TORONTO MODEL UNITED NATIONS II
SOCHUM

Table of Contents

Director's Letter

Dear delegates,

I am pleased to welcome you to the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee at TMUN! My name is Noah Pilnitz, and I will be your director this year.

I am a Grade 12 student, and this is my second year in Model UN. I have had experience directing Crisis conferences in the past, and I am excited to venture into a General Assembly to direct SOCHUM. I am a huge politics buff, from international relations to urban planning. I have always enjoyed discussing political issues with my friends, family, and of course, fellow delegates.

The SOCHUM committee will address two topics this year: the Mediterranean migrant crisis, and government interference in social media.

I hope that you use this background guide as an initial source of information in writing your background guide. The world today faces a multitude of economic, political, military, and social crises, which all converge to form the present *polycrisis*. As Aristotle proclaimed, man is a political animal. As academics engaging in diplomacy and negotiation, it is my hope that you take the values of cooperation and advocacy into all your future endeavours. Whether this is your first conference, or you are a veteran, I hope that you have a productive weekend of deliberation, debate, and academic and personal development.

Good luck to all delegates!

Noah Pilnitz
Director of SOCHUM

INTRODUCTION TO SOCHUM

The Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee is the third assembly of the General Assembly. As the name suggests, this committee is responsible for human rights, humanitarian causes, and any social issues. The SOCHUM committee works to the UN Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an extension of the Millenium Development Goals.

TOPIC I: MEDITERRANEAN MIGRANT CRISIS

The Mediterranean sea is one of the largest and most documented seas in the world. Since ancient times, it has functioned as a barrier but also an important conduit of trade and migration between Southern Europe and the Middle East and North Africa.

There are several main routes of migration in the area. The Eastern Mediterranean route begins in Turkey, a non EU country that borders Greece and Bulgaria, both EU countries. Aside from the land crossing, many migrants cross the Aegean Sea separating the Turkish mainland from the numerous Greek islands. The Central Mediterranean route begins on the shores of North Africa, in countries such as Libya and Tunisia. Migrants cross hundreds of kilometers of open sea in hopes of reaching - or being rescued by the authorities of - countries like Italy or Malta. Lastly, the Eastern Mediterranean route includes the small land crossings between Morocco and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, as well as sea routes to the Canary Islands or Southern Spain.

The Mediterranean routes, however, are extensions of the popular land routes used by migrants to enter the European Union. Most notably during the European Migrant Crisis of 2015, where an unprecedented number of migrants, many of them fleeing the Syrian Civil war, Afghan war, and other conflict zones, entered the European Union.
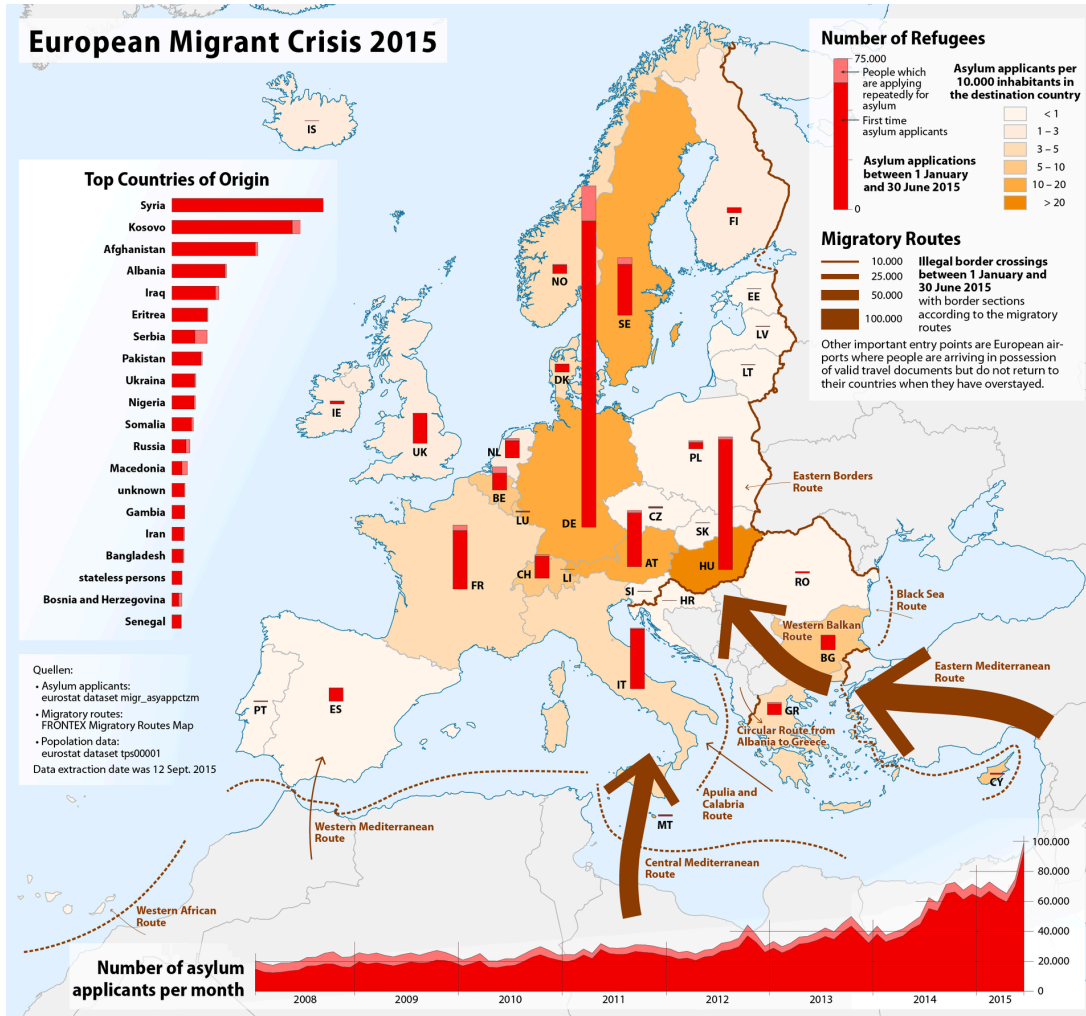
Map of popular migration routes used by migrants and the number of migrants by route in 2015.

There have been a wide range of reactions to the migration crisis in the European Union, ranging from welcoming with open arms to border closures and pushbacks. The crisis has also exacerbated relations between EU members, as states have grappled with issues of burden-sharing, coordination of efforts, and the balance between safeguarding national sovereignty and upholding international obligations.

HISTORY

The Mediterranean sea, for millennia, has been at the centre of an important naval network. Many civilizations have traded, conquered, and colonized using the Mediterranean. The Ancient Phoenecians, followed by the Ancient Greeks and Carthaginians have all used the Mediterranean to build a trade empire and to colonize its coastlines. Since the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, no polity has managed to unite the entire basin, and the sea has often served as a barrier between different ethnic groups and states.

During the Arab conquest of the Middle East in the 7th century by the Rashiduns, Umayyads, and the Abbasids, the Mediterranean initially served as a barrier to further conquests. However, Muslim influence eventually extended all the way into Iberia and Sicily. During the Christian reconquest of Iberia, hundreds of thousands of Muslims (called Moors), and Jews fled across the Mediterranean to avoid religious persecution.

The current migration crisis stems from a severe political, social, and economic disparity between two sides of the Mediterranean. Migrants often aspire to reach the European Union, one of the most economically advanced and politically free areas of the world.

One of the conflicts that prompted the migrant crisis starting in 2015 was the Syrian Civil War. This conflict lasted from 2011, and continues today with low-level fighting. More than 14 million Syrians fled their homes during the course of the war, with many Syrians fleeing to neighbouring countries[1]. Today, Turkey is home to the largest number of refugees in the world, and an estimated 4 million Syrian refugees remain today.[2] Many more Syrians continued their journey out of Turkey and into neighbouring European states such as Greece. Migrants at this border often cross short boat journeys to the Aegean islands or cross the short land border, and since 2015, hundreds of thousands of migrants have crossed Greece on their way to more prosperous states in Western Europe[3]. In 2015 and 2016, Syrians made up the single largest nationality of refugee claimants in the European Union, with roughly 700,000 claims (including repeat claims) in the two years[4].

Libya also plays an important role in the Mediterranean migrant crisis. After the fall of Muammar Ghadaffi in 2011, Libya experienced two deadly and lengthy civil wars. The political turmoil and insecurity that followed the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 created a power vacuum, enabling human traffickers and smuggling networks to operate with impunity. Today, different areas of Libya are controlled by rival governments, and civil authority is often weak in areas that have been ravaged by over a decade of fighting. The result is that Libya is often used as a staging point for migrants wishing to cross the Mediterranean sea into Europe. Migrants

---

[1] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained." *Unrefugees.org*, 2023, www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/.
[2] Ministry of Internal Affairs, Turkey. "T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı." *Goc.gov.tr*, 2023, www.goc.gov.tr/.
[3] Anthee Carassava. "Illegal Migration to Greece Surges, Sparking Measures to Shield Borders." *VOA*, Voice of America (VOA News), 24 Sept. 2023, www.voanews.com/a/illegal-migration-to-greece-surges-sparking-measures-to-shield-borders/7281297.html.
[4] *Europa.eu*, 2023, ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYAPPCTZA__custom_1142314/default/table?lang=en. Accessed 26 Sept. 2023.

from various African countries, as well as refugees fleeing conflicts and persecution in the Middle East, often embark on dangerous journeys from Libya's shores in overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels. According to Italian Intelligence officials, nearly 700,000 migrants are currently in Libya[5], waiting to sail across the sea.

ISSUES

MALTREATMENT OF MIGRANTS

According to the International Organization for Migration, nearly 2,000 migrants have lost their lives in the first half of 2023, while attempting to reach Europe by sea. Oftentimes, entire boats of migrants may sink, due to the long distance involved and the poor quality of vessels. Smugglers may take advantage of the disparity of power between them and the migrants. For example, smugglers may hire recruiting rings to canvass for migrants in villages in source countries and promise safe journeys to Europe for low prices. According to Deutsche Welle, a trip to Europe from origin to destination may cost as much as $10,000[6], a figure that can often be worth several years of work in a migrant's home country. In order to make up the difference, migrants often go into debt or servitude, putting them at significant risk of abuse and maltreatment from the smugglers, particularly when migrants are taken out of their home countries and are unfamiliar with the environment. It is not uncommon for migrants to stop in North African countries such as Tunisia and Libya and work in order to save money for the next leg of the journey. In addition to the claimed 700,000 migrants in Libya, there are an estimated 20,000 sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia, many of them waiting in transit to Europe[7].

Even before they reach Europe, migrants can face discrimination and hostility from their host countries. In February 2022, Tunisisan president Kais Saied announced a campaign to repatriate foreign nationals from Sub-Saharan countries like Cote D'Ivoire, Mali, Senegal, and others. Saied stated "The undeclared goal of the successive waves of illegal immigration is to consider Tunisia a purely African country that has no affiliation to the Arab and Islamic nations"[8]. Saied's

[5] Associated Press. "Italy Estimates 680K Migrants May Cross Sea from Libya." *VOA*, Voice of America (VOA News), 12 Mar. 2023, www.voanews.com/a/italy-estimates-680k-migrants-may-cross-sea-from-libya/7001371.html.

[6] Holleis, Jennifer. "Migrant Smugglers: Who Are They?" *Dw.com*, Deutsche Welle, 29 June 2023, www.dw.com/en/migrant-smugglers-who-are-they/a-66069532. Accessed 26 Sept. 2023.

[7] Al Jazeera. "Sub-Saharan Africans Recount Tunisia 'Hell' amid Crackdown." *Aljazeera.com*, Al Jazeera, 3 Mar. 2023, www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/3/sub-saharan-africans-recount-tunisia-hell-amid-crackdown.

[8] Al Jazeera. "Tunisia's Saied Says Migration Aimed at Changing Demography." *Aljazeera.com*, Al Jazeera, 22 Feb. 2023, www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/22/tunisias-saied-says-migration-aimed-at-changing-demography.

comments were condemned by several domestic and international human rights agencies, including the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights[9]. In the ensuing crackdown, several hundreds of Sub-Saharan nationals were forcibly repatriated to their home countries. Several thousands of Sub-Saharan Africans were simply pushed to the Tunisian-Libyan border and left to fend on their own. Human Rights Watch estimates that within one week of the operation, from July 2, 2023, to July 6 2023, Tunisian authorities had expelled between 500 and 700 people to the border area between Tunisia and Libya[10]. The reaction of Tunisian authorities draws parallels with the reactions of several European countries, and underscores the maltreatment of migrants and breach of due process in processing and hearing asylum claims.

Another tactic used to deny migrants access to European destinations are migrant pushbacks. Pushbacks occur when authorities illegally use physical force to "push" migrants back to their originating country. Although these pushbacks usually occur across land borders, where officers may physically block migrants from crossing borders, pushbacks may also occur at sea when coast guard authorities tow or remove boats attempting to land ashore. Moreover, pushbacks can also occur when authorities stop providing basic living conditions like food and water, forcing migrants to return from refugee camps in Greece's Aegean islands to the Turkish mainland. Médecins Sans Frontières, one of the humanitarian organizations present in refugee camps in Greek Aegean Islands such as Lesbos, Chios, and Kos, reported that Greece had moved migrants from informal camps to EU-funded Closed Controlled Access Centres, with around 2,700 migrants moved in the first six months of 2023. These CCACs were marketed by the EU and Greece as an improvement in living conditions for migrants. However, these centres were designed to severely restrict people's movement, maintaining prison-like facilities. On May 17, 2023, Greek authorities reportedly stopped providing food to both recognized refugees (protected persons), and migrants awaiting refugee status or migrants denied status.[11]Although the Greek authorities did not directly force migrants to leave, it had denied migrants a reasonable access to basic living standards, forcing migrants to return.

[9] Reuters. "Tunisian President Says Migration to Tunisia Aimed at Changing Demography." *Reuters*, 21 Feb. 2023, www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisian-president-says-migration-tunisia-aimed-changing-demography-2023-02-21/.

[10] Human Rights Watch. "Tunisia: Crisis as Black Africans Expelled to Libya Border." *Human Rights Watch*, 6 July 2023, www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/06/tunisia-crisis-black-africans-expelled-libya-border. Accessed 26 Sept. 2023.

[11] Médecins Sans Frontières. "Greece: Pushbacks, Detention and Violence towards Migrants on Lesbos | MSF." *Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) International*, 2022, www.msf.org/greece-pushbacks-detention-and-violence-towards-migrants-lesbos.

RESCUE AND HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS

An important force in saving lives in the Mediterranean are search and rescue ships. These ships may be part of national Coast Guard forces or be independent humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations. However, these humanitarian and life-saving interventions often conflict with the migration policies of EU countries on the Mediterranean, such as Italy and Greece. On February 24, 2023, the Parliament of Italy passed a law putting severe restrictions on the actions of international search and rescue ships, in a bid to discourage migrants from attempting the journey to Italian shores. According to Reuters, Under the new law, ships have to request access to a port immediately after any rescue, rather than remain at sea to search for other migrant boats nearby that are in distress.[12] Search and rescue boats must also share detailed information with the Italian authorities. Authorities in the subsequent months directed humanitarian ships to sail to Italian ports, often far removed from the rescue points. Several groups, including the Vatican, MSF, and Amnesty International have condemned the new regulations as an attempt to hinder the rescue of migrants in the Mediterranean, leaving scores of migrants to drown in the treacherous seas.[13]Ships that breach the new rules may be fined up to 50,000 Euros, and further punishments can include impoundments. Indeed, hours after the new law was passed, Italian authorities began fining ships that continued to carry out rescue operations. The *Geo Barents,* operated by MSF, was fined 10,000 euros and blocked for 20 days on the same day as the law was passed[14].

The use of such restrictive search and rescue laws brings into question the fundamental human right and convention to rescue persons in distress at sea, regardless of nationality. According to the Red Cross, such restrictive search and rescue laws may contravene this convention:

> "The duty to rescue persons in distress at sea is a fundamental rule of international law. It has been incorporated in international treaties and forms the content of a norm of customary international law. It applies both during peacetime and during wartime, albeit with the necessary adjustments to take into account the different circumstances. States are also under the duty to provide search and rescue services."[15]

---

[12] Amante, Angelo. "Italy Approves Clampdown on Migrant Rescue Ships." *Reuters*, 23 Feb. 2023, www.reuters.com/world/europe/italy-gives-final-approval-decree-clamping-down-migrant-charity-ships-2023-02-23/.
[13] ibid.
[14] ibid.
[15] Papanicolopulu, Irini. "The Duty to Rescue at Sea, in Peacetime and in War: A General Overview." *International Review of the Red Cross*, 15 Aug. 2016, international-review.icrc.org/articles/duty-rescue-sea-peacetime-and-war-general-overview.

EUROPEAN RESPONSE TO CRISIS

Various European states have responded differently to the crisis, ranging from an open-arms welcome as seen under Angela Merkel's acceptance of over 1 million Syrian migrants in 2015, to a military-grade treatment of migrants as invaders, as seen in the more recent and previously mentioned actions taken by Greece and Italy. The migrant crisis has also inflamed existing disagreements in policy between European countries.

One of the notable influences on politics in the past decade in European parliaments is the rise of alt-right parties that often champion hard-line and nationalistic immigration policy. Examples of such parties include Vox in Spain, National Rally in France, Lega Nord and Fratelli D'Italia in Italy, and Alternatif für Deutschland in Germany. Although the initial reception of these countries to migrants was often positive, cultural, economic, and religious differences caused tensions between the migrants and natives.

A common theme of anti-immigration parties is the use of xenophobic and islamophobic rhetoric. For example, one AfD campaign slogan in 2016 read: "Islam is not part of Germany"[16]. In France, the state value of laïcité, or secularism, is often invoked against public displays of religion. However, such laws, for example, the banning of religious displays by students in schools, often disproportionately affect Muslim women who wear the burka or niqab, a type of veil used by some Islamic women.

Another point of contention is the allocation of funding in relation to the migrant crisis. Several of the countries that experience the heaviest burden of migration, namely the countries on the shore of the Mediterranean, including Italy and Greece, are also significantly poorer than the states of Northern Europe. The states struggle with accommodating several thousands of migrants with limited resources. In particular, Greece and Italy have suffered from sluggish economies and a lack of funding in public agencies, necessitating transfer payments from wealthier European Union countries[17]. Moreover, the distribution of migrants in the EU is also a point of contention. Migrants have disproportionately settled in the wealthier states, such as

---

[16] News Wires at France 24. "Germany's Right-Wing AfD Party Adopts Anti-Islam Manifesto." *France 24*, FRANCE 24, 2 May 2016, www.france24.com/en/20160502-germany-right-wing-afd-party-adopts-anti-islam-manifesto.

[17] European Commission. "Funds for Migrant Integration in Greece." *European Website on Integration*, 13 Jan. 2017, ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/funding/national-level/funds-migrant-integration-greece_en.

France, Germany, Netherlands, and Belgium.[18] These migration dynamics have exacerbated the already existing divide between the European Union states' haves and have-nots.

In particular, the EU member states of Poland and Hungary have had governments who are staunchly opposed to migration from the Middle East and North Africa. In early 2023, negotiations between the European Council and the Polish government on the issue of EU states' individual responsibilities on accepting migrants reached yet another impasse when the EU threatened to impose a 22,000 Euro fine on each migrant that Poland refused to accept under the current migrant distribution policy[19]. However, these talks were further complicated by a new refugee crisis, that of the Ukraine-Russia war. Poland, a neighbour of Ukraine with close cultural ties, has welcomed over 1 million Ukrainian refugees in the past 2 years, which would put it far above the average EU country in terms of migrant acceptance.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How should EU countries discourage illegal migration by sea while preventing further loss of life due to a lack of rescue operations?

2. What is the role of the origin countries of migrants in stopping trafficking and illegal migration?

3. What is the responsibility of EU states that have not received migrants to share the burden of processing and housing migrants?

4. How should migrants be accommodated while their claims for asylum are processed?

5. Should the EU detain migrants as is the current policy in the Aegean Islands, or allow freedom of movement and work?

6. What is the responsibility of Europe, given historical exploitation and contribution to current crises in the Middle East and Africa, to accommodate migrants?

---

[18] *Europa.eu*, 2023,
ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYAPPCTZA__custom_1142314/default/table?lang=en.

[19] O'Carroll, Lisa. "Poland Criticises EU's 'Unacceptable' Proposed Charge for Refusing Migrants." *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 8 June 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/08/poland-eu-migration-summit-asylum-luxembourg-talks.
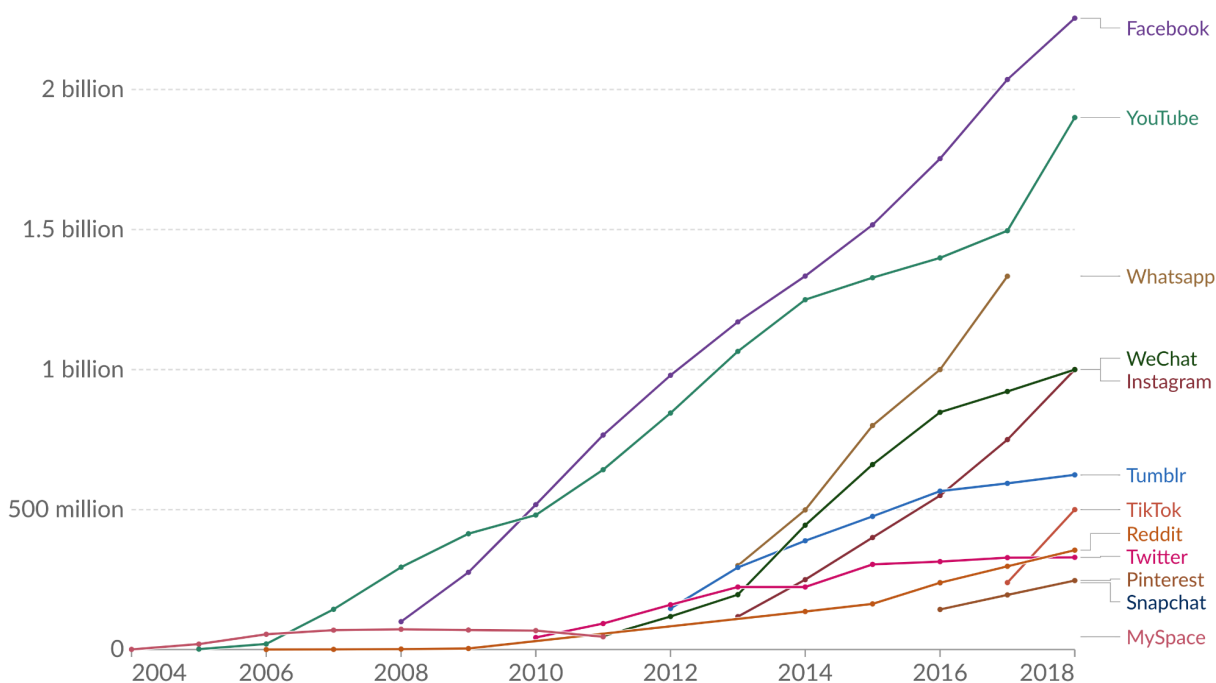
7. What precedents do the reaction and treatment of migrants in Europe set for other countries around the world dealing with similar issues?

8. What kind of international response or structure could be implemented to deal with future migration crises - which are only expected to get worse along with the climate crisis?

TOPIC II: GOVERNMENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Rarely has an innovation emerged and so quickly taken over the world as has the rise of social media. Today, the majority of the world uses some form of social media, whether that be owning an account for communicating with family, promoting a business, or accessing news media. The rise of social media has had many unforeseen consequences. These challenges extend to the governance and regulation of social media contents and companies, the collection of personal data, and political subversion. It is no surprise that the interaction between social media and the government has been a controversial topic. These challenges regarding social media are only poised to get more severe, as the digitalization of the economy continues, and more people in the developing world gain access to these social platforms.

Number of people using social media platforms, 2004 to 2018

Estimates correspond to monthly active users (MAUs). Facebook, for example, measures MAUs as users that have logged in during the past 30 days. See source for more details.

Our World in Data

Facebook — YouTube — Whatsapp — WeChat — Instagram — Tumblr — TikTok — Reddit — Twitter — Pinterest — Snapchat — MySpace

2 billion
1.5 billion
1 billion
500 million
0

2004 — 2006 — 2008 — 2010 — 2012 — 2014 — 2016 — 2018

Source: Statista and TNW (2019)

OurWorldInData.org/internet • CC BY

Graph of numbers of users of various social media over time.

HISTORY

Social media and the rise of digital communications is a remarkably modern phenomenon. One of the most prominent social media sites, Facebook, was launched in 2004. Founded by Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook quickly gained traction among college students before expanding to a global audience. Its success inspired the creation of numerous other social networking sites, including Twitter (2006), which introduced the concept of microblogging, and later platforms like Instagram (2010) and Snapchat (2011), which focused on visual content and disappearing messaging.

As social media continued to evolve, it became an integral part of everyday life in all spheres, including political, economic, and social. Today, the history of social media is a story of constant innovation, adaptation, and wrangling with regulations and government, with platforms continually evolving and juggling competing interests of states and users. From the early days of text messaging to the complex landscape of social networks, the history of social media, in a relatively short period of time, has changed the game for international relations and political processes.

ISSUES

POLITICAL SUBVERSION

Historically, governments have risen and fallen over the consent and cooperation of the masses that they rule over. A crucial part of this arrangement is the flow of information between the government and its people. Traditional media, such as print media and television, are high cost, meaning that it is very difficult to establish such channels of information. As a result, most news sources are controlled by either a few news barons or government owned. This small circle can then influence the media that is broadcast to the population. For generations, during times of crisis or war, or during times of peace, this was the way in which information was controlled and disseminated to the masses.

However, the rise of social media has upended the traditional model of information sharing. With the barrier to posting information being nearly nothing, any citizen may spread their views to millions of other citizens, often bypassing government censorship. While this can be advantageous to a democratic discourse, it can also threaten the authority and legitimacy of governments.

China, the second-most populous country in the world, is largely cut off from the Western social media system, having its parallel platforms, including WeChat, Youku, Douyin, and more. These networks are owned and operated wholly within Mainland China, allowing the Chinese Communist Party to more closely monitor their activities. According to Human Rights Watch, all

Chinese social media companies, private or public, are subject to the control of the Chinese Communist Party through information records, private messages, and user data[20]. This atmosphere of control creates ample opportunities and channels for state censorship, surveillance, and propaganda that allow the government to maintain a tight rule on Chinese citizens and the diaspora. Under China's 2017 National Intelligence Law, all citizens and businesses are required to assist in intelligence gathering and must share any data with Beijing if requested[21]. During the Covid-19 pandemic, China instituted some of the world's longest lasting and strictest lockdowns. These drastic actions, often announced with immediate effect and no prior warning, caused immense hardship for millions across China, especially for migrant workers who had lost their jobs and, due to the restrictions of the Chinese household registration system, could not access social benefits. These protests became known as the A4 protests, a reference to the blank sheets of paper that were often used in the protests to symbolize the censorship on social media[22]. Although these protests were eventually crushed, and several activists arrested, the extremely rare dissent in mainland China underscored the power of social media to challenge governments' authorities, even in a sophisticated and wealthy surveillance state such as China.

Another significant example of the power of social media against regimes is that of the Arab Spring, also known as the Arab Uprising or Arab Revolutions. The Arab Spring was a series of pro-democracy uprisings that swept across several Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region starting in 2011. The movement was characterized by widespread popular protests, demands for political reform, and calls for an end to authoritarian rule and corruption. It had a profound impact on the political, social, and cultural landscape of the region and drew global attention, not least due to the way in which the protests so rapidly gripped the region. The intensity and scope of the protests can be largely attributed to the use of social media to spread revolutionary messages across the entire region. At the time, social media was still a relatively new phenomenon, it had already emerged as a powerful force that had managed to unseat, in some cases, dictators that had ruled for decades. At the time, only one-third of Egyptians had

[20] Wang, Yaqiu. "China's Social Media Interference Shows Urgent Need for Rules." *Human Rights Watch*, 14 Aug. 2023, www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/14/chinas-social-media-interference-shows-urgent-need-rules.
[21] ibid.
[22] Feng, Emily. "China's Authorities Are Quietly Rounding up People Who Protested against COVID Rules." *NPR*, 11 Jan. 2023, www.npr.org/2023/01/11/1148251868/china-covid-lockdown-protests-arrests.

access to the internet[23]. This figure speaks to the sheer power in social media to reach unprecedented amounts of people. Moreover, social media is also one of the fastest channels of mass media. Protests were often coordinated quickly and spontaneously using social media, presenting a challenge to the authorities who could only play catch up.

Where the Arab Spring Happened
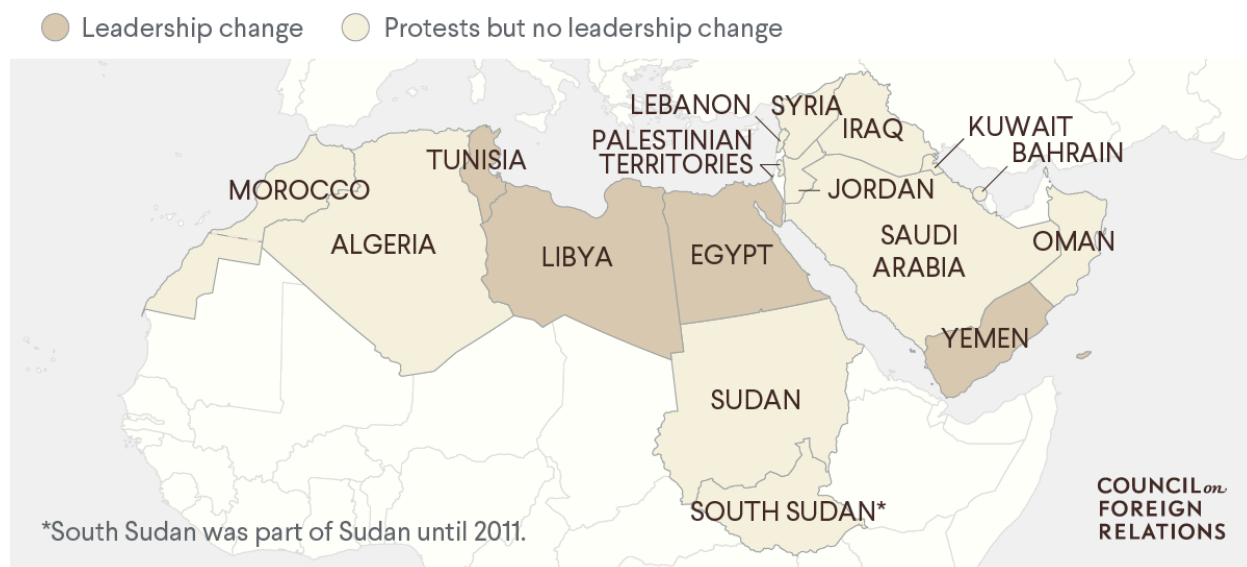
Map of Arab Spring protests in the Middle East and North Africa, 2011 to present.

MISINFORMATION

Despite previous examples of social media being used as a voice of democracy in authoritarian regimes, social media can also be used to promote misinformation that threatens societal norms and safety. Due to the low barrier to entry, a bad actor may easily post and promote harmful information, without the same checks that official sources are subject to. Moreover, the laws that have traditionally regulated print media have failed to adapt to the meteoric rise of social media, posing further legislative challenges for governments.

The Covid-19 pandemic fuelled an explosion in misinformation about its origins, lockdowns, and vaccinations. Many of these theories challenged the public health guidance, and may have contributed to a population less willing to protect themselves and others from the virus. Although criticism and discourse regarding pandemic policies are crucial in a democracy, as evidenced by the A4 protests in China, anti-scientific sentiment may also cause significant damage and risk to

---

[23] Pew Research Centre. "The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*, 28 Nov. 2012, www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2012/11/28/role-social-media-arab-uprisings/.

public health and safety. Moreover, due to the vast nature of social media, it is often very difficult to regulate and monitor online misinformation, even by the technology companies themselves. Big pushes, like the one Meta (formerly Facebook) undertook in late 2020 against misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines while promoting content from authoritative public health agencies and scientifically-sound sources, were ultimately ineffective at stopping the continuance of new misinformation, as described by Vox[24]. Moreover, there is a debate about whether or not the mandate of a private company, in this case, Meta, should be concerned and responsible for regulating what is "authoritative" or "misinformation".

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

This brings us to the next issue: that of the great influence of social media companies. Meta, the aforementioned corporation, owes Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger. These platforms have a cumulative user base of several billions of people. Therefore, Meta and other social media companies have immense leverage over the social, business, and political realms of the online world. For example, American president Donald Trump was banned off of nearly every major social media platform in 2020. This silencing of a public figure by private companies was justified in the name of promoting violence and extremism[25]. However, a debate exists as to whether or not such companies have the jurisprudence to decide on such issues, especially considering that they are not accountable to the citizens through elections or any other democratic process. Moreover, although social media platforms have been instrumental in promoting freedom of speech and expression, regulation of the spaces must balance free speech interests with that of public safety and responsible use of platforms.

USER PRIVACY

Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international rights treaties, governments are responsible for protecting their citizens's right to privacy. Article 12 of the UDHR states:

> *No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.*

---

[24] A.W. Ohlheiser. "How Covid-19 Vaccine Misinformation Stayed One Step ahead of Facebook." *Vox*, Vox, 16 Sept. 2023, www.vox.com/technology/2023/9/16/23875579/facebook-meta-vaccine-covid-19-misinformation-study.

[25] Meta. "Facebook Community Standards." *Fb.com*, 2017, transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/?source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fcommunitystandards.

This responsibility also extends to regulations to ensure that private companies do not infringe upon their customers' privacy. With the advent of social media and companies like Google, which offer a whole host of services, there has been an explosion of user data that can be generated and collected. This data is valuable; it can be used by advertisers to target demographic groups. One notable example of this harvesting of user data was during the 2016 American Presidential election. The New York Times first reported in 2014 of Cambridge Analytica, a data analysis company headquartered in London. It was revealed that Cambridge Analytica sold "psychological" profiles of American voters to political campaigns and that it had acquired the private Facebook data of tens of millions of users. At the time, it was the largest known leak in Facebook history. This information was then used by campaigners of the Republican party to target advertising to voters.[26]

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. To what degree should the government regulate political content on social media? Should the government take precedence over the wishes of a private company?

2. To what degree do social media companies have a responsibility to promote public health and safety? What should the government do in case of a public health crisis?

3. To what extent is social media a threat to governments' legitimacy and authority, and is this sufficient justification for censorship of social media?

4. How should terms of service or content deemed inappropriate be created? How much of a say should governments have in this process?
5. What is the government and the UN's role in protecting citizens' privacy rights in the face of data collection by social media companies?

6. What is the role of social media in the democratic process, including elections, campaigning, and organizing protests?

---

[26] The New York Times. "Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout so Far (Published 2018)." *The New York Times*, 2023, www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal-fallout.html.