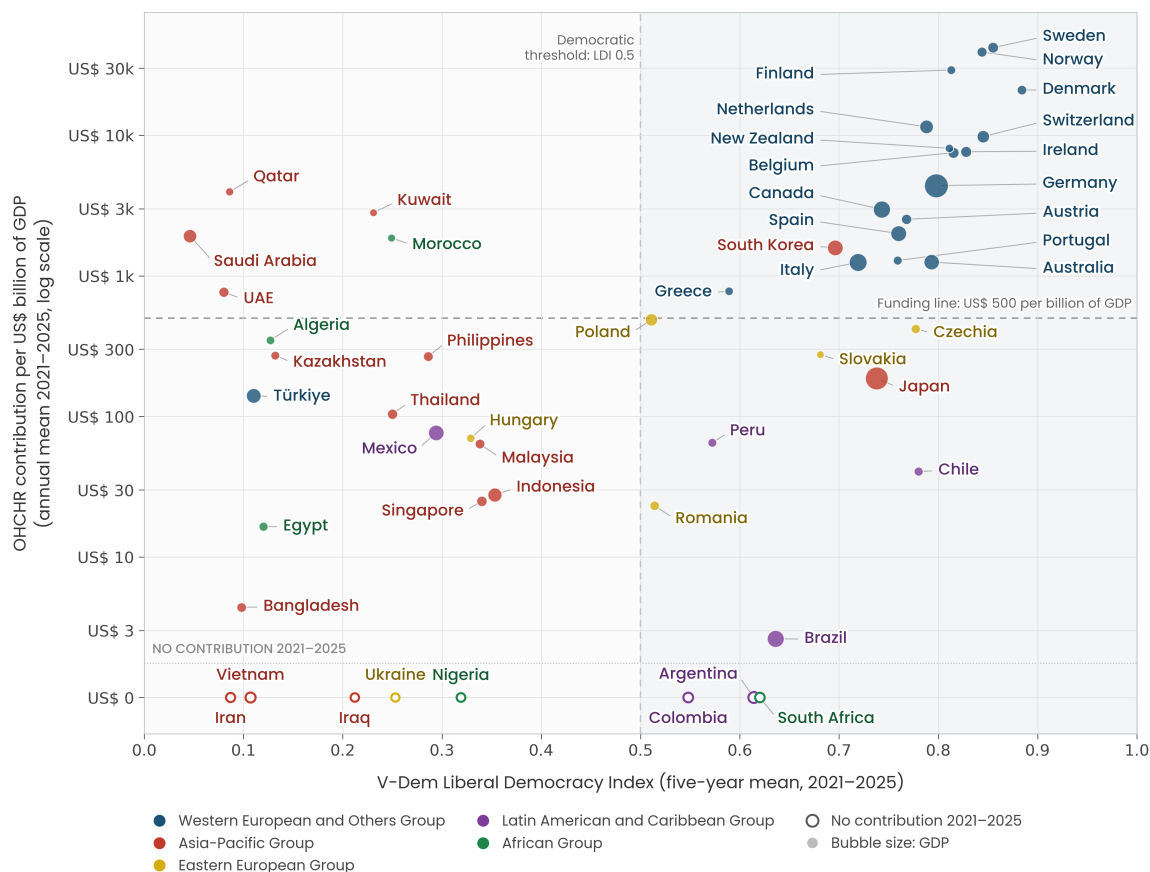


Figure: Intermediate powers by democratic quality (V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index) and human rights funding effort (OHCHR voluntary contributions relative to GDP), coloured by United Nations regional group.

Further details on this identification of the 51 states are provided in the methodology. View the full data at <https://progresschange.org/faultline#Dispatch2>.

Benchmark 1

Treat Democracy and Human Rights as a Security Interest

Intermediate powers should defend democracy and the universal human rights system as a matter of national security. States that depend on rules have the strongest stake in their survival, and that dependence grows as the largest powers treat rules as optional. Framing democracy and human rights as self-interest is the foundation on which sustained engagement can be built.²⁸

What protects a citizen of a middle-sized state travelling, trading or seeking protection abroad is a body of rules that applies to the strong, and an expectation amongst states that those rules will be enforced.

Austria has made this case: in its candidacy for the Security Council, it states that, as a militarily neutral country, it is dependent on an effective and functioning multilateral system, and that this dependence is part of its security policy.²⁹ Prime Minister Carney's warning at Davos points the same way: compliance, he told intermediate powers, would not buy safety.³⁰

In other words, where democracy backslides and the universal standards erode, the first to lose protection are the citizens of states without the means to defend themselves alone.

Concretely, a state that wishes to lead should write the commitment into the documents that bind its own government by naming the defence of democracy and the universal human rights system as a security interest in a national security strategy, a foreign policy review or a Security Council candidacy as Austria has done. A government that treats its voluntary contribution to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and its support for democracy and civic space as security expenditure will protect them under fiscal pressure and fund them on a multi-year, predictable basis;³¹ Benchmark 3 sets out how that contribution is best measured.

The influence on other intermediate powers comes from doing this in public and on the record. When one state of comparable size declares that its security depends on the rules and pays accordingly, it changes what is expected of its peers and lowers the cost of the next government making the same move.³² Further coordination could lead to a joint declaration formalised through the constitution of Coalition of the Willing for Democracy and Human Rights foreseen in benchmark 4.

Small states are the intended beneficiaries of this argument and can become its most committed adherents, since they have the least capacity to defend themselves alone and the most to gain from rules that bind the strong. Intermediate powers' leadership lowers the barrier to their participation.³³

Benchmark 2

Defend Universality and Indivisibility, Including the Right to Take Part in Public Affairs

A framing that places sovereignty and development above civil and political rights is gaining ground and it offers governments a route to escape accountability whilst appearing to engage. Intermediate powers should hold the line that human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent, that development complements accountability rather, and that the right to take part in public affairs is part of the standard being defended.

The most consequential shift in the human rights system is not the withdrawal of one power but the redefinition attempted by China working within the United Nations and through its bilateral engagements to advance a vision organised around state sovereignty, non-interference and the primacy of development, expressed through the language of a community of shared future.³⁴ Russia on its side has for long been pushing 'traditional values'³⁵ as a set of limitations to human rights. That language entered UN Human Rights Council resolutions through texts on development and mutually beneficial cooperation, promoted as a contribution to global human rights governance.³⁶ China and Russia, sometimes directly, often through their proxies, are not offering a link between human rights and the 2030 Agenda or a way of better integrating cultural rights and human rights of indigenous peoples into the global agenda. Their aim is to offer development as an alternative to civil and political rights, and so-called values as vehicle to excuse rights abuses, rather than as their complement.³⁷

This framing organised around sovereignty, non-interference, development and 'traditional values'³⁸ aims very directly at weakening participation rights, rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, and the right to be a democracy and human rights defender.³⁹

Concretely, the task for intermediate powers is to resist resolution language that subordinates rights to sovereignty, insisting on scrutiny where violations occur, protecting the independence of special procedures and treaty bodies, and treating attacks on civic space, on independent media and on electoral rights as violations of the same standard. The withdrawal of the United States has removed the counterweight that, for all its inconsistency, once contested this redefinition. With that counterweight gone, universal standards will hold only if leadership comes from an intermediary power every time China and Russia's attempt to advance their agenda. Furthermore, the establishment of a new UN special rapporteur mandate on democracy should be at the heart of such a leadership.

Benchmark 3

Protect and Properly Fund the Human Rights Pillar

The human rights pillar is being cut more deeply than the other two at the very moment violations are rising and democracy is backsliding. The cuts are presented as efficiency.

The UN80 reform has produced a result that no government would defend in principle but many have accepted in practice: the 2026 budget cut around 117 posts at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, close to one sixth of its establishment, and the human rights pillar absorbed a larger proportional reduction than the development or peace and security pillars.⁴⁰ The reductions sit on top of a liquidity crisis that left the Office with 73 per cent of its approved budget in 2025. The human rights pillar is the smallest of the three, and savings extracted from it are marginal to the United Nations as a whole whilst being severe for the mandates affected.

Reality is that these cuts follow a joint priority pushed by China, Russia and the United States, happily followed by their proxies and autocratic regimes around the UN membership.⁴¹

Intermediate powers should reverse the disproportionate reductions and treat their own contributions, measured against national wealth, as the real measure of seriousness.

On average, over the period 2021–2025, USD 256,268,413 were committed to OHCHR through voluntary contributions from various donors, including UN member states, the European Union, UN entities, foundations and companies. States alone averaged USD 204,877,328 over that period. Seven intermediary powers make up nearly 40 per cent (average combined annual contribution of USD 98,871,097 per annum over the period 2021–2025) of voluntary contributions to the Office, namely Sweden (contributing the equivalent of 0.00420 per cent of its GDP to the Office in voluntary contribution), Norway (0.00391 per cent of its GDP), Finland (0.00291 per cent of its GDP), Denmark (0.00210 per cent of its GDP), the Netherlands (0.00115 per cent of its GDP), Switzerland (0.00098 per cent of its GDP) and Ireland (0.00076 per cent of its GDP). Together these seven states contribute nearly 50 per cent of the total share of voluntary contributions by UN member states to the Office.

Voluntary contributions can by themselves however not make up for the cuts to the UN budget.

Forty States, led by Chile and drawn from every region, made the point precisely: the impact is disproportionate because the pillar is already the most overstretched, and a three-legged stool does not stand once a leg is cut.⁴² The case for reversing the cuts is also a case about the other two pillars: as set out above, the human rights machinery is what allows a government to explain its United Nations contribution to its own parliament and its own electorate. Cutting it to protect development and peacekeeping budgets weakens the argument on which development and peacekeeping budgets are defended at home.⁴³

Concretely, the first step for intermediary powers is collective. They must refuse, in budget negotiations, the disproportionate treatment of the human rights pillar and to insist on equity across the three pillars. An intermediary state should urgently set up, possibly around the Coalition of the Willing foreseen in benchmark 4, a working group of states and civil society to develop a strategy helping to counter future funding cuts and to develop scenarios to regain funding for the human rights pillar.

To reinforce voluntary contributions to the Office, intermediary powers should launch the 0.001 per cent of GDP for democracy and human rights pledge, potentially as rallying document for the launch of the Coalition of the Willing for Democracy and Human Rights.

Benchmark 4

Build a Multi-Geography Coalition of the Willing for Democracy and Human Rights

Building on a recommendation made by Human Rights Compass, intermediate powers should build a coalition of the willing for human rights that draws its members from every region.

In March 2026, more than ninety States, speaking as the Friends of Human Rights Multilateralism, issued a joint declaration at the Human Rights Council pledging to renew their commitment to a system grounded in the Charter and in international human rights law. The statement was delivered by Albania and co-led by Chile, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan and the Netherlands, a grouping that crosses every regional line.⁴⁴ In June 2026 the Office of the High Commissioner launched a Global Alliance for Human Rights in Geneva, designed around cross-regional and cross-sectoral initiatives.⁴⁵

The withdrawal of the United States, the obstruction of the Russian Federation and the redefinition pursued by China have changed that arithmetic: now moving towards formalizing a coalition that defends democracy and universal human rights is a sign of UN member states' willingness stand for democracy and human rights, with shared priorities, coordinated voting, pooled support for human rights mechanisms, and a common position in budget negotiations.⁴⁶

Human Rights Compass argued that a coalition of this kind is the most credible response to the realignment now under way.⁴⁷

Concretely, the next step will be to reaffirm the March 2026 statement at the Human Rights Council in March 2027. This reaffirmation should then set out what the Coalition of the Willing's next steps will be, including the establishment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Democracy and a plan to redress the financial situation of the UN's human rights pillar.

Benchmark 5

Activate the General Assembly and the Full Charter Toolbox

The Security Council is not paralysed, yet its composition keeps the human rights pillar out of its discussions on the maintenance of international peace and security. The General Assembly retains the authority to discuss and recommend on matters of peace and security, and the human rights system carries instruments of its own that do not depend on the Security Council, that however are also unable to influence the Security Council's agenda. Intermediate powers should use the full toolbox of the United Nations deliberately to better integrate human rights into the Security Council's agenda.

The Assembly's 2025 revitalisation resolution recalls its powers under Articles 10, 11, 12 and 35 of the Charter, reaffirms the 1950 Uniting for Peace resolution, and connects these to the 2022 veto initiative, under which the Assembly meets within ten days of any veto cast in the Council.⁴⁸ Together these provisions ensure that the Security Council does not silence the membership as a whole.⁴⁹

For human rights specifically, the instruments are well established — their use in a coordinated manner through a Coalition of the Willing would make them more powerful.

These instruments provide leverage, documentation and a route to accountability that survives great-power deadlock. The benchmark for intermediate powers is to treat the toolbox as a standing resource: to initiate and co-sponsor resolutions, to carry forward commissions of inquiry, to make full use of the mandates that address participation, assembly, association and the situation of human rights defenders, and to use the General Assembly to keep situations visible when the Security Council will not or when one of the great powers tries to escape accountability.

Concretely, the first opportunity is the composition of the Security Council from 1 January 2027. Austria, Portugal, Kyrgyzstan, Trinidad and Tobago and Zimbabwe take their seats alongside Bahrain, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Latvia and Liberia.⁵⁰ Two of the incoming members carry the argument of this Dispatch into the Security Council: Austria, which describes an effective multilateral system as part of its security policy, and Kyrgyzstan, which co-led the March 2026 declaration of the Friends of Human Rights Multilateralism. This is a time for bold steps, including inviting the High Commissioner to brief the Security Council, examine ways, including through Arria-formula meetings, to invite commissions of inquiry, fact-finding missions and special procedures to exchange with the Security Council.

Benchmark 6

Make Human Rights Central to the Next Secretary-General

The 2026 selection of the Secretary-General, examined in Notes from the Faultlines Dispatch #1⁵¹, is also a human rights decision. The next Secretary-General will inherit the funding crisis, the reform and the contest over the universal standard, and will either defend the human rights pillar or preside over its decline. Intermediate powers should make the defence of human rights within the UN system an explicit request of the new Secretary General.

The next Secretary-General will take office in a period when the human rights pillar has been cut to the point that the High Commissioner describes it as surviving rather than functioning.⁵² Leadership that accepts this as the new baseline will entrench it.

Intermediary powers, either through a Coalition of the Willing or through Security Council members, should address an agenda to the Secretary General designate and hold them to it:

1. Budget: Submit a programme budget proposal that reverses the disproportionate reduction of the human rights pillar, and report to the General Assembly within the first year of the term on what the 2026 cuts removed in operational terms, mandate by mandate;
2. Independence of the Office: Respect the mandate of the High Commissioner, renewed by the General Assembly on 24 July 2026 for four years from 12 October 2026⁵³, and keep the independence of the Office outside the scope of reform negotiations;
3. Appointments: Apply a demonstrated human rights record as a criterion for the Deputy Secretary-General, for the heads of political and peacebuilding affairs, peace operations and humanitarian affairs, and sustain parity in senior appointments;
4. Language: Refuse the substitution of sovereignty, non-interference and development for universal standards in Secretariat texts, reports and public communication, which is the route by which the redefinition described in Benchmark 2 enters the system from the inside;
5. Use of the Secretary General's office's own instruments: Speak publicly on human rights violations, in support of the parts of the United Nations that document them, use Article 99 of the Charter to act on the invitation contained in the Code of Conduct developed by the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency group, which asks the Secretary General to bring situations involving genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes to the Security Council's attention, in a systematic manner.⁵⁴

Concretely, a joint letter delivered on appointment, which could mark the launch of a Coalition of the Willing, setting out the commitments expected in the first hundred days and returned to in the general debate of the eighty-second session, establishes a record against which performance can be measured.

Benchmark 7

Lead with Consistency and Accept Measurement of Your Own Record

Intermediate powers that ask others to be measured should accept measurement themselves. The authority of a coalition for democracy and human rights comes from the consistency of its members, and inconsistency is the first argument opponents of the universal standards reach for, especially in the context of the United States' illegal war in Iran⁵⁵ and of Israël's response to the 7 October in Gaza and Lebanon.

Each state that wishes to lead should be able to show what it does at home and should apply the same standard to the partners it needs as to the states it can afford to criticise.⁵⁶

The Varieties of Democracy Institute records forty-four states as autocratising in 2025 and finds that six of the ten newly added are in Europe or North America, amongst them Croatia, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom.⁵⁷ The purpose of stating this is not to disqualify those states from leading on democracy and human rights; it is to insist that such leadership is earned by conduct.⁵⁸

Three tests serve as test for the intermediary powers' ability to lead on democracy and human rights:

The first is domestic: A state that argues for civic space abroad should be able to demonstrate an operating environment for its own civil society organisations, an independent press, protection for peaceful assembly, and conditions in which people can stand for office and take part in public affairs on equal terms;

The second is bilateral: Human rights concerns raised in a multilateral platform should also be raised with partners on whom the state depends for energy, for trade, or for migration cooperation, and the state should be able to show where it has raised them;⁵⁹

The third is procedural. A state should engage its own Universal Periodic Review and treaty body examinations with the seriousness it demands of others, accept country visits by special procedures, and implement the recommendations it receives rather than noting them.

The rules are the instrument through which states of moderate size exercise influence, and a rule that its own advocates suspend when it becomes inconvenient stops functioning as a rule.

Concretely, the coalition foreseen in Benchmark 4 should build the test into its own working methods. A light peer review, in which each member presents its own record before civil society organisations at the margins of a Human Rights Council session and answers questions on it, costs little and supplies the authority the coalition claims.

Afterword

From Shared Values to Shared Action

By Odette McCarthy

Executive Director of Equitas: International Centre for Human Rights Education
2024 recipient of The Karen Takacs Award

After years of working in human rights education, I have come to understand that lasting change begins when people have the knowledge, confidence and relationships they need to take action, and when they recognize their capacity to influence the decisions that shape their lives. The same principle extends beyond communities and workshops: meaningful change at the international level also depends on people and countries learning from one another, building trust and finding ways to act collectively. It means choosing to focus on what we share, the values, aspirations and hopes that connect us, which is far greater than the small differences that are used often to divide and separate us

The seven benchmarks highlighted point to an opportunity: countries can do more than defend the multilateral system as it exists. They can help renew it, by investing in the relationships, trust and collective action needed to make human rights and democracy meaningful in people's lives.

Countries already cross borders and continents to expand trade, deepen economic ties and build new partnerships across regions and political divides. That same capacity for cooperation can be harnessed to advance human rights and democracy. At a time of growing geopolitical fragmentation, these relationships can help build bridges where others are pulling apart.

This is where middle powers — or 'intermediary powers' — can play an important role, not because they hold the greatest power, but because they can bring countries together, build coalitions across regions and create space for cooperation where geopolitical divides might otherwise prevail. Their influence can help ensure that human rights and democracy remain a shared commitment rather than another fault line.

The task now is to turn shared values into shared action: to defend the universality of human rights and the instruments that uphold them, strengthen meaningful participation, protect civic space and build institutions people can trust. It means leading with consistency, listening to civil



society grounded in communities, learning across borders and being willing to apply at home the same standards we ask of others.

There is also an important set of mechanisms for advancing the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that should not be overlooked: debates in the General Assembly, resolutions that condemn human rights violations, and studies and reports produced by multilateral bodies and independent rapporteurs. Their influence is not measured only by whether they compel a government to act. They also help build a shared understanding of what human rights require, bring violations into public view and shape global opinion. In this sense, multilateralism is not simply a system for negotiating between states; it is also a way of building the knowledge, public pressure and common ground that make collective action possible. These mechanisms matter precisely because they can help countries find common ground around universal principles, even when geopolitical differences threaten to pull them apart.

Ultimately, the future of multilateralism will depend not only on the institutions we preserve, but on the relationships we build and the choices we make together. A stronger multilateral system is one that works for people, one where everyone can claim their rights, participate in the decisions that affect their lives and contribute to building more just and democratic societies.

That future is still within reach. And it will be built through the choices we make, the partnerships we forge and the collective action we take today.

Methodology

Unit of Analysis

The data used for the research in the production of this Dispatch covers fifty-one states classified as intermediate powers. In the framework of this Dispatch, an intermediate power is to be understood as:

- A state that carries weight in international affairs without holding the capacity to impose outcomes, and whose influence therefore depends on rules, coalitions and reputation;
- The five permanent members of the Security Council are excluded, since the argument of this Dispatch concerns the states that must act in their absence;
- Similarly, states that rank both amongst the ten largest economies and amongst the ten most populous states in the world are excluded. In 2025 the four states that meet both tests, the United States, China, India and Russia, are also excluded under another rule; the test is stated so that the definition holds as the rankings change;
- States that possess nuclear weapons are also excluded;
- States with a gross domestic product below 150 billion USD in 2025 are excluded. The floor keeps the set to states whose economic weight gives them standing across the whole agenda of the United Nations, and it marks the scope of this analysis. Many smaller states lead on human rights and their funding figures remain available in the data sheet;
- Only Member States of the United Nations are included, since the argument concerns conduct within its system.

The resulting set is deliberately broad and includes states whose human rights records are poor, because the sheet is designed to distinguish amongst intermediate powers. The selection sheet lists every Member State with an economy above 100 billion USD and records which rule includes or excludes each of them.

Method and Sources

The two quantitative axes in the figure published in this Dispatch are reproducible from published sources:

- The Liberal Democracy Index and the regime classifications come from the Varieties of Democracy dataset and the 2026 Democracy Report; the sheet records the mean of the five annual scores from 2021 to 2025;
- The contributions figures come from the Office of the High Commissioner's published annual tables of voluntary contributions for 2021 to 2025, averaged over the five years. The 2025 table records total voluntary income of 262.1 million USD;
- Gross domestic product figures come from the World Bank for 2025, and population figures from the United Nations World Population Prospects 2024, for the year 2025;
- The record column draws on United Nations treaty body and special procedures documentation, Universal Periodic Review outcome reports, and the reporting of established civil society organisations, each entry carrying its source.

The threshold of 0.5 on the Liberal Democracy Index is a judgement: it is set where it is because it separates states whose institutions can sustain a public argument for universal standards from states where the argument would be contradicted by the conduct of the government making it.

The funding line in the figure, at 500 USD of voluntary contribution per billion dollars of gross domestic product, is a judgement of the same kind.

Applied together, the two lines place eighteen states in the upper right of the figure, eleven in the lower right, five in the upper left and seventeen in the lower left.

Readers who prefer different lines can apply them; the sheet reports the underlying scores and recalculates each state's position when either line is changed.

Limits

Four limits must be stated plainly:

- The sheet measures disposition and capacity, not intention. A state can score well on both axes and decline to lead, for reasons of trade dependence, domestic politics or simple caution. Nothing in the data predicts behaviour;
- Voluntary contributions are volatile. A single earmarked project can move a small economy's ratio, and a change of government can remove a contribution entirely. The five-year mean dampens these movements; it also means that a state which gave once is averaged across five years;
- The Liberal Democracy Index measures the quality of a state's institutions, not the conduct of its foreign policy. Several states with high scores conduct migration, arms transfer or trade policies that conflict with the standards they defend in Geneva. This is the gap the record column exists to fill, and readers should treat the two quantitative axes as incomplete without it;
- The sheet says nothing about what a state does inside the Human Rights Council: how it votes, what it initiates, whether it joins statements at cost to itself. That behavioural dimension is the most direct evidence of coalition potential, and it is the intended addition to the next edition.

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