



Democracy and Human Rights: US Tools and Responses

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Testimony by

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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 Díaz-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 US 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 one 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.
