

**U.S. SUPPORT OF DEMOCRACY AND  
HUMAN RIGHTS**

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**HEARING**

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

—————  
MARCH 28, 2023  
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## **U.S. SUPPORT OF DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

**TUESDAY, MARCH 28, 2023**

U.S. SENATE,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:33 a.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Robert Menendez presiding.

Present: Senators Menendez [presiding], Cardin, Shaheen, Murphy, Kaine, Schatz, Van Hollen, Risch, Ricketts, and Young.

### **OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY**

The CHAIRMAN. This hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will come to order.

Two years ago, as the people of Cuba took to the streets chanting “Down with the dictatorship,” government forces tried to silence the protesters with tear gas and violence.

Afterwards, a Catholic priest from Cuba visited me and told me about a young man who came to see him in church. He related the story, saying, quoting the young man, “I would fight,” the young man said. “I would give my life for the cause of freedom if only someone would know that I died. If only someone would know that I died.”

I think about that 2 years later as I look around the world at those people willing to risk their lives to defend democracy and human rights, from the activist facing execution in Burma to those being jailed by dictatorships in Belarus or Venezuela, to those bravely protesting for their fundamental freedoms across Iran. I think about what we can do to support these people who are alive and fighting so they will not want to die just to be remembered.

The international community, in my view, is not doing enough. The United States is not doing enough and Congress is not doing enough. We are trying, but we need to do much better.

I hope to hear from all of our witnesses today about what more we must do to support human rights and democracy. How can democratic nations like our own better respond to autocrats like Putin and Xi, who have been meeting and marshaling their forces across the globe?

Do we have the right tools to hold them accountable for their blatant atrocities of the rules-based international order, to combat their aggressive disinformation campaigns inside their own countries and around the world, and to counter their economic warfare

and diplomatic bullying whose impact can be seen when we look at how many countries were unwilling to censor Putin for his war in Ukraine?

For too long, authoritarianism has lured world leaders with the promise of personal wealth and perpetual power. Authoritarian regimes have also been investing in technologies to control and repress their citizens, leading to social credit systems and intrusive state surveillance.

We need to adapt our assistance to keep up with emerging technologies that can support democracy activists and human rights defenders, to keep the internet on when dictators try to turn it off, to shield the identity of those trying to report the truth.

At the same time, we must also confront and understand the causes of the way of coup attempts that have increasingly undermined governments across the globe. From Burkina Faso and Tunisia to Peru and Brazil, we cannot stand idly by as democratically-elected leaders are threatened or pushed out of power by mobs or militias, because despite all of these challenges, pro-democracy movements are fighting back in some of the world's most repressive environments and fragile democracies continue to push forward with democratic reforms.

I am pleased that this week the Biden administration is convening the second Summit for Democracy with events in Washington and Zambia, the Netherlands and South Korea, but I am not sure I totally understand what the results of the first one are. We have to strengthen our efforts to help nations deliver for their people who want nothing more than peace and prosperity.

That is why I will be introducing two important pieces of legislation: first, the *Protect Global Heroes Act*, which will create a new limited visa category for human rights defenders and democracy activists facing imminent danger and persecution, and second, a comprehensive countering authoritarianism bill to strengthen the U.S. response and the tools to combat autocratic regimes.

Beyond such legislation, the United States must better leverage our democracy assistance, international diplomacy, and sanctions regimes. We must keep pushing for the release of Chinese political prisoners like Ilham Tohti, the Uighur writer, or Luis Manuel Otero in Cuba, or Vladimir Kara-Murza in Russia.

Their struggle against tyranny is also our struggle. It is in the national interests of the United States to support the people and organizations fighting for freedom. Respecting human rights delivers the stability and fairness that makes investment, capital growth, and innovation possible.

Democracies bring more wealth to more people and are more stable than autocracies. Democracy is more than just an ideal. It is a governing system to which people can hold their leaders to account and advance human rights.

Democracy is a practical engine of self-correction and improvement that empowers people to constantly peacefully struggle towards a better life. It is that better life that we want to help make a reality.

With that, let me turn to the ranking member for his comments.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO**

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States has been the largest and most robust supporter of democracy and human rights around the world. Unfortunately, in spite of our significant investments and efforts, freedom and democracy are constantly under attack.

According to Freedom House's 2023 Freedom of the World report, it is the 17th consecutive year of decline in freedom across the globe. We have all plainly seen authoritarians across the world increase their attacks on internationally recognized human rights.

In every region totalitarian and authoritarian nations like China, Russia, Cuba, and Iran are implementing new tools to silence a civil society. Putin's war in Ukraine is the most blatant attack on democracy we have seen since the Cold War. The United States, alongside our European allies, have been on the forefront of supporting Ukraine in this battle for freedom.

Ukraine is not the Kremlin's only target. Inside Russia, the Russian people have had their political and civil rights stripped. Any form of dissent is punished. The most prominent opposition leaders are jailed on fabricated charges and given harsh sentences.

Russia's authoritarian influence has stretched to Belarus, as well. We are honored today to have Sviatlana with us and she is going to testify here today.

As the President-elect of Belarus, she was forced to flee after dictator Lukashenko stole another election. There are an estimated 1,463 political prisoners inside Belarus. I look forward to hearing from your experience how the U.S. can better support freedom fighters such as yourself.

The next battleground for freedom and democracy will be Taiwan. China has made clear its willingness to take Taiwan by force. The U.S. and the rest of the world must not stand idly by.

We know exactly what the Chinese Communist Party would do to destroy rule of law and human rights because they just did it in Hong Kong. They were testing the West to see how we would respond.

Now the Chinese Communist Party continues its subjugation of this once vibrant city, including the persecution of Jimmy Lai. We strongly condemn this and Mr. Lai should be released immediately. Beijing should know the world has not forgotten about him or the Hong Kong people.

The Biden administration must not allow Taiwan to become the next Afghanistan. As we learned the hard way there, when the U.S. retreats, the rest of the world suffers. We have seen the human rights of women and girls completely obliterated by the Taliban in very short order.

It is important to remember that democracy is more than just about holding elections we are seeing play out in Nigeria. In a healthy democracy, elections must be free, fair, and transparent.

Now I ask today's witnesses what can the U.S. do better to support democracy and human rights around the world. As the Biden administration holds its second Summit for Democracy this week, I hope to see less talk and more action.

I agree with the Chairman in that regard. This is the second one. We did not see much come out of the first one, but again, sometimes these things do take time to blossom, but they should concentrate on actually getting something done. The speeches are wonderful.

It is one thing to gather countries together for a conference, but we need to do more than just pay lip service to democracy and human rights. Democracy can only endure when they have institutions that are strong and can sustain them.

Condemnation of human rights violations in the speeches are all well and good. What we really need is action. I look forward to hearing from the witnesses on what U.S. tools have worked to support democracy and human rights and where we can improve.

The dictators and authoritarians keep inventing new ways to suppress. We need to get creative.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Risch.

Let me introduce our witnesses. We are deeply honored to welcome Leopoldo Lopez, a Venezuelan pro-democracy activist, public servant, and opposition party leader. Mr. Lopez served two terms as mayor of the city of Chacao before founding the political party, *Voluntad Popular*, in 2009.

In retaliation for his efforts to speak out against the brutal Maduro regime, he spent more than 3 years under horrendous conditions in a military prison, subjected to torture, solitary confinement, and years more under house arrest before seeking refuge in Spain.

Mr. Lopez has received widespread international recognition for his work fighting for democracy and freedom in Venezuela. He is a co-founder of the World Liberty Congress, a new initiative gathering pro-democracy activists and political actors to share ideas on how to combat autocratic regimes.

We welcome you and thank you for traveling here to join us with us today.

We are also honored to welcome Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of Belarus' democratic opposition. After the regime jailed her husband, Sergei, who was running against the ruthless dictator Alexander Lukashenko in the 2020 elections, Ms. Tsikhanouskaya valiantly stood for election in his place.

The Lukashenko regime prevented free and fair elections in Belarus. However, Sviatlana is widely believed to have won the most votes. Since then, she was forced out of Belarus, but has admirably represented her country across the transatlantic community, fighting to keep the pressure on the regime in Minsk and serving as a voice for those resisting its brutal repression.

We warmly welcome you as we build support for the Belarusian people's democratic aspirations in the face of Europe's so-called last dictator. Thank you as well for traveling and joining us today.

Finally, we welcome Mr. Damon Wilson, the president and CEO of the National Endowment for Democracy where he leads the organization's mission to develop and strengthen democratic institutions around the world.

Mr. Wilson has demonstrated his deep commitment to supporting freedom and democracy around the world throughout his storied



career, which includes work at the State Department, NATO, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, and the National Security Council. We are honored to have you here with us today and, again, we thank you for your time.

We will start off the witnesses' testimony. Your full statements will be included in the record without objection. We would ask you to try to summarize in 5 minutes or so, so that we can have a conversation with you after your testimony.

We will start off with Mr. Lopez.

**STATEMENT OF LEOPOLDO LOPEZ, VENEZUELAN FREEDOM ACTIVIST, CO-FOUNDER OF THE WORLD LIBERTY CONGRESS**

Mr. LOPEZ. Thank you very much, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch. It is an honor for me to be here talking about something dear to our hearts and to our destiny, which is the fate of democracy in Venezuela and in the world.

As you said, I was sent to military prison in 2014 after calling for protests against the autocratic regime of Nicolas Maduro. I spent almost 4 years in solitary confinement, was sentenced to 14 years in prison, and then sent to house arrest from where I escaped in 2019 and spent the next year and a half at the Spanish embassy, and at the end of 2020, I was able to escape from Venezuela against my will, because I never wanted to leave my home country, and now I have been living in exile.

As Senator Risch was saying, democracy is in decline, 17 years of consecutive decline according to Freedom House.

According to V-Dem, 70 percent of the world's population is living under some sort of autocratic regime. However, global polling also shows that 80 percent of the world's population want to be free and we have seen that in the protests in China, Iran, and Cuba, surprising protests, but are an element that gives us hope that people want to be free.

I am often asked why Maduro is still in power and this is a question many people ask me, and there are many ways to answer this question. Some people would say it is because of the military that supports him. Others would say that it is because of the natural resources. Others would even say that it is because of the opposition not being united.

However, I believe that the real reason—the main reason why Maduro is still in power—is because of the international support that he has received from the adversaries of the United States—from Russia, from China, from Iran, from Belarus, from Cuba and from other autocratic regimes.

Maduro very clearly is part of an autocratic network, what Anne Applebaum has described as Autocracy Inc., an autocratic network that is aligned in protecting themselves, defending themselves diplomatically, creating a kleptocratic network, and pushing forward their view that autocracy should be the world model for governance. Its main enemy very clearly is liberal democracy and its main enemy within that is very clearly the United States, who has been promoting liberal democracy worldwide.

Being in exile gave me the opportunity to meet hundreds of other political activists, democracy defenders like Sviatlana, and many

others that have gone through what I went through, exiled political prisoners and those now living in an autocratic regime.

We have worked to come together through an initiative that is called the World Liberty Congress, as Senator Menendez just mentioned. The World Liberty Congress is an initiative to bring together like-minded activist movements that are willing to go forward and support the process to bring about democracy in our country.

Alongside Garry Kasparov from Russia and Masih Alinejad from Iran, we convened more than 180 activists and leaders and met in Lithuania at the end of last year and created an action-oriented way forward to support these pro-democracy movements.

It is not an easy task, but the most important task that we have is to recognize that we are not alone. We spent the first day in Lithuania hearing more than 40 delegations and we heard, to our surprise, the same story told in different ways from different perspectives from different voices.

It was the same story of harassment, political prisoners, people going into exile, crushing the hopes of the people to be free and it is from this perspective that today I ask you the following proposals.

First is the decisive support to democracy movements. Democracy movements today require the support of the United States and beyond. Democracy movements today are facing a paradigm shift.

In the 1990s, there was belief that democracy was going to happen everywhere in the world. It was going to knock on the door, but now we know that democracy needs to be actively fought for and we need the support for these freedom society movements that are all over the world.

Second, we need to emphasize the reality of political prisoners and transnational repression. We need to also increase the cost for a regime which has political prisoners.

Third, there needs to be massive access to free and uncensored internet in closed societies. We believe that to combat misinformation and to give the people the possibility to communicate and mobilize it is critical that access to the internet is widespread, accessible to the people under autocratic regimes.

This will also give the people within autocratic countries access to new tools to get resources inside their countries using financial technology.

Fourth, sanctions need to be rethought. Sanctions are not a silver bullet. Sanctions are a means to an end, but sanctions are a tool that needs to be used because they can be an effective way to pressure the regimes.

Fifth, we believe that the private sector needs to be included in this conversation. In the same way that the ESG concept has brought trillions of dollars to investment in the environment, we believe that to these three letters, "ESG," there needs to be an additional letter, "F," for freedom to channel investment for the private sector to initiatives that will help people to be free in different areas.

Fifth, we need to deny legitimacy to autocrats. We have seen—sadly seen—that sometimes in the United States and in other countries there is some sort of recognition of autocrats and we be-

lieve that this gives them stability and a way to continue to go forward.

Finally, the U.S. needs to lead from the front. There is no way that the struggle for democracy and freedom will be won if the United States does not lead this struggle and support the transition to democracies elsewhere.

We need bipartisan support, as we have seen today, but this bipartisan support also needs the incorporation of all of the branches of government and include the alliance with other free countries in order to fight the fight for freedom, which is something that autocrats are very clearly doing with their own interests and with their own view that autocracy should prevail. For democracy to prevail, we need the support of all of us.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Lopez follows:]

#### **Prepared Statement of Mr. Leopoldo Lopez**

In February of 2014, after calling for nonviolent protests against the corrupt and autocratic regime of Nicolás Maduro, I was arrested, sent to a military prison, kept in solitary confinement for almost 4 years, and sentenced to 14 years of prison after a manipulated trial concluded I was guilty of inciting violence through subliminal messages during my public speeches. In 2017, I was sent to house arrest until I escaped in April of 2019 to seek refuge at the Spanish Embassy in Caracas, where I stayed until late 2020 when I escaped Venezuela to meet my family that had been in Spain since 2019. My struggle against the regime has now spanned decades. I was elected mayor of Chacao in Caracas in 2000, reelected in 2004, and since then I was banned from running for office and became the target of widespread attacks that included two murder attempts. My story is one of many; I have not been alone in this struggle. Hundreds of activists, social leaders, journalists, union leaders, business people, students, military officers, and common citizens have been the targets of the Maduro regime. After being in exile and learning first-hand the testimonies of hundreds of democracy defenders, I now know that far from being an isolated case, this is the story of millions of individuals willing to stand up and fight for freedom around the world.

Last November, we launched the World Liberty Congress to gather pro-democracy leaders from more than 40 autocratic countries. The first day, we heard 40 delegations. It was eye opening that for hours we heard the same story repeating itself in different contexts and voices, the stories at the frontlines. It is from that perspective that I speak to you today, from the viewpoint of men and women who are willing to risk their freedom and lives to achieve freedom and democracy. The WLC is a non-ideological action-oriented alliance of democracy defenders and freedom activists. We seek to provide pro-democracy movements with political, legal, financial, and strategic assistance to enhance their effectiveness. The idea of the WLC was initially spearheaded by Masih Alinejad of Iran, Garry Kasparov of Russia, and myself, but today counts among its membership hundreds of activists from across the planet.

According to Freedom House, 2023 marked the 17th consecutive year of democratic recession. This rise of autocracy has reached a level where 70 percent of the world population now live under some type of autocratic regime (According to V-Dem). However, this should not be confused with the will of the people; global polling reflects that 80 percent of the world's population wants to be free and live in a democracy. The recent and surprising protests in Iran, China, and Cuba to mention just a few, show that despite the efforts of dictators and despots, the will to be free remains consistent. However, it is also true that these movements have become less successful given the capacity of autocracies to repress and contain the transition to democracy through civil protests. Nonviolent pro-democracy movements went from a 60 percent success rate in transition to democracy in the 1990s to less than 5 percent today according to a recent study from Harvard University.

I am often asked how a dictator like Maduro can hold on to power even when his government and that of his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, have plundered the country and caused living standards to fall to the lowest of any nation in Latin America or the Caribbean. There are many ways to answer this question. Some say it is because of the government's access to natural resources, in particular oil, and the sup-

port from the military. Some even say it is because of divisions within the Venezuelan opposition. But in my view, there is one reason that stands above the rest: Maduro gets support from autocratic regimes throughout the world. These regimes provide funding, technology, military supplies, and know-how—all of which are ruthlessly deployed against those who are campaigning for human rights, democracy and freedom. In my conversations with freedom fighters living under other autocratic regimes, they tell the same tale of governments propped up by like-minded autocrats.

Autocracies have aligned their efforts to support each other in a non-ideological but very pragmatic alliance to learn from and support each other. This concept, called “Autocracy Inc.” by Anne Applebaum, is a complex web of transnational corruption and criminal affiliations. Twenty days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin was in Beijing solidifying his partnership with the Chinese regime, and both states released a joint statement declaring their alliance in international relations.

These partnerships are a critical component of the resilience of these regimes. Russian oligarchs, anxious to prevent democratization in Latin America, routinely send delegations to Havana, Caracas, and Managua to discuss mutual “security.” The most recent visit was that of Nikolai Patrushev, a Russian General, intelligence officer, and orchestrator of war crimes in Ukraine. The topic of discussion was the suppression of “color revolutions.” Disguised as a diplomatic mission, this was a blatant Russian intervention in Latin America with the specific purpose of sharing methods of repression to terrorize and intimidate any possible dissenters. Putin, often considered to be a traditionalist, nationalist, and right-winger, has thrown massive support behind Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega, who styles himself as a socialist and a hardline left-winger. It’s important to realize that these despots’ “ideologies” are actually a thin facade for transnational corruption and the exportation of human rights violations. Putin will face no domestic backlash for his ideologically incomprehensible support of Ortega; Russian support is not rooted in admiration for Sandinismo in Nicaragua. It is merely a strategy to make the world less safe for those who respect human rights, the rule of law, and democracy.

Democracy is in retreat. Whether we want to accept it or not, there is a global battle being waged against liberal democracy by the forces of autocracy. Dictators recognize that their enemy is the system of democracy itself, because where it exists and thrives, it provides indisputable proof that the corrupt and decrepit ideals of autocracy are hollow and inferior. However, I want to stress that the fight against liberal democracy is also a fight against the United States, who is the principal defender and proponent of democracy on the global stage.

This is why Chinese communists, Russian nationalists, and Iranian theocrats have wholeheartedly embraced one another. They are not tied together by ideology or principles. They are united merely by a fear of popular grassroots mobilization which is the primary challenge to their illegitimate rule, as well as a desire to undermine U.S. influence across the world. They are thus willing to support each other unconditionally, because they recognize that they face an existential threat. If there is one purpose of my visit to this chamber today, it is to convince you, and freedom loving nations everywhere, that the political developments in Caracas or Khartoum or Hong Kong have direct implications for the security of the United States. We, too, face an existential threat.

There can be no delusion that sitting out of this fight is an option. A passive United States which is content to do business with dictators, and which shies away from doing everything possible to embolden and empower freedom fighters is making the world safer for human rights violators and kleptocrats. With or without the participation of the U.S., this battle is being fought. It must be understood that losing a square inch to autocracy outside of the U.S. is a square inch closer to autocracy inside of the U.S. Those who seek to spread autocracy and undermine democracy are not short of funds or weapons. They have found new ways to protect their interests, exchanging resources, intelligence, military support, and methods of repression regardless of their supposed ideologies. This is why the U.S. must take an active role in leading the creation of a parallel alliance, which is held together by a shared commitment to protect the values which we in this chamber hold dear.

Imposing sanctions on human rights violators is logical and necessary, but because of the criminal transnational support between dictatorships, there must be a comprehensive re-examination of the policy tools available. Most importantly, we must realize that we don’t have the luxury of “losing patience,” or giving these grotesque regimes even a shred of legitimacy on the international stage. To do so not only condemns the people trapped inside to live in poverty and persecution in perpetuity, but it also makes the world safer for those who seek to replicate the Ven-

ezuelan tragedy, and I can say to you that there is no shortage of these people around the world.

It must also be spoken out loud and plainly; the United Nations has allowed some of the world's most rampant human rights violators to masquerade as statesmen and honest members of the international community. Last week, I testified at the UN Human Rights Council, where the fact finding mission stated that Maduro is responsible for committing crimes against humanity. It was striking to hear the chorus of autocratic nations defending the Maduro regime. Once again, irrespective of ideology, human rights violators align to present themselves as legitimate governments and vote to protect each other's interests. The resolution to expel the Iranian regime from the UN Women's Rights Commission, for example, faced stiff resistance. Those who voted against the resolution included: Bolivia, China, Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Russia, and Zimbabwe. Journalist Hillel Neuer dubbed this group the "Axis of Shame." I will note that Venezuela does not vote on these matters since it is not up to date with its dues payments to the UN, but we can say with certainty that if it could, it would be a part of this cohort.

Authoritarianism is a hollow and decrepit ideal. It is incompatible with the human spirit, which innately yearns for freedom. Dictators intensely fear bottom-up popular mobilization, which is why they invest so heavily in suppressing it. By definition, authoritarianism centers itself around the suppression of basic human rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly, thought, and religion. This means that authoritarians will always have enemies, both within and beyond their borders. Dictators must always direct most of their energy, funds, and influence into terrifying and suppressing the will of their people, or their grip on power will slip.

We have spoken of the advantages autocrats have over democrats. This, however, is an inescapable disadvantage of the dictators. They rely on terror, extortion, and the steady flow of funds and weapons to remain in power. Their opponents, however, are motivated by much more powerful, incorruptible ideals. Victims of authoritarianism have had their basic humanity stolen from them. This is why across the world, pro-democracy demonstrators are willing to take to the streets week after week, willing to be shot at, beaten, imprisoned, and tortured. In many places, dictators are finding that their habit of abusing and humiliating their populations creates a determined, and with the help of free nations, increasingly organized and well-funded resistance. Even after 7 months, the people of Iran continue to fill the streets. When we see the images of Iranian women resisting a brutal theocracy, I ask you; what could be a better use of U.S. influence and leadership, than to embolden these people? What is a better demonstration of the American ideals of democracy and liberty than the Iranian, or indeed the Cuban, Hong Kongese, Sudanese, or Venezuelan people at this moment?

#### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

##### *Recommendation No. 1: Secure Bipartisan Support for Global Democracy Assistance*

It is critical that the issues of human rights and democracy not become caught up in partisan politics. For the U.S. to lead a sustained multinational effort to confront this issue, it is essential that within all elements of the U.S. Government, there be a unified front and commitment to preserve freedom and democracy at the global level. This includes law enforcement agencies, the presidential administration, congress, and the judicial system. Facilitating the conditions for people to elect their own leaders and to not be subjected to human rights violations should not be partisan. The U.S. must speak with one voice on this issue.

##### *Recommendation No. 2: Support Civil Resistance and Democracy Initiatives*

Research shows that the most effective engines to transition to democracy are nonviolent popular grassroots movements. External pressure is necessary, but should be viewed as complementary to pro-democracy and civil resistance movements. It's key to understand that internal pressure requires the mobilization of large numbers of people, either protesting or voting. We need to find innovative ways to provide resources, strategies, and coordination assistance to make these movements more effective. The U.S. and its allies should assist civil society initiatives which participate in community organizing and provide training in nonviolent methods of resistance. These kinds of initiatives are critical in not only getting people on the streets but also increasing their effectiveness.

##### *Recommendation No. 3: Declare Democracy a Central Foreign Policy Focus*

The United States Government should make supporting organic, localized pro-democracy movements a central focus in its foreign policy. In other words, irrespective of political denominations, the U.S. should seek to identify pre-existing movements who are struggling for democratic change and provide them with technical and fi-

financial support. All foreign policy decisions should take into account potential consequences for human rights and democracy. It is necessary to coordinate efforts within and beyond the U.S. Government. Different U.S. departments and agencies should be working in conjunction toward the same goal. Simultaneously, coordination with civil society and NGOs is critical in expanding the reach of pro-democracy policies.

*Recommendation No. 4: Incorporate the Private Sector*

The struggle for freedom and democracy should also include the private sector. We have seen the consequences of tying the economies of free nations to autocratic ones like Russia and China. The war in Ukraine demonstrated the danger of many European governments' dependence on Russian oil. We have also seen how guided investment in the ESG framework (Environment, Social, and Governance) has generated trillions of dollars into more conscious investors. However, the SDG (Sustainable Development Goals), which are the 17 goals approved by the UN in 2015 on which ESG is based, makes no mention of human rights, freedom, democracy, and has only one mention of transparency. This is because the UN framework for SDG was discussed and approved with the vote of many autocratic regimes. The issues of human rights, democracy, and freedom are absent from the ESG framework, and we therefore propose the inclusion of the "F" for freedom in the ESG. This will guide investment and promote incentives for different initiatives that would promote freedom in different areas, such as communications, secure internet, and access to financial services.

Simultaneously, it's important to make consumers aware that the goods and services they are consuming are manufactured or extracted in autocratic regimes. For example in Xinjiang, the slave labor of Uyghurs is widespread in the production of consumer goods. Corporations which operate in autocratic countries should be exposed as being complicit in these human rights violations. Their economic activity is instrumental in propping up the regime of Xi Jinping, and U.S. consumers and investors should be confronted with this reality.

*Recommendation No. 5: Consistency in Denying Legitimacy to Dictators*

The U.S. should not send any financial or military assistance to regimes who are anti-democratic and commit human rights violations. For example, the U.S. enjoys a beneficial military partnership with Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, who is the world's longest installed dictator, ruling the country with an iron fist since 1986. If the U.S. is to credibly stand up for democratic ideals on the world stage, there can be no double standard or deviation for the sake of U.S. interests. All dictatorships are incompatible with human rights, and the U.S. should make it clear that it opposes dictatorships everywhere. Similarly, the U.S. should use its influence with the European Union to adopt a similar stance. The U.S. cannot democratize the world alone; the full cooperation of free nations is critical if the authoritarian threat is to be countered.

*Recommendation No. 6: Massive Access to Internet, Smartphones*

Autocratic systems are closed societies. Dictators spend much effort restricting outside information to prevent any challenges to the official narrative of the regime. Dictatorship is far more difficult to maintain with a well-informed populace. Restrictions on the free flow of information constitutes an enormous challenge for democracy advocates within autocratic nations. To successfully mobilize large numbers of people for demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, activist leaders need uncensored and widespread methods of communication which circumvent the control of autocrats.

A program to distribute smartphones en masse in autocratic countries is a practical way to do this. It would assist not only in effective communications and combating misinformation, but also for access to different innovations and services that could be provided directly. There are also new technologies such as Starlink which can gravely undermine autocrats' controls on access to information.

*Recommendation No. 7: Support for Exiles*

As the U.S. repositions its foreign policy to prioritize pro-democracy and human rights work, it should simultaneously take into account the lives of activists who have been subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances, and assassination attempts. The U.S. has traditionally offered asylum to many of these people, but the process must be expedited. The circumstances on the ground often change rapidly, and the U.S. needs a process which rapidly assists human rights defenders who will face arrest if they are not quickly removed from the country. Bureaucratic steps in the visa granting process must be removed.

Another way to assist democracy defenders is with stable migration status. There are thousands of exiles in the U.S. who have a fragile status, which restricts their ability to travel. One of the main challenges we have is to coordinate the efforts of those who are exiled and those who are still in the country. Political refugees in the U.S. should be able to move freely to coordinate pro-democracy efforts with their colleagues who are still inside the dictatorship.

*Recommendation No. 8: Support and Visibility for Political Prisoners*

The Department of State estimates that there are over 1 million political prisoners around the world. These people are not afforded legal protections and are regularly subjected to heinous forms of physical and psychological torture. They are not allowed visitation or the right to appeal, and are frequently unaware of what they have been charged with. We should elevate the voices of these people whenever possible. The U.S. should apply diplomatic, economic, and political pressure to countries who have political prisoners. It should also highlight their names and facilitate international awareness of their plight. These brave people cannot be forgotten or allowed to rot away in prison cells for speaking out against dictatorship. Additionally, the U.S. can also provide legal support to the families of political prisoners for them to advocate and communicate on their behalf more effectively.

*Recommendation No. 9: Support International Enforcement Mechanisms Like the ICC*

The U.S. and other democracies should explore ways to make international institutions more effective. The supposed mission of the United Nations of promoting global peace and protecting human rights is gravely undermined when countries like Russia and China exercise such massive influence in UN decision-making. The potential for international enforcement mechanisms is immeasurable, but needs to be re-evaluated.

The U.S. should support the international institutions which identify, investigate, and punish crimes committed by autocrats. Organizations like the ICC are critical in the prosecution of these crimes, as we have seen in the recent decision by the ICC to issue a warrant for the arrest of Vladimir Putin to be tried for war crimes. It also initiated an investigation against Nicolás Maduro for crimes against humanity. I will also reiterate that the fact-finding mission of the UN Human Rights Council also identified Maduro as having committed crimes against humanity. It's critical that the U.S. and allied countries support these institutions so they can be more effective in their work.

*Recommendation No. 10: Rethink Sanctions and Empower Magnitsky legislation*

The imposition of sanctions has been a consistent tool for democracies to prosecute authoritarians for human rights violations. The U.S. should lead the way in pioneering new forms of targeted sanctions for corrupt officials in countries such as Venezuela. Magnitsky legislation has been a breakthrough on this front, denying Russian oligarchs or Venezuelan regime officials the ability to purchase properties or move with their families to live in free nations. Kleptocracy is not about ideology; it is about the theft of funds for private gain. By finding new ways to deny corrupt officials the ability to spend their ill-gotten monies, the appeal of transnational corruption is lessened.

The Venezuelan regime peddles the lie that sanctions are the cause of the humanitarian catastrophe in Venezuela, which we know to be untrue. In 2019, before the imposition of sanctions, the Venezuelan economy had collapsed by more than 60 percent, and 4 million people had already fled the country. Let's be clear; the situation in Venezuela is the result of government mismanagement and corruption.

Sanctions are one of the few peaceful diplomatic tools which can be used to consequence regimes which violate human rights. Without them, the autocrat has no reason to restrain his behavior. To increase the effectiveness of sanctions, we should take into account the transnational systems of corruption which prop up these regimes. They should confront the enablers—the individuals and companies which continue to do business with autocrats. Simply sanctioning regime officials will be insufficient in orchestrating political change.

*Recommendation No. 11: Respond Effectively to Transnational Repression*

Transnational repression is the attempt by autocrats to commit crimes against their opponents outside of their borders. This is an extremely common occurrence, and methods can include kidnapping, murder, extortion, unlawful deportations, coercion by proxy, or assault. Within our activist network at the World Liberty Congress, Masih Alinejad was subjected to an assassination attempt in New York earlier this year. Paul Rusesabagina, who we are glad to report was released from prison this week, was kidnapped in 2020 by the Rwandan Government, boarding a

plane he believed would take him to Burundi, but instead flew him to Kigali where he would be imprisoned. Another case within our network is that of Palestinian activist Fadi Elsalameen, who has been subjected to assassination attempts by the Palestinian Authority despite being a U.S. citizen and living in Washington. U.S. security and intelligence services should find effective methods to protect human rights defenders whose lives are threatened by dictators. There should be efforts to pre-empt attacks, and also to provide consequences for dictators when they send their agents to commit crimes against people in other countries.

*Recommendation No. 12: Use of FinTech and Bitcoin/Lightning To Overcome the Obstacles of Autocracies To Bring Financial Support*

We must use new technologies to move resources inside autocratic regimes without the surveillance of dictators. This includes using FinTech and Bitcoin/Lightning to transfer resources to activists. We have seen in recent periods that autocratic regimes seek to limit the access of NGOs by controlling their ability to use external financing. Providing reliable financial support is critical for democratic movements' success, so new methods of financing which circumvent the financial systems of autocrats are required.

*Recommendation No. 13: An Alliance for Freedom*

The cooperation of autocrats has been spoken about extensively. The central thesis of the World Liberty Congress is the need to articulate a global alliance of activist leaders who not only advocate for freedom internationally, but are willing to risk their lives inside their countries to achieve a democratic transition. We seek to identify concrete ways in which we can empower one another and cooperate to make our own movements more effective. By pooling together our experiences, resources, and strategies, we form a much more formidable threat to dictators. The membership of the WLC is extremely diverse—religiously, culturally, ethnically, geographically, and ideologically. However, because we have all faced the same brutal methods of repression and are all advocating for democratic transition, we are able to form a cohesive front. This is an excellent starting point, but is insufficient without the backing of a multinational alliance of sympathetic governments.

The U.S. should empower activist movements like the WLC and cooperate with our initiatives to advocate for the liberation of political prisoners, coordinate sanctions against kleptocratic networks, and train activists in nonviolent resistance. It should also use its global influence to enlist other governments who value freedom to do the same. Uniting freedom movements who are committed to fair elections, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the restoration of democracy is essential in this fight, and the U.S. has an enormous leadership role to play in making this a reality.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.  
Ms. Tsikhanouskaya.

**STATEMENT OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA, LEADER OF THE DEMOCRATIC FORCES OF BELARUS, VILNIUS, LITHUANIA**

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you on behalf of millions of Belarusians struggling for their freedom and independence.

I want to tell you about the dire state of democracy and human rights in Belarus and how it impacts on regional security and global interests. I will provide brief remarks and my full testimony is submitted for the public record.

In 2020, Belarusians voted to remove the dictator Lukashenko, who had been in power for 26 years. Initially, I had not planned to enter politics. I just wanted to support my husband, Sergei, who had been arrested after announcing his run for the presidency.

I participated in the presidential elections as the united opposition candidate. The regime did register me as a candidate as a sort of joke. No one will vote for a woman, they thought, but they were mistaken. According to independent polls and observers, I did win.



Voting for me, Belarusians voted for change, for democracy, and for the future of our country in Europe, but Lukashenko refused to step down. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets in peaceful protest to defend their vote and their future. The regime responded with violent crackdown on the innocent citizens.

Brutal state repression targets all groups, women and men, children and seniors, activists and journalists, doctors and athletes, human rights defenders and entrepreneurs. Tens of thousands were arbitrarily detained in KGB jails. They were tortured, humiliated, raped, and even beaten to death.

Recently, the United Nations admitted that the repressions in Belarus have all the signs of crimes against humanity. More than 4,000 were imprisoned on trumped-up political grounds.

Prison terms are extremely long. My husband, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, received 19½ years. My own sentence is 15 years. Political prisoners have become symbols of courage and dignity. Ihar Losik, Maria Kalesnikava, Pavel Sevyarynets, Mikalai Statkevich, even Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Ales Bialiatski, just to name a few, but thousands more remain invisible and receive very little support.

Despite the fear and terror, Belarusians have not stopped fighting for a single day. People joined the nonviolent underground resistance, conducted acts of disobedience and sabotage.

With the start of the Russian war against Ukraine, our resistance intensified. More than 86 percent of Belarusians are against Belarus' engagement in Putin's war.

Our goal is to liberate Belarus from tyranny and preserve its independence. There is no doubt that an independent, sovereign, democratic Belarus is in the interests of the entire international community.

However, Putin's Russia does not see Belarus as an independent country, but as a vassal state. With the help of Lukashenko, Russia expanded its military presence and has taken over economic and financial controls.

To please Moscow, Lukashenko destroys Belarusian national identity, the core of the nation's soul, and resistance. The Russian military is freely using Belarus territory, making our country a co-aggressor in the war against Ukraine.

Finally, Putin just announced that Russia is deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus by July 1 this year. Some call it occupation, some creeping annexation. Putin wants Belarus as a consolation prize in case he loses the war in Ukraine and we must not let it happen.

Russian troops must be withdrawn from Belarus territory and Belarus should stop its participation in this unjust war. I believe that democratic changes in Belarus would shorten the path to Ukraine's inevitable victory.

I urge the United States to appoint a special envoy on Belarus to oversee the growing Belarus agenda, to take strong measures on releasing political prisoners, and ending the terror unleashed against Belarusians.

It can be done through strong targeted sanctions in coordination with the EU, U.K., and Canada to increase assistance for Belarus democratic movement, civil society, media, human rights defenders,

and all their repressed; to initiate international proceedings against Lukashenko's regime for crimes against humanity, for crime of aggression, and for complicity in war crimes in Ukraine; to continue supporting Ukraine in its brave fight for the right to be themselves and decide their own future.

I urge the U.S. Congress to update the Belarus Democracy Act to reflect the role of Lukashenko in the war and suggest policies for the U.S. Government. I welcome the initiative or strategic dialogue with Belarusian Democratic Forces and call to introduce this mechanism by other friends of Belarus.

In conclusion, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the United States, its people, and government for the decades of principled and strong support for a democratic, sovereign, and independent Belarus. We share the same values and aspirations, and we must continue to fight for freedom together.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Tsikhanouskaya follows:]

#### **Prepared Statement of Ms. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya**

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the committee: thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the dire situation of democracy and human rights in Belarus and its implications for regional security and global interests.

I will provide brief remarks while I would like to ask Chairman Menendez to accept my full testimony for the public record.

In 2020, Belarusians voted out incumbent Aliaksandr Lukashenka and protested against his refusal to step down. The illegitimate regime responded with lawless crackdown against political forces, civil society, and the media. Systemic repressions affected literally all strata of the society: women and men, children and seniors, workers and teachers, athletes and lawyers, medics and religious communities.

Arrests are accompanied by violence, torture and degrading treatment amounting to crimes against humanity, as it was repeatedly recognized by the international community, including in the reports by the UN and OSCE experts.

Repressions led to 60,000 administrative arrests and criminal cases, at least 5,000 political prisoners, and hundreds of thousands of Belarusians fleeing their country. Prison terms are extremely long, for example my husband Siarhei Tsikhanouski received 20 years, my own term is 15 years. We cannot wait till these terms expire, we must do everything to end the regime and to free people.

Names of many political prisoners became symbols of courage and dignity—Ihar Losik, Maria Kalesnikava, Pavel Sevyarynets, Mikalai Statkevich, even Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski—just to name a few. But thousands more remain invisible and receive very little support. Repressions affected more than 1,500 Belarusians who support Ukraine and oppose the war.

The regime treats political prisoners as hostages, using them to cast fear inside the country and to bargain for international recognition. The regime maintains a high level of terror while changing the political system, ideology, and legislation into neo-Stalinism. The very concept of solidarity is outlawed in Belarus as the regime tries to break every horizontal connection in the society.

Nevertheless, Belarusians have not given up fighting for a day. But now we must resolve two formidable tasks: *liberate Belarus from tyranny and preserve its independence*. The democratic forces of Belarus are not delegating this work—it is our duty and responsibility. But we need help of the world to win this fight.

There is no doubt that an independent, sovereign, democratic Belarus is in the interest of the entire international community. *We, Belarusians, are the legitimate force* to bring democracy to our own country and this by default cannot be seen as an interference in internal affairs.

We have seen an unprecedented outpouring of support and solidarity since 2020. This energy should become the international strategy to realize the *commitment to independent and sovereign Belarus*.

The most damaging factor to democratic hopes of Belarusians has been *Russia's interference in our internal affairs*. Without the Kremlin's help Lukashenka would have lost power even before 2020. To return the debt he makes illegal concessions to Russia. This includes agreements expanding Russian military presence and hand-

ing over economic and financial controls to Moscow. The Russian military is freely using Belarus territory, making our country a co-aggressor in the war against Ukraine. To please Moscow and make space for the Russian world, Lukashenka destroys Belarusian national identity, the core of the nation's soul and resilience before external threats.

Finally, Putin just announced that Russia is deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus by July 1 this year. This is his way to deter Western support for Ukraine but also portraying Lukashenka as Putin's puppet. Some call it occupation, some creeping annexation, but it is clear that Russia's actions damage Belarusian and global interests. As long as Belarus remains under Russian control it will be an outpost of its aggressive projects, and this is unacceptable for us and for the world.

It is time for a *strong response to Russia's hostile, colonialist actions* against Belarus. I urge the world to support our demand of full removal of the Russian military from Belarus and complete termination of its involvement in the war. We cannot postpone Belarus until after the war. As we see this, a democratic Belarus would drastically shorten the way to Ukraine's victory. Going further, we see sustainable peace as the result of a comprehensive approach to stabilizing the region. This should entail a Marshall Plan for Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus since regional security and stability are only possible when all these nations are free of Moscow's control.

In the same vein, it must be guaranteed that the post-war arrangements have no place for Russia's special interests in Belarus. Such deals would lay the foundation for new instability. Discussions about peace must include the Belarusian democratic forces who have the legitimacy and think about national interests.

Russia denies to both Belarus and Ukraine their fundamental right to have a sovereign state. However, these two nations are not the final destination for Russia's ambitions, *they are a stepping stone on the path to dismantling the Transatlantic partnership*. Therefore, I urge the U.S. and like-minded nations to continue supporting Ukraine, including with the most advanced military equipment, in its brave fight for the right to be themselves and decide on their future.

The war has made it clear to Belarusians that *relations with hostile Russia must change*. The United Transitional Cabinet has adopted an approach to revising ties with Russia. This includes leaving the military alliance and the Union State Treaty. Instead, we started working on the European perspective for Belarus. This will also include joining regional initiatives and broad partnerships with neighboring states. *I ask the U.S. Congress to support this strategic change for Belarus*.

The U.S. Congress has always been active on the Belarus agenda. In 2021, the Belarus caucus was officially launched in the House. Senator Shaheen and Senator Wicker founded the Free Belarus caucus in the Senate. The Congress adopted four iterations of the Belarus Democracy Act and resolutions assessing and highlighting the developments in Belarus. *Now is the right moment to update the BDA* to reflect the role of Lukashenka in the war and suggest policies for the U.S. Government.

Lukashenka lost the mandate to represent the Belarusian people. Yet, he and Putin perceive the lack of full derecognition as a green light to realize their illegal ambitions and enjoy impunity along the way. I call the U.S. to complete this effort and to *fully de-recognize Lukashenka and his regime* as being under full control of the foreign power to the detriment of the very statehood of Belarus. This process must be accompanied by a growing recognition extended to democratic forces.

The U.S. sanctions against the Lukashenka's regime have shown their impact. This leverage should be further strengthened by removing loopholes and enhancing coordination with the EU, UK, and Canada.

The regime is implicated in a series of crimes and must be held accountable for the crimes against humanity, the crime of aggression and for complicity in the war crimes in Ukraine. Lukashenka made the war against Ukraine possible. The attack on Kyiv and Bucha came from Belarus. He remains the only ally of Russia, fulfilling all requests of Putin to help him in this aggression while brutally repressing any forms of protest from Belarusians against the war. *Lukashenka deserves to sit next to Putin at the tribunal* for the crime of aggression.

Finally, I want to reiterate the need of not just keeping Belarus in the agenda but to make this attention practical, to focus international efforts on taking away space and resources from the regime. Cooperation with the U.S. in this sphere has proven to be impactful and this momentum can be further increased, especially when it comes to the UN and its Security Council.

In conclusion, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the United States, its people and government, for the decades of your principled and genuine support for democratic, sovereign, and independent Belarus. The U.S. global leadership on these issues has always had a decisive role. We share the same values and aspirations, and we should stay in this fight together.

Thank you. I am looking forward to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.  
Mr. Wilson.

**STATEMENT OF DAMON WILSON, PRESIDENT AND CEO,  
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY (NED), WASH-  
INGTON, DC**

Mr. WILSON. Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss how the environment in which we work has fundamentally changed, how NED is adapting, and what more our nation could do.

The endowment was created 40 years ago with bipartisan congressional backing as an independent foundation dedicated to strengthening democratic institutions and values around the world.

At the time, fewer than 60 countries were considered free. Soviet-backed communism seemed stable behind the Iron Curtain as Moscow fueled conflicts around the world.

Today, while the world is far more democratic, authoritarianism is again on offense led by Beijing and Moscow. Last week, as Xi Jinping was departing Moscow, he said to Vladimir Putin, "Now there are changes that have not happened in 100 years. When we are together we drive these changes." "I agree," Putin said.

These changes they are referring to are meant to make the world safe for autocracy, which by definition means a threat to democracy. This underscores the biggest shift our nation must make in its support for democracy and human rights around the world.

We must recognize that our work and that of democracy advocates on the ground is taking place in a more hostile environment. Autocracies are waging a sophisticated coordinated global campaign to undermine freedom.

They are increasingly using technology, financial networks, and manipulated media environments together not only to better control their own people but also to bolster each other, capture elites, and undermine democratic practices and rule of law.

As such, democracy advocates must work in common cause in support of liberty and freedom. It is an extraordinary honor to be testifying alongside Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Leopoldo Lopez, two heroes of democracy.

Indeed, democratic leaders would be in power today in Minsk and Caracas if not for the backing that Alexander Lukashenko and Nicolas Maduro have received from the likes of Putin, Xi, and Diaz-Canel.

Sviatlana and Leopoldo have told you that they are not fighting a fair fight. This new environment means that we must learn, adapt, and raise our game by helping our partners on the front line do the same, and thanks to Congress that is what NED is doing.

The endowment now provides \$300 million in grants to more than 1,500 civil society and media organizations in over 100 countries. This includes support for our four core institutes which draw

upon the expertise of both major U.S. political parties as well as the business and labor communities.

We are singularly focused on our mission of supporting the courageous people on the frontlines of freedom in the most challenging and dangerous places.

At NED, we do not presume to tell our partners what they should do. We support their democratic ideas. We stand by them in their nonviolent struggle. NED's approach is built on people, on long-term relationships of trust. Our unique structure allows us to respond quickly as when Afghans fled the Taliban takeover, Iranians or Cubans suddenly mobilized in protest, or Nicaraguans were expelled from their homeland.

We are increasingly using resources to enable our partners to work together and to learn from each other to fight malign information operations, to protect media integrity, tackle kleptocracy, and foster democratic unity to counter authoritarian influence.

We stepped up our investment in innovation to ensure democratic activists have access to the latest tools to work more safely and effectively, and we are supporting efforts by civic actors to gain a seat at the table around the digital and technological norms shaping the future.

This committee has asked what the United States can do better to support democracy and human rights around the world. To defeat this network of autocrats, democracies must unite around a focused counter mobilization across multiple sectors.

Our nations should put democracy at the center of U.S. foreign policy by treating democracy as strategy, not programs. This means recognizing that the advance of democracy is among the most cost-effective national security strategies.

We should ensure foreign assistance bolsters democracy. Most aid does not support democracy directly. However, it should support efforts to demonstrate that democracies deliver for their citizens.

We must enlist other democracies to commit new resources to support freedom and human rights around the world, including creating NED-like organizations. We must also adapt our own institutions to ensure that they remain nimble. When a coup or invasion occurs, rigid project management is the wrong approach. Our learning curve needs to outpace the learning curve for dictators.

Finally, we must keep those on the front lines of this struggle in the lead. Democratic change is more successful and sustainable when it is anchored in local circumstances.

We should be proud of our efforts, confident in our values, but humble in our approach. We must begin by also keeping Ukraine and Taiwan's ability to safeguard their democracies front and center and we should remain optimistic.

The record numbers of those fighting repression and fleeing authoritarian regimes provide proof that people everywhere understand what the research shows—people are happier, healthier, safer, and wealthier living in a free society.

History tells us the most repressive and seemingly secure regimes can crumble, brought down by ordinary people demanding freedom, and it is our honor to ensure that those working for justice, dignity, and freedom know that we have their backs.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Wilson follows:]

**Prepared Statement of Mr. Damon Wilson**

Good morning Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our nation's approach to democracy and human rights at a consequential moment of rising authoritarianism.

I also want to acknowledge the two Members who also serve as honorary members of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) board of directors, Senator Kaine and Senator Young. Thank you for your service.

The Endowment was created 40 years ago with bipartisan Congressional backing as an independent, nonprofit, grantmaking foundation dedicated to strengthening democratic institutions and values around the world. At the time, fewer than 60 countries were considered free. Soviet-backed communism seemed stable behind the Iron Curtain as Moscow fueled conflicts around the world.

Today, while the world is far more democratic, authoritarianism is again on offense, led by Beijing and Moscow, in an increasingly coordinated campaign with autocrats around the world from Tehran to Minsk to Havana.

Last week in Moscow, as Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Xi Jinping was departing, he said to Vladimir Putin, "Now there are changes that haven't happened in 100 years. When we are together, we drive these changes." "I agree," Putin said.

The changes they are referring to are meant to make the world safe for autocracy which, by definition, means a threat to democracy.

This underscores the biggest shift our nation must make in its support for democracy and human rights around the world. We must recognize that our work, and that of our partners on the ground, is taking place in a more hostile environment. Autocracies are waging a sophisticated, coordinated global campaign to undermine democracy. They are increasingly using technology, financial networks, and manipulated media environments together not only to better control their own people, but also to bolster each other, capture elites, and undermine democracies.

As such, democracies must work in common cause in support of liberty and freedom.

Today, I have the honor of testifying alongside Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Leopoldo Lopez—two heroes of democracy who were forced to flee their home countries by autocratic leaders desperate to silence their voices through any means necessary, including violence or imprisonment. At NED, we are privileged to partner with the movements and values they represent.

But the truth is that democratic leaders would likely be in power today in Minsk and Caracas if not for the backing Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Nicolás Maduro have received from the likes of Putin, Xi, and Diaz-Canel. Sviatlana and Leopoldo can tell you that they are not fighting a fair fight.

This new environment means that we must learn, adapt, and raise our game by helping our partners on the frontline do the same.

Thanks to Congress, that is precisely what NED is doing. The Endowment provides \$300 million in grants to more than 1,500 civil society and independent media organizations in over 100 countries. This includes funding for our four core institutes which draw upon the expertise of both major U.S. political parties, as well as the business and labor communities, to inform our work.

On behalf of our grantees and staff, I want to express our thanks and appreciation to this Committee for your enduring support. You've enabled NED to stay singularly focused on our mission of supporting the courageous men and women working on the frontlines for freedom in the most challenging and dangerous places, as reflected in our largest programs: China, Russia, Afghanistan, Burma, Cuba, Belarus, North Korea, Venezuela, Ukraine, Pakistan, and Sudan as well as places like Zimbabwe, Iran, Nicaragua, and Haiti.

Our partners efforts to advance democracy keep us humble. They remind us that "made in Washington" strategies for a particular country won't deliver sustainable democracy. Because the future of every nation ultimately lies in the hands of its own people. At NED, we don't presume to tell our partners what they should do or how they should be governed. We support *their* democratic ideas. We stand by them in their non-violent struggle.

In Ukraine, for example, NED partners are working to document war crimes in real time, countering Russian information operations, and helping to ensure Ukraine emerges from this brutal conflict an even stronger democracy.

In Belarus, NED partners ensure access to independent information across the country and provide support to political prisoners and their families.

In Venezuela, NED partners document the horrific abuse of political prisoners and work to hold the Maduro regime to account in international bodies.

From Ecuador to Nigeria, our partners expose how corruption linked to CCP-backed companies undermines rule of law in their own nations.

NED's support for Uyghur partners has been central to their ability to document abuses against their community in East Turkestan and to rally much of the free world to hold CCP authorities to account.

And, most recently, NED grantee the Tibet Action Institute revealed to the world that the Chinese Government had taken nearly a million Tibetan children—starting at age four—from their families and placed them in boarding schools where they were subjected to indoctrination intended to “remove the Tibetan” from them.

We find ourselves in a consequential moment for global democracy, as the autocrats take their fight against freedom to new and dangerous levels.

Last week, in Moscow, Xi and Putin reaffirmed their leadership in the dictator's mutual admiration society, their “no limits” partnership stoking global fears that China will supply weapons in support of Russia's war on Ukraine and, by extension, on democracy.

With China and Russia at the vanguard, authoritarian powers have grown increasingly more assertive and ambitious, sharpening repression within their own borders, while engaging in a sophisticated, wide-ranging effort to corrupt and destabilize democracy in the rest of the world.

In this era of global interconnectivity, the autocrats recognize that keeping their own citizens in check is no longer enough to cement their power, and so they're partnering with other like-minded autocrats to share ideas, resources, and technologies.

Beijing invests billions of dollars on anti-democratic activities in other countries because it understands that corroding democracy in the rest of the world is the best way to protect the Communist Party's monopoly on power in China. Russia works to crush democratic uprisings in Europe and Africa to reduce the chances of a home-grown revolution. Both seek to gain partners-in-crime to wield influence in international institutions and neuter democratic and human rights norms.

These autocrats view democracy not just as a competitive system of governance, but as an existential threat to their own survival. Despite their rhetoric appropriating democracy and human rights, they know they don't govern with the consent of their people. As Sviatlana and Leopoldo can attest, they fear their people.

History is littered with dictators and despots working together to maintain their own power. What makes the current cabal more effective and dangerous is the sheer scale and scope of their activities and ambitions, turbo-charged by technology.

They've widened their spheres of influence with media and marketing campaigns that spread disinformation and divisiveness. Their corrupt deals erode the rule of law and the credibility of institutions. They exploit the openness of the financial sector to facilitate the transnational flows of money, technology and information to their own advantage, paving the way for corrupt governments in every corner of the world to roll back rights and freedoms.

This is decidedly not soft power; rather this is what NED has termed “sharp power.”

For decades, NED has funded the most innovative and effective individuals and organizations working for democracy. Our approach is based on long-term relationships of trust. Constant listening and learning from those fighting in the trenches ensures our programs and strategies remain effective and relevant to emerging challenges.

Our unique structure allows us to pivot quickly, so that we're able to respond quickly to events, such as when Iranians and Cubans suddenly mobilize in protest, or when there's an opening for Sudanese, Tunisians, and Burmese to resume their path towards democracy. Think venture capital for democracy.

We specialize in identifying grassroots organizations with good ideas and helping them develop their capacity. Historically, most of our partners have operated at the community or country level. They often lacked the resources or technical expertise to do battle against strategies deployed by an increasingly sophisticated web of transnational bad actors.

In recognition of this, Congress provided NED with funding specifically designated to deal with these emerging global threats.

We're using those resources to connect our partners and accelerate their learning from each other to develop cutting-edge approaches to fighting information operations, protecting media integrity, tackling kleptocracy, and fostering democratic unity to counter authoritarian influence.

There, of course, is no equivalency between the open, nonviolent tactics of democracy movements and the repressive, corrupt, and violent techniques of autocrats. But as authoritarians increasingly work together, so must we. To defeat the network of autocrats, democracy supporters must unite around a focused and coordinated countermobilization across multiple sectors.

When it comes to technology, for example, we don't need balloons to tell us China is conducting surveillance on a global scale. Using big data and biometric and facial recognition, Beijing has built sophisticated systems to keep tabs on its citizens at home, while offering up that technology to 97 governments, making repression easier and more affordable than ever before. Greater collaboration among democratic nations is urgently needed to confront digital authoritarianism and leverage technology on behalf of democracy.

At NED, we're taking a systematic approach to innovation, helping our partners outpace and outflank the autocrats by investing in democratic networks that are sharing ideas and best practices across movements and regions. We're ensuring democratic activists have access to the latest tools to work more safely and effectively. And we're supporting efforts by civic actors to gain a seat at the table around the digital and technological norms shaping the future.

The authoritarians are also working to reshape global governance and weaken systems by exerting influence over major international institutions like the United Nations and even Interpol. Political, business, and civil society leaders must join together to counter these efforts, reinforcing alliances that defend democratic norms and deepen democratic cooperation among key countries.

Democratic nations must support those who are bravely fighting the good fight on the autocrats' home turf. As Americans, we should not stand by and watch when activists and citizens are arrested and killed in their quest for human rights and basic freedoms. They deserve our support.

Most importantly, the democratic world must work together to help Ukrainians defeat Russian aggression, and to help the Taiwanese safeguard their democracy. To lose either to authoritarian invasion would be a catastrophic blow to the cause of global freedom.

It seems obvious that supporting freedom beyond U.S. borders is more than just a reflection of our democratic values, but a strategy vital to our national interests and to global security.

So, it's ironic that Russia and China have made democracy a priority strategy, while democratic nations have, more often than not, relegated it to the sidelines. The autocrats wage war on freedom beyond their own borders because they know it threatens their existence. We must defend freedom in other countries because we recognize it is necessary to our existence.

In fact, support for democracy is among the most cost-effective national security strategies for democracies. As democracy advances, the threats that democracies face recede.

As NED chairman Ken Wollack often argues, the notion that there should be a dichotomy between our moral preferences and our strategic interests is a false one. If our ultimate foreign policy goal is a world that is secure, stable, humane and safe, where the risk of war is minimal, then clearly supporting and advancing democracy should be a national security priority.

The reality is that hotspots most likely to erupt into violence are found, for the most part, in areas of the world that are nondemocratic—places that experience ethnic conflict and civil war; generate refugee flows across borders; harbor terrorists; produce illegal drugs.

And we have learned that regimes that repress their own citizens are more likely to act aggressively against their neighbors. This has been borne out tragically by one man rule in Russia and China.

We also need to invite other democracies to join the United States in stepping up their support for democracy around the world. The European Union, United Kingdom, and Taiwan play critical roles. Democracy advocates in allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and even India believe their countries could do more.

Progress in advancing democracy and human rights will come when we align our foreign affairs and development activities in ways that bolster democracy, especially in more open nations. Many of the investments of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, and USAID are not democracy programs, but in transitional democracies they definitely help democratic governments deliver.



Finally, we must keep those leading the struggle for democracy in their own countries in the lead. Even as we push ourselves to sharpen our strategies and to be more effective, we must not overwhelm the agency of those leading this fight on the ground. Our role is to support them.

Yes, these are challenging times for those of us who believe in democracy and freedom. But we remain optimistic. While democracy in many countries is on the back foot, the majority of people in most places still prefer the dignity that comes with freedom—and many are willing to risk everything in its pursuit.

We cannot be naïve. The environment remains hostile and progress is not linear. The autocrats are playing the long game. So must we.

But there are many reasons for hope—millions of them, in fact. Globally, the demand for democracy has never been stronger. The record numbers of those fighting repression and fleeing authoritarian regimes provide proof that people everywhere understand what research tells us: that people are happier, healthier, safer, and wealthier living in a free society.

At the start of 2022, autocrats felt ascendant. Putin's forces encircled Ukraine, as he met Xi Jinping in Beijing, while Xi was consolidating more power than any Chinese Communist leaders since Mao. The militarized theocracy in Iran was feeling more secure than it had in years.

Flash forward 1 year. Putin failed in his ambition to crush Ukraine and now faces an International Criminal Court indictment. China was swept by the A4 White Paper protests, reversing zero-COVID policies and representing the clearest expression of citizen demands for liberty and rights since the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Women now walk the streets of Tehran without wearing the hijab, while the future of the regime is challenged on the streets every day.

Despite rising authoritarianism, the human spirit is indomitable and cannot be repressed forever. Lessons from the past teach that democracies have more resilience and autocracies more brittleness than we sometimes see in darker moments.

The fall of the Iron Curtain reminds us that even the most repressive and seemingly secure regimes can crumble, brought down by ordinary people demanding freedom. It is those people, ordinary people who do extraordinary things, who we at NED are proud to support.

It is our honor to ensure that those working for justice, dignity, and freedom know we have their backs.

Thank you for your time, attention, and support.

Senator SCHATZ [presiding]. Ranking Member Risch.

Senator RISCH. Thank you very much.

I would like each of the three of you to respond, if you would, to the specific question I asked in my opening statement and that is, look, we have all given long speeches here today about the problem. We know what the problem is. We know what the difficulties are, the challenges are, and we all want to do something.

The question I have for each of you is, what is it that is specific? There has been a reference made to some of the things that we have done. Certainly, financial pressure is something that is important, but those are hard to do and even harder to enforce.

Maybe each of you could give me a short statement on what you think the specifics are, starting with you, Mr. Lopez.

Mr. LOPEZ. Thank you, Senator Risch.

I believe that the most important aspect is to have a paradigm shift in terms of what type of support is needed. For a long time most of the support has been focused on development issues and thinking that strengthening civil society is the way to go for the moment when democracy knocks at the door to our countries.

Now we know that that is not going to happen without a struggle, without a fight, without the support for those people who are willing to put their lives, their freedom, at risk, and this is what I call the concept of a freedom society.

We need to identify the movements, the people, the individuals, the activists, that are willing to stand up against authoritarian regimes.

It is critical to have internal pressure. Democracy transition requires pressure from the inside. People want to be free, but people require the support from countries like the United States and this is support that can be translated in different types of aspects that are critical.

Of course, resources, capacity to communicate, and I mentioned one that I believe is critical to every single country that is under an autocratic regime—free and uncensored access to the internet. This is something that can be a real game changer.

We are today in countries that are under autocratic regimes that are completely closed. People do not have information. They do not have the capacity to effectively communicate and have free access to uncensored internet.

Two, affordable smartphones can be a real game changer, and I know that this requires some technological improvements, but in the same way that the world came together to find a vaccine for COVID-19, I believe that the free world needs to come together to provide free access to the internet. This will give the possibility to communicate, to mobilize, and to effectively have a strong position against the autocrats.

The second is, I believe, that sanctions should be strategically rethought. There is often a discussion around whether sanctions should be imposed or not imposed.

I do not think that this is black or white—sanctions or no sanctions. This is about effective sanctions and, particularly—and I can tell that in the case of Venezuela, it is not only to sanction those government officials or the officials of the dictatorship.

It is also about identifying the enablers: the individuals, the companies within and without the autocratic countries that are creating this criminal structure of kleptocratic regimes to give impunity to these regimes.

These are some concrete ideas that I think need to be thought of.

Senator RISCH. I appreciate it. Sviatlana, could you give us a couple of words?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you.

I might reiterate all that Mr. Lopez said, but as for Belarus, in particular, I want you to initiate the international tribunal against Lukashenko and his cronies for he does not feel impunity for his crimes against Belarusian people and his crimes of aggression.

We are asking to increase sanctions on the Belarusian regime to punish them. Also, close loopholes because usually regimes do have opportunity to use other countries to circumvent sanctions and it gives them opportunity to survive.

We are asking to a create coalition of countries for independent Belarus to keep our crisis high on the agenda. We are asking to initiate the discussion on Belarus in international organizations. We ask—the hearing on Belarus in G-7 and the U.N. Security Council also to include in their discussion nuclear weapons.

Block the regime from taking the seat in the U.N. Security Council. As I said, send special envoy to Belarus to have constant communication with the Government of the U.S.A. Also, declare that all the agreements that Lukashenko made since 2020 are illegal, that they will not be—they will never be recognized by democratic

countries, and also speak out in support of Belarusian independence.

Now, when our sovereignty is under threat, we see the signs of creeping occupation. It is very important that powerful countries are defending our independency, our sovereignty, and people will feel this. Of course, be vocal about Belarus because people in our country who are fighting, they need to feel that they are not abandoned, they are not forgotten, and that the world with them. It gives us inspiration to continue our fight. Thank you.

Senator RISCH. Thank you very much.

I have a specific question for you. Had your election actually come to fruition—we know you won, but that does not do any good unless you actually take office. We also know that in these countries that repression is only successful because the military, the police, and the security forces obey the orders of the head of state.

What is your thought about what would have happened had you taken the presidency? Would you have been able to take command of the military and the security forces?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. One of our main tasks is to split elites and split military environment around Lukashenko, but it might happen only when those people inside the regime see that Lukashenko is not recognized, he is losing legitimacy, he is unrecognized in the normal democratic world, that there is no future with him.

In that case, they will—at particular moment of our history, they will take the side of people and we already see the signs. You know that Lukashenko launched a new law that allows him to bring people from the military service to death penalty if they are accused of state treason. He is afraid of internal coup d'etat or internal betrayal, and we have to split these people even more.

Senator RISCH. That is—obviously, that is a key. If you can peel off major people in the security forces and/or the military that changes the dynamics because, obviously, they have the command and the power and that is where it is at. That is how they keep order.

Be interesting to see by looking at the personalities involved there which ones are the most likely to flip because that is what is going to change it. There is no question about it.

Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Senator.

I would outline a couple of key points where we could do better. The first begins with that paradigm shift of understanding democracy as strategy. Support for democracy is the most effective return on investment for our national security in a world in which autocracies are on offense attacking democracy.

Second, leaning in on innovation. This is where understanding how to leverage technology for democracy is key. The investments—modest investments—we have made in circumvention tools to see a skyrocketing use of VPNs to gain access to the internet, mirror sites to overcome firewall blockages, investments in the next generation of technology as well as tools like financial forensics skills to track kleptocratic stealing of wealth.

Third, really adapting some of our tools. As I said, sometimes our institutions are trapped in project management and when things change—there is a coup, there is an invasion—we do not need to

be trapped by contracts on a project. We need to be focused on how to actually be there with folks in the fight and support them in real time and have that flexibility.

Senator Menendez mentioned his efforts behind the Global Heroes Act. This has been a big challenge as we have seen increasingly with rising numbers of democracy advocates forced from their countries, pushed into exile.

Many countries do not have the capability to support them with visas and are not able to get them set up, and I think a rapid coherent response among democracies is quite important.

I would also say aligning other foreign aid, such as economic support funds with the U.S. Development Finance Corporation, MCC. A lot of USAID projects are not per se about democracy, but in this world they should be aligned such that they are helping support transitional democracies to deliver for their citizens in this contest.

Finally, I would say it is important that we enlist others. Many of our allies—democratic allies—Japan, South Korea, Australia—are generous with development assistance.

We need them to be equally generous with democracy assistance and I think that is somewhere where we can help enlist other partners in this cause, all the while understanding that we have to keep those in the fight in the lead and to recognize it is their agency, their struggle, and we are only behind to support them.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator SCHATZ. Thank you very much. Thanks to all of you for being here.

I want to talk a little bit more about press freedom and I am going to ask you each the same question. Well, actually, I am going to ask a slightly different question for Mr. Wilson.

What is working on press freedom? Because we are, obviously, seeing the trajectory is bad. I am wondering if there are kernels of hope and what we ought to be investing in, thinking about, talking about as quickly as possible because I also want to cover internet freedom. Go ahead.

Mr. WILSON. I would say a couple of things. What we have seen is a consolidation in autocratic control often of mainstream media outlets, consolidation around TV stations, print newspapers.

Where we have seen a burgeoning of creativity, innovation, and ideas is on online digital platforms, YouTube channels, and the growth in the audiences of these has been quite remarkable and also sustained in a way in which independent journalism is thriving.

We see this both in autocratic societies and semi-open societies and so it is not all bleak. There is a lot of opportunity there.

Second, investing in those new technologies to reach audiences where they are—the use of Telegram channels, YouTube channels, and other means, oftentimes arts outreach, to reach mass audiences with democratic messages in broader audiences when traditional TV outlets are not available.

Senator SCHATZ. Ms. Tsikhanouskaya. Here is my question for you.

It seems to me—I have two questions, right, one on press freedom and one on internet freedom, and it seems to me they are in-

creasingly becoming the same question. I would like you to speak to press freedom and internet freedom and if in practice this is becoming the same question.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. In Belarus, there is no media freedom. You know that since 2020, all the alternative media in our country have been liquidated. Journalists were arrested. Tens of them now are behind bars.

Belarusians have to be inventive, have to be creative in these obstacles, and the leadership of media had to flee Belarus and re-install the media outlets in exile.

Now, we are using all the possible platforms like YouTube, Instagram, controversial TikTok to deliver our messages to Belarusian people and, moreover, in Belarus where all the media—alternative media are declared as extremist and people who are subscribed or follow tweets or whatever, they can be sentenced to years and years in jail for this.

People know how to use VPN. People are being educated and we are trying to deliver the truth to Belarusians on the ground and to the world.

Of course, it is difficult to counter to Russian and Belarusian propagandistic narratives because they use all the possible state outlets, TV, to show the views of regimes and that is why we are asking our allies in the countries to assist more to our media, to open Belarusian services in international media organizations like Voice of America, for example, just the world to hear the voice of free Belarusians.

Senator SCHATZ. Thank you.

Mr. Lopez.

Mr. LOPEZ. As has been said before, the regular media in Venezuela and in many autocratic regimes is completely closed—TV stations, radio stations. Just recently, Maduro closed 80 radio stations in Venezuela.

Thinking that converting regular media as a way to communicate with the Venezuelan people is something that does not seem like it is going to happen.

Social media through access to the internet can also be an alternative. However, we need to understand that social media today has been contaminated by the influence of dictatorships, particularly of Russia.

In the case of Venezuela, we have seen how the Russian influence in the communications of social media is happening through bots, through trolls, and that conversation has also been impacting the perception of the Venezuelan people.

It is critical that we understand that the social media conversation requires some participation and support technological organizations to really combat the trolls, the bots, the influence—the external influence of Russia and others.

I will give you an example. In 2014, when we called for protests, I was completely banned from regular media. I could not go on TV stations or radio stations. We called for protests only through Twitter. Only through Twitter were we able to get hundreds of thousands of people to the streets.

Today, 10 years later, that reality has completely changed. The conversation in social media is manipulated, contaminated, and Russia plays a big role in the way in which this is happening.

Free access to the internet is critical.

Senator SCHATZ. Thank you very much.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Let me thank Senator Schatz for presiding while—we have an important banking meeting. We have a few problems in our banking system.

Let me follow up. I listened intently to your testimony and I got a summary of some of the responses you have given while I was away.

I would like to get, if I can, a little more granular because we are really trying to think about how do we support those of you who are on the front lines in a meaningful way, and I have heard—for example, Mr. Lopez, you said support the activists for freedom, not just civil society.

In what ways? Because sometimes we hear, oh, if we support A, B, or C in the country, it is going to be the United States that is trying to create a subversive response or a overthrow of whatever that existing tyrannical government is, and so there is that question that is always raised, well, we should not do that too much.

On the question of the internet, of course, part of our challenge is that for the internet to be free and open, you still have to be able to receive it on the ground in the country that you are in.

We have this problem with Cuba where we would like to have—I have been advocating for a free internet and thinking about satellite transmissions and other ways—of course, circumvention technologies that we use.

That then gets into the question of can you just beam into a country where there are other international conventions that suggest you can and can you get the receptions on the ground.

Just by way of example, when you say support those who are fighting for freedom, give me a tangible. What would you—if there was an A, B, or C, is that about economic resources? Is that about greater access to our surrogate broadcasts? If you can help me, I would appreciate it.

Mr. LOPEZ. Well, research shows that supporting civil resistance and nonviolent movements has been proved effective and what this means is supporting the possibility to provide training, massive training, simultaneous training to activists under autocratic regimes and training in civil resistance methods, in nonviolent methods, in communications, in movement building, giving the capacity, the confidence, to activists on the ground that they are not alone, that they can have the capacity to organize and to extend that organization.

In 2 weeks, we will launch what we have called the Global Freedom Academy from the World Liberty Congress. This will take place in Zambia. We will start with the training of the first cohort of African activists that will be trained in these issues.

We have taken the best practices from all of the research and the information of what works in terms of providing strength to movement building and we have a moonshot idea to train in person 1 million people in the next 3 years in countries that are autocratic, and this will give confidence in the capacity to mobilize.

I can tell you firsthand that this works. We have done this in Venezuela. We have created networks of activists, men and women that are committed to the struggle for freedom, and this is why there is a difference between the development type of support that Mr. Wilson was talking about versus the freedom type of support that we are talking about.

This needs to be decisive and there needs to be no fear in supporting the movements and the people who are willing to put their lives at risk to provide change.

We will always be confronted with the accusations of regimes. They will accuse any activist of being a spy of the U.S. or being a terrorist, of being influenced by the United States or the organizations of the United States.

I remember one day Damon Wilson asked me, are you afraid that you will be signaled as being supportive of the United States or being part of this network? I said, they are always going to say that. They always say that regardless of whether you receive the support or not.

It is critical that that support is received.

The CHAIRMAN. Let me ask you about this. You mentioned in your opening statement that sanctions need to be rethought.

In what way? Because sanctions is one of the few peaceful diplomacy tools we have to get a country to rethink how it is acting or to try to move it in a different direction. When you say to be rethought, what are you thinking about?

Mr. LOPEZ. Well, we have seen recently in Venezuela a massive scandal of corruption and it is very clear now to the Venezuelan people and beyond that the problem of Venezuela is not sanctions.

We have heard over and over that the crisis—the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela—is a consequence of sanctions and this is simply not true. In the year 2019, before the sanctions were imposed, the Venezuelan economy had collapsed by more than 60 percent. More than 4 million Venezuelans had fled the country at that time.

It was not because of sanctions. It was because of government mismanagement and corruption, and today we believe that sanctions should be focused not only on government officials, because the government structure is only a facade to the real political economy, to the real power structure in our country.

When we are talking about sanctions, we are thinking of targeting the enablers, the individuals, the companies that are behind this kleptocratic network of corruption that is providing support to the dictatorship.

We also think that there needs to be some multilateral thinking of how to apply sanctions because Maduro is linked with Lukashenko, is linked with Putin, is linked with the mullahs from Iran.

There is a transnational kleptocratic network that also needs to be targeted in an effective way. That is what we are thinking in terms of repurposing sanctions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. It is very insightful. I have other questions for our panelists, but let me turn to Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to each of you for being here. A special thanks to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Mr. Lopez for the sacrifices that you and your

families have made to promote democracy and human rights. Damon, thank you for your work as well.

We had a press conference last week with Ms. Tsikhanouskaya and one of the things we talked about was the number of Belarusians who have been imprisoned. Here, I have a picture, Ihar Losik, who is a journalist who has been in prison now for over a thousand days, who reports were that he tried to commit suicide last week.

If we were going to make a poster for everyone who has been wrongly imprisoned in Belarus, we would not have enough room in this room, much less in the building. I am sure the same is true in Venezuela.

One of the issues that we had talked about was trying to encourage the State Department to appoint another special envoy for Belarus. Can you discuss why that would be important for the opposition movement in Belarus, Sviatlana?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you, Senator Shaheen, for this picture and that you are advocating for the Belarusian prisoners whose number is increasing every day. Every day in Belarus, about 17 people are being detained every day.

Of course, a designated special envoy to Belarusian democratic forces has extremely important meaning. We had very fruitful collaboration with Julie Fisher. She opened us a lot of doors, created a lot of opportunities for us here in the U.S.A. She delivered our messages. She connected us with the necessary people here in the U.S. Government, and when she left, we just physically felt this lack of attention, lack of communication, lack of collaboration.

If there was a person who is like a bridge that is connecting countries, is designated, it will be much more easier for Belarusian voice to be heard here in these walls, to be heard in the government, because we know that this attention span is rather short and we have to be always on agenda that Belarus is not overlooked in this situation, that Belarus is not left for one day later so to update information about what is going on in our country.

In this way, we hope for concrete, for decisive actions from the U.S.A., because when this connection is lost, so we are not in focus and we can easily be forgotten.

Senator SHAHEEN. You will be pleased to hear that Secretary Blinken last week in his hearing said that he is hoping to have a special envoy appointed very soon.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you.

Senator SHAHEEN. We will continue to raise that issue.

Can you talk about what the reaction of the people of Belarus has been to Putin's announcement that he was planning to move nuclear weapons into the country and what, as the opposition, you think the United States and other countries should do to try and discourage that?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. People in Belarus understand that this possible deployment is against Belarusian people's will and against our constitution, that Russia now acts as an occupying force. It violates our national security and makes Belarus possible a target.

By deploying nuclear weapons, Russia is trying to subjugate Belarus and deprive it of sovereignty, and I think that international community must demand from Russia to stop deployment



of nuclear weapons and impose strong sanctions on those who are responsible for this and, of course, launch a hearing in the U.N. Security Council about this case and to show regime of Lukashenko and Kremlin a strong reaction on this because the feeling of impunity is very strong now in pro-regime countries and we have to understand that dictators cannot be appeased, cannot be reeducated, and they understand only their language of power, and democracy has to show its teeth.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Damon, I only have a little bit of time left, but I wanted to ask you about Georgia because I was there the end of February. I spoke with Ken Wollack before he was headed there and one of the things we talked about is the fact that the people of Georgia are still very interested in joining the EU and looking west and, yet, the Government of Georgia seems to be behind the people in supporting those efforts.

What more can we do to support the people of Georgia?

Mr. WILSON. Thank you for raising Georgia, Senator Shaheen.

We were quite concerned in the past 10 days when the government tried to introduce a law that would restrict foreign funding to NGOs, essentially, copycat laws that we have seen proliferate across the world, this one mirroring quite a bit of what was done in Russia.

In response to that, you saw the Georgian people turn out in incredible numbers on the streets of Tbilisi. We sent our chairman, Ken Wollack, to Georgia on a mission just to raise our concerns with the government and to bolster and support our partners and we have seen the government step back from the brink at this moment.

I think that the real issue here is understanding. As you said, the Georgian people see themselves in Europe and have made that clear repeatedly and so our bet, our commitment, our stand, needs to remain with the Georgian people across the country, including outside of Tbilisi, who organized.

From farmers, agricultural unions to teacher groups, a much broader cross section of society was mobilized and protecting what they understood was backsliding, a hit at their democracy.

I think investing in the people, maintaining pressure on the government not to do these types of things, and I think really keeping a focus on how to support the enabling environment and those actors to ensure a free, credible, fair election as they look towards that next year and, ultimately, to have the Georgian people decide that trajectory and their future.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Let me just return to a couple final questions.

Ms. Tsikhanouskaya, you have a unique insight in the global fight for freedom—the wife of a political prisoner, the candidate that won the election.

As a woman, do you think that there are any unique insights that you face versus some others—Mr. Lopez faces or some others face—in that fight for freedom as a woman in that fight?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. No. I think that women sometimes are—tend to be even stronger than men and when obstacles put you in

such situations when you have to show your strength, when you have to transfer your anger to strength or love to strength, you just do this because you know that you are doing this for your children, for the future of your country.

You act just like a mother, for you feel the pain of everybody who is in jail, of everybody who has to flee the country, but you realize that you are not alone, that you have strong Belarusian people who really want to help you and the world and you understand that you take strength from them as well and you are powerful only then when you have people around you.

As I am still here, there, I still have this power, so I know that hundreds of thousands of people around the world are supporting me, supporting our movement, and support their friends in Belarus.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. It is a very great, insightful answer. I am reminded all the time by my daughter, my wife, and others that they are stronger.

Let me—and members of this committee as well. Let me ask you what I asked Mr. Lopez. You specifically said in your opening statement, increased assistance to the democratic movement. In what way specifically would you want to see that?

Mr. LOPEZ. Well, I believe—

The CHAIRMAN. I am sorry, Leopoldo. I am asking Ms. Tsikhanouskaya. You answered that for me, largely. I want to hear from her perspective.

You said increase assistance to the democratic movement in Belarus. Tell me what you would want to see us do or others in the world do in doing so.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. You know that it is impossible to fight inside of Belarus at the moment. We have the underground movement, underground resistance, anti-war movement in our country.

Most of our NGOs have been ruined inside Belarus and they have to—had to relocate outside, and all those initiatives, organizations, they need assistance to continue the fight, and we do not have opportunity to get this assistance only from powerful countries, powerful foundations.

We are asking our—those people who believe in the changes in Belarus, who believe in the Belarusian people, to support our human right defendant centers who are supporting political prisoners and their families, for them not to lose hope; to support our media to deliver honest news to Belarusian people; to support our cultural initiatives because we understand how strengthening of national identity is important for Belarus because for last 27 years Russia was “Russifying” everything in our country and we have to keep our national identity strong.

We are asking to support our sportsmen initiative because our sportsmen went against Lukashenko’s regime back in 2020 and they are suffering because of this also a lot.

We ask not to invite pro-regime sportsmen to different sports events, but instead invite free sportsmen. Also, just—and when our people see that you are not—that they are not abandoned, that they receive this opportunity to continue the fight, to build ties, to create this—that you are institutionalizing our relationship, they have power to continue.

We are not asking to fight instead of us, but help us not to be exhausted, not to be overstressed with this difficult fight. We will do everything by ourselves on the ground, but help us not just to sustain, but to win.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Wilson, our USAID administrator, Samantha Power, recently wrote that, “Advocates of democracy have focused too narrowly on defending rights and freedoms, neglecting, among other things, economic hardship and inequality.”

Do you—well, I do not want to say do you agree because you are a grantee. I do not want to put you in a conflict, but give me a sense of that. It struck me and, of course, economic hardship and inequality, we deal with those core issues. Sometimes that gives us a strengthening of democracy and less likely for autocrats to be able to take hold.

By the same token, if our democracy assistance efforts is about sending economic assistance to bright spot countries where peaceful pro-democracy movements have been successful, yet democracy remains fragile, which I think is a worthy cause, but I am not sure that that now becomes the focus of our assistance.

How do I help these two distinguished people create movements that are successful in their countries if I am focused on the bright spots alone? Can you give me a sense of that?

Mr. WILSON. Senator, yes. I would sort of frame it a little bit differently because you are exactly right, if you are talking about Belarus, Venezuela, Russia, China, we need to stand by those who are fighting for political freedoms, human rights, dignity, individual liberties in a very, very hostile environment.

What I welcome from the USAID administrator’s point of view is that a large part of foreign assistance in the United States, but especially in our democratic allies is development focused, and I think what she is arguing is aligning that development focus behind our democracy objectives.

NED is not going to get involved, for example, in energy projects or infrastructure, but USAID’s funds that do that should be focused in a way that they are supporting democratic leaders, those on a transition path, to help them show that their citizens that they can deliver.

That alignment, I think, is really important across the foreign assistance approach because that is not always the case and it is particularly not the case with some of our partners.

It is not a substitute for the direct democracy programs that are absolutely required in the toughest places. That is an area where the endowment specializes, and you cautioned against the allegations that we would be seen as the instruments of the U.S.

For us, it is very clear. For us, we stand behind their ideas. It is their struggle, their ideas, what can they do, and by our getting involved, how do we make them more effective and, hopefully, more secure through digital security and physical security.

I think there is a different way to think about it. We have to stay focused on democracy assistance in the toughest, toughest places and that is not development aid. That is where we need to actually be able to think more like venture capital for democracy, be able to take risk, invest in some new technologies that lead to more se-

cure VPNs where we have seen skyrocketing access in Russia, or creative investments in satellite television that have provided Afghans a new audience. Whereas we have seen the effectiveness of a digital Wailing Wall for COVID in China breaching the Great Firewall—that sort of venture capital approach.

Also, we have talked a lot about media. Sometimes our development assistance is restricted to capacity building and training, but oftentimes these are quite sophisticated media outlets. They do not need more trainings. They actually need support with operations, content production, facilities, and content, and I think some of those restrictions that is where flexibility comes into play.

Finally, as Senator Shaheen talked about, Ihar, who was arrested, who tried to commit—almost committed suicide while he was in captivity, coming to this approach with flexibility.

We had a partner arrested in Belarus last week. Many traditional donor agencies would have to stop their grant to that organization because he has been arrested. We do not. We work with the organization to pivot, to change the objectives, to ensure that that organization can survive, the family is supported, that it is focused on political prisoner advocacy rather than just saying, oh, that project no longer applies, and that mentality bringing in to all of our instruments of flexibility, being relevant to the circumstances in which we are in, I think, is helpful.

The CHAIRMAN. I appreciate if our development assistance is going to have a democracy bent to it. That is great.

Of course, USAID is very often the entity that uses direct democracy grants, and so I am concerned about making sure that we do not turn away from helping courageous people like those who are with you on the panel and think that let us go just consolidate that which we have—and I do not want to use the word forsake, but triage away from that, that is a dangerous proposition.

I do not know if that is what the administrator meant. I intend to have conversations with her about that, but it is a concern to me.

Thank you all for those insights. I normally do not do this, but we have a vote going on the floor. Is there anything you have not said that you want to say before I close this hearing?

Mr. Lopez.

Mr. LOPEZ. I would just like to support what you said at the beginning of the Democracy Heroes Act, and I can tell you that this is something that is very important for, I would say, hundreds or maybe thousands of people who are in exile that do not have a stable migration status, and that takes them to a position where they are uncomfortable. They are in a fragile position to continue their work from exile.

I commend this and I think that this is something very important for the struggle of those of us who are in exile. We need to continue to bridge those who are in exile like us with those who are in the inside, and the Democracy Heroes Act in the way you presented today, I think, is an important way forward.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Thank you.

Anyone else? Ms. Tsikhanouskaya.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Yes. I just wanted to say a couple words of gratitude to senators who are involved into—in Belarus here, in

the Belarusian Caucus who are keeping Belarus high on the agenda and help us to fight with dictatorship and Russia. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. WILSON. Mr. Chairman, I would just foot stomp your last point. The NED's forte is the toughest cases. If you look at our top 10 portfolio—China, Russia, Cuba, Venezuela, Belarus, Burma, North Korea, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Sudan—we are in the toughest places uniquely, in a way, because we do not have to have a cooperative grant agreement with the government.

Because we do not have field offices or a physical presence in these countries, we can stand by those that are on the frontlines of the fight for freedom in the most difficult places and understanding that their success—when the opportunity opens and they are in a position to succeed that will have the greatest impact in mitigating the threats to U.S. national security.

Seeing the support—democracy support in the most hostile environments is fundamental to an investment in our own security and that is why we are proud to stand by the cause and the movement of people like Leopoldo and Sviatlana. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

This has been very helpful. We hope we can continue to count on you as we develop a continuing agenda to maximize our ability to deliver on behalf of freedom fighters and the democracy movement in the world for insights.

With the thanks of this committee, the record for this hearing will remain open until the close of business on Wednesday, March 29. Please ensure that questions for the record are submitted no later than tomorrow.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:45 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

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#### ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

##### RESPONSES OF MR. LEOPOLDO LOPEZ TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR BRIAN SCHATZ

*Question.* The Venezuelan people do not have access to a free and open internet—the government blocks websites, manipulates online information, and cracks down on dissent.

How can the U.S. Government support people in Venezuela, and around the world, who are subject to internet restrictions?

Would it be valuable for the U.S. Government to publish a regular strategy on how to promote internet freedom as part of broader U.S. foreign policy?

*Answer.* We believe that a regularly articulated strategy by the United States to increase internet/information freedom will be invaluable to freedom fighting movements not only in Venezuela, but in all autocratic countries.

It's important to promote access to the internet for two primary reasons:

*I) Countering regime misinformation:* Autocratic regimes rely on misinforming their population as a means to stifle potential dissent. A confused and divided populace is less likely to mobilize en masse. Free and reliable access to the internet will undermine autocrats' ability to set their false narrative, and is the first step in pro-democracy mobilization.

*II) Providing unrestricted channels of communication:* Reliable and anonymous methods of communication are necessary for the mass mobilization of people required for pro-democracy movements. Organizing massive civil resistance movements requires intimate logistical coordination, so activist leaders need to be able to communicate freely to organize and mobilize people without fear of pre-emptive crackdown by regime intelligence services.

There are a variety of initiatives that show promise on this front, such as Starlink, Jigsaw and others. The United States should lead the way in exploring how these initiatives can be applied to the struggle for freedom and democracy, and incorporate them into their foreign policy strategy.

In conjunction with internet access, FinTech and Bitcoin/Lightning are new technologies which can provide critical financial support to people living within closed societies. Remittances abroad account for \$600 billion USD globally, the majority being sent into autocratic nations. These funds can be subject to transaction fees as high as 30 percent.

Internet access can unlock FinTech and Bitcoin/Lightning inside autocratic nations, which for millions of people can protect them from inflationary costs. It also opens the possibility of receiving transactions outside of autocrats' financial systems where they are subject to theft.

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THE COMMITTEE RECEIVED NO RESPONSE FROM MS. SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA  
FOR THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY SENATOR BRIAN SCHATZ

*Question.* Internet freedom has continued to deteriorate in Belarus following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

How can the U.S. Government support people in Belarus, and around the world, who do not have access to a free and open internet?

[No Response Received]

*Question.* Would it be valuable for the U.S. Government to publish a regular strategy on how to promote internet freedom as part of broader U.S. foreign policy?

[No Response Received]

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RESPONSES OF MR. DAMON WILSON TO QUESTIONS  
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR BRIAN SCHATZ

*Question.* According to Freedom House, global internet freedom declined for the 12th consecutive year in 2022. Users faced legal repercussions for expressing themselves online in at least 53 countries last year. North Korea and China are the most extreme examples, but leaders in many more—including in vibrant democracies—are censoring, surveilling, and shutting down the internet.

Are restrictions on internet freedom antithetical to democratic principles, and if so, how is NED working to address these challenges?

Answer. Digital rights are human rights. People today exercise many of their core human rights online, including freedoms of information, association, and expression. Citizens around the world use the internet to organize, mobilize, deliberate, and engage in political and governance processes. Therefore, unduly infringing upon internet freedom is antithetical to democratic principles.

Unfortunately, the internet's emergence as a digital public square has not gone unnoticed by authoritarian states and actors. Narrowing civic space online—whether through legislative, administrative, informational, or technological means—has quickly become a cornerstone of their strategies to stifle democratic voices, disrupt collective action, and silence independent media. Autocrats aim to exploit emerging technologies and shift global norms in ways that support their surveillance, constriction, and control of digital spaces.

Pushing back against the growing threats to internet freedom is fundamental to the long-term resilience of global democracy. For this reason, the Endowment is leveraging both its core grantmaking tools and its democracy support activities to better equip civil society actors for this challenge, providing knowledge and resources to counter authoritarian attacks on democratic participation online. NED grantees are: documenting internet shutdowns; conducting local and global advocacy and helping to set internet standards; and localizing censorship evasion tools for civil society actors worldwide.

Through the NED's core institutes—the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, the Solidarity Center, and the Center for International Private Enterprise—the Endowment is supporting political parties, the private sector, and trade unions to strengthen their capacities and collaborate in promoting internet freedom.

NED's International Forum for Democratic Studies (Forum) and Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) have supported this work through research and convenings that bring together stakeholders from NGOs, academia, independent media, and the tech sector, among others. The Forum has examined authoritarian

influence and democratic vulnerabilities in the online information space as well as the contest over global digital norms, including the implications of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. CIMA has focused on the ways that authoritarians are using internet shutdowns, cybercrimes legislation, and targeted spyware to repress journalists and news outlets. These activities help the democracy support community to identify emerging challenges and foster concrete strategies for civil society and donor responses.

*Question.* Would it be valuable to have the U.S. Government publish a regular strategy laying out how it is marshaling resources to promote internet freedom as part of broader U.S. foreign policy?

*Answer.* Clear and coordinated messaging and actions from the U.S. Government regarding its efforts to support internet freedom would be beneficial, particularly to our global civil society partners.

As NED partners have demonstrated, civil society and the private sector are necessary allies in advocating for an open internet. As authoritarian states seek to tighten their grip on digital public life, the U.S. Government can play a critical role in fostering multistakeholder and rights-based approaches to digital governance, supporting civil society responses, and countering authoritarians' export of digital repression.

In the absence of clear messaging from established democracies like the United States, other countries may be more easily swayed by the digital models of leading autocracies, which are all too willing to provide strategic guidance, funding, and digital tools and infrastructure that can encourage censorship, surveillance, and targeted curbs on internet access. Communication of a coordinated strategy that incorporates all U.S. Government actors engaged in this space, notably the Department of State, USAID, and the Department of Commerce, accompanied by diplomatic advocacy among U.S. partners worldwide, could help to counter efforts by authoritarian actors to promote more restrictive—and less free—internet regimes, whether within their borders or around the globe.

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RESPONSES OF MR. DAMON WILSON TO QUESTIONS  
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR CHRIS VAN HOLLEN

*Question. Press Freedom in India and Pakistan:* The State Department's Human Rights Report was released on March 20. According to the report, both India and Pakistan have seen increasing threats on press freedom and both countries are increasingly dangerous places for journalists trying to do their jobs. The State Department is not alone in sounding the alarm—Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks India 150th and Pakistan 157th out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index, and cites the dangers involved with being a journalist in both countries. According to both the Human Rights Report and RSF, journalists are subjected to harassment, threats, and even death in the course of their work. This is concerning not only for freedom of speech, but for the overall rule of law in both countries.

What programs, if any, does NED fund or support, either directly or indirectly in India and/or Pakistan and what is NED doing to promote free speech, protect journalists, and protect minority rights and religious rights in India and Pakistan?

*Answer.* NED does not have an *India*-focused grants program. Instead, the Endowment seeks to share best practices and highlight lessons learned from India's democratic experience with partners around the world.

In *Pakistan*, NED currently supports approximately 35 local partners as well as the work of its core institutes—the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, the Solidarity Center, and the Center for International Private Enterprise—totaling more than \$3 million in FY 2023. The Endowment has long prioritized support for programs focused on freedom of expression and independent media, as well as promoting and protecting the rights of religious minorities, and currently funds 12 projects that advance these priorities.

Within our work supporting freedom of expression and independent media, NED provides a total of \$965,000 annually to six organizations promoting free speech and protecting journalists. These independent organizations are implementing projects related to digital and workplace safety for journalists, countering disinformation, and support for independent media platforms.

Regarding promoting religious freedom and protecting the rights of religious minorities, NED provides \$800,000 to six civil society organizations. These projects include research and advocacy to remove bias and hate speech against minorities prevalent in textbooks and the school curriculum, the political empowerment of minority communities, and public campaigns to promote interfaith harmony, tolerance

and pluralism. As freedom of religion and expression are cross cutting issues for strengthening democracy and inclusive governance, many of NED's civil society partners have incorporated these themes into their activism and policy advocacy.

The project summaries below offer more details on NED's 12 current Pakistan grants that focus on promoting freedom of expression and independent media, as well as promoting and protecting the rights of religious minorities:

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND INDEPENDENT MEDIA

*Organization: Digital Rights Foundation*

*Project Title: Fostering Safe and Democratic Online Spaces for Civil Society*

*Summary:* To strengthen the ability of civil society groups, human rights defenders, and media practitioners to participate in online spaces safely and to advocate effectively for digital rights. The organization will maintain a cybersecurity helpline to provide assistance to at-risk individuals and groups, conduct trainings on digital security and online advocacy, and establish a digital media fellowship program to foster online platforms for issue-based advocacy and to promote freedom of expression.

*Organization: Global Neighborhood for Media Innovation*

*Title: Fighting Disinformation and Supporting Independent Media*

*Summary:* To strengthen journalists' skills in fact-checking, investigative journalism, and their ability to identify and counter disinformation in both traditional and digital media. The organization will carry out an online media capacity-building project to increase journalists' skills to counter disinformation and carry out responsible, ethical fact-based reporting. The project will also publish digital content produced by participants and organize webinars on the thematic issues related to democracy, pluralism, human rights, and media freedom.

*Organization: International Federation of Journalists—Asia Pacific*

*Project Title: Promoting Labor Rights, Gender Equality and Freedom of Association in Pakistan's Media*

*Summary:* To strengthen the capacity of media associations to protect and defend the rights of journalists and to support collaborative efforts to promote greater gender equity in media unions. The project will connect international labor experts with local partners to strengthen the understanding of media worker rights and develop a decent work agenda for media. The group will conduct advocacy and trainings on strengthening unions, digital organizing, and gender equity as well as monitor labor rights in the media sector.

*Organization: Media Matters for Democracy*

*Project Title: Countering Online and Digital Disinformation*

*Summary:* To strengthen the knowledge and capacity of media organizations and journalists to identify and counter online disinformation. The grantee will conduct research to update a toolkit on digital disinformation. It will also carry out trainings for journalists on how to identify disinformation online and teach techniques to verify information and detect digital manipulation. The project will also sponsor a fellowship to produce investigative stories on digital disinformation.

*Organization: [Name not for publication to maintain security and safety of grantee]*

*Project Title: Supporting Freedom of Expression through Independent Media and Citizen Journalism*

*Summary:* To promote freedom of expression and enhance media freedoms through independent reporting and citizen journalism. The project will support a media platform that features independent media reporting, investigative journalism, and digital content produced by citizens. The content will focus on issues of human rights, government accountability, and gender equality that are censored or ignored by mainstream media outlets. In addition, the media outlet will launch digital campaigns on public interest issues.

*Organization: Women Media Center*

*Project Title: Enhancing the Skills of Women Journalists and Media Students*

*Summary:* To enhance the skills and knowledge of women journalists and media students for the promotion of democratic values. The organization will conduct trainings for women journalists and mass communication students in cities across Pakistan to strengthen their ability to increase public awareness on democratic



issues such as gender equality, public accountability, free and fair elections, and freedom of expression and to improve their technical skills in reporting as well as producing news packages and short documentaries, script writing, camera-work, shooting and editing for television and digital media.

RELIGIOUS MINORITY RIGHTS AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

*Organization: Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace*

*Project Title: Campaign for Education Reform and Minority Rights*

*Summary:* To facilitate the development of a more tolerant and inclusive curriculum in the public education system and promote policy dialogue related to equal rights for religious minorities. The organization will produce a research study on textbook content and conduct national-level advocacy for education reform. The organization will also engage with political parties as part of a campaign to protect minority rights.

*Organization: Center for Human Rights Education*

*Project Title: Training Institute for Democracy, Human Rights and Peace*

*Summary:* To strengthen the skills and knowledge of activists in promoting human rights, democracy, and peace and to promote public discourse and activism on issues of peace and democracy. The organization will conduct training courses for activists on democracy and peace and tolerance to strengthen a grassroots movement on pluralism and religious tolerance.

*Organization: Center for Social Justice*

*Project Title: Advocacy Campaign for Inclusive and Equal Citizenship*

*Summary:* To enhance advocacy for government policies and political party platforms that promote inclusive and equal citizenship and to promote active participation among religious minority communities in electoral and political processes. The project will develop leadership skills of religious minority political activists who will then engage political parties, legislators, and other key decisionmakers on issues of equal constitutional rights. The group will organize seminars, conferences, and community-level meetings to promote public discourse and mobilize citizens on these issues.

*Organization: DAMAN*

*Project Title: Civic Education and Engagement for Minority Communities in Sindh*

*Summary:* To increase public awareness of and civic engagement with democratic institutions and electoral processes. The organization will conduct a civic education program to strengthen knowledge among women and youth about democratic rights and good governance. The program will include exposure visits to national- and provincial-level political and civic institutions, awareness-raising sessions, advocacy training, street theater performances, forums bringing together citizens and elected representatives to promote public accountability, and a celebration of International Democracy Day.

*Organization: International Research Council for Religious Affairs*

*Project Title: Enhancing Understanding of Democracy and Religious Freedom in Islam*

*Summary:* To increase awareness of and support for democracy and democratic principles such as peace, pluralism and tolerance among religious communities. The organization will organize trainings for religious leaders, media and youth on democratic values and concepts within Islam and skills to strengthen democratic narratives and practices within religious communities and society. Trained religious leaders and opinion makers will conduct dialogues, seminars, and media campaigns to strengthen awareness and acceptance of democratic values and practices within their respective communities. The organization specializes in outreach to religious communities and engages in advocacy with government institutions on countering radicalism and militancy.

*Organization: Youth Development Foundation*

*Project Title: Making Local Government Inclusive*

*Summary:* To promote civic participation among women, youth, and religious minorities in local government. The organization will work with civil society and the provincial government to launch a campaign to increase voter participation and the number of candidates contesting local elections from marginalized communities. The

activities will include community awareness sessions, mock voting exercises, and voter outreach through television, radio, and social media highlighting messages of political inclusion.

*Question. Elections in Turkey:* Elections are scheduled to take place in Turkey on May 14. In the lead-up to the elections, the Government of Turkey has intensified a media crackdown and sentenced a leading opposition figure—the Mayor of Istanbul—to prison. The state media agency has begun to heavily sanction and fine Turkish television stations for their coverage of the earthquake and has continued to stifle social media, including banning Twitter and a popular forum site. There are also concerns over the past performance of the Turkish Supreme Election Council, which has not addressed irregularities that favor Erdogan, and annulled elections not in his favor.

What, if anything, is NED doing, either directly or through entities it funds, to promote free and fair elections in Turkey?

Answer. In Turkey, NED supports civil society-led programs that aim to increase voter participation and enhance electoral integrity. Out of NED's 15 active grantees, the work of seven of our partners—which include independent media outlets, human rights organizations, and think tank and policy centers—directly focuses on the upcoming general elections. In addition, three of NED's core institutes—the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and the Center for International Private Enterprise—also have election-related programming.

NED-supported election-related programs are primarily focused on the following areas: non-partisan youth participation and voter education; objective analysis of candidates, pre-election environment, and voting day developments; combating disinformation; monitoring campaign financing; voting rights; and nationwide coverage of the election process.

The below list offers the summaries of current NED-funded election related projects in Turkey:

- *To promote free and fair digital political campaigns.* The grantee investigates and monitors electoral violations in the digital activities of political campaigns and publishes monthly reports on findings. In addition, monthly op-eds by renowned journalists inform civil society and media about the impact of digital advertising on election integrity.
- *To promote a transparent election environment.* The organization examines, investigates, and reports on political party programs, polls, and presidential and parliamentary candidates. The target audience is primarily youth and undecided voters. The project curates, and publicly shares summaries of party programs on key issues such as education, immigration, and economy in a non-partisan way via biweekly podcasts, a weekly online publication of articles representing different political views, and weekly newsletters focusing on young voters.
- *To promote youth participation in electoral processes through countering disinformation.* The project aims to equip university students in three major Turkish cities with fact-checking skills and tools. The organization will hold one online and three on-campus workshops with university students, prepare an election fact-checking toolkit, organize awareness raising meetings, and provide live fact-checking on election day.
- *To advocate for democratic, fair, and accessible elections; and to monitor and document voting rights violations.* The project produces podcasts, TV programs, and animated videos to raise awareness of voting rights. The organization also monitors the election process to identify irregularities by collaborating with international election monitoring groups and coordinating a joint local CSO election observation platform. The project will include election day monitoring in 20 different cities.
- *To strengthen and expand local media and their news coverage in regions traditionally underrepresented in mainstream media, and to enhance local media coverage of elections.* The project provides training on digital media, rights-based and election-focused journalism in six different cities to promote local journalism and electoral participation and transparency.
- *To strengthen free and fair elections through objective election related analysis and information, and to monitor and investigate irregularities and undemocratic practices related to the electoral process.* NED sponsors an organization that provides evidence-based media coverage of the campaign season, election day, and post-election period, particularly in regions with a history of election irregularities. It also provides a platform for political parties and candidates of diverse

backgrounds to communicate their messages and for voters to express their opinions and priorities. The project produces live coverage, short videos, written reports and podcasts.

- *To increase awareness about the election process and post-election reforms.* The project produces a series of informational videos and blogposts on elections, post-elections reforms and critical socio-political issues in Turkey to help youth understand public policy. It also publishes regular infographic and textual content on its social media accounts aimed toward engaging youth on political developments.
- *To promote youth participation in the elections.* The project promotes informed and productive political discourse by organizing political discussion forums with young men and women from six municipalities across Turkey. The project brings together young people from each selected municipality to discuss issues facing youth and bring these issues to the attention of leaders and candidates from each of the major parties. Led by youth leaders, hundreds of youths have taken part in issue-focused discussions in their communities, delving into issues including youth employment, education, freedom of expression, access to basic goods and services, and youth participation in decision-making processes.
- *To promote accountability tool in the post-election period.* The project has mobilized its Youth Fellowship Alumni Network to conduct a series of policy-focused interviews with officials of the political parties running in the upcoming elections. The interviews will then be analyzed and published. The Network then plans to continue its advocacy efforts, keeping the officials and the parties accountable for their promises and policy positions in the campaign. Finally, the organization is conducting opinion polls on election topics and broader political issues in the country.
- *To provide data-driven information about Turkey's economy that is central to political debate in the elections.* The project works with a local partner to collect and compare data sets that connect adherence to democratic principles, such as fair and inclusive elections, to the overall health and fortune of the country.

*Note:* NED does not publish or publicly share the names of most partners in the Turkey portfolio as the revelation of those partners could put them at risk of harassment and harm. If you would like more detail on partners in this portfolio, please contact NED and we will arrange a secure briefing.

