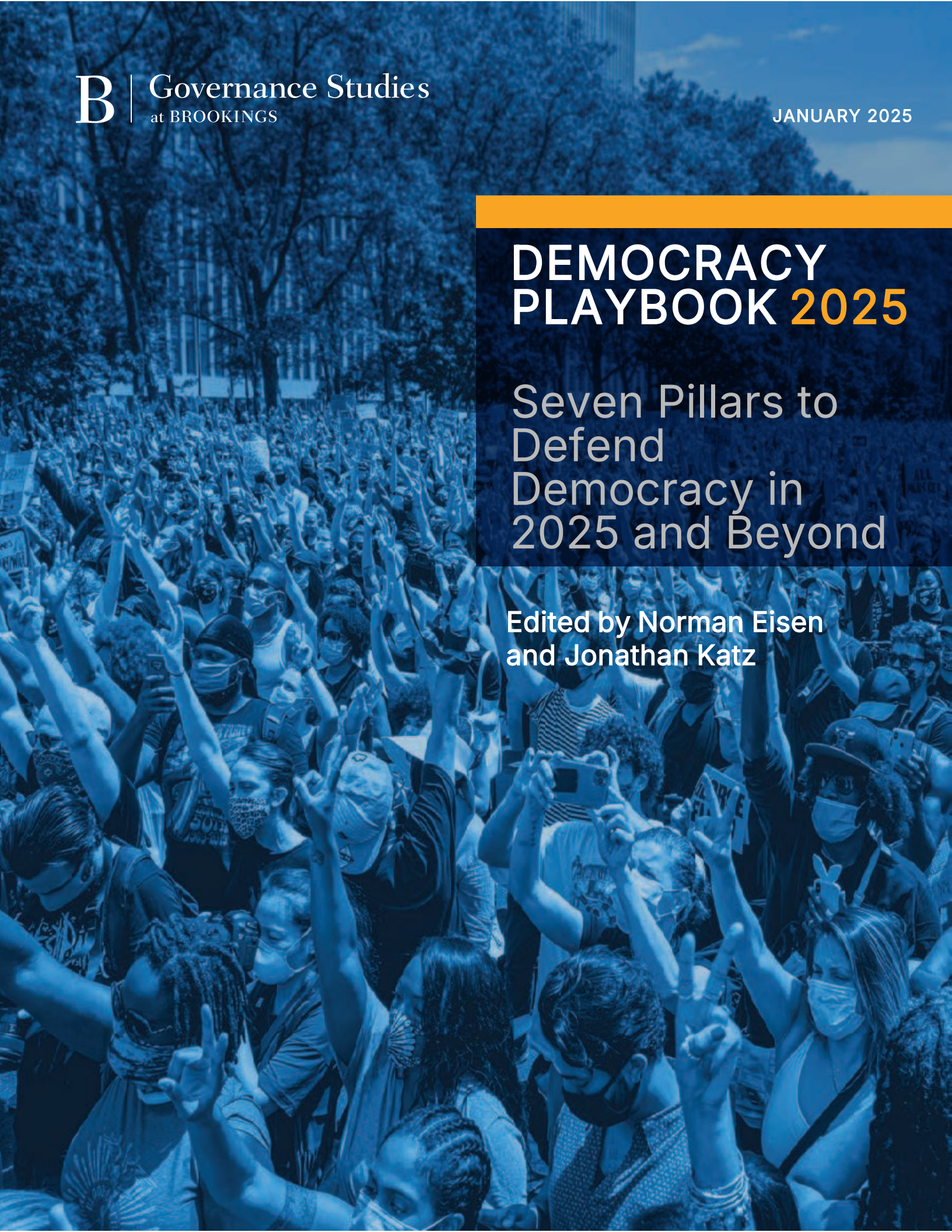

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JANUARY 2025

DEMOCRACY PLAYBOOK 2025

Seven Pillars to Defend Democracy in 2025 and Beyond

Edited by Norman Eisen and Jonathan Katz

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Edited by Norman Eisen and Jonathan Katz

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY: SEVEN PILLARS TO DEFEND DEMOCRACY—THE CASE OF THE U.S.

This third edition of the Democracy Playbook updates its predecessor 2019[1] and 2021[2] publications of evidence-based best practices for reversing democratic backsliding. We have added the research and developments of the eventful past three years—and have done so with an eye toward what is likely to be a challenging 2025. Our aim as before is to help citizens and stakeholders reclaim good governance, transparency, and the rule of law, and strengthen democratic resilience in the face of dangerous autocrats. Recent events in the United States, South Korea, Romania, France, Germany, Georgia, and elsewhere around the world remind us of the precarious challenge democratic actors face to either preserve or rebuild democracy and freedoms in the year ahead.[3] The far-reaching consequences of a decades-long run of global authoritarian resurgence and democratic decay (albeit with fits and starts) make renewing, reenergizing, and advancing liberal democracy all the more necessary.

In the introduction to the 2021 edition of the Democracy Playbook,[4] we focused on democracy principles for global stakeholders. We did so with an eye toward the U.S. launching the Summit for Democracy process in which Brookings (including authors of the Playbook) played a leading role on behalf of civil society as cohort co-leads.[5] In contrast to the optimism of that moment, the situation that presents itself today in the U.S. raises heightened concerns about the resilience of democracy at home and abroad.

Experts across the ideological spectrum agree that the U.S. at the federal level constitutes a backsliding democracy,[6] although there are differing views on how fast and far that slide might go, including at the state level where there is also erosion.[7] The health of U.S. democracy is of critical importance within and beyond its borders.[8]

Accordingly, for the introduction to this 2025 refresh of the Playbook, the editors focus on the following question: What does the scholarship and practice of democracy promotion globally teach us about this critical juncture in the U.S.? From the extensive body of newly updated research in the Playbook that follows, we, in this introductory essay, identify seven foundational pillars. Each is essential to the continuity of democratic governance and to protect freedoms and rights in the U.S. Should these pillars collapse, autocratic and illiberal forces have their own playbook and are prepared to rebuild the American political system in their own fashion, fundamentally reshaping the foundations of power and governance. Because all of this has profound international implications, we also consider those,

including the need for others to take on some of the democracy promotion work the U.S. has historically done. This introduction and this Playbook draw upon lessons learned, examples, and action-oriented steps Americans and democracy stakeholders everywhere can take to reinforce democracy, shore up its core elements to withstand another and more dangerous incoming stress test, and seize the opportunity to strengthen U.S. democratic resilience.

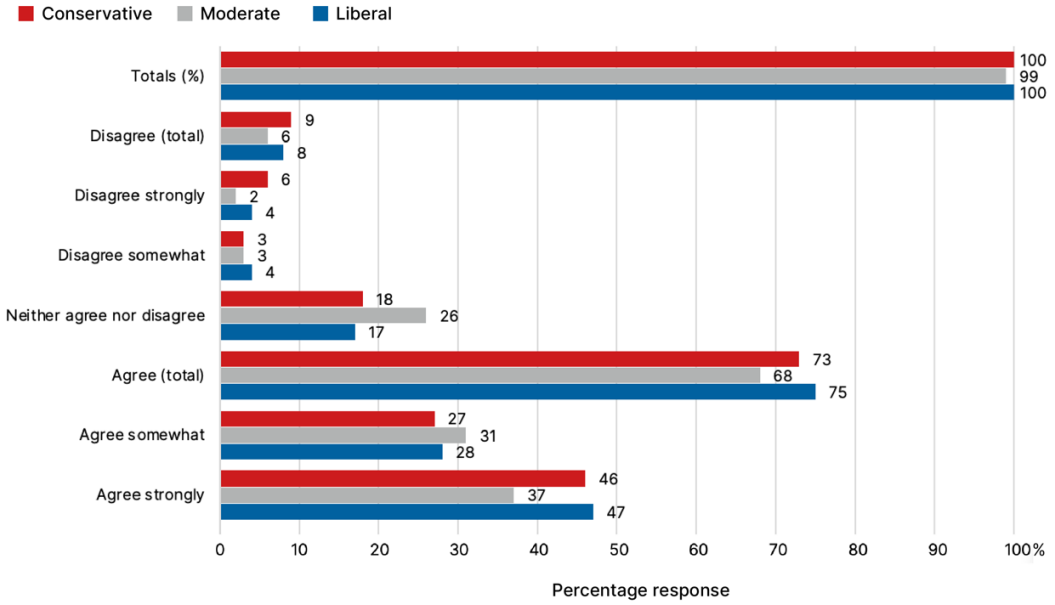
While the U.S. is the focus of these introductory pages, the body of the Playbook as a whole maintains its concentration on defending and strengthening democracy globally and has been newly revised and refreshed to take account of developments since the 2021 edition. We will continue to provide comprehensive updates to the Playbook in the future.

THE U.S. STATE OF PLAY

Concerns about the health of democracy in the U.S. are not a new phenomenon; our democratic institutions have been tested before. Nevertheless, the current threats to our system of governance are acute. The health and future of U.S. democracy is of deep concern around the world and here at home, including to both Republicans and Democrats. There is a shared view across both major political parties that democracy is the best form of government, with 67 percent of Americans agreeing with that statement according to an Economist/YouGov poll from shortly before the 2024 election.[9]

FIGURE 1

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Democracy is the greatest form of government."



Source: Economist/YouGov poll, December 16 - 18, 2023, N=1500 U.S. adult citizens, https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/econTabReport_pJolTxJ.pdf

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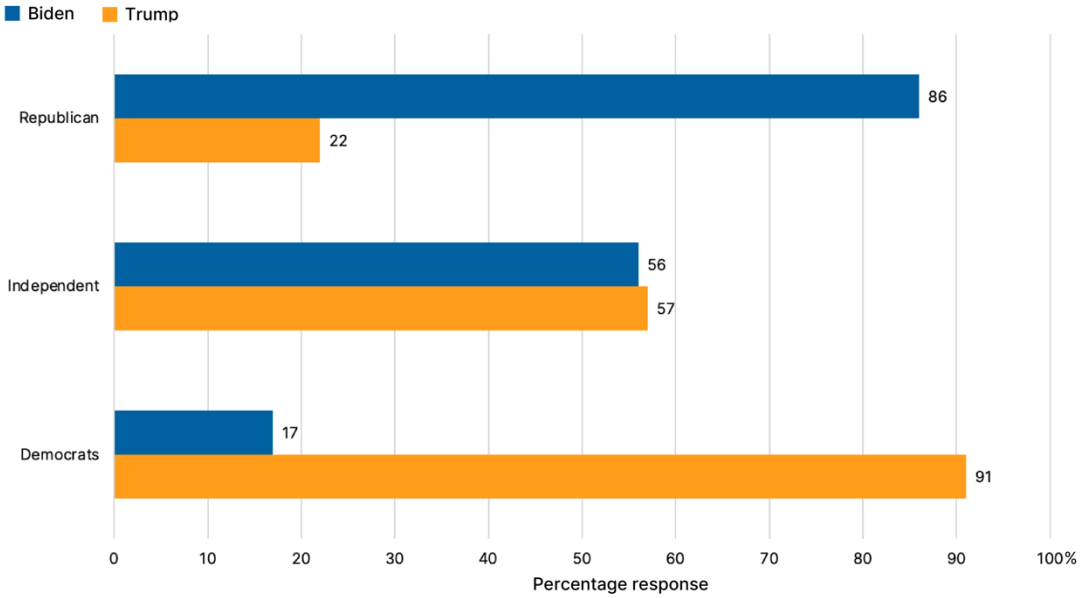
However, according to a New York Times/Siena poll, 76 percent of Americans also agreed that "U.S. democracy is currently under threat." (76 percent of Democrats, 79 percent of Republicans, and 74 percent of Independents).[10]

However, Democrats and Republicans have divergent opinions on what the threat to American democracy is. Before Kamala Harris entered the 2024 presidential race, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) American Values survey found 91 percent of Democrats believed the re-election of Donald Trump would pose "a threat to American democracy and way of life" while 86 percent of Republicans believed the same about the reelection of Joe Biden.[11] These divisions and their impact are magnified by increased levels of support for autocratic tactics in the U.S.[12]

FIGURE 2

Percent who agree the reelection of ___ poses a threat to American democracy and way of life



Source: PRRI 2023 American Values Survey, "Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election," Figure 20, https://www.prri.org/research

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Despite deep political divisions across the U.S. and concerns about the nation's democratic health, it is not a fait accompli that America will join the axis of illiberal nations. There is an opportunity and an imperative in 2025 and beyond for Americans, both governmental and nongovernmental actors, to work together across the country to prevent democratic backsliding and advance good governance and democracy. Although we aim for these seven pillars to be relevant to democratic stakeholders internationally, we will illustrate them in this introduction in terms of the current moment in the U.S.

THE SEVEN PILLARS

The seven pillars that follow are intended to be useful for a variety of purposes including as key benchmarks for how democracy is advancing or declining in the U.S. in 2025 and as a checklist for prioritizing the investment of financial, social, policy, and other resources in protecting American democracy. The refreshed Democracy Playbook that follows considers both the U.S. and global democracies, and these seven pillars are no less relevant in the global context.

FIGURE 3

Seven pillars to defend democracy

	Pillar
1	Protect elections
2	Defend rule of law
3	Fight corruption
4	Reinforce civic and media space
5	Protect pluralistic governance
6	Counter disinformation
7	Make democracy deliver

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PILLAR 1: PROTECT ELECTIONS

Safe, free, and fair elections are the cornerstone of democracy and are integral to preventing and reversing autocracy. U.S. elections in recent years have seen a resurgence of efforts to restrict voter access and create real or perceived obstacles and threats to electoral integrity. The 2020 post-election period was characterized by a flood of disinformation and assaults led by Donald Trump on the legitimate outcome of the election, culminating in the events of Jan. 6, 2021.[13] Acts of intimidation continued during the 2024 general election cycle, when Americans faced numerous barriers and threats, including at least 67 bomb threats at polling stations on Election Day, disinformation and misinformation, and a mushrooming number of baseless election lawsuits, restrictive voting laws, voter suppression, and election denial.[14]

Going forward, pro-democracy coalitions and actors must not waver in ensuring the U.S.' tradition of safe, secure, free, and transparent elections by maintaining and strengthening systems and institutions that protect and prioritize election processes and voter access at all levels including in the pre-and post-election periods. Even if federal action is unlikely to address these threats and challenges in the immediate period ahead, state and local governments, civil society, and the media can continue and double down on their ongoing efforts.

U.S. democracy actors must leave no stone unturned and look internationally at best practices, policies, and structures to shore up and improve threatened elections and protect voters.[15]

This effort in 2025 and beyond to ensure election integrity should include a committed private sector, including leading technology, media, and social media companies, collaborating closely with civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), government, and others to ensure election integrity and security.[16] To take just one example, encouraging initiatives were launched in 2024, like The Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections, which included U.S. tech companies agreeing to prevent deceptive artificial intelligence (AI) content from interfering with global elections and increasing trust in the information ecosystem.[17]

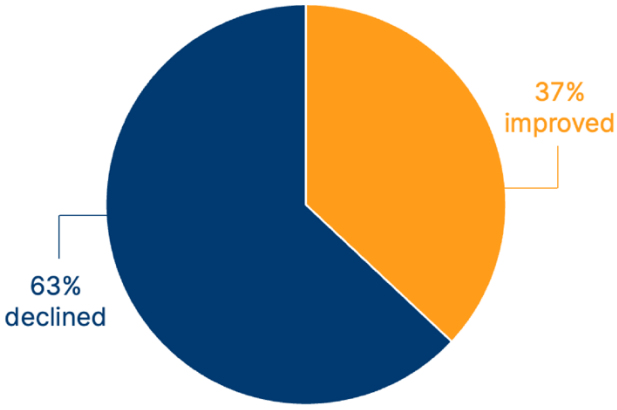
A thorough assessment of this and other initiatives in 2025 will be critical to fully understand the impact of these measures and to what extent stronger government oversight is needed as one piece of the much larger puzzle.

PILLAR 2: DEFEND RULE OF LAW

While winning elections and governing are critical to a functioning democracy, so too is the bedrock of the constitutional institutions that protect the rights of all and ensure that the peaceful transition of power remains intact. Experts assess that rule of law is under threat in the U.S. as never before in modern times.[18] Here, the U.S. is following a trend that we are seeing globally, with democracies and human rights increasingly threatened by empowered authoritarians. These autocratic actors often work to escape from the constraints of rule of law institutions such as courts, legislatures, and elections, or other power centers protected by the rule of law such as media and civil society.[19]

FIGURE 4

Over 5.4 billion people live in countries where human rights declined between 2023 and 2024



Source: "The rule of law has declined globally for the 7th year in a row." World Justice Project, https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/insights#Human-Rights-in-Trouble

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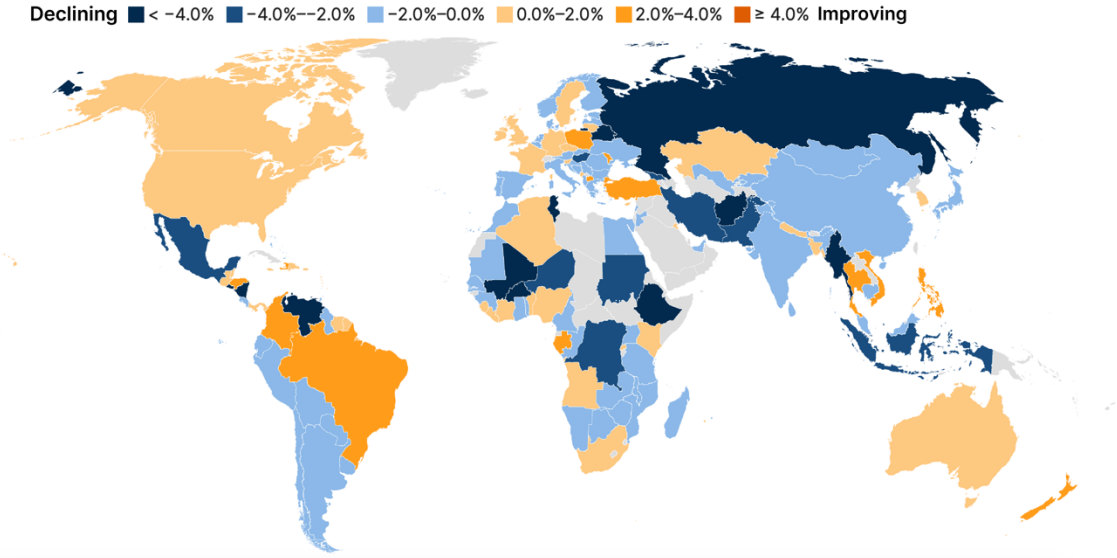
FIGURE 5

Over 5.4 billion people live in countries where human rights declined between 2023 and 2024



Source: "The rule of law has declined globally for the 7th year in a row." World Justice Project, https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/insights#Human-Rights-in-Trouble

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Federal, state, and local actors must use all available levers to reaffirm existing structures of judicial independence, rule of law, and the Constitution. Critical checks and balances and citizen trust in government weaken when courts and prosecutors do not adhere to mechanisms for transparency and accountability, and when elected officials prioritize personal vendettas or political gain over public good. Shirking binding ethical codes of conduct (including in the executive branch and at the U.S. Supreme Court) and allowing prosecutors to face political influence erode public confidence in them and in the judiciary that oversees them.[20]

The decay of democratic norms, such as the weaponization of government and efforts to capture the judiciary, must also be vigorously contested by all actors, including vocal and organized condemnation by civil society and independent media.[21] We must also vigorously oppose the political violence that has emerged in our politics. Jan. 6, 2021, represented a profoundly concerning example of that phenomenon in the U.S. This is compounded by Donald Trump's threat to pardon Jan. 6 defendants, potentially strengthening militia movements.[22] Threats to the judiciary have also been on the rise, as Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court John Roberts highlighted in his 2024 end-of-year report.[23] Chief Justice Roberts identified four areas of concern: "(1) violence, (2) intimidation, (3) disinformation, and (4) threats to defy lawfully entered judgments."[24] Insisting on the operation of the rule of law, with all its flaws, is critical to deterring and preventing illiberal influence.

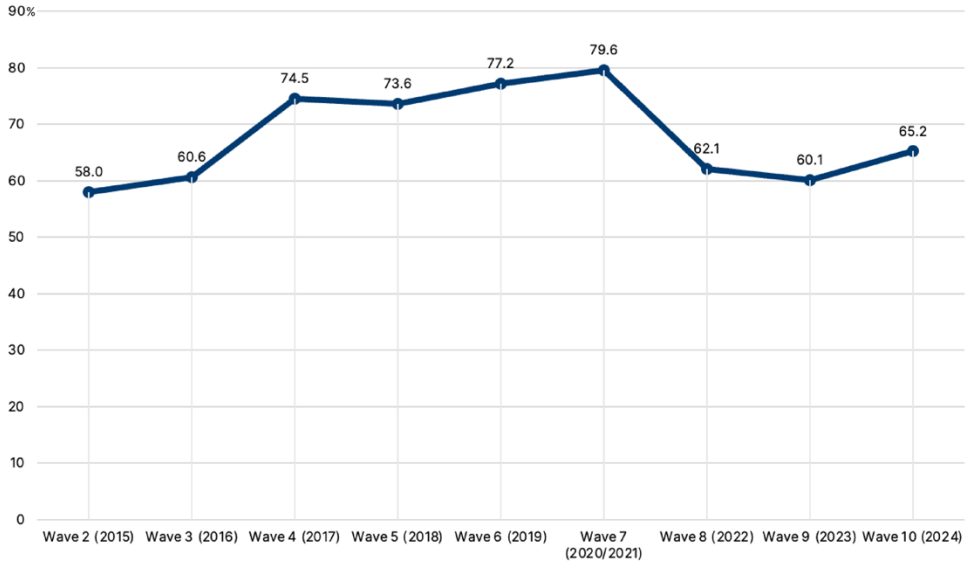
PILLAR 3: FIGHT CORRUPTION

In order to retain trust in the democratic system, and democracy itself, it is essential to combat corruption.

Americans have deep concerns about corruption at all levels of government.[25] Corrupt officials, including most autocrats, abuse publicly entrusted power to enrich themselves and their proxies.

FIGURE 6

Percentage of Americans afraid or very afraid of corrupt government officials
2015 to 2024



Source: "Chapman Survey of American Fears 2024," https://www.chapman.edu/wilkinson/research-centers/babbie-center/_files/2024-csaf-key-findings-final.pdf

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Actors at all levels and across all sectors must insist on government transparency, ethics, and accountability and use every tool available to push against corrupt practices. The fight against allegations of corruption, however, should not be weaponized based on political motivation or selective enforcement. National, state, and local pro-democracy actors must continue to push for a common set of anti-corruption standards, regulate the role of money in politics, and pledge to protect whistleblowers, media, and civil society actors combating illicit behavior. For example, pro-democracy actors must insist that the new administration fully implement and not weaken the enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the Foreign Extortion Prevention Act, and the Global Magnitsky Act.

Whatever may transpire at the federal level in 2025, state and local actors still have many available avenues for legal or voluntary regulation. That should include seeking jurisdictional regulation of money in politics, whether through creation of mechanisms such as public financing of pro-democracy candidates for office, disclosure requirements for donations, and/or limits on campaign donation amounts. Campaigns must also play a role in self-regulation by additionally agreeing to a common set of ethics and anti-corruption standards.[26]

PILLAR 4: REINFORCE CIVIC AND MEDIA SPACE

History and social science have repeatedly demonstrated that democratic governance and institutions are more likely to be protected, preserved, and strengthened when buttressed by big tent coalitions.[27] This includes diverse democracy alliances that include a wide range of civil society, state actors, political opposition, labor unions, the private sector, and members of the independent media.

Democracy alliances globally are increasingly threatened. Singling out activists and entities, like NGOs and independent media—through foreign agent laws or terrorist-sponsor labels—is central to the autocratic playbook.[28] For example, U.S. democracy actors now see challenges reminiscent of the ones faced by civil society and other pro-democracy advocates, including in Hungary, China, and Russia,[29] as well as globally. This could include the passage in 2025 of the Stop Terror-Financing and Tax Penalties on American Hostages Act—a similar type of repressive law we see wielded by autocrats and governments in backsliding states to shut down NGOs, including advocacy organizations, think tanks, and others.[30]

A key difference in the democratic backsliding of Hungary and Poland is the resilience of independent media.[31] In Hungary, Orbán and his allies have largely captured independent media and have targeted civil society,[32] and critics have faced pressure and attacks from the government and its allies.[33] In Poland, despite efforts to stifle opposition,[34] independent media survived, largely due to support from external pro-democracy actors, like the U.S., and independent media companies. In the U.S., it remains to be seen whether mainstream media will retain its historic independence, with some corporate owners showing worrying signs of anticipatory obedience.[35] Meanwhile, a host of innovative new media platforms are springing up and growing, with voices loudly supporting democracy.[36]

Aspiring autocrats are increasingly targeting independent media, including via frivolous libel and other legal actions.[37] They are also taking advantage of technological advances such as AI and social media to promote disinformation.[38] This impacts traditional media and journalism writ large by crowding out the truth. It is exacerbated by news deserts, which are rapidly growing in the United States.[39] These problematic trends impacting free media are taking place in an ever more dangerous environment for journalists. In the U.S., attacks on journalists increased by more than 50 percent from 2023 to 2024.[40] There are legitimate concerns that this climate for journalists could worsen in 2025 and beyond.[41]

These growing efforts to close civic space and weaken independent journalism must be vigorously resisted by civil society, media, and political

opposition. Non-state actors should be prepared to surge financial and other support to targeted entities, organize against government actions that seek to wrongly target dissent, and endorse laws that promote protections of individuals from political attacks.[42] There must also be an effort to address the proliferation of false claims both online and by mainstream media outlets, which affected how voters viewed each candidate in the Nov. 2024 election and millions of Americans spread knowingly.[43] (The importance of countering disinformation is further discussed in Pillar 6 below.)

PILLAR 5: PROTECT PLURALISTIC GOVERNANCE

In a democracy, elected and appointed officials should serve the public interest and that of democracy as a whole—and not political partisanship or personal grudges. That is an increasingly difficult task in an era of intensified polarization.[44] In addition to modeling responsible behavior, political leaders at local, state, and national levels must swiftly and firmly oppose antidemocratic sentiments from their peers, even when those views are within legal protections. No matter their political affiliation, leaders must strongly challenge attempts to suppress dissenting voices or undermine freedoms of assembly, press, and speech.[45] Civil society actors, citizens, and other stakeholders must make every effort to depolarize politics and create space for common ground and solutions. Local government models for overcoming political differences and solving local issues serve as a positive model for progress.[46]

All democratic actors are charged with seeking respectful public discourse on critical issues while resisting slides toward toxic identity politics.[47] As Karl Popper laid out in *The Open Society and its Enemies*, there must be no tolerance of views that deny basic human rights to certain groups, while still engaging in legitimate debate. This is the so-called "paradox of intolerance."[48] The disinformation and hatred toward Haitians in Springfield, Ohio, during the 2024 presidential campaign is one of many examples that highlight toxicity in politics that is corrosive and harmful. The military, law enforcement, and other arms of government must continue recognizing the threat from extremist ideologies, resist instruction that aligns with those views, and implement programs that train law enforcement—from recruitment to return to civilian life—on these dangers.[49]

An essential element of good governance in the U.S. and other democracies is healthy civilian-military relations, with the firm understanding that civilian control of the military is the rule. However, such civilian control must never transgress constitutional order. There are many "lawful but awful" orders of politicization and autocratization that do not extend to the point of illegal orders but, nonetheless, break vital constitutional norms.[50] In the U.S.,

experts have raised concerns about the looming possibility of the misuse of the military in domestic settings.[51]

PILLAR 6: COUNTER DISINFORMATION

In democracies, new forms of media and quickly evolving technologies, including social media and generative AI, are impacting the information space, electoral integrity, and democracy by driving the spread of misinformation and disinformation, as we saw in the year of elections globally.[52] Social media's ability to amplify disinformation and manipulate narratives has been exploited by authoritarians to flood the information space with antidemocratic propaganda. The increasing prevalence of AI could worsen the flow of false content online (traditional media, which we discuss in Pillar 4 above, also has a central role to play in combating disinformation but there have been worrying signs that some corporate owners are abdicating this role). Conversely, AI can also strengthen democracy, and the rapid advancement of tech has the potential to strengthen systems of democratic governance.[53]

Although there has been some action on the federal level to place guardrails around new media and emerging technologies, it is uncertain how next steps will evolve—and whether progress will continue.[54] Federal action may be uncertain, but pro-democracy proponents at the state level should consider wielding their considerable regulatory power to minimize the destabilizing effects of new and evolving technologies while discovering ways of leveraging them to democratize public spaces.[55] They may find partners in allied regulators such as the EU, Brazil,[56] and globally in 2025.[57] While government legislation and regulation try to keep pace with innovation, the private sector must counter deteriorating content moderation policies and adopt industry standards that incorporate transparency and accountability.[58]

PILLAR 7: MAKE DEMOCRACY DELIVER

Pro-democracy actors must strengthen their commitment to supporting policies at the national, state, and local levels of inclusive growth that tackle economic inequality and improve well-being and opportunity across all demographic lines, including race, class, and geography. In the U.S., this includes bolstering labor unions that are increasingly supported by the American public and critical to the health of our democracy and to addressing inequality.[59] The prioritization of these policy objectives—that aim to strengthen democracies so they equitably deliver for working families and everyone—must be acted on and powerfully communicated to all. The failure of democratic elites to address widening income gaps and kitchen table frustrations must be fixed, learning lessons from effective pro-democracy officials (particularly at the state and local level).

In the U.S. and globally, democracy still offers the greatest opportunity for economic progress, particularly in marginalized communities. Democracy is a strong driver of a healthy economy, with economists finding that democratization causes about a 20 percent boost in GDP per capita.[60] These policies and their communication should seek to address the unique needs of each geographic region by elevating existing community assets and collaborations that bolster local economies. Domestic actors can find expertise and collaboration across the U.S. and with their international peers to seek to form a more unified and coherent effort. That must include efforts to address the large-scale ramifications of climate change, including increases in natural disaster recovery, climate refugees, and infrastructure protection policies.

DEMOCRACY NEEDS A PLAYBOOK

In advance of the inauguration of a new U.S. president, it is not an exaggeration to say that all of these seven pillars are under stress. The advance of illiberalism and autocracy here are part of a two-decade global trend. We are barreling toward a dangerous path with serious repercussions for democracy, freedoms, and security in America—and around the world.

With all our imperfections, the United States historically has been a leader on democratic initiatives. But with democracy's erosion here, at least at the federal level, it is now more critical than ever to learn lessons from elsewhere and to lean on experts, wherever they may be. For that reason, and also to be of use to democracies everywhere, this Playbook extensively surveys international considerations, examples, and lessons. Subnational settings are included. In many places, those are rich sources for institutions that support or study democracy—including in the U.S. at the state and local levels.

We know that Americans do not want to live in a country where their freedoms are restricted. They have the agency, courage, and tools at their disposal to act together at all levels, to protect democracy, norms, and values and outright reject illiberalism. When utilized by democratic stakeholders, the actions we describe in our seven pillars and in the remainder of this updated Playbook show that it is possible to defend liberal democracies. We have seen this in recent years in places as diverse as Poland, Brazil, Moldova, and the Czech Republic, where the levers of power were held by illiberal actors, and democratic coalitions have gained or have come back to power.

It is also worth noting that there were significant reversals for autocracies in 2024, and not only for democracy. For example, the fall of the Assad regime in Syria and the end of Sheikh Hasina’s 15-year rule in Bangladesh by student-led protests open the door to political reform and a break from corrupt autocratic rule. The consequential changes in the Middle East,

including severe blows to Hezbollah and Hamas and the fall of the Assad regime, represent a profound setback for Iran and its autocratic ally Russia.[61] We also saw democracy progress following elections in Senegal and Guatemala, as well as democratic and civil society resilience in Taiwan—despite a massive Chinese disinformation campaign to disrupt the Taiwanese presidential electoral outcome. If it may be said that democracy is under stress globally, so too are autocracy and illiberal actors and their proxies.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SECTIONS

Each section of the Playbook should be read in conjunction with the seven pillars set out in this introduction. We begin each subsection with a summary of its contents. We conclude each subsection with recommendations for further reading on the corresponding topic. The material that follows in the body of the Playbook is not organized in seven pillars because many of the sections are crosscutting or move between domestic and international settings. **But to aid the reader and to collate with the introduction, the editors mark in the margins throughout which pillar applies to particular text.**

In Section One of the Playbook, we provide a set of insights, drawn from the U.S. and global contexts, to help inform and strengthen the strategies of domestic democratic actors such as:

- The incumbent political establishment;
- The political opposition;
- Civil society and independent media; and
- Private enterprise—including social media enterprises—and ordinary citizens.

Section Two discusses the role of international actors, institutions, and organizations in supporting pro-democracy forces, empowering local actors, and advancing democratic reforms. This report highlights efforts including:

- Partnering with domestic NGOs;
- Assisting civil resistance and nonviolent movements;
- Countering disinformation campaigns; and
- Providing foreign government and institutional support.

Relevant domestic and international actors include additional groups such as experts and professional associations, state and local government leaders, cultural and educational institutions and associations, and many more.

Despite the domestic democracy crisis in the U.S., the editors—as in the prior editions of this Playbook—give equal time to the international setting. The U.S. as the standard-bearer for democracy globally should continue to unabashedly embrace a bipartisan foreign policy based on relations with fellow democracies, not illiberal demagogues. The support of our G7 allies, NATO, and frontline democracies like Ukraine and Taiwan is not only vital to democracy globally but also for the safety, security, and prosperity of the U.S. itself. U.S. alignment with autocrats could likely cause devastating consequences for democracy. But we must face the reality that such a realignment may occur. Accordingly, we, among other things, document U.S. democracy promotion efforts and discuss how other governments and nongovernmental actors can carry the torch forward if it becomes necessary.

To be clear, no single pillar or collection of strategies is a guaranteed solution to the illiberal challenges at hand in the U.S. and globally, nor is it a foolproof response to present opportunities for democratic advancement.[62] Contextual factors impact challenges and powerfully shape the outcomes of particular pro-democracy strategies and tactics.[63] This Playbook seeks to inform actors designing and implementing comprehensive strategies to safeguard democracy. We hope that stakeholders will find this update of the Playbook a useful guide to the scholarship and the relevant history as they contest and resist the illiberal toolkit—and employ the democratic one.

SECTION ONE: DOMESTIC ACTORS

In both ascendant and troubled democracies today, contentious political dynamics are at play and involve a wide variety of domestic contexts and actors.[64] People and organizations working toward advancing democracy sometimes have structural and other winds at their backs accelerating their progress. At other times, those advocating democracy must press against strong, constant, and dangerous headwinds. Yet obstacles to democratic renewal, such as authoritarian strength, need not be decisive.[65] Nor is the backsliding in democratic regimes—which is our focus—irreversible.[66]

Recent scholarship on pro-democracy actors and political history shows that the strategies they deploy to pursue their goals can matter.[67] Describing his own convictions, Larry Diamond writes: "I became (and remain to this day) convinced that the failure of democracy is not foreordained, and that within the various social and institutional constraints, actors act, making choices that can doom or possibly sustain democracy."[68] Democracy's fate rests in the hands of people, and securing it begins at home.

This section of our report distills principles of strategic action for how domestic actors can promote democracy in their own nations. That includes jurisdictions experiencing, or at risk of, democratic backsliding. We examine scholarship on the roles of governing political parties and actors; political opposition groups; civil society and independent media; and the business sector. We draw upon both the academic literature and reported practical experience.

The following recommendations are intended to be broadly applicable globally. We recognize of course that they must be customized to the particular circumstances of each national and subnational unit where they are applied. For example, in the United States, applying some of these at the federal level will be challenging in the immediate period ahead because of illiberal advances. But state and local governments, particularly where pro-democracy majorities command control of all three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) offer fertile ground for advancements. And the U.S.'s deep civil society provides a strong platform for nongovernmental action. Indeed, there may even be pockets of opportunity at the federal level for achieving compromise on particular issues, and the pro-democracy forces should be ready to pounce, for example, achieving additional federal funding for safe, free, and fair elections as part of larger budget compromises between the legislative and the executive branches. Because of the central importance of preserving elections as a channel for ousting autocracy, seizing these opportunities should be prioritized at the national and subnational levels.

1. POLITICAL PARTIES AND ACTORS

SUMMARY

Political parties and actors should:

- Be prepared for, and invest in, protecting against internal and external interference in elections. Elections are the foundation of a democracy—yet advances in digital technology, cyber, generative artificial intelligence, and disinformation have rendered elections and electoral processes increasingly complex and vulnerable to interference, discord, and manipulation. Governments should have a proactive, comprehensive deterrence strategy—with responsible actors in clearly defined roles—that will capably detect interference, respond, and punish nations and non-state actors who interfere in democratic elections. Governments and political parties should invest in the people and systems necessary for the technological and physical security of election counting, voter registration machines, and political campaign networks. Parties must take responsibility for screening candidates for both character and competence.

- Enact policies that promote and protect broad access to the vote and reject voter suppression.

- Regulate the role of money in politics to retain trust and transparency in the democratic system through the creation of such mechanisms as public financing of campaigns, disclosure requirements for donations, and limits on the amount of campaign donations. Conduct investigative journalism to follow the money and expose it as a first step.

- Uphold institutional obligations and use their political power ethically and responsibly. That includes through "institutional forbearance" (i.e., politicians should refrain from using the full breadth and scope of their politically allocated power) and through "mutual toleration" (i.e., opposing sides regarding one another as legitimate rivals but not enemies.) When these norms break down and antidemocratic and authoritarian challenges emerge, further legal mechanisms should be considered to hold accountable and sanction extreme behavior.

- Defend the independence of the judiciary by establishing public procedures for the selection, appointment, and promotion of judges, for the allocation of cases to judges, as well as codes of ethical

behavior that protect the integrity of the judicial decisionmaking process from undue political pressure, intimidation, and attacks.

- Implement judicial transparency mechanisms (e.g., opening up courtrooms, producing publicly available transcriptions of proceedings, and placing cameras in courtrooms).

- Strengthen the independence of prosecutors, including insulating them from political pressure and allowing them to fairly and freely apply the rule of law.

Those with institutional control of national and state-level, democratic political systems bear responsibility for their vibrancy and commitment to democracy. This section distills best practices that incumbent executive, legislative, judicial, and political party leaders can follow to maintain the democratic health and character of the system within which they operate and are responsible. These duties manifest in separate but related ways, from policy choices to institutional behavior to political statements.

A. STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES AND FEATURES

In a democracy, political actors at all levels are responsible for strengthening democratic practices and institutions and upholding checks and balances and connected features. We highlight three features in particular: Secure, free, and fair elections; money in politics; and the formation of strong political parties populated by pro-democracy politicians that are appropriately attuned to a diverse grassroots support base.

PILLAR 1: Protect Elections

Secure, free, transparent, and fair elections are the foundation of democracy, yet ensuring they meet the highest standards is a complicated endeavor, and increasingly so. Even in well-established democracies, measures must be taken to guard against partisan or other efforts to manipulate the vote.[69] Conversely, governments should enact policies that promote broad access to the vote, taking into account their national contexts. In the United States, for example, such measures could include automatic, early, mail, or same-day voting.[70] But each nation uses its own voting systems and structures and will need to customize best practices to its particular context.

Elections must first be secured against domestic interference by the parties in power and the government officials who are responsible for carrying out these electoral processes and management, who may have strong incentives to warp them, and be particularly well positioned to do so. Election results in a democratic society need to be accepted as legitimate by all sides of the competition; as many democratic societies become more polarized and

hyper-partisan, this of course remains critical but is increasingly more difficult.

The ramifications of historical and contemporary policies disenfranchising certain populations of voters should be rectified through legislation and enforcement of laws at national, state, or local levels when appropriate.[71] Protecting the right to vote and ensuring ballot access guarantees marginalized groups equal access to the rights of citizenship and democratic participation through the platform of electing their representatives. For example, 24 U.S. states and the District of Columbia have linked voter registration mechanisms to "routine and necessary transaction(s)" such as updating one's address at the DMV.[72] Proponents correctly argue that automatic voter registration (AVR) processes will increase voter participation by ensuring that no eligible citizen will be disenfranchised by registration hurdles.

Protecting the right to vote means responsible officials should reject laws and other policies that undermine and restrict ballot access for eligible voters. For example, in the U.S. there have been a rash of laws passed in U.S. states that make voting more difficult, including for marginalized communities. Pro-democracy officials at the federal level in the U.S., including in Congress, have sought to pass legislation such as the Freedom to Vote Act, which would broadly bolster election protections, and the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would restore protections that existed in the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 to prevent states from enacting discriminatory laws. We see antidemocratic actors block these attempts and similar efforts have been frustrated by such actors globally.[73]

Ensuring that every eligible citizen has an unimpeded path to exercising their democratic right to vote is not merely an issue of equal rights; it is also a bulwark against would-be autocrats and antidemocratic actors who cast doubt on the ability of democracy to both deliver results and realize people's desires in politics and policymaking. The belief that people can make their voices heard through their votes is fundamental to the functioning of democracy.

Elections must also be secured against rising international interference practiced by Russia, China, Iran, and others in the U.S., Europe, and globally.[74] To do this, governments must provide the necessary resources and infrastructure to eliminate and prevent against vulnerabilities within the electoral process, both internally and externally. This includes investing in efforts to combat Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). Protecting against external meddling requires improving the technological security of election counting, voter registration machines, and political campaign networks. It entails encouraging social media and other news

media companies to cooperate with the government in addressing the problem of disinformation.[75] Governments must also develop a comprehensive deterrence strategy that will appropriately punish nations.[76] Governments must also restrain themselves from politicizing intelligence on foreign interference, as the U.S. did in 2020.[77] And governments must refrain from even the appearance of courting foreign electoral interference, as when then-candidate Trump asked Russia to find emails belonging to his opponent in 2016.[78]

Democracies that wish to deter election interference, which by its nature is usually ambiguous, plausibly deniable, and largely covert, face many challenges.[79] Recent interference in U.S., Moldovan, and Romanian elections—and clear evidence of Russian actions—points to more brazen and coordinated attempts to undermine democratic elections and democracy writ large.[80] A successful deterrence strategy, nevertheless, should generally be predicated upon two fundamental approaches: deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment.[81] The former amounts to good defense. That is, persuading the adversary not to expend energy attempting to do you harm, because they will ultimately prove unsuccessful. Efforts to protect against foreign interference, which we touch on above, can thus have a valuable deterrent effect. Not only can these efforts reduce the impact of interference should it occur—they can (in theory) reduce the likelihood of it occurring in the first place. These steps can be particularly worthwhile but alone cannot prevent rising levels of interference.

The second approach to deterrence—deterrence by punishment—entails clearly and credibly conveying to the potential adversary a willingness to undertake painful and proportionate retaliatory measures. The most immediate hurdle that democracies face here is developing a capacity to quickly and accurately determine the identity of the offender. To that end, nations with robust and sophisticated intelligence operations, such as the United States, should continue to monitor election interference abroad and share evidence with democracies with more modest capabilities. In the scenario in which allies conclude that the intelligence function of a backsliding democracy has been compromised by an autocrat who is in power, they must find ways to assist each other individually or through separate groupings. Governments must also be transparent and move quickly to point out interference and debunk disinformation networks.

Continuously recalibrating and communicating viable and impactful retaliatory and countermeasures is a difficult enterprise but is essential as democracies face consequential backsliding and illiberal candidates. Democracies must be ready to impose sufficient punishment, including if necessary punitive sanctions, for election interference so that an adversary will be deterred while balancing this with the need to control potentially

dangerous escalation ladders. Moreover, democracies face tradeoffs in communicating their possible mechanisms of response—ambiguity allows leaders to save face and provides flexibility down the road, but it can also leave room for adversaries to ignore or otherwise misinterpret unclear signals. Governments' national security strategy teams should carefully identify a range of possible means of punishment, and craft (at least privately) detailed plans for how each tool might serve the broader strategic end of electoral interference retaliation.

Given the remarkably low costs of electoral interference and the potentially high yield for bad actors, it is, of course, extremely unlikely that democracies will be able to perfectly deter further meddling. Nonetheless, deterrence by denial and by punishment, taken together, should form the foundation of democracies' deterrence strategies. It is necessary for democracies to do what is possible to deter and dissuade nefarious governments from meddling. Where those efforts fall short, they must then mitigate the damage of foreign interference and pursue punishment when it occurs and preempt additional election attacks given a perpetual cycle of interference and domestic enablers of foreign election interference.

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

An important component of deterrence by denial is a robust and empowered independent media able to investigate, watchdog, and hold violators to account. Therefore, part of the deterrence strategy should include increased governmental resources and an expansion of programs and agencies to support a sustained and top-level commitment to support free media. This should include supporting independent investigative consortiums such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, which has been funded in part by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, and private foundations.[82] Government-subsidized media can be captured by an autocratic government,[83] so another option is to establish private foundations for this purpose to which tax-deductible contributions can be given—still vulnerable given the tax status but less vulnerable than direct government funding. Should the U.S. step back, other democracies must step up. Officials should reject efforts to weaponize government to stifle quality and unbiased information or undermine a diverse, pluralistic media environment.

The advancement of technologies, including addictive social media platforms and newer AI developments, is rapidly transforming the functioning of democracy as government actors have struggled to keep pace. Technological advances can bridge various peoples and ideas and have helped create some democratic openings (alas, some short-lived) in countries like Belarus, Myanmar, Iran, and Sri Lanka.[84] However, technology's growing influence also poses a mushrooming array of risks to democracy. In 2012, democracy scholar Larry Diamond saw the power of

social media as a double-edged sword: It could be used as a "liberation technology" by citizens or "deployed just as effectively by authoritarian regimes seeking to control the internet, stifle protest, and target dissenters."[85] Recently, Diamond raised the alarm, again citing social media as "a major threat to democratic stability and human freedom," and warning that swift advances in technology hold the potential to fuel "postmodern totalitarianism." According to Diamond, "this two-sided dynamic has set off an intense technological race between 'netizens' demanding freedom and authoritarians determined to retain their grip on power."[86]

PILLAR 6: Defeat Disinformation

In recent years, the darker potential of these technologies to disrupt and impact democracies emerged. We have learned how social media platforms and algorithms enabled misinformation in many democracies, and authoritarian-leaning states. Technology giants generally have pursued profits and tried to evade responsibility for the role their platforms play in the functioning (and malfunctioning) of democratic processes, including shaping election discourse. U.S. tech companies have at times taken steps to voluntarily address the impact of election integrity and challenges posed by AI but there has been backsliding as well and much more action is needed.[87]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Details surrounding the run-up to and aftermath of the United States' 2020 presidential election, for example, suggest that companies like Facebook and what was then known as Twitter, not only initially failed to address the use of their social media platforms to spread disinformation, but helped the far-right movement by amplifying those voices who were prolific spreaders of disinformation.[88] Some remedial measures were eventually taken, but they have since fallen by the wayside. For instance, despite taking swift action to curtail misinformation in the wake of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, social media companies' efforts to moderate content on their platforms have steadily declined in the years since, allowing lies about the 2020 and 2024 elections, the attempted assassination of Donald Trump, and similar issues to flourish.[89] In 2024, more examples surfaced of this decline, including a fake video—determined by U.S. intelligence to be the work of Russian actors—depicting a Haitian man claiming to have voted "multiple times" in the state of Georgia, which was circulated hundreds of thousands of times on social media platforms.[90]

An authoritarian leader or an aspiring autocratic actor can harness the internet and digital technology to consolidate and capture the state, undermining rule of law, democracy, and freedoms inside their own country; likewise, wealthy tech entrepreneurs can seek to capture candidates for their own purposes. The risk is amplified in cases where there is a lack of social media and artificial intelligence regulations. There are also increased threats to governments and their citizens from state and non-state actors: cyber assaults, hacking, ransomware, and spyware to name only a few examples.

The state backing, or tacit support, of such efforts creates a risk to the prosperity and security of democracies. Bullying, doxing, and harassment are also used to keep candidates from running or to prevent individuals from standing up against autocrats.[91]

Governments, particularly the United States where many of the most powerful tech companies are headquartered, should require regular, mandatory reporting by technology service providers to document abuse of their systems and provide more accountability through prescribed transparency standards.[92] If this cannot be achieved at the federal level it should be addressed at the state level. At an Oct. 2021 Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Frances Haugen, a whistleblower from Facebook, testified that "as long as Facebook is operating in the shadows, hiding its research from public scrutiny, it is unaccountable. Until the incentives change, Facebook will not change. Left alone, Facebook will continue to make choices that go against the common good."[93] At the DataGrail Summit in Aug. 2024, Haugen once again emphasized that "because of the corporate culture," trade-offs made by Facebook ended "up on the side of profits instead of optimizing for what was good for people."[94]

While the United States will need to lead in oversight of social media companies and AI platforms, like-minded countries should (and some, like Brazil,[95] already are) develop a code of conduct to prevent the proliferation of technologies used to undermine democracy and enable oppression.[96]

PILLAR 3: Fight Corruption

The role of money in politics must be properly regulated so as not to elevate special interests over those of the public and foster a lack of trust in the democratic system. To retain trust in the free and fair elections that are fundamental to the democratic system, political parties should implement a small donor matching system or other mechanism for the public financing of campaigns; create disclosure requirements for donations; and set limits on the amount of money that can be donated to campaigns.

States should also agree to a common set of anti-money laundering and anti-corruption standards that surpass international best practices. These reforms can have positive effects such as the emergence of more political challengers, the reduction in the total cost of campaigns, and a larger proportion of budgets being devoted to public welfare spending, each of which works in tandem to strengthen democratic institutions and trust in government.[97]

Finally, political parties must strike the proper balance between central control and grassroots influence. Excessive domination by party bosses has long been viewed, and rightly so, as antidemocratic.[98] But too much decentralization of decisionmaking power in selecting party leaders and

candidates may also have perverse effects. Some of these effects include unduly empowering fringe elements that do not represent the views or interests of the majority and special interest groups.[99] This may reduce the breadth of party appeal, which in turn, may reduce politicians' incentives to make decisions in the public interest. Recent work has advocated for an approach to political parties that brings establishment political figures and activists closer together and emphasizes the value of critical debate among decisionmakers, with the objective of diversifying political discourse to include alternative perspectives.[100] Such an intermediate approach enables political parties to keep central control in mind while maintaining a diverse base and remaining in touch with grassroots supporters, and properly representing their interests.

B. RESPONSIBLE POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

In addition to helping foster conditions conducive to democratic consolidation and implementing policies that protect democratic practices, officials must also use their political power responsibly in order to safeguard democracy. In practice, politicians who uphold their institutional obligations will respect two important norms of political behavior: institutional forbearance and mutual toleration. In so doing, they can insulate themselves, their parties, and their democracies from would-be authoritarians.[101]

PILLAR 2: Defend Rule of Law

The norm of "institutional forbearance" holds that politicians should refrain from using the full breadth and scope of their politically allocated power, when doing so would undermine the democratic system.[102] Leading political scientists stress the importance of such restraint for democratic stability and functioning. Institutional forbearance is often a matter of adhering to norms not written into law, such as not packing courts, respecting term limits, and refraining from issuing executive orders to circumvent the decisions of other branches of government. In Germany, for example, the threatening rise of the Alternative for Germany pro-autocratic party, or AfD, enacted changes to the Constitutional Court Act and a constitutional amendment to prevent the pro-autocratic part from packing the courts if they were to come into power.[103]

Important work on cooperation in political systems suggests that politicians who exhibit moderation, while seeking the best possible outcome for themselves, are making a good strategic bet. Such behavior will help produce repeated cooperation and sustained 'playing' over the long term. Intransigence, on the other hand, incentivizes costly retaliation.[104] Significant historical evidence suggests that excessive retaliation can lead to system breakdown.[105]

Sometimes the solution can be found in strong constitutional protections, but deftly written constitutions (and where available, amendments) alone are insufficient to guarantee democracy. Even the best constitutions include gaps and ambiguities that are subject to competing interpretations. Moreover, constitutions will unavoidably be vulnerable to what legal scholars have dubbed "constitutional hardball."[106] This is the opposite of institutional forbearance and is exceptionally difficult to guard against.[107]

An example of illiberal leaders playing constitutional hardball was the political turmoil in the Czech Republic in 2017–2018. The unabashedly illiberal Czech President Milos Zeman used his limited constitutional powers to their fullest extent to support the populist Prime Minister Andrej Babis, who in 2019 was embroiled in a corruption scandal that prompted the largest Czech protests since the Velvet Revolution.[108] Zeman allowed Babis' proposed government to continue in a caretaker capacity even when he lost a parliamentary vote of no confidence in Jan. 2018 and stated that he would reappoint Babis as prime minister even if he lost another vote of no confidence in Nov. 2018 (a vote that Babis ultimately survived).[109] All of these decisions are technically legal; Zeman operated within his constitutional authority. However, Zeman's purported alliance with Babis disregarded generally accepted political norms, particularly the norm of replacing a prime minister after he or she has lost a no confidence vote. In 2021, Babis and his party, ANO, narrowly lost to a coalition of pro-EU opposition parties that united against them and formed the next government, which is still in power.[110] Since its defeat in 2021, ANO has remained influential in regional and domestic politics. In Sept. 2024, ANO, still led by Babis, picked up a third of the seats in the Parliament's upper house and secured landslide victories in 10 of the Czech Republic's 13 counties,[111] providing momentum as some predict its return to power in the 2025 parliamentary elections.[112] It's important to have the judiciary as a neutral referee in these constitutional machinations because constitutions are not self-enforcing.[113] And this is why the capture of the courts, and particularly the highest court in the land—whether Hungarian or Polish or Russian or American—is so crucial for autocrats.

Examples from Donald Trump's first term of going beyond institutional norms include his declaration of a national emergency to redirect congressionally appropriated military funds for the use of building his border wall,[114] his use of the White House as a backdrop for his acceptance speech as the 2020 presidential nominee,[115] and—most prominently and worryingly—his refusal to concede defeat and commit to a peaceful transfer of power following the 2020 presidential election.[116] Trump's failure to admit defeat in the 2020 presidential election, along with the repeated spreading of falsehoods of impropriety and fraud in the election, culminated in the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. The events of Jan. 6 serve as a reminder of the danger

illiberal leaders can pose to democracies[117] when they refuse to abide by political norms. This is not in the least because they can set an example for others, as appears to have been the case with the storming of the Brazilian capitol on Jan. 8, 2022, following Bolsonaro's defeat.[118] Trump has made even more extreme promises to bypass institutional norms in his second term.[119] Any such transgressions should be met with a redoubled commitment to democracy by the legislative and judicial branches, and what is in effect the fourth branch in our American federal system: the states, where considerable power lies. But that ferocious response must itself be normative, and not mimic Trump's transgressions in a race to the bottom.

A second norm crucial to democratic functioning is "mutual toleration," which addresses how political opponents treat one another.[120] Politicians who are mutually tolerant acknowledge that, if their competitor follows constitutional rules, they have an equally legitimate claim to run for office. Although there may be significant substantive disagreements between opponents, and they may not like each other, they do not treat each other as existential threats.[121]

PILLAR 5:
Defend Good Governance and Pluralism

In practice, mutual tolerance requires that democratic actors on both sides of an issue accept that a legitimate debate over pressing concerns such as migration levels is different from tolerating the anti-migrant—often anti-Muslim—rhetoric that frequently employs xenophobia to exploit refugee and migration crises. Harmful identity politics must be detoxified, while meaningful differences in policy debates should be respected.[122] While substantive debates on policy issues should be welcomed, democratic actors are responsible for limiting the extent to which debates over identity politics poisons democratic politics and empowers extreme parties. Debates on migration policy and reasonable restrictions need to be matched with efforts focused on local and urban-level integration, with a posture that eschews hateful and discriminatory rhetoric. In the lead-up to the 2024 general election, researchers saw high levels of anti-minority hate speech. From Jan. 2023 to Aug. 2024, for example, harmful online rhetoric targeting South Asians doubled.[123] During the Sept. 2024 presidential debate, Donald Trump made false comments about Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, which has led to bomb threats and xenophobic harassment of the Haitian community.[124] He also used similar language to Adolph Hitler in "Mein Kampf" saying immigrants are "poisoning the blood" of the country.[125]

Another aspect of responsible political behavior is keeping power out of the hands of extremist leaders.[126] Political leaders and parties generally enjoy significant ability to curb the influence of political extremists through, for instance, making strategic, mainstream choices about coalitions and leadership roles. Yet history shows that pro-democracy, establishment politicians permitting the rise of radical leaders, while operating under the mistaken belief that they would benefit from those leaders' popularity and be

able to control their worst impulses, is frequently a mistake.[127] Research also shows that the moderate right wing tends to lose when they normalize far-right parties.[128]

Unfortunately, not all would-be despots are easy to spot. Some of today's infamous illiberal leaders, such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán, had promising beginnings as liberal pro-democracy figures. In 1989, Orbán studied civil society at Oxford University, funded by a scholarship from the Soros Foundation. He began his political career as a liberal democrat and governed democratically, though in coalition with parties that had solid democratic track records, in his first term as prime minister from 1998 to 2002.[129] But that changed after he lost two national elections. His lurch towards authoritarianism following his return as Prime Minister in 2010 accelerated when the Hungarian electoral law gave him a constitutional majority in the Parliament.[130] The Orbán government began attacking democratic institutions through controlling the media, capturing the courts, and targeting nongovernmental organizations.[131] He installed loyalists in key positions and then rewrote the election law, such that it tilted it in his favor—all in the first three years.[132] By 2022, Orbán won his fourth consecutive term with the opposition weak and disadvantaged by the ever-changing election laws as well as by more than a decade of attacks on their funding sources.

As Orbán was progressively ostracized by some in the European Union,[133] Hungary adopted a foreign policy of reaching out to fellow autocrats and adversaries of the transatlantic alliance.[134] Orbán's relationship with China has arguably contributed to significant Chinese foreign direct investment to Hungary.[135] As another indicator of Hungary's support for China, the Hungarian government has blocked EU statements and other actions, including EU condemnation of China for human rights abuses in Hong Kong.[136] Orbán's close relationship with Russia's Vladimir Putin has played a role in shaping Hungary's anti-Western foreign policy, including at times by blocking EU aid to Ukraine, impeding EU sanctions on Russia, and opposing NATO expansions, given Russian objections. Orbán had left power and then returned, doing considerable damage to democracy the second time around.[137] This example highlights that aspiring autocrats' second stint in control can be much more devastating than their first. Trump has admired Orbán's governing style, which raises concerns that Trump will attempt to emulate Orbán's tactics in his second term. Orbán's approach has involved corruption, suppressing civil society and independent media, capturing the judiciary and state, taming the bureaucracy, and tilting elections in his favor. Furthermore, Trump has expressed frustration with White House officials and bureaucrats who prevented him from transgressing executive authority, such as blocking him from using the military on American citizens, suggesting a desire to overcome these limitations in his second administration.[138]

As an early-warning system of such developments, political scientists have articulated a generally reliable framework for identifying prospective dictators, and democracy proponents should vigilantly look out for these warning signs. Drawing upon the foundational scholarship of Juan Linz,[139] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt propose four key indicators of authoritarian behavior. They include: "1) Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game; 2) Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; 3) Toleration or encouragement of violence; and 4) Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including the media."[140] It is important to note that prospective authoritarian leaders initially tend to demonstrate these behaviors within the confines of existing laws and powers that they already possess. They often go to great lengths—such as inventing threats to justify the utilization of emergency powers—to maintain the legality of their actions. These early detection mechanisms can be found elsewhere. Opposition political parties and leaders must, therefore, respond in turn, using all legal and discretionary tools at their disposal to identify, isolate, and ostracize aspiring politicians who meet one or more of those criteria.

Note that when autocratic takeover is looming, outgoing leaders may choose to take protective measures, such as preemptory pardons.[141] For example, likely in response to Trump's reported plans to restore his 2020 Schedule F executive order as part of his Agenda 47 platform,[142] the Biden administration instituted a new rule that protects civil servants from being stripped of their protected status.[143] While this will not stop Schedule F from being implemented by a Trump Administration, it will slow it down and make it more difficult to institute.[144]

PILLAR 3: Fight Corruption

Levitsky and Ziblatt suggest five mechanisms for how pro-democracy establishment groups might use their influence to prevent the rise of authoritarian politicians altogether. First, and most importantly, to keep them out of positions of power, rival pro-democracy parties and leaders should collaborate in a united front to push back against extremists. Second, they can refrain from placing would-be authoritarians on party ballots for higher office, even when doing so might generate votes. Third, they can purge extremists in the grassroots of their own parties, by expulsion if necessary. Fourth, political parties can avoid forming any alliances with extremist wings on their own side of the ideological spectrum. Finally, they can go one step further by refraining from appearing or associating with potential despots, in turn refraining from providing those groups with political legitimacy.[145] Such steps can go a long way toward marginalizing, and in turn defeating, would-be authoritarians.[146]

These strategies, taken together, amount to a gatekeeping function. Put simply, it is the responsibility of elected politicians to make every effort to prevent obvious threats to democratic health. The annals of history contain

many examples of opportunistic but misguided democratic leaders who facilitated the rise of populists with clear and identifiable antidemocratic tendencies, hoping that they could harness the latter's popularity to boost themselves or their own party and believing that they could control them along the way. All too often, such optimism has proven to be foolhardy and consequential. Such populists, once entrenched, can and do use their positions and powers to do tremendous damage to democratic systems and processes. Many, at least in part, owe their positions to the acquiescence of shortsighted democratic elites.

French establishment politicians, however, successfully used a combination of these gatekeeping strategies (and the fact that their election system has a second round) in the 2017 and 2024 presidential elections to keep the far-right National Front leader Marine Le Pen out of power. In 2017, all moderate presidential hopefuls who lost in the first round of the election immediately endorsed centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron in the second round. These endorsements provided a much-needed boost for Macron, who went on to defeat Le Pen in a landslide victory—albeit with a lesser margin than in 2002 when France rallied around Jacques Chirac against Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine's father. Reportedly, the French establishment politicians who universally endorsed Macron did so to limit the influence of Le Pen and her party, whom they perceived to be a danger to democracy.[147] In France's 2024 snap elections, after the National Rally Party finished first in initial balloting, a coalition of four left-wing parties united and strategically pulled candidates to avoid splitting anti-National Rally Party votes, ultimately keeping Le Pen and the far right away from power once again.[148]

C. JUDICIAL AND PROSECUTORIAL INDEPENDENCE AND RULE OF LAW

PILLAR 2: Defend Rule of Law

Healthy democracies thrive on a partnership between the general public, elected officials, and independent institutions.[149] Among those institutions, the judiciary is one of the most important, particularly in countries veering toward illiberalism. As Christopher Larkins notes, an independent judiciary serves a unique role in constitutional democracies in enforcing the constitution, civil and political rights, checks and balances, and other democratic procedures.[150] An independent judiciary is one that remains impartial, approaches cases without bias (including toward the politically powerful), is not vulnerable to threats, and operates without fear.[151] It is one that is regulated by a clear and fairly administered code of judicial ethics which in turn inspires public confidence in the administration of justice.[152]

It is important to distinguish the normal operation of healthy democracies from the tactics of aspiring authoritarians who operate under a veneer of legality and put into place a system that Kim Scheppele calls a "Frankenstate." Dr. Frankenstein created a monster by stitching together

what had been normal body parts of normal people. Autocrats mirror this technique with law—manipulating and twisting it into a new and wholly illiberal monstrosity.[153] To combat this "autocratic legalism," it is crucial to view the rule of law as a first line of defense against the dismantling of democratic institutions and to defend it vigorously.[154] Poland is a leading example of how hard it is to deal with a packed court at the top captured by autocratic interests—and the Venice Commission's recent opinion on this, which rebuffed an effort to remove certain judges who had been appointed by the illiberal government, is counterproductive.[155] In places in which autocracy really took root and damaged the institutions, getting them back is not easy.

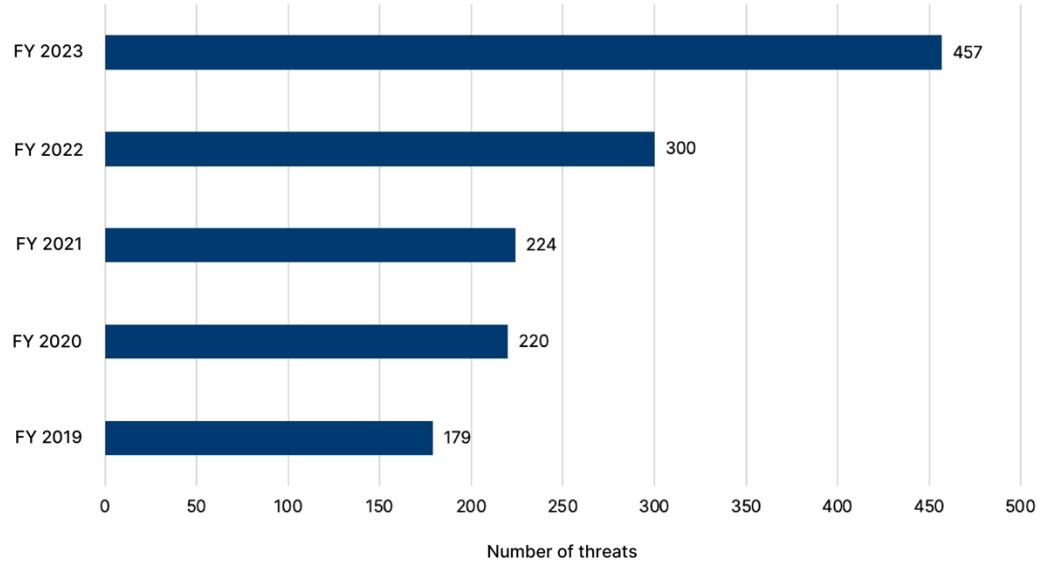
The increase of illiberal tendencies in Europe, for example, poses a serious threat to judicial independence. In a 2022 survey of 15,821 judges across 27 countries, they generally "rate the independence of the judges in their country between 7.0 and 9.8,"[156] and they rank "the independence of councils for the judiciary [national judicial oversight bodies] on average per country between 2.7 and 9.6" on a scale of 10.[157] Many judicial officers see corruption as an issue and are critical of the appointment and promotion processes for judges, and feel inappropriate pressure from social and traditional media in individual cases.[158] Some also express that they faced threats of or actual disciplinary action based on how they decided a case.[159] Many judges also felt that implementation of judicial decisions that go against the interest of the government are often not sufficient, nor is respect for judicial independence.[160] Constitutional courts in particular have been targeted by populist leaders. As Bojan Bugarič and Tom Ginsburg note, "rule-of-law institutions in Central and Eastern Europe always lacked the necessary support of genuinely liberal political parties and programs, leaving the courts vulnerable to attacks from populists."[161]

There have been similar concerns in the U.S. at various levels about threats to judicial independence. In April of 2024, the American Bar Association released a statement warning of increased threats and attacks to federal judges.[162] They note that serious threats have doubled since 2019 and tallied 457 serious threats in total for 2023. U.S. prosecutors, too, have faced an increase in threats, from 58 in 2021 to 155 in 2023.[163]

FIGURE 7

Serious threats against federal judges

Fiscal years 2019 to 2023



Source: "Judges in Trump-related cases face unprecedented wave of threats", Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-election-judges-threats

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These threats in the United States aren't contained solely to judges and prosecutors. Court staff, family members of justices, and courts themselves have been on the receiving end of such threats.[164] The number of these threats has increased markedly since before Trump's first campaign for presidency. In the years before Trump's first candidacy,[165] the average number of incidents at the federal level against judges, prosecutors, staff, and buildings was 1,180, which grew to an average of 3,810 in the seven years following.[166] These threats in the United States are extremely harmful for the ability of judges, as well as prosecutors and court staff, to operate effectively and independently without the fear of unfounded retribution.[167] Similar erosion of the judiciary has also occurred elsewhere globally. For instance, in Poland, as briefly noted in the introduction, the autocratic Law and Justice (PiS) regime was ousted by a coalition of democratic forces. The new pro-democracy coalition government has been struggling with the erosion of the independence of the judiciary that was wrought under eight years of PiS. That damage had been described back in 2018 as having brought the country close to "a point of no return concerning the independence of its judiciary."[168] From 2015 to 2017, the courts were packed with new judges,[169] the Constitutional Tribunal was reorganized to decrease power, and decisionmaking rules were changed to "paralyze the court." Among several new laws designed to cripple judicial independence was a 2015 amendment that required a two-thirds majority for binding decisions and raised the quorum to hear cases from nine to 13.[170] Since the court had only 12 justices

at the time, the rule rendered the body effectively inoperable. As soon as PiS controlled a majority of judges on the Constitutional Tribunal—thanks to a combination of illegal packing and attrition—PiS pivoted from paralyzing the tribunal to weaponing it towards PiS's own autocratic ends.[171] Throughout its time in power, PiS chipped away at judicial integrity through action as well as legal changes: It forcibly removed upwards of 149 regional court officials for "discretionary" reasons, appointed poorly qualified replacements, and reshaped the National Council of the Judiciary (created to ensure judicial independence) with political appointees.[172]

PILLAR 2: Defend Rule of Law

The Council of Europe previously identified a series of steps to defend a besieged judiciary.[173] First, states should seek to depoliticize the election and appointment of judges. Appointees should neither represent political factions nor face "political influence either from the executive or legislature." Second, established procedures should guide the selection, appointment, and promotion of judges. These procedures should be transparent and "based on objective criteria relating to the exercise of judicial office and focused primarily on ability and experience." Third, states should enact codes of ethical behavior for the executive and legislative branches that "restrain [unduly harsh or politically motivated criticism and protect the integrity of the judicial decisionmaking process from undue political pressure, intimidation and attacks." Fourth, the judiciary itself should pursue a more "proactive" approach to dealing with the media to increase public confidence and dispel misunderstandings about processes and cases. Engagement with media might come through independent "communication services or spokespersons that can answer criticism on behalf of the judiciary and give general explanations of the legal process." Fifth, objective and established criteria should determine the allocation of cases to judges. Sixth, states can deter corruption through adequate remuneration, working conditions, transparent investigations, and clear ethical standards.[174] The Council of Europe has also engaged in a multi-year review that is set to culminate in November of 2025 with updated recommendations.[175]

The EU has taken a more hard-nosed path to restoration of judicial independence than the Council of Europe because it has stronger enforcement powers.[176] When Poland's attacks on the judiciary began, the European Commission triggered its "rule of law mechanism," which produced a series of warnings before it invoked Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union that a breach of basic values was threatened.[177] The Commission also brought five different enforcement actions (infringements) against Poland before eventually freezing nearly all of its EU funds in 2022 under newly enacted authorities conditioning the flow of EU funds on the maintenance of judicial independence and the protection of fundamental rights.[178] Hungary too had significant EU funding frozen for having compromised the rule of law,

including judicial independence, and other issues.[179] As of Jan. 1, 2025, Hungary has permanently lost access to just over €1 billion in EU funds.[180] While direct parallels to these actions under U.S. law are hard to come by, the experience of the EU suggests that once judicial independence is fatally weakened, it is very hard to get independent courts back.[181]

Returning to the application of enforceable codes of ethical behavior to the judiciary, we note that such codes of conduct for judges and for all branches of government are a critical piece[182] of a functioning democracy. To understand the erosion in the public trust that can ensue given the lack of such codes, one need only look to United States Supreme Court issues in recent years.[183] Supreme Court Justice Thomas, for example, received the most in gifts with 193 gifts totaling over $4 million.[184] Justice Alito had the second most contributions of the current Court, receiving over $170,000.[185] Both Justice Thomas and Justice Alito's particular ethics issues were compounded by their spousal conflicts, given that Virginia Thomas participated in efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election and that Martha-Ann Alito flew an upside-down American flag, a symbol used by the insurrectionists on Jan. 6, 2021, outside her home only a few days after Jan. 6.[186] These concerns were further exacerbated given that justices decide themselves whether or not to recuse from a case for conflicts of interest.[187] Neither Justice Thomas nor Justice Alito decided to recuse themselves from two cases related to the events of Jan. 6: Fischer v. United States and Trump v. United States.[188] These recent ethical lapses create at least the "appearance of impropriety," which may contribute to the public's remarkably low levels of public trust in the Supreme Court.[189]

PILLAR 2: Defend Rule of Law

In response to these and other such scandals, various proposals have been put forth to apply term or age limits to Supreme Court justices, as exist in 49 of the 50 U.S. states (all except RI),[190] and around the world, and to extend to the Supreme Court a code of ethics like those already applicable to state supreme court judges.[191] In 2024, then-President Joe Biden similarly proposed Supreme Court reform by way of both term limits and a binding ethical code of conduct.[192]

Ethics codes and enforcement have been present at the state supreme court level for decades. As of 1980, all 50 states had established commissions that could impose discipline following violations by justices to, at that time, the most common ethical code: William Howard Taft's "Canons of Judicial Ethics."[193] That original ethics code has been updated in the years since 1980. Regardless of their specific code in effect, the states vary in enforcement of their ethics norms, with some subjecting judges to judicial discipline, some

relying on review procedures if a justice is under investigation, and some that "bifurcate the prosecutorial and adjudicatory functions of their conduct commissions," according to a report by State Court Reporter.[194]

Though the Supreme Court announced they would subject themselves to their own code of ethics in November of 2023, there are no enforcement mechanisms in place, meaning the justices are not meaningfully bound to any ethical enforcement.[195] And the Court has so far refused meaningful changes in its recusal rules, which leaves the determination of conflicts of interest up to the individual judges who might be conflicted, all on the honor system. Many other high courts in constitutional democracies have procedures for considering recusals that do not leave the decision solely in the hands of the judge who has been challenged.[196]

PILLAR 2: Defend Rule of Law

Enforceable codes of ethics not only avoid the reality of conflicts of interest but also their appearance, which can be devastating to public confidence in a democracy. Public faith in democratic forms of governance is reinforced when officials adhere to high and enforceable ethical standards. The same is true of transparency: Democracy is strengthened through transparency mechanisms. Though transparency is no instant panacea for spurring democratic mobilization,[197] its thoughtful use throughout government is essential.[198] Multilateral organizations have sprung up in recognition of this crucial role of transparency in vibrant democracies, one of the foremost among them being the Open Government Partnership (OGP). OGP brings together both national and local governments in a voluntary declaration of government commitments to citizen empowerment and other good-government initiatives.[199] Its membership includes 77 countries and thousands of civil society organizations (CSOs).[200] By creating a coalition of stakeholders united by a shared commitment to transparency and openness in government, OGP is a model organization for collective efforts to fortify and improve democracy on a global scale.

PILLAR 3: Fight Corruption

However, even frameworks that go beyond a singular focus on transparency and accentuate the equal importance of accountability and participation (grouped together as TAP) are often insufficient to effect meaningful reductions in corruption and malfeasance. Research has shown that context is an indispensable consideration when crafting approaches to anti-corruption and transparency reform.[201] As such, a holistic fusion of TAP measures with context-specific factors ("TAP-plus") is necessary for success. Without appropriate attention to circumstances that can retard even the most time-honored, TAP-centered formulas including state capture, trust, and civic and media freedoms, these approaches are bound to prove inadequate.[202]

Returning to the case of the judiciary, empirical research has shown that there is a positive relationship between judicial transparency and trust in judges.[203] Both state actors and members of the judicial system should therefore work to open up courtrooms by producing publicly available transcripts of proceedings in a timely fashion, taking steps to ensure that sealed documents are minimized, lowering financial barriers to accessing court documents, and placing cameras in courtrooms, among other strategies. These actions can help to augment both judicial independence and citizen trust in the judiciary. In addition, emerging technologies, particularly big data and AI, pose both challenges and opportunities in promoting judicial independence and equity. Big data and AI can play a role in litigation by, for example, forecasting which judges and jurisdictions are responsive to which arguments and guiding well-funded litigants while disadvantaging those without access to such tools. They can also play a more beneficial role within the judiciary by identifying and serving as a tool in mitigating bias in judicial decisionmaking.[204] These lessons of transparency and technology for good government have much broader implications for democratic functioning, and as these technologies rapidly develop and deploy, democratic actors must work to ensure that their benefits are available and accessible to all.

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Finally, no discussion of the rule of law would be complete without addressing best practices for the functioning of prosecutors in investigating, initiating, and litigating enforcement matters. The need for prosecutorial autonomy in democratic systems is well recognized, as evinced by special safeguards from firing those entrusted with investigating government corruption.[205]

During his first term, then-President Trump and his administration offered striking proof of this need when they eroded the traditional independence of the Department of Justice (DOJ), triggering a crisis of confidence across democratic stakeholders including elected officials, judges, the press, and the public.[206] Under the Biden administration, the DOJ made strenuous efforts to restore independence, going so far as to counter Biden on one occasion when he expressed an opinion about a charging decision,[207] which he then admitted was done in error.[208]

In advance of his second term, Donald Trump's threats to the independence of the Department of Justice have only increased, with his promise of a "top to bottom overhaul to clean out the festering rot[,] corruption"[209] and "sickness that has taken over our Justice Department."[210] Trump has also called for utilizing the DOJ in order to seek retribution against perceived adversaries[211] and has picked individuals to run both the DOJ and the FBI, Pam Bondi, and Kash Patel, respectively, who have expressed agreement with this approach.[212]

There are a variety of best practices that federal prosecutors and agents can follow in response to these threats. For starters, they should not leave their positions as autocracy looms, but rather remain and insist on doing their jobs, which includes refusing to engage in wrongdoing. To the full extent permitted by law, which is considerable, they can in addition engage in whistleblowing activities.[213] U.S. structures allow for a variety of such channels, both within the executive branch, and otherwise. Congress takes the position that whistleblowers may go directly to its members or committees.[214] Whistleblowers have at times gone to the press or filed litigation of their own.[215] Long experience in the U.S. and internationally has established that these types of public and private activities can serve as an effective response to overreach by a new regime.[216] Of course, these kinds of activities should follow law and best practices. The operation of the rule of law also binds prosecutors as its guardians. Like judges, prosecutors must be subject to strong, transparent, and enforceable codes of conduct.[217] Over time that builds a culture of compliance that can withstand illiberal buffeting.

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2. POLITICAL OPPOSITION GROUPS

SUMMARY

Political opposition groups should:

- Form networks between other opposition groups, electoral activists, civil society groups, and, where appropriate, international organizations and actors. If the national government has taken a turn toward autocracy, subnational (state and local) government can be a powerful counterbalance. It may be especially important to bring into the coalition people who are leaving a political party that has turned autocratic.
- Create a unified democratic opposition where possible or consider using referenda as an alternative. When opposition groups can build a broad-based coalition, they significantly increase their chance of a democratizing outcome. Where forming a coalition is not possible, an alternative model to consider is implementing popular referenda, which provides the advantages of a binary structure and the potential to expose the unpopularity of populist governments and their policies.

- Increase election monitoring capacity and be prepared to use electoral abuse evidence as the basis for reform advocacy. Pro-democratic opposition parties must prioritize the protection of independent election monitoring. The opposition can boost its technical proficiency by partnering and collaborating with domestic and international election experts and observers and involving them in the process early in the electoral cycle. Where there is evidence of electoral abuses, the opposition should be prepared to work with external allies to apply pressure to the regime to reform electoral practices and protect democratic systems.

- Engage new voters by presenting a vision for the future. The pro-democracy political opposition must get voters to the polls. The opposition should partner with civil society groups to reach new segments of the population and convey optimism that change is possible. Successful tactics include bus tours and marches, discussion forums between candidates and citizens, door-to-door canvassing, civic education in schools and universities to prepare new voters to vote knowledgeably, street theater, popular music concerts, and satire.

- Remember that the message matters. The opposition must explain the costs of keeping an illiberal incumbent regime in power. Successful

campaigns combine this with positive and inclusive messages rather than solely negative attacks on the incumbent.

- Forcefully contest each individual illiberal act of nondemocratic actors within the bounds of democratic norms. Utilizing institutional measures such as the constitutional authorities of courts and legislatures can slow or obstruct illiberal reforms. Opposition leaders may also choose to pursue more extreme institutional measures available to them (e.g., impeachment processes, votes of no confidence, and recall referenda) and/or deploy extra-institutional tools (e.g., protests, strikes, or boycotts).

PILLAR 3: Fight Corruption

Political opposition groups face stark challenges in governments controlled by illiberal politicians, who, surrounded by loyalists, have gradually degraded democratic processes and consolidated their own holds on power.[218] To varying degrees, authoritarian-leaning political parties and leaders in countries like Turkey, Hungary, Georgia, and Egypt have already significantly eroded their nations' democratic natures.[219] Elections in such places are heavily tilted to favor the party in power, if not outright rigged; pro-democracy political opposition parties have been marginalized or extinguished altogether; and freedoms of speech and assembly are warped or nonexistent. These conditions constrain the operating space of pro-democratic opposition actors and, in turn, make illiberals harder to oust. This should not discourage pro-democratic actors from working toward improved conditions in those nations, as examples in jurisdictions such as Poland, Brazil, and Colombia show. Nevertheless, it highlights the importance of being alert to warning signs and preventing deterioration in nations where there is risk.

The iterative process of democratic backsliding provides opportunities for pro-democratic political opposition parties to resist these trends. Especially in early stages of democratic reversal, political opposition groups still have many tools available to them to compete for power through standard political processes, both at the polls and within legislative bodies. Although would-be authoritarians should be expected to continue to try to tilt the rules of the game in their favor, pro-democracy opposition parties have a very important role to play.[220]

What, then, should pro-democracy political opposition parties in backsliding nations do to restore democracy? Based upon recent scholarship, this section provides detailed recommendations for leaders and members of the political opposition—broken down between electoral strategies and institutional and extra-institutional tools.[221]

A. WINNING AN UNFAIR ELECTION

Elections, even when warped by authoritarians in hybrid states, have the potential to lead to liberalizing outcomes and provide real opportunities for transformational political change.[222] They can serve as an important mode of democratization that political opposition groups should aggressively pursue, even when the odds seem stacked against them.

Political scientists Valerie Bunce's and Sharon Wolchik's analysis of 11 elections in nine nations suggests that variance in opposition group electoral strategy was the most important explanation of success or failure. Ambitious and innovative opposition groups exhibited strong performance in elections and, in turn, improved democracy.[223]

Bunce and Wolchik outline the "electoral model," a set of electoral strategies for opposition campaigns against authoritarians.[224] To implement the model, pro-democracy political opposition must practice long-term planning, as well as pay close attention to detail, coordination, and lessons learned from past failures. Perhaps most importantly, pro-democracy parties must pursue an overarching process through which they form transnational networks between civil society groups, other opposition groups, local electoral activists, international organizations, and nations striving to promote democracy.

The electoral model includes several important components. The first, which has received significant scholarly attention, is forming a unified democratic opposition. Although far from a guarantee of electoral victory or ultimate democratization, empirical analysis of elections in competitive authoritarian regimes between 1990 and 2002 suggests that there is great value in taking this step. Even in challenging cases, when oppositions were able to build a broad-based coalition, the likelihood of a liberalizing electoral outcome increased by over 80 percent. Across 10 tested variables (including structural factors such as economic growth and the prior occurrence of a liberalizing electoral outcome), the opposition's formation of a coalition was the best predictor of a positive result.[225]

Although overcoming differences can be a challenge, forming a unified opposition provides multiple benefits. Most obviously, coalitions can reduce the number of squandered votes for different pro-democracy groups. Collaboration can also signal commitment to contesting power, and that the groups involved possess the political skills necessary to effectively govern. This can persuade skeptical citizens, civil society groups, and external democracy promoters to join the cause.[226] As the opposition grows its base, the ruling party faces increasing pressure to undertake anti-corruption reforms. For this reason, Mert Kartal argues that the EU can encourage good

governance practices in backsliding countries by providing opposition parties with electoral incentives to support pro-democracy policies.[227] Although institutional factors such as electoral rules and social cleavages do shape the formation of political coalitions before elections, scholarship suggests that their effects in hybrid regimes are only modest.[228] Thus, political opposition groups in backsliding nations enjoy agency to set their own electoral coalition strategies; environmental factors are not deterministic.

Of course, coalition formation can be excruciatingly difficult, especially in contexts where illiberal leaders have engineered or exploited divisions. Voters, too, face difficulties with this approach, as strategic voting may point them toward candidates whose views they find unpalatable. As Jan-Werner Müller argues, one way out of this political dilemma is the use of referenda.[229] With their binary yes-or-no structure and potential to craft pointed questions that reflect unity among opposition parties, referend offer an opportunity to citizens to decisively communicate their aversion to a populist government. While not possible in all contexts, such exercises of direct democracy could serve as alternatives to coalition formation when the latter is beyond reach. Of course, referenda can also be abused by autocrats, like the 2023 Polish referendum that was misused by PiS to caricature the opposition and enable campaign finance abuses.[230]

A second core component involves voting processes themselves. As we know, in hybrid regimes the ruling party works to tilt the playing field in its favor.[231] Election rigging techniques can be sophisticated, and at times, even include meddling with vote counts.[232] In response, the pro-democratic opposition must work hard to ensure independent election monitoring as well as find innovative solutions to counteract these practices.

The opposition can boost its technical proficiency by partnering and collaborating with international election observers and involving them in the process early. While independent election monitors are most effective, as they can more easily deflect claims of bias, opposition parties should also work to have their own trained election monitors where possible. Moreover, once armed with evidence of electoral abuses, the opposition should work with external allies to apply pressure to the regime to reform electoral practices.[233] We discuss possible synergies in greater detail in Section Two of the report, which focuses on how international actors can best promote democracy.

A third and final critical element of the electoral model is generating high turnout. There is no way around it: To win back power, the pro-democracy political opposition must get voters to the polls and must be prepared to counter unfair voter suppression tactics. Opposition parties in hybrid states

often lose elections partly because citizens opposed to the regime nonetheless abstain from voting due to their frustration with the opposition's frequent infighting or incompetence.[234] Others are young and are potentially first-time voters. The opposition must tune their messaging to win over both groups, generating new votes. Research investigating 61 competitive authoritarian elections after the end of the Cold War shows that increased voter turnout is directly associated with a larger vote share for the opposition.[235]

How can the opposition mobilize votes? Here, again, partnerships with a broad swath of civil society (and with international actors, who can help to provide an enabling environment, support political space, and provide skill-building opportunities for opposition groups) are valuable; the opposition should also maximize media opportunities to disseminate messages to a broader audience. Civil society groups can provide a key link to segments of the population that are otherwise difficult to reach. International organizations can also play a role; we say more about this in Section Two of this report.

PILLAR 7: Make Democracy Deliver

The opposition must clearly explain to the public the costs of keeping the incumbent regime in power and promote direct contact between opposition political leaders and citizens outside of major cities. The opposition must articulate, in clear terms, how particular encroachments place the system at risk and advantage the incumbent. Also effective is a positive and inclusive message that does not solely rely upon negative attacks on the incumbent. The opposition should go beyond rhetoric by improving upon policy failures and proposing better solutions that will meet the needs of real people.[236] To do so effectively, the opposition must understand the conditions of anger and disillusionment along the electorate that led to the rise of authoritarian leaders in the first place; merely seeking a return to the previous status quo is unlikely to suffice.

PILLAR 1: Protect Elections

Pro-democracy parties must also adjust to the changing digital landscape for political campaigns. Despite initial optimism about the internet's potential to make elections more democratic, it has become clear that the web is a double-edged sword for political campaigns, one that seems to favor illiberals. On the one hand, the internet enables candidates to fundraise, run less expensive campaigns, organize supporters, and mobilize voters.[237] But as the legal scholar Nathaniel Persily argues, "What the internet uniquely privileges above all else is the type of campaign message that appeals to outrage or otherwise grabs attention."[238] As a result, extreme actors have been able to harness the power of the internet better than their pro-democratic counterparts. Maria Ressa recounts in "How to Stand Up to a Dictator" how authoritarians and dictators can rise to power faster when equipped with "technology's godlike power to infect each of us with a virus

of lies, pitting us against one another, igniting, even creating, our fears, anger, and hatred."[239] Social media platforms such as Facebook have enabled democratic vulnerability, provided a forum for false information and hate speech, and fueled partisan divisions. Although such platforms have begun to make changes in the face of public pressure, these measures are unlikely to prove adequate on their own. As Persily points out, "Democracy depends on both the ability and the will of voters to base their political judgments on facts, or at least on strong intermediary institutions that can act as guardrails to channel decisionmaking within the broad range of democratic alternatives."[240]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

The campaigning landscape in recent years has been altered by artificial intelligence. AI tools have democratized the campaign field in certain respects,[241] including by lowering financial barriers to campaign entry for underfunded candidates,[242] supporting election officials in speeding up their processes by using AI to match mail-in ballot signatures and track hate speech that may unfairly warp the playing field,[243] and helping candidates proliferate targeted advertisement.[244] However, AI tools also pose a significant potential threat to safe, free, and fair democratic elections and campaigns. One of the most severe threats of AI in campaigning and elections is the proliferation of mis- and disinformation, including deepfakes of candidates. In advance of the 2024 primary, for instance, a fake robocall of former President Biden was circulated in New Hampshire intended to discourage voters from participating in the primary.[245] Because AI tools are comparatively low-cost, non-state actors and autocracies can easily develop political bots,[246] AI-generated visuals,[247] and pink slime news sites that are comprised of entirely fake news.[248]

Pro-democracy campaigns will need to learn from the success of illiberal candidates and implement a targeted digital strategy that maximizes message "virality," connects better with supporters on social media, and employs clever mobilization tactics. At the same time, opposition campaigns should take the high road by being truthful and inclusive in their messaging. Moreover, until governments and tech companies can plug digital vulnerabilities, the reality is that campaigns will also need a cybersecurity risk management plan. A successful example of a prepared and nimble campaign can be found in Emmanuel Macron's 2017 presidential election. Despite a "coordinated attempt to undermine" Macron's candidacy in what is now referred to as the "Macron Leaks" operation, Macron's campaign was able to fend off the attack, win the election, and boost its credibility as a modern, tech-savvy party.[249] More recently, in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, candidates of both parties ran campaigns that engaged with social media influencers and popular video game platforms to connect with certain voter groups virtually.[250] Assaulted by misinformation from the opposition, the

2020 Democratic campaign of Joe Biden formed an in-house effort and partnered with civil society to address misinformation online.[251] Another example of using online engagement to mobilize people against autocracy is the case of Syarhey Tsikhanouski in Belarus.[252] He started a YouTube channel in 2019 on which he documented and vented against daily autocratic obstacles facing entrepreneurs in Belarus.[253] The channel rapidly attracted subscribers, and in 2020, he announced an intention to run for president.[254] Two days later, he was arrested by autocrat Lukashenka's regime,[255] after which his wife, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, ran for president in his place.[256] Tsikhanouskaya credibly claimed, based on data from Belarusian CSOs and election observers, to have won the 2020 election.[257]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Social media strategies can be used in combination with offline mobilization tactics to increase citizen engagement. These tactics can include, but are not limited to, bus tours and marches, discussion forums between candidates and citizens, and door-to-door canvassing. Successful campaigns have demonstrated the importance of optimistic messaging in overcoming fear and inspiring public political participation. For example, in Chile's 1988 referendum that deposed the autocratic Pinochet, the opposition ran television ads depicting celebrities and ordinary citizens communicating hope for Chile's future and used slogans such as "Joy is coming". These messages stood in stark contrast to the fearmongering campaign by Pinochet, motivating citizens to work toward a stronger democratic future.[258] A similar approach was also tried in the 2024 U.S. presidential contest and appeared to gain traction although it did not ultimately carry the day in the outcome. Also, along the lines of campaigning with a smile, youth groups have used street theater and satire to ridicule and delegitimize would-be authoritarians, as well as rock concerts and the media to add energy to what is often considered a dull process. In the words of participants in Slovakia's Civil Campaign OK'98—which successfully ousted the illiberal Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar through an ambitious electoral campaign—such activities were aimed at making participation in elections "fun and not just a duty."[259] As Bunce and Wolchik assess, Slovakia's pro-democracy movement in the lead-up to the 1998 elections helped create "a climate of optimism supporting the ideas that votes count and that change was possible."[260]

Appropriately calibrating and implementing electoral policies designed to favor the incumbent is more difficult for authoritarian leaders than is generally assumed, even when they face few legal or institutional obstacles.[261] And even the most extreme election fraud (such as ballot box stuffing, multiple voting, voter intimidation arising from a lack of voter secrecy, the falsification of vote counts, or refusal to certify accurate vote counts), presents significant management problems for the authoritarian. Contemporary scholarship suggests that the uncertainty and collective

action problems inherent to implementing electoral fraud tend to produce unintended results that are not ideal from an authoritarian's perspective. They may be either excessive fraud that produces a flagrantly false margin of victory that draws widespread condemnation, or too little rigging, such that the authoritarian loses.[262] (Indeed, as strong independent analyses by election observers in nations such as Russia, Turkey, Venezuela, and Mozambique have shown, vote rigging is very difficult to conduct undetected.)[263] Even when incumbents are actively trying to secure their reelection using the most extreme election rigging measures, they may fail. To push back against election rigging, opposition parties (and the movements that support them) should proactively develop plans ahead of time in the event that such fraud occurs; relevant mechanisms include election monitoring, exit polling, and a mass mobilization strategy if discrepancies arise. Across competitive authoritarian contexts, political opposition campaign strategy matters, and every vote can make a difference.

B. SLOWING DETERIORATION

Although winning elections should be a centerpiece of pro-democratic political opposition parties' strategies to promote democratic change, it cannot be their only objective. While running ambitious and energetic campaigns, the opposition must also compete within the government (and, at times, outside it) to slow the process of democratic backsliding as much as possible. As we know, when leaders and parties with authoritarian tendencies gain power in democracies, they will take incremental steps to tilt the playing field in their advantage.[264] The political opposition must vigilantly contest each individual act.

Despite narrowing democratic space, the political opposition does have a broad menu of institutional and extra-institutional options of varying severity available to them. How, then, should the opposition best compete? The answer is context-dependent. However, as a general rule, the opposition should not resist would-be authoritarians by breaking the democratic norms that it ultimately seeks to strengthen. As Maria Ressa counsels about standing up to dictators, "Don't become a monster to fight a monster."[265]

Instead, opposition members should draw mainly upon institutional measures, the standard tools of the democratic game, to slow or obstruct illiberal reforms.[266] These measures derive primarily from the constitutional authorities of courts and legislatures to maintain a check on executive power. Though exact mechanisms vary depending on a country's system, opposition legislators should work to obstruct the passage of an executive's antidemocratic agenda. If justified, opposition leaders may also choose to pursue more extreme institutional measures available to them, such as impeachment processes, votes of no confidence, and recall referenda.

Relying upon the institutions of democracy and rule of law strengthens those institutions at a time when they need that confidence and fortification. To raise the profile of their campaign against democratic erosion, opposition leaders can also utilize extra-institutional tools—engaging in or encouraging, for example, a protest, strike, or boycott, in conjunction with civil society within the spirit of civil disobedience and civic call to action.

On this model, the norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance—which incumbents must practice to preserve democracy—still maintain their importance, even as the political opposition resists an illiberal leader. While the goal of the opposition is to gain control of the government to halt democratic decay and begin a process of reform, they must also keep the system running. Full breakdown, which becomes more likely when the opposition casts those two norms to the winds, will always favor the incumbent. It provides him or her with increased incentives, further justification, and greater means to crack down and seize ever more control.[267]

Moreover, one important prize at stake in the contest between the would-be authoritarian and the opposition is legitimacy. Legitimacy confers tangible benefits: Without it, rulers exercise coercive power—not authority.[268] Accordingly, it is unsurprising that aspiring authoritarians expend great effort attempting to maintain their nation's democratic façade, even as they work to dismantle its democratic character.[269] Political scientists Sergey Guriyev and Daniel Treisman explain in "Spin Dictators" how modern authoritarians equip this façade with professional trappings of modern politics rather than relying more on dictators' traditional fear-based tools of repression.[270] The pro-democratic opposition, then, must work within the system and partner with civil society experts to expose the ways in which would-be authoritarians are mimicking, but actually violating, the rule of law. Kim Lane Scheppele, for example, argues that the seemingly normal continuity of the surface-level indicators of rule of law can conceal creeping autocratic legalism. She therefore contends that deeper legal forensic analysis and wider education of citizens on constitutionalism are needed to combat growing dysfunction.[271] The pro-democratic opposition must not abandon democratic principles in their contest with illiberal leaders through extreme, extra-institutional resistance measures, which will usually serve neither end.[272]

Turkey's pro-democracy political opposition offers an example of the foregoing strategies. Despite almost two decades of democratic deterioration led by the authoritarian-leaning President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development party (AKP), and despite AKP's recent victory in the 2023 presidential election, opposition parties have generated electoral successes at the subnational level.[273] This includes winning pivotal mayoral elections in key cities such as Istanbul and Ankara in

2019 and 2024, counterbalancing the centralization of power by Erdoğan and his allies, and revitalizing efforts for democratic renewal. During the 2023 presidential election cycle, oppositional, pro-democracy parties formed a six-way strategic alliance, focusing campaign rhetoric on finding constructive solutions to Turkey's economic problems, undercutting Erdoğan's legitimacy with clever social media messaging, and emphasizing face-to-face interaction with a broad array of Turkish voters.[274] By leveraging diverse constituencies, the opposition came close to unseating Erdoğan while gaining momentum and demonstrating the resilience of the pro-democracy movement.[275]

India is another example of the foregoing strategy. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dominated national elections for years, the proliferation of many smaller parties at the regional level eventually overcame Modi's dominance at the national level and, instead of governing with a dominant party, he has been forced to govern in a coalition.[276]

SECTION 1.2 KEY RESOURCES:

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3. CIVIL SOCIETY AND INDEPENDENT MEDIA

SUMMARY

Civil society groups should:

- Work together with each other and seek broad, diverse, and large-scale participation in their shared activities.
- Model organizationally what they seek to achieve in a democracy. Leadership teams should conduct open, regular, grassroots deliberations and decisionmaking authority rather than concentrate decisionmaking power in the hands of a few.
- Establish defined goals, a clear vision, and an actionable agenda with specific desired changes to the status quo. Organizations should define who is mobilizing whom to do what.
- Be prepared to use diverse and varied nonviolent tactics to increase the pressure on government and attract more people to participate.

Independent media should focus their efforts on four key areas:

- Occupational development and education to provide a pipeline to up-and-coming media actors able to notice and resist threats to the industry.
- Professional associations to enable and support individual journalists on issues like professional values, employment conditions, legal questions, and editorial standards.
- Media self-scrutiny and development of a robust media criticism community. Such a community could increase public trust, and thus public support, through the transparent and constructive questioning of the relationship between journalists and politicians and advertisers.
- Internal governance. As with civil society organizations, media outlets should assume responsibility for improving their own internal governance, develop mechanisms to deal fairly with audience complaints, and develop all work contracts to cover all employees to prevent self-censorship.

Most people in a nation are neither politicians nor government officials. Centuries of scholarship and millennia of political history show that people can exert extraordinary influence on politics and government through separate avenues. This section addresses those seeking to influence politics

from outside the public sector. We begin with recommendations to leaders and members of civil society and then turn to professionals working in perhaps the democratic institution most often attacked—independent media. Both civil society and the media are critical parts of the democratic process, and we thus aim to distill best practices for ensuring their strength and efficacy.

A. THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN DEMOCRACY

There are numerous definitions of civil society. For purposes of this section, we follow Kohler-Koch and Quittkat's representative definition: "Civil society includes all those organisations which play an important role in giving voice to the concerns of citizens and in delivering services that meet people's needs," including grassroots organizations, political advocacy groups, labor unions, and other communities.[277] A robust civil society helps preserve democratic vibrancy, provides citizens with information that can help inform their voting, and presents opportunities for powerful collective action. Even when these social connections and activities are completely unrelated to political or governance issues, their depth and frequency bear important implications for the strength of democracy and paths of democratization.[278] In the words of two political scientists, civil society organizations can "sensitize society to pressing domestic and international issues, build cohesion within communities, help citizens to articulate their beliefs and interests, exercise control over those holding political power and provide social services."[279]

In contrast to civil society groups writ large, civil resistance movements are formations of individuals engaged in particular kinds of collective tactics. We follow the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict in defining civil resistance as "a way for people (often ordinary people with no special title, status, or privilege) to wield power without using or threatening physical violence. It consists of (a) acts of commission, in which people do things they're not supposed to do, not expected to do, or forbidden from doing; (b) acts of omission, in which people don't do things that they're supposed to do, expected to do, or required to do; or (c) a combination of both acts of commission and omission."[280] Acts of commission include demonstrations, petitions, and other forms of lawful civil protest. Acts of omission include boycotts, strikes, and divestment.[281]

While many of the recommendations we make can be adapted by leaders with a wide range of goals, we place emphasis on associations and movements that adopt political ends and push to bolster democracy through noninstitutional channels. These groups can protect civil liberties and other democratic institutions through persistent advocacy for democratic rights and norms and civil resistance against authoritarian encroachment. Czech

dissident (and later president) Václav Havel's Charter 77, which ultimately became the political movement called Civic Forum, is one famous example.[282] How do groups like Havel's surmount enormous obstacles to successfully promote democratic renewal?

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Despite relying on nonviolent tactics and operating without access to standard levers of government control, civil society groups and civil resistance movements are able to wield great influence, because ultimately, power derives from the consent of the governed. As Gene Sharp argues, would-be authoritarians may use lies, economic inducements, and a variety of coercive tools to obtain that consent, but without it, they are powerless.[283] Indeed, in order to carry out policy initiatives and government functions, modern would-be authoritarians are dependent on a wide variety of other people and organizations, many of whom exist outside the government. Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam note that modern nation-states exist within "strategic action fields," units of collective action that include both state and non-state actors.[284] If enough of those actors withdraw their consent, the state can lose its basis of authority and capacity to rule. Citizens and organizations can do their part by withdrawing their consent and applying pressure on other actors to do the same. Eventually, pillars of authoritarian power start to show cracks, and a nonviolent group can coerce valuable, or even transformative, concessions from the government.[285] In other words, everyday citizens, working together, can turn the entire system upside down. Several scholars have substantiated this idea empirically,[286] as well as with influential game theory models.[287]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Indeed, for advocates of democracy, among the most encouraging academic findings from the past two decades is that civil resistance works. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan argue that nonviolent resistance can be an effective means of promoting democratic consolidation and transition, even in particularly challenging scenarios.[288] Moreover, after analyzing 323 violent and nonviolent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006, the authors find that nonviolent groups were more than twice as likely to achieve a full or partial success as their violent counterparts.[289] Other work by Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman supports this finding. In fact, they argue that a public's capacity to engage in collective action to hold leaders to account is among the most important predictors of democracy.[290]

B. DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP TEAMS WITH HIGH STRATEGIC CAPACITY

Not every civil society organization or social movement achieves its goals. The decisions made by civil society groups and social movements are important to their ultimate success or failure.[291] In this section, we review which kinds of approaches and tactics seem to correlate most with success.[292]

We begin by discussing a fundamental question, especially considering the context-dependence of particular strategies. Why do some groups make better decisions than others?

Scholar and activist Marshall Ganz seeks to answer this question by proposing the concept of "strategic capacity." He writes that leadership teams with high strategic capacities are better able to think and plan creatively, respond to shifting and uncertain environmental conditions, and mobilize supporters around shared goals than those with lower capacities.[293] In other words, leadership teams with high strategic capacities are more likely to succeed.

According to Ganz, a group's strategic capacity derives from two principal sources: biographical and organizational.[294] Biographical sources include a leadership team's combined identities, social networks, and tactical repertoires. Organizational sources refer to a leadership team's bureaucratic structures, including its deliberative processes, resource flows, and accountability mechanisms.

Across biographical sources, diversity is crucial. To maximize its biographical strengths, a movement must build a leadership team from a diverse array of people with different backgrounds, networks, and skills. Leaders with diverse identities will bring relevant knowledge from a wide range of constituencies that can allow for innovative problem-solving.[295] As Ganz summarizes, "[a] leadership team's strategic capacity grows out of who its members are."[296]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Organizations and movements can also maximize their organizational sources of strategic capacity by following a series of best practices. For instance, the organizational structure itself matters, with hierarchical organizations tending to have more centralized decisionmaking processes; in turn, because rank-and-file members have less say in group decisions, their commitment to the organization can be lowered.[297] Leadership teams that conduct "regular, open, and authoritative deliberations" will benefit from the full diversity and innovation of their team, producing better strategy than groups that concentrate decisionmaking power in the hands of one leader who makes choices without broader input.[298]

How groups are organized and managed is also important for their credibility and effectiveness. Governments seeking to restrict and repress civil society spaces specifically target the legitimacy of civil society groups to challenge their authenticity and validity. Saskia Brechenmacher and Thomas Carothers identify four typical attacks that regimes take against CSOs to undermine their legitimacy: They are self-appointed rather than elected, and therefore do not represent the popular will; they are receiving foreign funding and are accountable to external rather than domestic constituencies; they are

partisan political actors posing as nonpartisan civic actors; and they are elite actors who are not representative of the people they claim to represent.[299] One illustrative example is when the Georgian government justified restrictions on foreign-funded civil society organizations in May 2024 by arguing that the foreign agent law promoted transparency and that, as the founder of the ruling Georgian Dream Party stated, "NGOs are pseudo-elite nurtured by a foreign country" that deny Georgians the right to be "governed by people who are elected by Georgians."[300]

For all these reasons, civil society groups should model the responsible behavior and organizational structure they wish to see in their elected leaders, to "walk the talk." Ganz details a wide array of additional best practices in his work.[301]

C. ENCOURAGING BROAD AND DIVERSE PARTICIPATION

PILLAR 5: Defend Good Governance and Pluralism

While the characteristics of an organization or movement's leadership are critical, so is the makeup of the entity's member base. The most successful movements and organizations are those that appeal to broad and diverse audiences. Within and among civil society groups silos must come down and broad coalitions must be built. Srdja Popovic, a leading civil resistance practitioner and thinker, emphasizes that building bridges between disparate societal groups is key. As he colorfully puts it, "It's unity, stupid!"[302] The diversity of a movement—in gender, age, religion, ethnicity, ideology, profession, and socioeconomic status—makes it harder for a government to ignore, discredit, or isolate.[303] Quantitative research confirms that robust social ties reduce the effectiveness of repression.[304]

In addition to having diverse participants, civil society organizations and civil resistance movements should strive to have as many members or followers as possible. Initiatives with large numbers of people participating are fundamentally more likely to succeed than small movements. Chenoweth and Stephan confirm this empirically: Controlling for other variables, lawful nonviolent resistance movements with high participation levels are significantly more likely to succeed.[305]

PILLAR 7: Make Democracy Deliver

To gather a large and diverse support base, Popovic recommends that movements work hard to figure out what people truly care about. Since a majority of potential participants in any given jurisdiction may be generally uninterested, movements should set political priorities that will be popular. Two notable historic political movements, the American Revolution and Mahatma Gandhi's campaign for Indian independence, chose British taxes on simple, everyday goods as the foci of their struggles. Choosing a broadly relatable symbol—in the American case, tea, and in the Indian case, salt—helped the leadership inspire the population into action.[306]

In addition to picking popular policy goals, groups and movements should adopt widely appealing rhetoric and culture. Too often, contemporary pro-democracy campaigns end up being defined by one particular segment of the population, thus losing their appeal to the rest of the populace. For example, Pussy Riot, a Russian anti-authoritarian, punk rock protest group, appealed far more to educated, primarily urban youth than it did to rural and older Russians who did not relate to the colorful satire of the demonstrators. Popovic contrasts this example with the success of his own pro-democracy movement, Otpor! ("Resistance!"), after it adopted a simple, universal slogan, "He's finished," to define its campaign against former Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević.[307]

A salient example of a nonviolent resistance movement with broad and diverse participation in the United States is the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM), which garnered widespread media attention after its inception in 2013. Civic engagement peaked following the killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in June 2020, after which two-thirds of Americans at least somewhat supported the BLM movement.[308] A survey conducted in 2020 on adolescent development showed that youths demonstrated high civic engagement, particularly with media, against police brutality and racial injustice[309] in accordance with the Movement's stated mission to "eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state."[310] One in five Americans said they participated in a protest since the start of the first Trump administration, and of those who protested, 19 percent reported they were completely new to engaging in activism. Support for BLM was and remains divided by party lines. A study by the Pew Research Center in Sept. 2021 showed that nearly 85 percent of Democrats were at least somewhat inclined to support BLM, while 78 percent of their Republican counterparts opposed the movement.[311] A June 2023 update found that 84 percent of Democrats, or individuals who lean Democratic, support BLM, while 82 percent of Republicans, or individuals who lean Republican, are in opposition to BLM.[312] While there has been abatement of mass popular energy around BLM, some racial justice improvements in policing have become institutionalized. In just the first year after June 2020, at least 30 states and Washington, D.C., enacted policing reforms, the majority of which focused either on use of force, duties to intervene, and misconduct reporting or decertification. From 2020 to 2024, 1,129 police reforms have been enacted across all 50 states and Washington, D.C.[313]

Of particular note is the importance of encouraging broad and diverse participation within trade and labor unions, because union members sit squarely in a demographic often targeted by right-wing populist politicians for support. Research has shown that labor union participation has a negative

effect on extreme right-wing voting—that is, "unionization immunizes voters" from the messages of extreme right-wing populists, likely due to the principles and values of labor movements.[314] While unionization is not a magic bullet against increased populist support, unions can serve as a bulwark for democracy. They can also serve as a model by integrating migrants, women, and other historically marginalized workers,[315] and adopting democratic and inclusive practices and procedures within their own decisionmaking structures.[316]

D. ESTABLISHING DEFINED GOALS AND A CLEAR VISION

Having an area of passionate concern is not enough; organizations and movements should have an actionable agenda with specific desired changes to the status quo. These goals do not need to be sweeping or all-encompassing: Chenoweth and Stephan find that maximalist goals are perceived to be less likely to succeed than more limited ambitions.[317] As Sharon Erickson Nepstad notes, advocates of civil resistance often seek specific political or economic reforms in society or within a particular regime or institution, rather than pursuing a full-fledged political transition.[318]

PILLAR 3: Fight Corruption

An example of an organization that has set specific goals to great effect is Rekonstrukce Státu, or Reconstruction of the State, in the Czech Republic, a country faced with longstanding and endemic corruption. Despite its name, Rekonstrukce Státu did not seek to reorganize the entirety of Czech government to eliminate corruption; instead, it set forth nine practical principles for government anti-corruption efforts that could be easily written into law. They include transparency in public procurement, publishing government contracts on the internet, and increased independence of public prosecutors. These specific goals have helped the organization achieve success, with a majority of the nine goals being passed into law in three years.[319]

Another example can be found in Hungary, where opposition leader Péter Magyar has successfully breathed life into the Respect and Freedom (TISZA) party that he joined in 2024.[320] TISZA won seven seats in the June 2024 EU parliamentary election and has outperformed Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in recent polls,[321] although the outcome of the next national election in 2026 remains to be seen.[322] Magyar and TISZA have in part focused on specific shortcomings of the Orbán government, including allegations of corruption.[323]

E. UTILIZING DIVERSE AND VARIED TACTICS

The exact tactics employed by activists vary widely depending on context, resources, and mission. As a general rule, however, groups should aim to

diversify their tactics. Employing a range of different nonviolent strategies increases the pressure on government and attracts more people to participate based on the activities that appeal to them most. In contrast, limiting an organization to one particular tactic, or even type of tactic, can constrict a movement's reach and efficacy.

By way of example, Popovic points to the Occupy Wall Street movement that began in 2011, during the "Great Recession." The group was focused on the scale of economic inequality and wealth disparity in the United States. It garnered national and global attention at a time when many felt that those responsible for the economic downturn were facing few repercussions. Yet, argues Popovic, Occupy failed to capitalize on the massive popular frustration with capitalism's failures. He contends that one of the Occupy movement's predominant errors was that it named itself after a single tactic. To participate in Occupy meant to conduct sit-ins, which immediately limited the number of people willing to engage. Many of those sympathetic to the cause, who would have been willing to support the movement in other ways, were not able to skip work, class, or other obligations to participate in open-ended sit-ins. Occupy also overlooked other tactics that might have worked to apply pressure. Artificially limiting its support base and restricting its tactical repertoire likely prevented Occupy from generating more meaningful change.[324]

Slovakia offers a contemporary example of a civil resistance campaign that utilized diverse tactics to achieve meaningful change. In Feb. 2018, a Slovak investigative journalist named Ján Kuciak was shot dead in his home, along with his fiancé. In the months leading up to his death, Kuciak published dozens of articles on Slovak corruption. Many exposed potential corrupt ties between Slovak businesses, state agencies, as well as the previous ruling political party, Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD).[325] The murders sent shockwaves through the nation. Recognizing the widespread public frustration, and the opportunity it presented to push for political change, a small group of students calling their movement "A Decent Slovakia" organized an assembly and candlelight tribute in the center of Bratislava. Five hundred people attended the first gathering. Next, the group organized a memorial march. Over 135,000 people flooded the streets in Bratislava and 55 other Slovak cities. Weekly protests grew ever larger, reaching sizes unseen in Slovakia since the Velvet Revolution. The massive public mobilization succeeded in forcing the resignations of three key government figures in Mar. of 2018: Prime Minister Robert Fico, Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák, and Police Chief Tibor Gašpar.[326]

Slovakia next diversified its tactics by pivoting to electoral politics. One of its co-founders, Juraj Seliga, noted that although protests were able to purge problematic officials, "Real, lasting change would have to come through

elections."[327] Accordingly, the movement has worked with and endorsed pro-democracy political candidates, seeking to mobilize votes. These efforts were initially successful. In 2019, Slovakia inaugurated its first female president—the moderate, pro-democracy Zuzana Čaputová—and anti-corruption Ordinary People party (OLaNO) won the Feb. 2020 parliamentary elections,[328] creating a four-party governing coalition that dislodged the long-ruling center-left SMER-SD party.[329]

Slovakia's democratic rebound and new government committed to reforms was short lived, highlighting the difficulties in reconsolidating democracy after democratic backsliding.[330] In 2023, Fico and the SMER-SD party won the parliamentary elections with a large enough share to form a governing coalition and restore Fico's premiership.[331] The election was held amid significant Russian and domestic disinformation campaigns, including a last-minute generative AI ad targeting Fico's opponents.[332] Notwithstanding the resurgence of autocratic forces, the response to the Kuciak killing demonstrates the power of diverse and varied tactics.

F. THE ROLE OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN DEMOCRACY

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

In addition to a robust civil society, democracy cannot flourish without an equally strong media sector. A free and independent press fulfills critical democratic roles, including monitoring public officials, providing a platform for debate, and informing citizens.[333] An informed citizenry serves as a check on powerful officials by ensuring that "representatives uphold their oaths of office and carry out, broadly, the wishes of those who elected them."[334] James Curran and Toril Aalberg highlight the positive impact of well-informed citizens on society: stable and meaningful opinions on issues, linked interests and attitudes, and preference for political candidates who represent their views.[335] Freedom of the press plays a "crucial role" in democracy as the "'matrix, the indispensable condition of nearly every other form of freedom', and indeed of the democratic process itself."[336]

The independent media has become a popular target of illiberal politicians looking to consolidate power across Europe. Indeed, in 2024 the Civil Liberties Union for Europe called press freedom "perilously close to the breaking point in many EU countries."[337] Journalists increasingly face obstruction, hostility, and overt violence in their investigations.[338] Following a new "illiberal toolbox," populist leaders have used a variety of strategies to undermine independent news: government-backed takeovers, arbitrary tax investigations, unjustified lawsuits, selective enforcement of laws, abuse of regulatory and licensing practices, and verbal harassment.[339] In Italy, for example, members of a coalition government subjected journalists to hostile rhetoric, intimidation, and threats to withhold public funding and protections.[340] Widespread action against independent media across the EU

led the Council of Europe to caution that the "space for the press to hold government authorities and the powerful to account has been diminished."[341] In 2023, the Council launched the Campaign for the Safety of Journalists to provide EU member states with practical reform proposals aimed at protecting independent journalists.[342] In July 2024, 26 civil society organizations urged Ursula von der Leyen after being reelected President of the European Commission to "ensure that media freedom, the protection of journalists, and EU citizens' access to public interest journalism remain high political priorities over the coming term of [the] Commission."[343]

Two cases in particular illustrate the risks posed to media independence. In Turkey, President Erdoğan and the AKP have carried out a "massive purge" of independent media, becoming the world's fourth most prolific jailer of journalists in 2022.[344] Over the past few years, Erdoğan has pursued his assault on media across several fronts: hostile rhetoric amplified by pro-regime press, legal and regulatory constraints, outright censorship, and consolidation of media companies. Other tactics have included buying off or forcing out media moguls, intimidation, mass firings, wiretapping, and imprisonment of journalists.[345] As a result, Freedom House has deemed the country's media as "not free,"[346] and Reporters Without Borders ranks it at a dismal 158 out of 180 countries for press freedom.[347]

Another example of increasingly restricted media freedom is in Hungary, where systemic efforts to compromise independence have led Freedom House in 2024 to give the country only 2 out of 4 points in its rating of "[a]re there free and independent media."[348] The "Fidesz governing coalition and their allies" have played a role in reshaping the Hungarian media landscape, which is "increasingly dominated by progovernment outlets."[349] In Nov. 2018, for example, pro-government media outlets merged to create a "huge right-wing media conglomerate under the direction" of an Orbán ally.[350] At the time, the formation of the new conglomerate raised concerns about the health of Hungarian media pluralism due to its lack of transparency, exemption from external scrutiny, and close ties to the ruling regime.[351] Those outlets that have maintained autonomy face numerous obstacles, including "lack of advertising revenue, a restrictive regulatory environment, and public campaigns to discredit independent journalists."[352] Hungary's media environment is not necessarily static. The U.S.-based news outlet Radio Free Europe bolstered access to independent media since relaunching in Hungary in Sept. 2020, and there remains some opportunity for the nation's media landscape.[353] However, in 2024 Reporters Without Borders wrote that "thanks to political and economic manoeuvres and the buyout of media outlets by oligarchs with close ties to Fidesz, the ruling party, the latter now controls 80% of the country's media."[354]

Around the world, media are vulnerable not just to state censorship and threats to journalists, but also to economic pressures. Since the rise and dominance of internet-based news sources, traditional media have found it hard to maintain business models that allow them to remain solvent.[355] Even before Orbán came to power, one study estimated that media in Central and Eastern Europe had lost between 30 and 60 percent of their income three years prior to 2009.[356] Part of the decline in independent journalism in Hungary can be attributed to oligarchs in Hungary, some close to Orbán, buying up economically precarious media, a tactic that is now spreading across Europe.[357] For example it was reported in a joint investigation that entities linked to Orbán bought a controlling share in the financially strapped Euronews which has millions of consumers of its news content across the EU.[358]

New funding models are necessary to diversify public and private sector funding for free media in democracies. The U.S. Mission to the EU and EU Commission have in recent years explored critical opportunities to identify and support innovative funding solutions, including blended private-public sector finance models, that ensure pluralistic and independent media sustainability. A wide network from the U.S. and Europe participated in workshops that focused on addressing the challenges media is currently up against in the digital era.[359] The network, which was broadly composed of civil society, the private sector, and the media, highlighted various models as examples of solutions for financing independent media and journalism.[360] Such examples included the Pluralis fund,[361] created and managed by the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF),[362] and the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM).[363]

In the United States, media freedom is increasingly under threat, as news outlets anticipate dire legal and regulatory challenges under Donald Trump, who in the two years prior to Oct. 2024 "called for every major American TV news network to be punished," according to a CNN review.[364] Already, Trump has taken legal action against various media outlets, including an Iowa newspaper that published a poll showing him trailing Kamala Harris in the days before the Nov. 2024 election.[365] In Oct. 2024, after two major outlets broke from longstanding tradition and declined to issue an endorsement in the presidential election,[366] proponents of media freedom raised alarm over media owners choosing to curb editorial independence in order to avoid angering Trump.[367] Concerns over anticipatory obedience were amplified in December 2024, when ABC News and its parent company Disney agreed to a $15 million settlement in a defamation lawsuit brought by Trump.[368]

G. MAINTAINING AND DEFENDING INDEPENDENT MEDIA

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Media actors in backsliding democracies should focus their efforts on five key areas:

- Occupational development. Journalism classes should integrate practitioners and draw on the collective knowledge of older generations of media actors[369] to "foster occupational socialization."[370] The aim is to provide a critical mass of up-and-coming media actors able "to recognize and withstand" threats to the industry.[371]

- Professional associations. These should enable and support individual journalists on issues like professional values, employment conditions, legal questions, salaries, and editorial standards.[372] The European Commission in 2014 noted that many problems faced by media result from the "civic weakness of the media community," which is "largely fragmented and politically polarised thereby giving ample space for clientelism and a decline in professional standards."[373] Strengthening the capacity and representativeness of professional associations may help alleviate that threat.

- Media self-scrutiny. Additional efforts should focus on the development of a robust media criticism community. Such a community could increase public trust, and thus public support, through the transparent and constructive questioning of "journalists' relations with politicians and advertisers."[374]

- Internal governance. Media outlets should assume responsibility for improving their own internal governance. The European Commission offers several suggestions: adhere to clearly and publicly defined ethics codes, develop mechanisms to deal "honestly and transparently with readers/viewers complaints," develop work contracts to cover all employees to prevent self-censorship, and offer opportunities for professional development.[375]

- Financial independence and sustainability. Finally, where possible, media outlets should seek to avoid capture by state and state-affiliated funders. In Hungary and Serbia, for instance, pro-government actors have acquired prominent media entities and used advertising and other financial means to gain leverage over other press organizations.[376] To maintain independence, media actors in backsliding nations should explore alternative funding models such as crowdfunding, subscriptions, paywalls, and grants.[377]

Freedom House further recommends support for social media as an "alternative outlet for free expression."[378] Indeed, new technologies like social media offer the chance to better engage citizens, provide space for opposition, and hold elites accountable for their actions. As shown by Matthew Placek, social media can increase demands for democracy and be used to mobilize and express dissent.[379] Notably, Placek finds that social media use is associated with higher support for democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. It also helps to facilitate the flow of societal commentary and political information, which may "diffuse democratic norms."[380]

The potentially democratizing impact of new technology has been further outlined in Larry Diamond's theory of "liberation technology": Forms of "information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social, and economic freedom."[381] ICTs like social media can contribute to a "more pluralistic and autonomous arena of news" in illiberal regimes, but, as Diamond cautions, they can also undermine democratic stability by amplifying disinformation or enabling authoritarian control.[382] They can serve several positive functions: supporting transparency and identifying disinformation and misinformation, monitoring actions of officials, and mobilizing dissident networks and activists.

PILLAR 6: Defeat Disinformation

Social media and similar technology are not, of course, without potential downsides. Illiberal states sometimes filter content on the internet or deny access. The advent of disinformation—"false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit"[383]—poses an additional serious challenge to democracy by social media and AI tools. The European Commission's 2022 guidelines highlight strategies for combating disinformation: demonetize the spreading of disinformation; enhance transparency; promote media literacy; develop robust fact-checking tools; and continue research on the problem.[384]

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4. THE PRIVATE SECTOR

SUMMARY

The private sector should:

- Resist corruption, co-optation, and state capture. Corporate actors that shape the system to work for them, rather than the public, are, by definition, fundamentally undermining representative democracy and may be undermining economic growth. History is replete with examples of businesspeople who disregarded these dangers and came to rue doing so for the sake of their company and employees—and themselves.

- Aim to do well by doing good. Beyond merely avoiding the negative, the business sector should seek affirmative ways to help protect rule of law and democracy and, in turn, promote its long-term interests. These include activism, philanthropy, corporate social responsibility, and public-private partnerships.

- Recognize the key role of social media companies. They should:

    - Prioritize digital media literacy.

    - Quickly remove material that violates the law and their codes of conduct policies.

    - Support narrowly tailored targeted government regulations that do not infringe on users' right to free speech—focusing on mechanisms like political advertising and disinformation prevalence measures.

    - Intensify cooperation with other platforms to share best practices.

    - Support the continued development and utilization of new AI technology to deter and combat misinformation and disinformation.

    - Share data about the use of their platforms and the functioning of their algorithms with researchers.

In this section, we address the role that the business sector can play in protecting democracy.[385] Corporate behavior can be influential for the health of democratic institutions. The private sector also has a profound capacity to increase societal prosperity, which in turn presents significant opportunities to protect and promote democracy.[386] We review why advancing democracy is in the corporate interest, how businesses sometimes harm democracy, and

recommend strategies that both local companies and multinational corporations can use to support democracy.

Since social media companies and AI platforms face unique challenges as gatekeepers of information, we address them separately at the end of this section.

A. DEMOCRACY AND BUSINESS

Democracies and business are co-dependent: A healthy democracy needs successful companies, and successful companies require a healthy democratic society. Outputs of strong democratic institutions and processes such as the rule of law, property rights, education, human rights, access to healthcare, and low levels of corruption all facilitate economic growth and corporate sector profitability.[387] These operating conditions, which democracies provide, allow business to flourish.[388]

Authoritarian and democratically backsliding nations tend to be reliably poor places to conduct business. Russia, for instance, is ridden with structural and political issues that harm businesses.[389] Russian corporations can also be pressured to sell their shares to the government, as happened with the profitable oil company Yukos in 2004.[390]

Some experts believe that, based on Chinese law, Chinese companies would be unable to refuse the handing over of sensitive information to the Chinese government upon request,[391] which has caused Western governments to be suspicious of the actions of Chinese companies.[392] Western-based corporations, in particular, are often targeted with government threats of regulatory changes, unplanned inspections of facilities, and other increased and arbitrary regulations that slow efficiency when they operate under autocratic governments abroad.[393] For example, German companies experienced an unwelcome surprise when the Orbán government began to demand that they sell their Hungarian subsidiaries to Hungarian owners.[394]

Conversely, when democratic conditions improve, so too does the business environment. According to a 2015 quantitative study, higher levels of democracy have led to more positive labor market outcomes in Central and Eastern European countries. The study found that democracy increases average annual hours worked and employment rates, in addition to reducing general and long-term unemployment rates.[395] Thus, corporations that work to advance democracy will be furthering their labor pool and their lasting interests.[396]

B. AVOIDING STATE CAPTURE, CO-OPTATION, AND CORRUPTION

PILLAR 3: Fight Corruption

Corporate corruption is inimical to democracy, and avoiding corruption is perhaps the most fundamental thing businesses can do to support democracy. At its most drastic level, corporate corruption takes the form of state capture, where firms seize such control of the mechanisms of government that they "shape the formation of the basic rules of the game (i.e., laws, rules, decrees, and regulations) through illicit and non-transparent private payments to public officials."[397] Corporate actors that shape the system to work for them, rather than the public, are, by definition, fundamentally undermining representative democracy.

But in some autocratic governments, capture works the other way around. In Hungary, which analyst Bálint Magyar has called a "mafia state," the regime has created its own oligarchs by corruptly co-opting state power to enrich a small group of allies.[398]

Perhaps less obviously, captured economies are also undermining the economic growth and overall business environment of the countries in which they are operating: One study found that the growth rates of captured economies over a three-year period were reduced by 10 percentage points,[399] and raising regulatory barriers for new firms to enter the market stifled competition and the long-term health of the captured economies.[400]

PILLAR 3: Fight Corruption

Instances of multinational corporations actively profiting from dealings with others who are corrupt and authoritarian also merit attention. For example, McKinsey, the U.S.-based consulting giant, has courted controversy over the past few years by maintaining some dealings with Russian entities that bankrolled the invasion of Ukraine,[401] as well as for working with authoritarian and/or corrupt actors in countries like China, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia.[402] In Ukraine, for instance, McKinsey took on a contract to help presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovych improve his public image, despite Yanukovych's previous criminal convictions and attempt to rig an election.[403] Yanukovych went on to win the presidency and lead Ukraine into upheaval and illiberalism.[404] McKinsey also notably did business with the state-connected South African power companies, Eskom and Trillian, who came under fire for their corruption and undue influence over the government.[405] The contract was initially lucrative for McKinsey, reportedly making up more than half of its African revenue.[406]After the widespread publication and protest of McKinsey's activities, however, the consulting company lost most of its South African clients and had to pay back the $74 million that it had gained from the deal.[407] In Feb. 2021, McKinsey agreed to pay $573.9 million in a settlement with 47 states in the U.S. regarding its role in aiding Purdue Pharma to expand the sales of OxyContin during the opioid addiction epidemic.[408] Companies should take note of these matters and exercise more

prudence in their business dealings with potentially corrupt and illiberal actors.

Businesses can also be misused by governments as a tool to undermine democracy, as in the case of what was then known as Twitter (now X) in India. In Jan. 2023, the platform blocked a BBC documentary "critical of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi" at the request of Modi's government, which called the film "hostile propaganda and anti-India garbage."[409] Twitter's owner, Elon Musk, claimed that he was unaware of this censorship and that his company was merely following India's laws.[410] Two months later, Twitter agreed to collaborate with the Indian government's internet blackout in the Punjab region. As the Indian police searched for a Sikh nationalist leader and detained hundreds of his alleged followers, Twitter blocked more than 120 accounts of prominent politicians, activists, and journalists.[411] As a Washington Post report noted, Twitter's change in ownership resulted in a notable shift from "[a] company that not long ago adopted the risky strategy of fighting government censorship in the Indian courts" to one that "now consistently bends to official demands."[412] When Musk took over the company in late 2022, Twitter complied with only about 20 percent of India's takedown requests.[413] In the first six months of his leadership, Twitter reportedly approved 83 percent of censorship requests by authoritarian governments, including India.[414] Social media companies have similarly bowed to government censorship demands in Turkey, China, and elsewhere, a concerning trend that undermines media freedom and democracy.[415]

C. CORPORATE BEST PRACTICES

In addition to avoiding corruption and the like, there are affirmative ways that the business sector can work to help protect democracy and, in turn, promote its long-term interests. These include activism, philanthropy, principled investments, and smart corporate social responsibility.

PILLAR 5: Defend Good Governance and Pluralism

Corporations can exert positive influence as public advocates for democratic values.[416] From the CEO of a leading global financial institution speaking out for the rights of LGBTQ individuals to 118 CEOs co-signing a letter calling for meaningful policies that bolster the business case for combating climate change, CEO activism has become an increasingly important method that companies use to promote their engagement with social and political causes.[417] Frequently, CEO activism is influential in framing public discourse, particularly because the media is likely to report comments from CEOs of recognizable corporations.[418] Other promising developments include the work of the Business Network on Civic Freedoms and Businesses for Social Responsibility, which recognizes that attacks on civic freedoms are also attacks on the business sector and publicly advocate for improved democratic conditions. In 2024, the network launched the Zero Tolerance

Initiative to develop and organize resources centered on preventing attacks against Human Rights Defenders.[419]

Corporate philanthropy is another way that businesses can work to strengthen democratic principles and bolster independent media. Nike's Global Community Impact fund, for example, partners with several community-based organizations in both the United States and Europe to support grassroots movements that work to provide equal opportunity for children.[420] Corporations can also work to bolster the rule of law and government accountability. General Electric, for example, contributed to government reform in emerging markets by meeting with business leaders, NGO leaders, and government officials from a Southwest Asian country to discuss reforms to strengthen the rule of law in that country. It also sponsored legal and educational training for government officials to ensure the effectiveness and legitimacy of GE's action.[421]

Corporations should also avoid providing a veneer of legitimacy to illiberal leaders. Rather, they should be careful to invest in a principled, thoughtful manner. For example, Hungary's Orbán has encouraged the continued investment of German car companies such as Audi and Daimler in the country, granting them tax reductions, subsidies, and access to decisionmakers.[422] In return, he has used their support to legitimize his regime and grip on power.[423] This symbiotic relationship has allowed German auto manufacturers to maintain and "develop" their factories in Hungary, even as global competition and unprofitability prompted mass closures in other European markets in 2024.[424] Such companies should, as Thorsten Benner has argued, disinvest from the Hungarian economy to demonstrate their support for the liberal democratic institutions that Orbán is working to dismantle.

Companies can act in support of the elements of democratic systems by engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR). As defined by the UN Industrial Development Organization, CSR is "a management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and interactions with their stakeholders."[425] The principles of corporate social responsibility can help promote transparency, corporate accountability, and sustainable development, as well as help businesses support the long-term democratic health of their society.[426] CSR can include donations, employee volunteering, and pro bono work for civil society organizations.[427] Within the framework of CSR, companies can also work to defend established standards and regulations that can counter democratic backsliding and can themselves propose their own policies that promote and protect democratic values, even when the state itself rolls back such protections.[428]

Further, the private sector can commit to reining in corruption where government regulations leave room for it to grow. Lobbying, for instance, may prove to be a lucrative activity for those leaving senior government posts. While no longer government employees, the connections that these individuals make throughout their service allow them to gain lawmakers' attention much more easily than other lobbyists. Companies willing to pay for this insider access may hire former officials soon after they leave their posts to capitalize on this potential. This 'revolving door' of government service-to-private employment presents a dangerous opportunity for former officials to promote their personal and financial well-being over advocating for healthy democratic reforms. For this reason, corporations should pledge not to hire former government officials for positions that could contain a conflict of interest for a specific period of time following their service.[429] A pharmaceutical company, for example, should not hire a former high-level official from the Health and Human Services Department (HHS), at least for an amount of time sufficient to allow that individual's connections and influence over colleagues in their former government post to wane, out of recognition that that individual may retain particular sway over those colleagues and their policymaking decisions.

At the same time, corporations must take care not to undermine the role of the state or of democratic institutions when designing CSR programs. As Anthony Bebbington argues, CSR programs are typically presented to the public not only as "acts of corporate good will," but, notably, as "responses to states that lack significant capacities in the development of programmes of social welfare and environmental protection," wherein "corporations assume roles they would really rather not but feel they have to."[430] By replacing the role of the state, these CSR programs can have the perverse effect of undermining government institutions themselves; because corporations are not responsible to the public, democracy is undermined by the replacement of state institutions with those run by the private sector.[431] Moreover, governments could be incentivized to free ride on corporate efforts and no longer face incentives to provide those same services to maintain public support. Like other corporate functions, CSR is also susceptible to abuse. For example, it can be used as a convenient cover for paying bribes to government officials. Or well-intentioned, reduced price, or outright-gifted technology can be deployed for purposes of surveillance. Firms and their compliance departments should be keenly attentive to these risks when designing and implementing CSR programs.

Technology companies have a particularly important obligation to implement best practices. For example, surveillance programs, including some developed in democratic states, designed to monitor terrorists and criminals have been sold to regimes who then turn them on critics and dissidents.[432]

One example is the 2021 revelation that the Pegasus spyware program developed by the Israeli-based NSO Group was used by the governments of Hungary, India, Gulf state monarchies, and even drug cartels to target journalists, activists, and opposition figures.[433] Similarly, in 2022, another spyware tool was deployed to unlawfully surveil Greek political officials and journalists in a scandal dubbed "PredatorGate."[434] In 2024, the Serbian government has also been accused by civil society and journalists of installing spyware on phones while they were detained by authorities.[435]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

To prevent the abuse of sensitive technologies such as surveillance software and ill-intentioned applications of AI, corporations should develop industry best practices that prioritize oversight and transparency, such as a global code of conduct that mandates the end of proliferating spyware for repression or the sale of data that could be deployed to harass political opposition groups. Corporations should also be subject to multi-stakeholder constraints. There are international standards that already exist, such as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which companies like the NSO Group claim to adhere to, but, without independent scrutiny, these are not reliable mechanisms for accountability.[436]

D. SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

Social media companies face unique challenges and responsibilities, given their immense capability to aid or harm democracy in the countries in which they operate. Through their role in enabling, facilitating, and monitoring debate in the public arena, these companies have in effect created a new governing ecosystem within which democracies function. As social media platforms become more integral to daily life, early optimism about the technology's democratic potential has shifted into profound concern about misuse by authoritarian and illiberal actors. As a result, social media companies have faced increasing pressure to prioritize platform regulation and corporate responsibility. In this section, we briefly review risks posed by social media platforms and related responsibilities for those who own them.

HOW ANTIDEMOCRATIC ACTORS HAVE POLLUTED DEMOCRATIC SPACE ONLINE

Antidemocratic actors globally have weaponized democratic space online using a multifaceted strategy that includes propaganda, trolls and bots, cyberattacks, and misuse of private data. Rapid advances in AI models have enabled those efforts to grow even more sophisticated and dangerous through the use of deepfakes, chat bots, and AI-generated content and images.[437] Given the estimated 5.22 billion people who are active on social media as of Oct. 2024, "state-affiliated threat groups have access to massive troves of personal data that can inform sophisticated spear phishing

campaigns."[438] Several key risks posed to democracy by social media include polarizing society through echo chambers, amplifying and spreading disinformation, algorithms that create distorted reality, gathering data to manipulate behavior, and facilitating harassment of target groups.[439]

While individual actors are responsible for some democracy-disruptive action, governments in authoritarian regimes tend to fund and coordinate the bulk of bad behavior.[440] Disruptive social media network efforts are deployed by authoritarians for both international and domestic antidemocratic purposes, including suppression of opposition, civil society, and media. In 2017, a study by Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard found that, among 28 surveyed countries, "every authoritarian regime has social media campaigns targeting their own populations."[441] In a 2018 paper based on this research, the authors clarified that illiberal leaders rely on constantly evolving methods operationalized by "cyber troops" (government actors who receive public funding) "to spread disinformation and attempt to generate false consensus."[442] In the most recent update of the study (2020), it found that the use of social media to disseminate "computational propaganda and disinformation about politics" could be observed in 81 countries, of which 76 used disinformation to mislead users, 59 targeted "political opponents, activists or journalists," and seven conducted "mass-reporting of content [and] accounts."[443]

Social media can also enable illiberal leaders to communicate directly over widely viewed platforms that reach significant audiences rapidly and in an echo chamber. In doing so, these leaders' actions affect the proper functioning of democracy. An illiberal leader, by highlighting antidemocratic tendencies, "subverts established protocol, shuts down dissent, marginalizes minority voices, projects soft power, normalizes hateful views, showcases false momentum for their views, or creates the impression of tacit approval of their appeals to extremism."[444]

In the United States, for instance, monitoring ahead of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol demonstrated how illiberal leaders and anti-democratic actors can use social media platforms to undermine the functioning of democracy.[445] In the period leading up to Jan. 6, antidemocratic actors across the country and then-President Trump repeatedly spread falsehoods about the election through social media channels, claiming without evidence that the 2020 election was being stolen.[446] Organized antidemocratic, nongovernmental actors coordinated, planned, and trained to engage in political violence.[447] Some of Donald Trump's supporters, who believed his claims and adhered to the antidemocratic and anti-government ideology of organizing entities, would go on to participate in the Jan. 6 riot after such Trump statements as, "The BIG Protest Rally in Washington, D.C. will take place at 11:00 A.M. on January 6th. Locational details to follow.

StopTheSteal!" and "Be there. Will be wild!"[448] The very public nature of the organizing on social media platforms had a normalizing effect that obscured the danger, even while watchdogs for political violence and democracy protection sounded a warning. In 2021, then-Facebook vice president, Nick Clegg,[449] claimed that blaming social media for the Jan. 6 insurrection is too simplistic an explanation for a complicated issue. Yet, when asked "Yes, or No," on the question of whether Facebook's algorithms amplified or spread pro-insurrection voices prior to Jan. 6, Clegg could not say "No."[450] The congressional committee charged with investigating the attack further found evidence that social media platforms allowed harmful posts to circulate in an attempt to avoid retaliatory action despite declining to examine these issues in depth in its final report.[451]

HOW TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGE

PILLAR 6: Defeat Disinformation

Numerous studies have outlined recommendations for how social media companies should fight the spread of misinformation and disinformation.[452] This fight is already being aided by the deployment and advancement of new technologies to combat disinformation and misinformation. The same technologies fueling this problem can also be used to address this threat to democracy and the information space online and via social media.[453] Last year's pledge by some U.S. social media companies to voluntarily combat disinformation, including at the Munich Security Conference in Feb. 2024, highlights these important steps to protect democracy and election integrity.[454]

At the user level, social media companies should prioritize digital media literacy, which some democracies such as Finland have begun teaching in schools,[455] to teach users how to spot and report misleading content.[456] Social media companies can also strengthen digital literacy, with government and nongovernment partners, by ensuring users have critical skills, including the "ability to search, evaluate, and communicate information through technology" and to use digital tools "effectively and responsibly."[457] For example, Meta partnered with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2023 to launch an initiative for 200 university students in Indonesia promoting digital literacy and critical thinking skills.[458] Although both Meta and YouTube created digital literacy programs in recent years, there is a lack of publicly available data on the reach or effectiveness of such efforts.[459] The growing digital literacy gaps make addressing digital media literacy increasingly difficult—but more important given media consumption trends. In addition, data should be well protected and responsibly shared for use in academic research that furthers the study of disinformation.[460] A better understanding of the impact of digital literacy and digital media literacy is critical to practitioners, social scientists, media, and the private sector.

At the content level, social media companies should quickly remove material that violates policy and flag disinformation with "[l]arge, assertive, and disruptive labels."[461]

The new Digital Services Act in the EU requires takedowns, and in 2024, Brazil temporarily barred X for failing to have a content moderation team responding to government takedown requests in the country.[462] Decisions to take down content should be governed by clear criteria that illustrates the "connection between facts, rational argument, and a healthy democracy." [463] Unfortunately, social media companies have recently rolled back content moderation efforts; between Nov. 2022 and Nov. 2023, the three largest platforms—Meta, X, and YouTube—eliminated 17 critical policies that had limited the spread of misinformation.[464]

PILLAR 6: Defeat Disinformation

Tech companies and social media should continue to use tools and offer products that enable the detection, tracking, and deterring of misinformation and disinformation. Existing tools, including Microsoft Video Authenticator and Truepic, can be utilized to identify manipulated video content, for example.[465] These tools and access to new technologies will be absolutely necessary for media, civil society, and citizens to discern the authenticity of visual evidence.

The large-scale deplatforming of extremist entities and individuals, such as that which occurred in the aftermath of Jan. 6, can limit the dissemination of misinformation on social media.[466] However, some popular platforms—particularly X—have become more reluctant to deplatform users and have even allowed extremists to reactivate their accounts.[467] A long-term study of the impact of deplatforming and the flagging of misinformation and disinformation is needed to understand any lasting impact. In addition, companies should develop and maintain a robust appeals process run by employees not involved in the initial decision.

At the company level, executives should design algorithms to reduce "the outrage factor" and thereby diminish falsehoods. Regular training should be provided to staff on current threats and "to exchange views on the potential for further improvement."[468] Companies should support "narrow, targeted government regulation" that does not infringe on users' rights to free speech—focusing on things like political advertising and disinformation prevalence measures.[469] Lastly, companies should intensify cooperation with other platforms to share best practices.[470]

Although restrictions by social media companies on advertising false news sites have been shown to reduce the sharing of spurious news articles by up to 75 percent,[471] positive advertising requires human judgment, and multinational tech companies—particularly X—have been resistant to self-

regulation.[472] While these private entities may be reluctant to take on such a responsibility, government officials at opposite ends of the political spectrum have increasingly expressed a willingness to regulate digital traffic. In the EU, the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act have created a legal framework focused on regulating media content on the internet.[473] In the U.S., following the aforementioned testimony by former Facebook employee Frances Haugen, Republican and Democratic senators alike expressed the need for regulatory changes to address misinformation promoted by the company's advertising algorithm.[474] In the years since, draft legislation aimed at addressing the spread of misinformation via AI-generated deepfakes has similarly attracted bipartisan support. The "NO FAKES Act," for example, was introduced as a bipartisan, bicameral bill in September of 2024 to regulate AI and deepfakes that may misrepresent an individual.[475] There are considerations of creating independent oversight of major platform companies,[476] but an international perspective on the problem addresses that companies apply different policies and algorithms in different legal jurisdictions.

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Both companies and governments can support prevention and response efforts at the familial and caregiver level to address youth radicalization in online social media and gaming platforms. Investments in promotion and distribution of research-based tools from community NGOs offer an individualized and societal-level avenue to address the impact of antidemocratic online efforts. Resources include information about the key vulnerabilities that make young people more susceptible to radicalization, how to recognize the warning signs of radicalization, what drives online radicalization, and how to engage a radicalized child or young adult.[477] This tactic of addressing early onset antidemocratic affiliation by youth (such as combating the anti-establishment rhetoric that has become increasingly prevalent in online subcultures dominated by young men) offers a more durable potential for building stronger, more resilient democracies.[478]

SECTION 1.4 KEY RESOURCES:

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- Deb, Anamitra, Stacy Donohue, and Tom Glaisyer. “Is Social Media a Threat to Democracy?” The Omidyar Group. October 1, 2017. https://www.omidyargroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Social-Media-and-Democracy-October-5-2017.pdf.

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- Roig, Julia. “Business for Democracy: A Call for Courage and Action.” Horizons Project. https://horizonsproject.us/business-for-democracy-a-call-for-courage-and-action/.

5. CONCLUSION OF SECTION ONE

This section reviewed the challenges faced by four major groups of actors with capacity to promote and defend democracy within their own nations: the incumbent political establishment; political opposition; civil society and independent media; and private enterprise. Throughout, we outlined challenges faced by each group, as well as strategies they might employ to improve the odds of democratic success. The next section explores how international organizations and foreign partners can best support domestic actors. But before transitioning to international actors, we would be remiss if we did not say a word about the role of individual citizens in upholding democracy and holding elected leaders accountable.

As we have argued, leaders in government, policymaking, media, the private sector, and civil society all have critical domestic roles to play in the defense of democracy. This section has surveyed strategies they might choose to employ for such pro-democracy work. Yet just as important to democracy as sector leaders are ordinary citizens. At the end of the day, democracy expresses the will of the people, and the choices made by ordinary people shape the spirit of the governing order. Not every citizen will take an active role in political life by running for office, becoming a civil servant, joining a civil society organization, or even attending a demonstration. However, everyday choices can have an important impact on the democratic process and the functioning of healthy democracies.

PILLAR 1: Protect Elections

While the role of individuals in a democracy is essential to its function, democratic citizenship is at risk and is being undermined to varying degrees in backsliding democracies. Therefore, citizens in today's democracies need to carry important water, including strengthening their own and societal resilience to misinformation and disinformation. While the full literature on this subject is beyond the scope of this updated Playbook,[479] Timothy Snyder's recommendations for people in such nations are a suitable coda to this section. First, of course, people should defend democratic elections, ensuring the continued existence of the multiparty system.[480] Beyond merely voting, Snyder calls on people to reject symbols of hate and exclusion, listen for dangerous or extremist rhetoric, and focus on verifiable information. Furthermore, all of us should respect and recognize the importance of democratic institutions in our daily lives and be prepared to defend them. As Snyder puts it, "choose an institution you care about and take its side."[481]

SECTION TWO: INTERNATIONAL ACTORS AND EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE

For decades, international democratic actors have played a significant role in bolstering the efforts of domestic pro-democracy actors, both government and nongovernment, particularly in backsliding democracies. That role carried out bilaterally or multilaterally, including through international organizations, can support a nation and its democratic transformation or prevent democratic erosion. Given the rise of autocratic networks and ongoing democratic decline globally this role, while not without challenges, remains essential to the fight for democracy. This effort can be imperiled if leading donors, including the U.S., back away from democracy support and the political ground is ceded to illiberal actors.

This section highlights best practices of engagement for government actors; donor partners, foundations, philanthropy and the private sector; and multilateral institutions. The section primarily concerns itself with the scholarship and experience of international democracy support in the non-U.S. setting because that is where it has happened in recent decades. With the U.S. now a backsliding democracy, the review of scholarship and practice that follows has important potential U.S. applications. The U.S. has for many decades led, or helped to lead, international support for democracy; now we need to benefit from it. We seek to lay the foundation for that (perhaps hard to accept) concept by providing the general theory and practice of such assistance globally. We do so with particular reference to the European setting because that is where our principal expertise lies, and it offers ample examples. Although we offer some preliminary reflections throughout, full application of international lessons to the U.S. context must await further development as the scope and scale of the backsliding becomes clear.

We explain below that this set of international actors can appropriately support domestic citizens, nongovernmental organizations, and independent media, bolster civil resistance and nonviolent movements, counter foreign disinformation campaigns, and push back against illiberal governments' use of corruption and repression. The following best practices and policy recommendations stem from the operating assumption that democratic governments and international organizations can and should continue to support, prioritize, and strengthen democracy and freedoms globally. This is particularly true in countries experiencing backsliding, internal and external threats to good governance, excessive levels of corruption, closing media and civil society spaces, and where international actors have the most leverage and opportunity.

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Maintaining strong relations and cooperation across democratic states through economic, political, informational, security, and social ties has historically helped to develop, fortify, and advance democracies. Support from external pro-democracy actors is even more important in an increasingly contested international environment of global democratic stagnation, closing civic space, and coordinated efforts of illiberal actors, including authoritarians. Now more than ever in the post-Cold War era, powerful authoritarian states such as Russia and China, as part of an autocracy axis or network, are lending support, coordinating in some instances, and presenting an alternative governance model to bolster the strength of illiberal regimes globally while weakening or pushing democracies to collapse, including with the aid of domestic proxies. This illiberal network's efforts are advanced by subverting and weaponizing digital technologies—once thought of as a boon to global democracy—to develop and export models of digital authoritarianism, particularly as the rapid advancement of AI outpaces digital governance reforms.

As Gene Sharp noted, "the main brunt of the struggle must be borne by the grievance group immediately affected by the opponents' political elite. Third party action can be seen as at best supplementary and complementary to internal resistance, never as the main actions of the struggle."[482] An indirect approach to democracy supported by international actors and foreign governments thus works best. These outside actors should aim to empower local actors, not by managing them, but by collaborating with them to incentivize democratic reforms, support organic democratic development, and empower an active pluralistic civil society. A direct approach to democracy support should remain an option as long as illiberal threats grow.

PILLAR 7: Make Democracy Deliver

It is also necessary to recognize that the efficacy of diplomatic pressure and other actions varies across target states. Efforts to leverage trade or aid in support of democratic outcomes may not be effective with states less dependent on trade with or aid from the relevant outside actors.[483] Despite these limitations, democratic foreign governments and international institutions have their own toolkits to promote and support free and fair elections, rule of law, freedom of the press, human rights, and to counter democratic backsliding, particularly in countries where recently established democratic institutions are coming under attack. But, foreign economic incentives or financial support will not change the situation on the ground unless there is a powerful and genuinely domestic movement to hold public figures and institutions accountable to democratic rules and principles.

Finally, the reader will note that we below discuss (as in the first two editions) many U.S.-led international democracy promotion successes. We do so through no illusion that the U.S. will continue to build on that record in the years ahead or that all of those programs that are active will continue. Rather, we document U.S. democracy promotion efforts because of the lessons they afford, and so that other governments and nongovernmental actors can carry the torch forward, if and when that becomes necessary.

1. PARTNERING WITH DOMESTIC CSOS AND NGOS

SUMMARY

International actors should partner with domestic CSOs, NGOs, and other stakeholders by:[484]

- Going local. Foundations, the private sector, and international donors should enhance collaboration with local NGOs such that external support to well-established, well-known, and sophisticated organizations is balanced with cooperation with local and emerging entities.

- Building basic capacities. Where local NGOs lack some of the capacities of more well-established and well-resourced national organizations, donors can help expand resources through flexible funding and further develop basic core organizational capacities in strategically positioned NGOs. That includes strengthening institutional financial management, human resources management and organizational capacity, and risk management and independence.

- Development through inclusive policies. Development efforts should be grounded in policies of inclusive growth that tackle economic inequality and that improve well-being across all demographic lines—including race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and geography.

- Coordinating donor support. A multiplicity of sudden large donors can overwhelm a recipient organization's bandwidth and undermine its effectiveness through competing demands and priorities. Establishing networks of donors supporting democracy and coordinating support across organizations would help to mitigate the problem.

- Responding to increasing government attacks on NGOs, media, and activists. External actors including donors, NGOs, and government officials should issue systematic, coordinated, and high-level responses to government authorities' restrictions on NGO, activist, and independent media activities, while taking steps to avoid the perception that domestic activities are externally driven. In more supportive environments, donors and governments should vocally promote laws that safeguard NGOs, independent media, and activists to help create an environment that is conducive to their activities, including government oversight, election monitoring, and democracy building.

- Empowering nontraditional actors. Donors should help develop pro-democracy networks of actors such as individuals, the private sector, academia, student groups, and think tanks. In parallel, efforts should be

made to help establish mechanisms and incentives to induce well-established NGOs to provide training to the less well-established groups. Such training needs to be relevant to the location and culture.

- Developing local sources of funding and philanthropy. Particularly in countries that are at risk of democratic backsliding, donors should help NGOs diversify their external support, develop local sources of funding, and build local habits of corporate philanthropy to help build sustainable civil society ecosystems over time.

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Civil society organizations and nongovernmental organizations in emerging, backsliding, and even collapsed democracies are important partners for international engagement.[485] Although international actors and foreign governments have supported domestic NGOs for decades, CSOs did not emerge as a focal point for external support until the late 1980s and early 1990s, as donors grew frustrated with operating through corrupt and uncommitted state institutions.[486] At the time, leading academics were also embracing neo-Tocquevillian ideas about the relationship between civil society and democracy. Robert Putnam argued that civil society built social capital by facilitating cooperation, building trust, and encouraging solidarity.[487] Similarly, Larry Diamond suggested that civil society was vital for democratic consolidation.[488]

The "third wave" of democratization swept across Southern Europe, Latin America, and Central and Eastern Europe between the 1970s and the 1990s, and was most prominently captured by the citizen-led protests that toppled the Berlin Wall and facilitated the Central and Eastern European democratic transitions of 1989. International donors came to see civil society as a "domain that is nonviolent but powerful, nonpartisan yet pro-democratic, and that emerges from the essence of particular societies, yet is nonetheless universal."[489] The 1990s witnessed the "NGOization" of civil society, and aid from the West increased massively.[490] The number of NGOs and other CSOs skyrocketed, and between 1970 and 2000 there was a sevenfold increase in resources transferred through international NGOs.[491]

"NGOization," however, did not begin as an inclusive endeavor.[492] Foreign governments, foundations, and other donors initially preferred to work with Western NGOs. Collaboration with local NGOs was generally limited to organizations based in a country's capital and resembled patron-client relationships as opposed to more equal partnerships. This proved costly and unsustainable.[493] It was expensive to fly in and host Westerners, and NGOs struggled to build genuine relationships with local citizens and organizations. In Russia, for instance, citizens "repeatedly rejected what they saw as a paternalistic model positioning them as recipients of aid and instead advocated for equal partnerships in the design and delivery of projects."[494]

Past EU funding to CSOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cyprus, and Georgia (for example) also points to a risk of widening disconnects between CSOs and the public. [495] EU funding has incentivized many domestic NGOs in these countries to prioritize EU-friendly projects that are more short-term and measurable.[496] Some feel that an "elitist" civil society sector has emerged. And, as Sarah Bush has argued, Western democracy assistance programs have contributed to a "taming" of democracy promotion by shifting to support technical programs rather than those aiming at transformative change.[497] Whatever one may make of this scholarship, we do not understand it to detract from the good work that is being done by these organizations. Rather, the point is to also focus on direct democracy promotion and to broaden the scope of civil society in any given jurisdiction.

Bush argues that the power of this select group of the civil society sector is at times reinforced by the media, which calls upon representatives from those organizations to provide input on certain issues. This cycle has harmed grassroots organizations and distanced many big CSOs from the public.[498] In Cyprus, for example, citizens described many NGOs that receive foreign funding as "artificial" and "externally driven," while those in Bosnia-Herzegovina see them as corrupt entities.[499] Understandably, confusion about the role of CSOs emerges as a result of this divide, with many citizens not being informed about how foreign funding works, how CSOs operate, and what their goals are.

In response to these weaknesses and criticisms, external assistance became a more local endeavor starting in the mid-1990s.[500] "Going local" was cheaper and more effective, and external actors and donors began to prefer working with local NGOs because of their many comparative advantages.[501] This remains true today, although working with local and less well-known organizations also has its drawbacks. In terms of their strengths, they can be deeply aware of the local context, less constrained by bureaucracy and sovereignty laws than official government actors, maintain clear goals and professional structures that match donor needs, and are better trained to organize pro-democracy movements. Advocacy NGOs in particular can aggregate citizen demands and push for government action and accountability, acting as a "transmission belt" between civil society and the state.[502] Local NGOs, however, can have limited capacities, be overly dependent on competing and inefficient donor agendas, and lack powerful political contacts.[503] For example, there is uncertainty over whether Donald Trump's administration will prioritize continuing to provide ample U.S. assistance for democracy, rule of law, civil society, independent media, and other activities globally.[504]

External assistance to CSOs and NGOs in Kosovo makes it clear that international donors conceptualize local consultation in different ways, and that there is no "one size fits all model" when it comes to working with partners on the ground.[505] Some organizations such as the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung have employed local staff and consult with them, while others have more formal processes.[506] For instance, the EU has held "multilevel consultations" with various local actors, while the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency have sent delegations to Kosovo while interacting with domestic actors through formal institutions, like advisory boards. Other donors rely more on reports and data to shape their approach: The UN Kosovo Team is guided by its own Human Development reports as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Kosovo's European integration agenda, which already have input from Kosovo specialists and groups operating in the area.[507]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

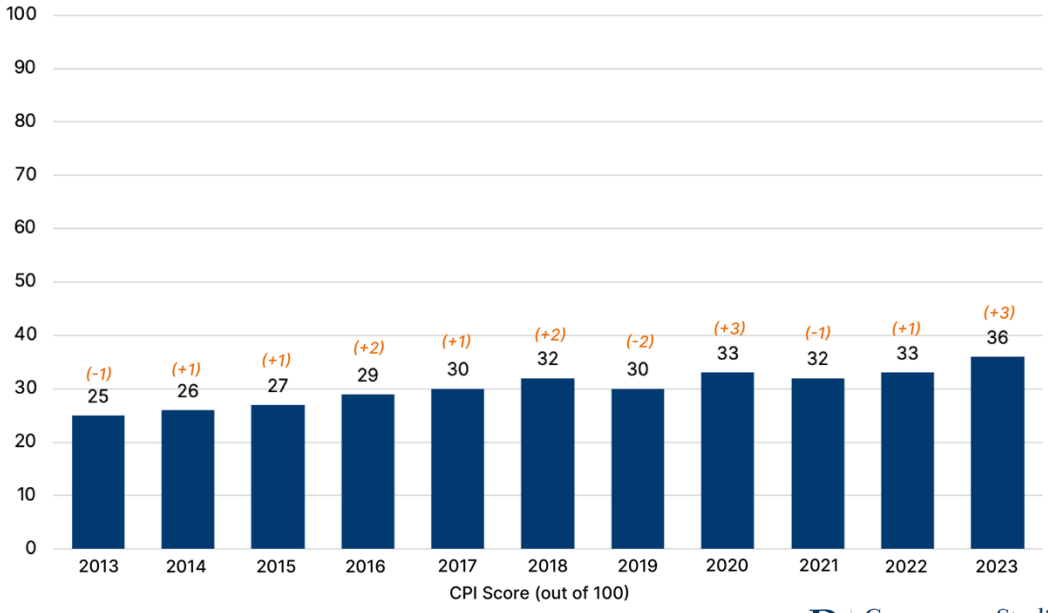
The provision of vital international donor support to Ukraine, especially following Russia's full-scale invasion in Feb. 2022, offers important examples of how democracy and key actors can be supported and reforms advanced while other national security, economic, and foreign policy considerations are also prioritized. For example, in the pro-democracy, rule of law, and anti-corruption space, government partners, global CSOs, and the private sector within those nations (and internationally), have surged financial, technical, and moral support, which has helped Ukraine achieve anti-corruption breakthroughs and weaken their oligarchs.[508]

PILLAR 3: Fight Corruption

FIGURE 8

Anti-corruption results of Ukraine

Ukraine's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score 2013 to 2023



Source: Corruption Perceptions Index, https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/index/ukr
Note: Numbers in parenthesis indicate the change in score from the previous year.

B | Governance Studies at BROOKINGS

A. ADDRESSING RESTRICTIONS ON CSOS AND NGOS

Over the last two decades, illiberal government actors intent on consolidating power and reducing checks and balances have taken steps to increasingly restrict the activity of independent NGOs by enacting censorship laws; restricting freedom of assembly; banning or limiting foreign funding (foreign agent laws); requiring approval by the government for operations; creating registration requirements; not issuing visas to employees of foreign partner organizations; and labeling NGOs as "foreign agents."[509]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Another complicating factor is when regimes sponsor or create NGOs, or GONGOs (government-organized nongovernmental organizations), to further their own political interests. Rather than the independence that characterizes the best of the NGO world, including taking on their own or other governments when that is the right thing to do, these GONGOs are the captives of the regimes that foster them.[510] Their activities can serve as "NGO-washing" of the regime, purporting to express civil society support for illiberal policies or people when it does not actually exist in the broader societies of these countries. GONGOs can confuse external actors by making it difficult to discern what is a genuine civic group and what is not.[511]

Restrictions on NGOs—especially foreign-funded ones—date back to the post-Cold War years.[512] In the aftermath of major waves of decolonization that took place in the 1950s and 1960s, external actors tended to give aid—which was aimed at facilitating socioeconomic development as opposed to political reform—directly to governments. This was a way of respecting the agency of newly independent recipients wary of continued Western interventionism, given their colonial history.[513] But by the end of the Cold War, donors were focused on democracy promotion and preferred to channel aid through NGOs.[514] Initially, governments in countries with a growing third sector didn't see NGOs and democracy assistance as a threat—a perception that was reinforced by the end of the Cold War, which reduced concerns about Western interventionism.[515]

However, NGOs quickly became prominent and powerful. Their development worried host governments, which reacted by restricting the ability of NGOs to receive foreign aid.[516] These regulations were exacerbated by the "color revolutions" in countries such as Georgia which showed the world the capacity of opposition parties and organizations that received Western support.[517] Between 1993 and 2012, more than a quarter of low- and middle-income countries enacted laws (e.g., administrative burdens, limitations on the use of foreign funds, reporting requirements, and high taxes) that restricted foreign contributions to local NGOs, and, between 1994 and 2015, 60 countries implemented laws limiting foreign funding of NGOs. From 1990 to 2015, 13 of 54 African states implemented similar laws.[518] According to Just Security, this trend continued into 2024, with at least six new countries worldwide either proposing or adopting similar laws.[519]

In recent years, the overall environment for CSOs globally has deteriorated, a development closely connected to the rise of illiberalism, years of democratic backsliding, civic space closing, and rising authoritarian threats. For example, over the past decade governments in several Central and Eastern European countries have cracked down on NGOs, such as Georgia's foreign agent law in 2024[520], and in 2017, when Hungary passed an act on "the transparency of organizations supported from abroad," similar to Russia's "foreign agent" law discussed below.[521] The Hungarian law required CSOs that received funding from foreign sources above a certain amount to register as "foreign funded" and label themselves as such on all publications and websites.[522] The law, which was the first of its kind in an EU member state, included stringent reporting requirements, and noncompliance was punishable by high fines and even eventual dissolution.[523] Despite the EU attempt to hold Hungary accountable,[524] civic space is currently rated as 'Obstructed' in Hungary according to the CIVICUS monitor.[525] Orbán's government continued to target Hungarian civil society in 2023 through the adoption of the act on the "Protection of National Sovereignty."[526] The

Sovereignty Protection Office established by this act has the power to investigate and "gather information on any groups or individuals that benefit from foreign funding and influence public debate."[527] They also kept other restrictive legislation in place.[528] The Hungarian government continued to use the label of "foreign agent" to restrict freedoms and cause self-censorship of civic actors.

Other nations, to varying degrees, have passed laws that have imposed burdensome restrictions and administrative duties on foreign-funded NGOs.[529] That being said, there have been some positive developments as well. North Macedonia's Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization—Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), which had overseen democratic backsliding, attacks on civil society, and a spree of nationalist building projects, lost power to the more pro-democracy Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) in 2017.[530] Prioritizing joining NATO and the European Union, the new government resolved the country's long-standing dispute over its name with Greece and accelerated governance reforms, including adopting a revised NGO law allowing NGOs to engage in economic activity pertinent to their mission, enhancing their financial sustainability.[531] However, like many other Eastern and Central European countries, the return of a potential illiberal power with the reelection of VMRO in 2024 has raised concerns over a slowdown of EU-mandated democracy reforms and the possible reintroduction of restrictive NGO laws and the closing of civic spaces in North Macedonia, where Orbán's allies bought up lots of the formerly independent media outlets.[532] Vigilance is necessary to ensure that democratic reforms continue, that antidemocratic tactics are not reintroduced, and that NGOs can operate as key actors along with other government and non-government partners to advance reforms and advance North Macedonia's EU accession goals in 2025.[533]

Lawmakers understand that adopting legislation that hampers civil society and closes civic space and freedoms comes at a cost. In enacting restrictive legislation, governments risk being named and shamed by the international community, impacting assistance levels, losing valuable services provided by NGOs, and being met with public disapproval. Yet governments often think that these costs are outweighed by political survival, which can be threatened when civil society, and society as a whole, is empowered to demand accountability, rights, and democratic rule, and takes active steps to pursue these goals.[534]

Crackdowns that draw the most attention tend to take place in semi-authoritarian or competitive authoritarian regimes, which try to retain some form of legitimacy in the eyes of the international community (e.g., through pluralist elections or allowing some NGOs to do advocacy work) while hampering challenges to the regime.[535]

Common forms of restriction include:

- Hampering civil society: enacting censorship laws; and restricting freedom of assembly.
- Targeting foreign funding and support: banning or limiting foreign funding; requiring its approval by the government; creating registration requirements; and not issuing visas to employees of foreign partner organizations.
- Intimidation and harassment: labeling NGOs "foreign agents," threats to public order, violent actors or even terrorists; suing activists, and carrying out illegitimate audits.

In light of these repressive tactics, international donor responses matter. When international donors and organizations, including aid agencies, take decisive action to signal disapproval of attacks on civil society and rule of law, governments are forced to respond. Uncoordinated action can have the opposite effect of facilitating further attacks on civil society.[536] Based on these assumptions, below is a series of best practices and case studies to help international actors assess both the pros and cons of partnering with domestic NGOs.

B. COORDINATING AND DIVERSIFYING SUPPORT

The multiplicity of donors operating in similar spaces and with similar organizations on the ground can overwhelm recipients' bandwidth and even undermine their effectiveness through competing demands and priorities. To address this, donors should coordinate and diversify their support. One possible model of pro-democracy networking is the Community of Democracies, which works with civil society to coordinate the efforts of their member state for democratic processes and institutions.[537] As illiberal governments implement restrictive laws targeting foreign funding of civil society organizations, it is important to foster coordination not only among like-minded donors but also among local organizations. Responses include creating platforms (e.g., in international organizations) for activists who have been affected by a closing civil society space and bringing domestic NGOs together to develop joint responses to restrictive government policies. A lack of systematic, coordinated, and high-level responses to government authorities' restrictions on NGO activities opens more opportunities for heavier-handed approaches that will further hamper local actors' freedom of operation.

Large foundations and other international donors should commit to collaborate with local NGOs, and those beyond capital cities. Many authoritarian leaders will target well-established, well-known, and Westernized organizations operating in their country. Local entities often lack the capacities of more established organizations in national capitals. Through diversification of funding donors can help develop basic core organizational capacities, especially financial management and human resources management, that will enable smaller NGOs to grow in capacity and influence. This involves providing aid through smaller grants (and therefore developing small grant funding models) to less Westernized groups and local organizations operating outside the capital cities. It also involves working to empower nontraditional actors such as businesses, individuals, universities, student groups, and think tanks. For example, one way of supporting local pro-democracy actors is through scholarships to specific individuals. In parallel, efforts should be made to help establish mechanisms and incentives inducing well-established NGOs (which donors typically favor) to provide culture and location-specific training to the less well-established groups. What is important is not putting all the donor "eggs" in a few baskets. By spreading out the network of recipient NGOs, and varying the funding models, it is more difficult for authoritarian leaders to crack down through laws and rhetoric.

C. PLANNING IN ADVANCE AND DEVELOPING CORE CAPACITIES

In countries that are at risk of democratic backsliding, donors should help CSOs and NGOs develop local sources of funding and build local habits of corporate philanthropy—all of which can build sustainable civil society ecosystems over time. Donors can also use flexible funding to help organizations develop core organizational capacities, especially financial management and human resources management, rather than just providing support for project activities with limited time horizons. Developing a healthy civil society ecosystem will require a sustained investment in inclusive, pro-growth policies for left-behind areas, such as extending broadband access, providing investment capital for new and small businesses, and using both transportation investment and regulatory policy to address rural-urban imbalances. Policies should address the unique needs of each area by elevating existing community assets and collaborations that bolster local economies. Underserved areas often have systemic and structural barriers to economic stability and growth that both prevent democracy building efforts due to conflict over a scarcity of resources, poor health indicators, and susceptible opportunists who fulfill the economic needs of the community through undemocratic, and at times violent, means.[538]

PILLAR 7: Make Democracy Deliver

Donors can, moreover, bolster community resiliency by investing in economic development efforts that build sustained, inclusive, and more equitable community structures.[539] Kosovo in recent decades has proven why it is important for external actors to help develop basic capacities among native CSOs and NGOs. In the 1990s, external donors and organizations did not enter Kosovo with hopes of supporting democratization by collaborating with young CSOs. Instead, they came in as part of an emergency, attempting to balance the provision of humanitarian aid and the facilitation of peacebuilding in the aftermath of a devastating, bloody conflict. As a result, many of Kosovo's NGOs were left inexperienced and needing to "depend entirely on international donor funding."[540] Second, there are "no developed NGO networks with relevant and appropriate capacities for advocacy, project management, service provision, or basic community development," save for a few in the capital, Pristina.[541]

As the political situation in Kosovo changed (e.g., with the declaration of independence in 2008), so did donor priorities. Today external actors, including Kosovo's partners such as the EU, with its 2023 Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, work robustly on rule of law and democracy promotion by collaborating with government institutions and NGOs.[542] However, early enthusiasm from external actors proved that funding NGOs' initiatives is not enough to maximize their efficacy; it is also crucial to do basic organizational capacity-building activities and equip them with important skills like advocacy and grant management.

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

In more supportive environments, external actors should vocally promote laws that safeguard NGOs and activists and create an environment that is conducive to their activities (e.g., recognizing freedom of speech and peaceful assembly). One example is article 56 of Montenegro's Constitution, which states that "Everyone shall have the right of recourse to international organizations for the protection of their own rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution," thereby welcoming NGOs' and activists' access to international organizations where they can advocate for their causes.[543] Montenegro still needs to do more to support the Montenegrin civil society environment, including strengthening cooperation between state authorities and NGOs, as highlighted in Dec. 2024 by Center for Development of Non-Governmental Organizations (CRNVO).[544]

Where governments seek to restrict civil society actors, and apply repressive measures to do so, external actors including international donors, NGOs, and government officials should issue systematic, coordinated, and high-level pressure and exert leverage by linking democratic performance to other policy areas such as in the security, energy, and economic realms. Donors, including democratic governments, should also vocally promote laws that safeguard NGOs and activists to help create an environment that is

conducive to their activities. At the same time, it is important to empower local actors and avoid the perception that activities are solely externally driven. Repressive governments will retaliate by trying to tarnish the affiliation of domestic NGOs with foreign actors. The Russian government has been a repressive trailblazer with its 2012 "foreign agents law," which it expanded in 2020, and again in 2022, and 2025.[545]

There have been many similar versions of these restrictive laws enacted by other autocratic leaders, including in Georgia adopted by the ruling Georgian Dream party and in Apr. 2024 in Kyrgyzstan.[546] Within the EU, Orbán's government targeted civil society organizations by law in Hungary in 2017 and again in 2021 and 2023.[547] The original law had to be repealed after the EU Court of Justice found the 2017 measure, which imposed registration requirements on organizations receiving above a certain threshold in foreign funding, was contrary to EU obligations. (The EU requirement that capital be mobile inside the EU). But instead of requiring NGOs to declare foreign funds, a new rule was enacted that required certain NGOs to submit to annual audits conducted by the State Audit Office.[548] As noted above, the EU has opened an infringement procedure against Hungary to change their 2023 act on the "Protection of National Sovereignty" and is now suing Hungary at the European Court of Justice for breach of EU law.[549] While Hungary continues to dodge the EU's rulings and has not meaningfully changed its repression of NGOs, it is nonetheless a step in the right direction that EU institutions are seeking to hold Hungary accountable for rule of law and democracy backsliding.[550] Donors and governments should vocally promote laws that safeguard NGOs and civic activists to help create an environment that is conducive to their activities.

While distinct in some respects, it is also worth noting the bill in the U.S., formally known as the "Stop Terror-Financing and Tax Penalties on American Hostages Act." The proposed legislation would "allow the treasury secretary to revoke nonprofit status for groups suspected of providing 'material support or resources' to terrorist organizations."[551] The bill has not so far become law as of this writing, including because of concerns that "that the bill's vague criteria and lack of due process would give the government broad power to target any civil society organization."[552]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

To foster greater resiliency before restrictions occur and in places where backsliding is already taking place, donors should increase short and long-term support for CSOs and for independent media and investigative journalists. This funding program should prioritize projects that will demonstrate to communities outside of national capitals (by providing services, education, etc.) the benefits of democratic institutions. It should also improve government accountability and transparency through in-depth investigative reporting on, for example, misuse of public resources.[553] In

addition, donors can encourage NGOs to develop productive relationships, when possible, with central and local governments, moving away from the idea that advocacy NGOs must naturally take a completely independent, or even antagonistic, stance toward their governments.

SECTION 2.1 KEY RESOURCES:

- Kirova, Iskra. "Foreign Agent Laws in the Authoritarian Playbook." Human Rights Watch. September 19, 2024. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/foreign-agent-laws-authoritarian-playbook

- Merriman, Hardy. "Small Grants, Big Commitment: Reflections on Support for Grassroots Activists and Organizers." International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, January 10, 2019. https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/small-grants-big-commitment-reflections-support-grassroots-human-rights-activists-organizers.

- Carothers, Thomas. Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011.

2. ASSISTING CIVIL RESISTANCE AND NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS

SUMMARY

International actors should assist civil resistance and nonviolent movements by:

- Developing clear criteria for providing support. Civil resistance movements involve many actors and organizations. It is therefore important to make informed decisions about whom to support both during and after civil resistance campaigns. Baseline criteria for a campaign to receive support should include: a public commitment to nonviolence; campaign goals that are consistent with internationally recognized human rights; and clear independence from registered political parties (although total electoral disengagement is not a prerequisite).[554]

- Thinking long term. There is always work to be done in the aftermath of successful civil resistance campaigns. This involves supporting newly empowered democratic political actors and taking steps to avoid a power vacuum. These political actors may be trained in policymaking and processes of deliberative governance. Building democratic governance institutions and processes can take years and requires patience from all actors involved. Making sure economic and other support is available to governments during a lengthy democratic transition is an important partner to the democracy transformation process.

- Establishing the local context. Given the difficulties around identifying appropriate internal partners within a jurisdiction, a starting point for external support must be understanding the local context and the expressed needs of local activists. This knowledge transfer should occur through frequent interactions with a broad range of civil society and other local actors.

- Promoting local ownership. External support for nonviolent movements, while beneficial, can in certain contexts be used by domestic governments to delegitimize homegrown movements. Support that is poorly administered can also be detrimental to their success. Therefore, it is critical to advance local ownership and involvement. This can help prevent possible free-riding and encourage domestic support from those who might have concerns about association with a foreign actor.[555]

- Focusing on training and skills development. Invest in developing and sharing knowledge across civil resistance and movement organizing, so that activists have greater opportunities for learning and cultivating skills, including physical and cyber security.[556] In supporting domestic efforts, training and mentoring in strategic nonviolent action and coalition building can help improve the skills and effectiveness of activists.

- Helping to boost the efforts of independent media. Independent journalism plays an important role in raising awareness of and supporting the goals of civil resistance and nonviolent movements. Enhancing media effectiveness should involve training journalists inside and outside of resistance movements. Independent journalists and news outlets need to be sensitized to the dynamics of civil resistance movements, and nonviolent activists must be trained as effective spokespeople for their causes.

A. DEFINING CIVIL RESISTANCE AND NONVIOLENCE

Per Section One, we follow Gene Sharp in defining civil resistance or nonviolent struggle as "a technique used to control, combat, and even destroy the opponents' power by a nonviolent means of wielding power."[557] Generally, it emerges when political, economic, or social grievances go unaddressed with no feasible way to enact change in the status quo.[558] It tends to occur when more traditional channels, including dialogue negotiations and institutional processes such as elections and legal recourse, fail to produce results.

B. WHY SUPPORT CIVIL RESISTANCE, AND WHOM TO SUPPORT?

Why should international actors support civil resistance and nonviolent movements? As we explained in Section One, Part 3.A., they can be highly effective, especially when sufficiently resourced and supported. One reason for the success of nonviolent movements is that they tend to attract sympathetic international attention, especially when the regime responds disproportionately. This attention can be highly valuable. For instance, international divestments, sanctions, boycotts, and even barring sports teams from international competitions all played important roles in ending apartheid in South Africa.

In recent decades international actors have provided various types of assistance to civil resistance campaigns through diplomatic engagement, material support, sanctions, and international coverage.[559]

Steps supported by external actors include:

- Challenging government cover-ups through investigations and reports.
- Bringing issues and civil resistance leaders to multilateral institutions (e.g., EU, UN, Organization of American States (OAS), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and G7) to bolster their international legitimacy.
- Promoting dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution.
- Developing and sharing knowledge about civil resistance and movement organizing, so that activists have greater opportunities for learning and cultivation of skills.[560]
- Monitoring and attending trials of political prisoners.
- Attending protests, activist trials, and vigils.[561]
- Supporting independent media.
- Pressuring the government to enact changes or step down.
- Creating safe spaces for activists to meet and organize.
- Providing technology and technical support to support non-violent activism.[562]

These forms of assistance have helped to promote the aims of civil resistance movements and enforce human rights standards in oppressive environments.

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Civil resistance movements involve many actors that coordinate actions, recruit participants, and inform the international community. As such, it is important for external actors to make informed decisions about whom to support during and after civil resistance movements.[563] Diplomats are influential due to their political connections, have an easier time getting in contact with government figures, and are protected by diplomatic immunity.[564] Diplomats and government affiliated organizations can help convene civil society actors with funders, and they can facilitate meetings between government supporters and opposition groups.[565] Domestic CSOs and NGOs are also powerful partners, as they tend to be more informed about the situation on the ground, less constrained by bureaucracy and sovereignty laws, and better trained to organize resistance movements.

More broadly, Hardy Merriman and Peter Ackerman of the International Center of Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) outline three basic criteria for campaigns to receive assistance: A public commitment to nonviolence and calls for nonviolent discipline from all supporters; campaign goals that are consistent with internationally recognized human rights, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and maintaining independence from registered political parties (although total electoral disengagement is not a prerequisite).[566]

In terms of timing of support, there are two additional elements for external actors to keep in mind. First, there is still work to be done in the aftermath of a successful civil resistance campaign in order to support newly empowered political actors and avoid a power vacuum. As leaders of a successful movement and new political parties move onto the political stage, they may need to be trained in policymaking and processes of deliberative governance, such as participatory budgeting.[567] Second, building democratic governance institutions can take years and requires patience from external actors. Supporters must avoid buying into the "graduation myth"—the concept that countries become immediately stable, democratic, and peaceful after a certain combination of years and funds.[568]

C. UNDERSTANDING THE OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Given the difficulties around identifying appropriate internal partners, a starting point for any discussion of external support must be understanding the domestic context and expressed needs of national and local activists. This knowledge transfer should occur through frequent interactions with a broad range of civil society actors. External organizations and institutions must also be aware of the legal, political, and social constraints faced by activists. According to Hardy Merriman of the ICNC, civil resistance movements face daunting challenges to building unifying visions and networks of trust; eliciting broad participation and mobilization; and spreading knowledge about how nonviolent conflict works. A key component to civil resistance movements' success is developing local and national level strategies that work in unison to challenge powerholders and institutions.[569] For external actors to support these goals, a deep understanding of the operating environment and range of actors engaged in civil resistance movements will help to better coordinate resources and avoid duplicative efforts. Indeed, the most effective strategies to be employed by external actors will vary depending on the operating environment of the region. In urban municipalities, for example, nuanced systems are needed to better address long-term social service needs of urban populations, including in middle- and high-income countries. Moreover, new city-focused responses must enable a wide range of actors—local authorities, business leaders,

academics, philanthropists, and development agencies—to provide input on decisions that affect their communities.

D. PROMOTING LOCAL OWNERSHIP

While external support for civil resistance movements can be incredibly valuable, it can also be detrimental to their success—a risk that all international actors must take into consideration when considering support of domestic campaigns. Governments can use external assistance to delegitimize homegrown movements, portraying them as foreign agents. That is the case in the nation of Georgia, where the government's deployment of the foreign agent law has been used by the ruling Georgian Dream political party to suppress opposition political parties, remove checks and balances, and attack civil society.[570] Moreover, large amounts of funding that are poorly administered can destroy resistance movements internally. While we believe that external assistance to movements can do more good than harm, it is important that international actors make every effort to encourage local ownership.[571] Deep knowledge of the national and local context can help avoid (although not entirely) the risk of internal quarrels, accusations of profiteering, and the loss of movement momentum and people.[572] Local involvement can help prevent free riding as well as the dissuasion of locals who might choose not to participate in order to avoid being associated with a foreign actor.[573]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

One successful example of civil resistance came in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when citizens in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia initiated efforts to gain independence from the Soviet Union.[574] The West was initially reluctant to help the Baltic states, whose governments were declaring their sovereignty and condemning military occupation by the USSR, though the longstanding policy of the United States of not recognizing their incorporation into the Soviet Union gave symbolic assistance to the uprisings.[575]

The independence movements cooperated across Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, with some backing from other nationalist movements in the USSR. Activists shared tactics and ideas, and they coordinated protests.[576] Perhaps one of the most memorable manifestations of this cooperation was the Baltic Way demonstration of Aug. 23, 1989, which saw approximately two million people form a human chain across Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Organizers across the Baltics worked together to map the chain, organize transportation to maximize participation, and disseminate information about the protest.[577]

E. PROVIDING TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Supporting in-country efforts such as training and mentoring in strategic nonviolent action and coalition building can help improve the skills and

effectiveness of local activists. Training sessions (in-person and virtual) should highlight practical ways to maintain nonviolent movements in repressive environments, including codes of conduct, lessons of dealing with security forces, and diversifying tactics to maintain resiliency. Training in activities such as political party development, voter mobilization, and election monitoring can complement support for civil resistance activities.[578] Training sessions—online and in person—can also be facilitated by convening diverse actors engaged in a civil resistance movement from across the political and NGO spectrum to coordinate and share best practices and to help convene and recruit participants. Training sessions should highlight tools, resources, and tactics to fend off physical and digital attacks and spyware and improve digital security.[579]

In Serbia, international support and training sessions helped end the repressive regime of Slobodan Milošević after the Sept. 2000 presidential election, which was rife with irregularities.[580] The nonviolent movement that ended Milošević's rule was organized by the domestic activist group Otpor. It drew the support of an estimated hundreds of thousands to millions of people in Serbia and received support from various international actors. Otpor received aid and training from the American organizations National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute; demonstrators were also given copies of Gene Sharp's foundational work From Dictatorship to Democracy by the Serbian organization Center for Civic Initiatives.[581]

External actors also helped counter government censorship of independent media outlets such as the Serbian broadcaster Radio B92. When domestic outlets were censored or shut down, foreign outlets like the BBC and VOA broadcast some of their content.[582] Furthermore, external actors like the EastWest Institute understood the importance of bringing activists together. They started the Bratislava Process in 1999 by facilitating meetings between anti-Milošević parties and organizations, Slovak NGOs, and media correspondents to "build a broad coalition of all relevant democratic actors in Serbian society and friends from the international donor community."[583] American and European officials also participated in some of these meetings and provided advice and aid.[584]

F. BOOSTING EFFORTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

As noted earlier in this report, independent journalism has played historically important roles in raising awareness of and supporting the goals of civil resistance, nonviolent movements, and democracy. Enhancing media effectiveness involves training inside and outside of resistance movements. From the outside, independent journalists and news outlets need to be "sensitized to the dynamics of civil resistance;" on the inside of movements, nonviolent activists must be trained as effective spokespeople for their

causes.[585] Traditional media outlets, including television, print, and radio, are often the first target of authoritarian regimes in minimizing voices critical of government policies. That targeting now includes social media platforms as well. After pro-democracy movements surprised autocratic regimes with their adept use of social media and other digital tools to organize nonviolent resistance, authoritarian regimes have increasingly leveraged new technologies to restrict online freedoms, surveil the opposition, and sow misinformation.[586] To counter digital repression, donors must support civil society and activists' adaptation to new technologies and new authoritarian tactics. This includes bolstering access to training and tools like end-to-end encryption and virtual private networks, as well as fostering international activist networks and encouraging decentralized movement structures.[587] They should also encourage social media companies to allow messages from political opposition and other civil society groups to get through.

Despite the challenges posed by authoritarians on social media, online platforms are important to highlight shared grievances, expose regime propaganda, present governance alternatives, and facilitate communication among local activists—albeit in a more restrictive and dangerous environment.

G. UKRAINE'S ORANGE REVOLUTION: A CASE STUDY OF EXTERNAL SUPPORT TO CIVIL RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS

Ukraine's nonviolent Orange Revolution of 2004 helped to bring the democratically elected Viktor Yushchenko to power after widespread election fraud had resulted in the victory of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych.[588] External actors, including USAID, the Westminster Foundation, National Endowment for Democracy, and the Alfred Moser Foundation had been supporting Ukrainian civil society for several years prior to the election.[589] Ongoing efforts included running seminars on civil society activism and democratic principles.[590] One of the leading organizers of the Orange Revolution, Pora (meaning, "It's Time"), received grants from the German Marshall Fund, Freedom House, the Canadian International Development Agency, and others, which helped them spread awareness about their movement and develop their organizational capacity.[591] Pora also received assistance from other groups that had triumphed over repressive regimes: Otpor leader Aleksandar Marić ran seminars for Ukrainian activists in Serbia, while Slovak organizations who had defeated Vladimir Mečiar helped Pora to strategize.[592]

Diplomats coordinated their actions, at times using their own embassy funds to fund independent media outlets like Ukrainska Pravda and exit polls.[593] They also used their diplomatic immunity to protect activists. For example, on Oct. 23, security services attempted to search the house of Pora leader

Vladyslav Kaskiv; their entry was blocked by two members of parliament from the opposition (who had parliamentary immunity), three diplomats from France, and some representatives from the OSCE and European Commission. Eventually, the security forces withdrew.[594] Moreover, international representatives on both sides of the conflict (Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus, EU Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana) helped broker talks between Yanukovych and Yuschenko.[595]

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3. COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

SUMMARY

International actors should counter disinformation by:

- Supporting independent media organizations and CSOs working to expose disinformation campaigns. International actors should use targeted funding to support the investigative capacities, including technology, of domestic watchdog groups that monitor and expose media consolidation through non-transparent financial schemes, journalist harassment and censorship, raids of independent news outlets, and other abuses of public resources aimed at stifling the space for independent media.

- Investing in and expanding organizational capabilities. The EU, NATO, G7, and other international organizations should invest in and expand capabilities for monitoring disinformation campaigns emanating from foreign actors.

- Enhancing communication between democratic governance and social media companies. Establish better communication and information-sharing processes between social media companies and democratic governments.

- Advancing pro-democracy messaging. Develop positive narratives around democratic values and principles to counter antidemocratic ones.

- Supporting sanctions and other punitive measures on actors driving disinformation. Build on, for example, the approach of the United States and the European Union in the imposition and enforcement of sanctions relating to Russian disinformation efforts.[596]

PILLAR 6: Defeat Disinformation

Russia has pioneered a toolkit of digital and traditional disinformation to undermine democracies, which has been adopted by autocrats in Iran, Turkey, Hungary, and elsewhere.[597] These techniques were first and foremost deployed against the Russian people as the Kremlin sought to control information flows, propagate negative narratives about the West and liberal democracies, and suppress independent domestic voices.[598]

Russian disinformation in 2024 targeted democracies globally, including the United States and other democratic allies. These disinformation campaigns sought to stoke divisions and influence the outcome of democratic elections,[599] but even outside of the election season, Russian disinformation

efforts continue to target Western democracies and threaten democratic stability in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere.[600] At the end of 2024, the U.S. sanctioned Russia (and Iran) for their actions that year.[601] The U.S. Department of the Treasury said that "the Russian entities used generative AI tools to create disinformation to distribute across websites designed to create false corroboration between the stories," and that Russia "also manipulated videos to its benefit."[602]

After Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, the Russian government moved to consolidate control over domestic media and co-opt the digital domain. It did so by placing media networks in the hands of pro-regime oligarchs, using the police and intelligence agencies to harass independent journalists, shutting down independent news outlets under trumped-up charges, labeling journalistic organizations as foreign agents or undesirables, and infiltrating social media networks to spread disinformation narratives.[603]

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

Journalists, pro-democracy activists and organizations, and human rights proponents are among the most vulnerable groups in Russia today. Anna Politkovskaya, a prominent Russian investigative journalist and human rights activist reporting on the Russian government's brutal activities in Chechnya, was gunned down in her apartment building in 2006 after years of intimidation and violence against her.[604] Boris Nemtsov, a former Russian government official turned anti-government opposition leader, was assassinated near the Kremlin in 2015.[605] Other opposition leaders are routinely harassed, searched, and face cyber and disinformation attacks by Russian government proxies. During nonviolent protests in 2011–2012,[606] 2019,[607] and 2020,[608] Russian opposition leaders, student activists, and protesters were arrested and sentenced to jail time. In the time since, the government's security services have intensified their repressive efforts with nationwide raids on opposition movements' offices.[609] In Aug. 2020, opposition leader Aleksey Navalny fell into a coma after he was poisoned with the toxic nerve agent Novichok in Siberia.[610] An independent investigation by Bellingcat determined that agents of the Russian Federal Security Service were involved in Navalny's poisoning.[611] Upon returning to Russia in Jan. 2021, after receiving treatment abroad, Navalny was promptly arrested and sentenced to prison despite a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights that he be freed.[612] Kept in brutal conditions in a penal colony above the Arctic Circle, Navalny's health continued to deteriorate as he was subjected to solitary confinement. He died on Feb. 16, 2024.[613] His wife Yulia Navalnaya rejects the Russian government's explanation for his death, which cited a combination of diseases.[614] Since her husband's death, Navalnya has carried on his mission in exile—advocating for free and fair elections in Russia.[615] A Moscow court has since ordered her arrest in absentia as she continues to speak out against Putin's dictatorship[616]

For decades, Putin's regime has been crafting an increasingly repressive and nuanced legal and administrative apparatus to expel foreign NGOs and impose costs on local CSOs that receive any financial support from foreign sources—public or otherwise.[617] The process began in 2006 with a federal law that put initial limits on access to information by so-called undesirable foreign NGOs, which was followed by multiple amendments and a 2012 law that requires any CSO receiving foreign funding to register as a foreign agent.[618] A 2015 legal extension allows the Kremlin to ban any organization it considers undesirable—de facto creating a blacklist.[619] Putin has expanded the law several times. In 2020, the law was expanded to include individuals and informal organizations.[620] In 2022, the law included "almost any person or entity, regardless of nationality or location, who engages in civic activism or even expresses opinions about Russian policies or officials' conduct" if authorities claim they are under foreign influence.[621] The Russian government continues to take actions to expand the restrictions placed on foreign agents, tightening restrictions on their income.[622]

The "foreign agent" designation is interpreted by most of the Russian public as denoting a foreign spying operation, carries significant registration requirements, and requires groups to label their materials as being from a "foreign agent."[623] The Kremlin applies the "foreign agent," "undesirable," or "extremist" labels to any organization or person that challenges the government.[624] Since Russia's large-scale war of aggression against Ukraine began in 2022, those who have condemned the "special military operation" have been slapped with the foreign agent label.[625] The foreign agent classification greatly limits an organization's ability to operate in Russia.[626] Put together, these measures have set up a complex legal web of repression while granting the Russian government the power to block access to information that it designates extremist or undesirable, including any distributed information appealing for public protest.

As a result, well-known international NGOs such as the MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy, Open Society Foundation, and the International Republican Institute have all closed their operations in Russia after being classified as undesirable foreign agents.[627] USAID is also banned from operating in Russia.[628] And local CSOs, particularly those with a focus on democracy, human rights, electoral transparency, and even environmental issues, have been fined, audited, and raided either for failing to prove that they are not "foreign agents" or refusing to voluntarily register as such.[629] In this repressive environment, foreign actors' abilities to support local actors have been limited to supporting independent media and CSOs that have moved operations abroad or using passthroughs to get very limited funding for groups still operating in Russia.[630]

PILLAR 3: Fight Corruption

The Kremlin's consolidation of traditional media (e.g., television networks and newspapers) in the hands of government-linked oligarchs has allowed the regime to control domestic information flows and narratives.[631] Following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, suppressing independent media became a top priority for the Kremlin.[632] Most independent Russian media outlets have been labeled foreign agents and now must operate in exile.[633] In 2024, Moscow banned 81 Western media outlets from 25 EU countries for alleged misinformation in its coverage of the war.[634] More recently, the government has moved to force tech companies and other digital media platforms, such as Telegram, one of the country's most popular messaging and news apps, to provide data access to government agencies, most notably the intelligence services.[635] As with NGOs and CSOs, the Kremlin erected a complex legal structure that, among other things, requires companies to install surveillance hardware on their systems, store data in Russia rather than abroad, and give away encryption keys to the Russian security services.[636] With these tools, the government is able to monitor communications between individuals and groups, acquire personal information, and monitor online activities on social media platforms. Using this suite of traditional and digital media resources and surveillance capabilities, the Kremlin is able to control messaging at home and attack opposition activists.[637]

Abroad, Russian state-funded outlets, such as RT and Sputnik, and Russian-linked social media entities (e.g., trolls, bots, and cyborgs) lend support to far-right political movements and like-minded governments while propagating antidemocratic narratives and content.[638] This Kremlin toolkit finds appeal among political parties and leaders who aim to stifle opposition and criticism in their own countries.

PILLAR 4: Reinforce Civic and Media Spaces

In addition to supporting independent local media, as outlined above, international actors should commit to developing funds and other mechanisms to support domestic watchdog groups that monitor and expose media consolidation through non-transparent financial schemes, journalist harassment, and censorship, raids of independent news outlets, excessive defamation lawsuits, and other abuses of public resources aimed at stifling the space for independent media. Recent successful initiatives include Reporters Shield, which was developed by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), to coordinate legal defense for investigative journalists and NGOs facing expensive and draining lawsuits known as SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation.[639]

The establishment of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), which "tracks, monitors, and reacts to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries," has helped expose the continued erosion of press freedom and attacks on media and advocates European policymakers to support journalists across the continent.[640] In Oct. 2024, the

European Commission referred Hungary to the Court of Justice given that they consider Hungary's law on the "Protection of National Sovereignty" to be in breach of EU law, unduly affecting civil society and journalists.[641] However, the Commission did not ask for interim measures or to expedite the case, so Orbán will be able to use the Sovereign Protection Authority to investigate and harass the political opposition all of the way up to the election in 2026. When such abuses of rule of law take place within the EU, the EU should take immediate steps to publicly condemn such behavior while pressing for government leaders to be held publicly accountable for their repressive actions. A common tactic that is used by oligarchs, frequently operating on the behalf of authoritarian governments, is to file defamation suits against journalists or researchers that are critical of them, especially in western capitals. These can be lengthy and quite expensive for media outlets and NGOs, especially smaller outlets, but a modest sum for the oligarch. The lawsuit brought by Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich and Russian state-owned energy firm Rosneft against former Financial Times journalist, Catherine Belton, for statements she made in her book Putin's People is one example of the type of lawsuit that puts a chilling effect on reporting.[642] Providing support and resources so that journalists and watchdogs feel empowered to expose the truth could go a long way to empower robust investigative journalism. The USAID launch of Reporter Shield in 2023 was a significant step to address the legal risks facing journalists globally, including SLAPPs, which have grown increasingly common.[643] By providing training, resources, and legal support to journalists facing legal threats, the Reporter Shield helps protect the ability of NGOs and independent media to provide accurate and critical information to bolster democracy around the world.[644] The EU as well took recent action to protect journalists from SLAPPs, adopting new rules in May of 2024.[645] The U.K. has also taken steps to protect journalists through its national action plan but has yet to ban SLAPPs.[646] Anti-SLAPP legislation was introduced in the U.S. Congress in Dec. 2024 to address frivolous lawsuits aimed at journalists in federal courts but has yet to be passed.[647]

The foregoing responses in the EU and global contexts should be studied for possible application in other backsliding democracies elsewhere, including the U.S. To ensure more direct funding to local NGOs, international actors should review democracy support programs with a focus on improving operational support, such as staff time and direct costs, rather than project-based outcomes alone. This will allow for more sustained, flexible, and strategic operations. In addition, international donor organizations should fund local media outlets that identify disinformation campaigns not only from foreign states, such as Russia, but also those that emanate from their own governments. Further, these international organizations should also develop

funds and other mechanisms to help media outlets protect against excessive defamation lawsuits.

PILLAR 6: Defeat Disinformation

Lastly, the United States, other national governments, and multilateral actors such as the EU, and NATO, should introduce and enforce transparency standards, including with respect to foreign-origin political and issue ads on both traditional and social media, and otherwise monitor and notify their publics in real time about the activities of foreign propaganda outlets. In fields like information technology where lax global regulations leave room for illiberal actors to spread misinformation, democracies should advance common interests by collaborating in multilateral forums and more effectively compete for leadership positions within international organizations. The EU Digital Services Act (DSA) entered into force in Feb. 2024.[648] The Act represents one effort to address this pernicious problem at the multilateral level by regulating online search engines and large platforms, including social media networks, online marketplaces, and app stores.[649] The DSA aims to implement greater democratic oversight over these platforms and mitigate risks, such as manipulation and disinformation, and requires an increase in fact-checking capabilities and overall resources.[650] The Slovak parliamentary election was the first test case for the DSA and assessing the impact is difficult.[651]

The Dec. 2024 decision not to renew funding for the U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC) could weaken the United States' role in combating mis- and disinformation by democracy's adversaries such as Russia and China.[652] The GEC had long been accused by Republican officials of censorship, demonstrating the challenge of balancing the fight against disinformation with a desire to protect freedom of speech—particularly in an environment where domestic actors are engaged in spreading foreign disinformation.[653] In order to combat disinformation campaigns, governments should seek to sharpen tools and emulate initiatives such as the EU East StratCom, the NATO StratCom Center of Excellence in Riga, the Helsinki Hybrid Center of Excellence, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. [654]

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4. PROVIDING FOREIGN GOVERNMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

SUMMARY

Foreign governments and institutions should:

- Leverage transnational funding. The EU for example holds powerful tools of conditionality—such as withholding funding from member states that do not comply with EU law in the administration of EU programs[655]—that it can use to incentivize both member and nonmember states. Rule of law conditionality should be imposed fairly across the EU, including in long-tenured member states as well as those that joined in the 2004 and subsequent enlargements. An alternative approach, which the EU is already debating,[656] would be to link overall levels of EU funds provided to a member state to a rule of law index, whereby states that score higher on the index have greater access to funds.[657]

- Enhance support for civil society and independent media. Official actors such as those within the EU and International Financial Institutions should increase support for independent civil society and investigative, independent media organizations. More funding should be allocated to countries where checks and balances are under attack, democracies are backsliding, and particularly to organizations operating outside of national capitals.

- Encourage NGO-Government relations, when possible. Positive relations between NGOs and national, state, and local governments should be encouraged, when possible. This would help move away from the idea that advocacy NGOs must naturally take a completely independent, or even antagonistic, stance toward their governments.

- Prioritize governance, democracy, and anti-corruption issues. High-level officials, as well as official actors within the development and diplomatic arms of democracies globally should engage in ongoing pro-democracy and anti-corruption dialogue with ruling political forces and the opposition when necessary. This engagement should prioritize messages including not supporting democratic rollbacks, infringements on human rights, censoring of independent media, universities, and NGOs, and the hindering of judicial independence and efficacy. Special attention must be paid to addressing corruption and combating kleptocracy given its transnational impact. U.S. efforts, including its countering corruption strategy under then-President Biden, are strong examples of utilizing diplomatic and development

leadership to combat corruption; however, there is no guarantee that President Trump will continue these critical efforts. Other global anti-corruption leads must fill the gap if the U.S. walks away from democracy, anti-corruption, and good governance support. Continuing the work of the U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption will be critical to maintaining hard-won progress against kleptocratic threats.

- Enhance international efforts to respond to global health and humanitarian emergencies. Democracies should pledge to form a coordinated international effort that is equipped to manage the current and future ramifications of climate change—including increases in natural disaster recovery and infrastructure protection—in addition to mobilizing humanitarian support for civil society organizations and municipalities that are working to house and assist refugees.

Foreign governments and international institutions have historically played critical roles in advancing democratic movements by placing pressure on governments and supporting pro-democracy actors. Efforts include orchestrating sanctions, providing press coverage, creating economic and trade incentives for change, and issuing statements of condemnation at multilateral forums. The United States in particular, as a leading economic and democratic power, has tremendous leverage in applying carrots and sticks in pursuit of democratic outcomes in the region.

At the end of the Cold War and throughout the 1990s, the United States lent support to consolidating democratic governance in countries across Central and Eastern Europe. Today, this support is once again of critical importance. During a time of heightened illiberal and authoritarian-leaning trends globally, it remains a key U.S. interest to bolster democracy at home and abroad. Scholars, however, point out that this interest should be qualified by the Hippocratic responsibility to first do no harm.[658] The United States has a long track record of both working with authoritarian governments to advance national interests and attempting democratic advancements that result in unintended consequences. This does not mean that Washington has not and will not continue to learn valuable lessons from past efforts, moving forward (ideally) with humility and better informed of best practices. Given democratic backsliding in the U.S. we are great need of better understanding best practices and lessons learned to protect democracy in our nation.

European institutions have also historically been a powerful impetus behind advancing democracy in the region.[659] Today, the European Union, as a supranational quasi-government aiming for "ever closer union among the peoples of Europe" since the Maastricht Treaty created it from predecessor organizations in 1992, has one of the broadest toolkits to advance democratic

institutions in prospective member states, and to a lesser degree in member states.[660] These criteria incentivized post-communist countries like Poland and Hungary seeking admission to democratize their domestic institutions.[661]

Scholars and practitioners must also take a fresh look at whether international law, rather than individual countries, may provide avenues for addressing democratic backsliding. Kim Lane Scheppele in "Restoring Democracy Through International Law" argues that both the European and Inter-American systems are stepping up to the plate to provide advice and infrastructure, including through "right to democracy" court decisions that back in-country democratic forces.[662] Resources (both legally binding and not) drawn from international law, treaties, and human rights courts can be used to shore up domestic legal systems within a country. Regional human rights courts play an important role in democracy promotion, and the functioning of these judicial bodies presents an important lesson for democracies.[663]

A. STRENGTHENING PRE- AND POST-ACCESSION EU TOOLS: A CASE STUDY

PILLAR 2: Defend Rule of Law

One of the most developed tools for cross-border democracy promotion remains the mechanisms evolved by the EU, and we begin there. Today, the EU's pre-accession requirements remain one of the EU's most important tools of leverage to strengthen democracy and rule of law in a country, although they have unfortunately waned as an incentive for some EU aspirant countries in recent years. In the accession process, candidate countries have to adopt a large body of EU law over a number of years; engage in technical negotiations with the European Commission to open and close 35 chapters of the acquis communitaire, including on the judiciary and fundamental rights; and face scrutiny and detailed public reports by the Commission until they meet the Copenhagen Criteria.[664]

Slovakia was a notable success story. The illiberal populist, Prime Minister Vladimir Mečiar, had run the country from before independence in 1993; he was ousted in a general election in 1998 (although his party finished first in that and the subsequent election) amid U.S. and EU pressure for the Slovak government "to alter its policies and redress past violations as a condition for NATO and EU membership."[665] Kevin Deegan-Krause notes that the Euro-Atlantic organizations' demand for respect for institutional accountability was a disincentive for Mečiar's government, which had built power by dismantling restraints. Public opinion in favor of European integration—and the ballot box—led to Mečiar's loss of power.

Deegan-Krause's point is also relevant for Moldova, Ukraine, and the Western Balkan countries.[666] Elites in these countries can benefit from a close

relationship with the EU, but fully meeting the Copenhagen Criteria requires more reform, rule of law, and accountability than many are comfortable with. Bulgaria and Romania, which joined in 2007, three years after the "big bang" enlargement of other post-communist member states, are also widely perceived as having been given entry before they truly met criteria. As of Jan. 1, 2025, Bulgaria and Romania have become full members of the Schengen borderless area 17 years after joining the EU but only after having satisfied other member states on their progress in combating corruption and organized crime.[667] Several countries, including Ukraine and Moldova, are on track pending meeting pre-accession conditionality to join the European Union, with democratic reform, good governance and anti-corruption efforts at the center of this thorough process.

Of course, pre-accession tools alone are only half the story. What does post-accession experience in the European Union teach us? The EU is, of course, more limited in its ability to impose costs on member states that are infringing on democratic institutions and the rule of law at home. On the extreme end of the spectrum, the EU maintains the power under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, passed in 1999, to suspend certain rights from a member state if it is identified by the European Council as breaching the EU's founding values of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The activation of Article 7 was debated when Austria's far-right Freedom Party was included in a coalition government in 2000 and mentioned when the French government expelled thousands of Roma in 2009 as well as during a power struggle between President Traian Băsescu and Prime Minister Victor Ponta in Romania in 2012.[668]

In 2015, after eight years of domination of Polish politics by Civic Platform, a center-right party well-regarded in Brussels (its leader Donald Tusk was elected President of the European Council the year prior), PiS won the Polish presidency and a narrow parliamentary majority.[669] Joanna Fomina and Jacek Kucharczyk write, "Since then, the PiS government has sought to impose its will in a ruthlessly majoritarian fashion, taking on the high court, the prosecutor's office, the public media, and the civil service in a campaign meant to dismantle existing checks and balances while leaving the opposition and the general public little say."[670] Jarosław Kaczyński, the party's leader, was thwarted on policy by the country's Constitutional Tribunal a decade prior as prime minister and immediately targeted it when PiS returned to power. The government amended the law regulating the Tribunal and has refused to recognize its rulings.[671] While the Constitutional Tribunal was the first victim, the ordinary courts were also a target and have come under immense pressure to rubberstamp the government.[672]

After only two months of PiS rule, the EU activated its new "pre-Article 7" procedure for Poland, a "framework to safeguard the rule of law in the European Union" adopted by the European Commission in Mar. 2014.[673] In Dec. 2017, in the face of Warsaw's intransigence, the Commission moved to invoke Article 7(1) TEU.[674] Soon after PiS was ousted in Dec. 2023, Donald Tusk and Civic Platform returned to the helm and helped launch a series of measures to address the EU's concerns on independence of the Polish justice system.[675] Satisfying the European Commission with the ongoing restoration of rule of law through its Action Plan, in May 2024, the European Commission closed its Article 7(1) proceedings.[676] Ultimately, the EU's delays in funding helped served as an accountability measure against PiS's autocratic tendencies.[677]

However, ongoing democratic backsliding in Hungary highlights the limitations of Article 7 and other EU institutional responses. Returning to power in Hungary in 2010 with a legislative supermajority, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party was able to write and implement a new constitution without opposition input and take legislative action to pack the Constitutional Court as well as to threaten the independence of the judiciary and the media. The European Commission frequently expressed legal concerns and demanded changes but notably did not use its powers to bring infringement actions on any of the most serious changes to the institutional structure of the country.[678] Around the same time, the European Commission referred Hungary to the European Court of Justice over its Higher Education Law,[679] amended in Apr. 2017 in what was broadly seen as an attack on Central European University, an American institution in Budapest founded by financier and "open society" champion George Soros. In Sept. 2018, the European Parliament triggered Article 7 against Hungary. Broadly speaking, Budapest did not completely ignore Brussels but made largely cosmetic adjustments.[680] The potential effectiveness of this step has also been blunted by European party politics, as the European People's Party (EPP), of which Orbán's Fidesz party was a member until March of 2021, helped shield for a period Orbán from political recourse and is an obstacle to effective democracy protection in the EU. In Sept. 2022, the European Parliament determined that Hungary had become a "hybrid regime of electoral autocracy."[681] As such, there have been increasing calls for the Council to adopt Article 7(2) TEU, a sanctions mechanism in response to serious and persistent breaches of rule of law.[682] This "nuclear option" is "an extreme move that can result in a country having its [EU] voting rights suspended."[683] Orbán's conflict with the EU and democracy continues to grow as he openly claimed in late 2024 that the bloc wished to install a puppet government.[684] Decisive EU action can play an essential role in restore democracy in Hungary and protect the bloc's fundamental values.[685]

A more successful example of the EU helping to check democratic backsliding was in the case of Romania in 2012, when Victor Ponta of the center-left Social Democratic Party took power as prime minister and impeached center-right President Traian Băsescu, removing constitutional checks on the impeachment procedure to ease the task. Issue linkage increased Brussels' leverage in Romania. The country's barriers to the Schengen Area, with Bulgaria, was subject to post-accession monitoring via the EU's Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification, instituted in 2006 shortly before their EU accession to assess progress against corruption, organized crime, and judicial reform.[686] Ponta complied with Commission and Council demands, including reinstating a 50 percent turnout requirement to validate the referendum to confirm the impeachment. This resulted in the defeat of impeachment;[687] the opposition opted for a strategy of boycotting the referendum, which then failed to meet the 50 percent requirement.

PILLAR 2: Defend Rule of Law

The European Union adopted three rule of law conditionality measures accompanying the 2021–2027 budget passed. The rule of law conditionality regulation allows EU funds to be withheld if a member state's rule of law breaches risk affecting the EU's budget.[688] The new Common Provisions Regulation that specifies in detail how EU funds are to be managed now has a new provision making EU spending conditional on observing the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Finally, the Recovery and Resilience Facility—established through joint borrowing by EU states on the open market—made the flow of funds linked to at least partial fulfillment of the "country-specific recommendations" that are made with each European Semester review.

In Dec. 2022, the Council of the European Union took up an "implementing decision" on Hungary,[689] making it the first time the mechanism was employed. In addition, receiving common funds became contingent upon a country's "respect for the rule of law."[690] As we highlighted above, after this first use of the conditionality regulation, the Commission then froze Recovery Funds to both Poland and Hungary as well as all funds covered by the Common Provisions Regulation. As a result, Hungary has had billions of euros in EU funds frozen, and on Dec. 16, 2024, the EU found Budapest has made unsatisfactory progress in the Commission's concerns "on public procurement, prosecutorial action, conflict of interest, the fight against corruption, and the public interest trusts,"[691] thus continuing to leave part of Hungary's cohesion funds in suspension so its ability to draw €1 billion was lost (as we already highlighted) while an estimated €18 billion remains frozen.[692]

At the end of 2022, Poland had an estimated €110 billion of its funds frozen, but after the 2023 election when a pro-democratic government won and indicated that it wanted to pursue rule of law reforms, the EU institutions unfroze Poland's money in tranches even though the holdover PiS institutions

(the presidency and the Constitutional Tribunal) have the power to block some reforms.[693]

An alternative way to structure such measures to protect rule of law via the EU budget would be to link overall levels of EU funds provided to a member state to a rule of law index, whereby states that score higher on the index have greater access to funds. This would employ an incentive process rather than a punitive approach.[694] The definitions and measurements of such a rule of law index could be established according to rulings of the European Court of Human Rights and with reference to the opinions of the Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), which has already conducted reviews of numerous problematic policies in Hungary and Poland.[695]

B. ADVANCING INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

We have so far focused on the EU and its agencies. But—to continue with the example of Europe—its states are also subject to a uniquely dense web of regional institutions that aim to support democracy with free and fair elections, rule of law, freedom of the press, and human rights. These include the Council of Europe (CoE), the European Court of Human Rights, the Venice Commission, and the OSCE, over and above the EU and its instrumentalities. These institutions produce reports and rulings that deter misbehavior by governments that fear reputational damage, but they lack strong enforcement mechanisms.[696] This dynamic is evident in the fact that the OSCE includes governments long considered to be more authoritarian than that of Turkey, including Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan (which has held the chairmanship of the organization),[697] Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.[698] Russia was expelled from the Council of Europe in Mar. 2022 following its invasion of Ukraine[699]; however, despite its abysmal democratic record, Azerbaijan remains a member.[700]

Nearly all European countries are members of the CoE and the OSCE. The OSCE contains an Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) that deals with the "human dimension" of security; conducts election monitoring; and works to strengthen democratic governance, human rights, tolerance, and nondiscrimination.[701] CoE members are subject to the European Court of Human Rights[702] and the European Commission for Democracy through Law.[703] Despite their weak enforcement mechanisms, these institutions can still work in a deterrent capacity, urging member states to heed rulings out of concern for the blow they would suffer to their positional influence in the organization if they did not. One way to strengthen enforcement powers would be for the EU—with much stronger sanctions at hand—to take CoE and OSCE assessments directly into its evaluation

processes in determining when its member states have breached European law.

While members may comply with these institutions' mandates for fear of reputational damage, bad actors must also be held accountable to root out global corruption, which remains at concerning levels according to the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). The CPI shows that most countries either failed to make any anti-corruption progress in the last decade or even declined in their scores. In 2023, 23 countries recorded their lowest ever CPI score, including traditionally high-ranking democracies like Sweden, Iceland, and the United Kingdom.[704] The globe does not lack laws against corrupt acts. There are 191 countries party to the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), which requires them to have laws criminalizing varying forms of corruption.[705] However, kleptocrats wield their control over police, prosecutors, and courts in the countries they rule to establish impunity.[706]

States should provide support for initiatives such as the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), which investigates and prosecutes crimes against the EU such as corruption, misappropriation of funds, and fraud, helping to protect the rule of law and fight corruption in the EU.[707] Though membership in the EPPO is presently voluntary, membership reaffirms shared EU values of the rule of law and would guarantee unbiased investigations into abuses of EU funds. For countries intent on joining the bloc such as Moldova, combating corruption is essential to its membership bid, and cooperating with the EPPO provides a chance to responsibly utilize and steward EU funding.[708] Since 2022, the EPPO has had the support of the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security in cooperation with "investigations and prosecutions relating to criminal offenses within their respective competences, and with respect to the exchange of strategic and operational information and evidence, extradition and other forms of cooperation such as joint training sessions."[709] The EPPO should similarly enjoy the support of the U.S./EU mission. The ambassador to the EU should be directed to work discretely with the EC and the EPPO in providing whatever technical support the EPPO needs from the U.S. Department of Justice.

Additionally, states should carefully consider proposals such as the International Anti-Corruption Court (IACC), a new multilateral institution. The IACC could also help fill the critical enforcement gap in the international framework for combating grand corruption. It could constitute a fair and effective forum for the prosecution and punishment of kleptocrats and their collaborators, deter others tempted to emulate their example, and recover, repatriate, and repurpose ill-gotten gains for the victims of grand corruption. The IACC's expert investigators, prosecutors, and judges could also be valuable resources for their counterparts in countries striving to improve their

capacity and establish the rule of law.[710] However, the reluctance of the U.S. to join international courts is a significant impediment to any such institution's effectiveness.

The key vulnerability of kleptocrats is their reliance on complex international networks of lawyers, bankers, accountants, real estate agents, and other financial service providers, many of which are located in robust democracies. An IACC would therefore be effective if established by a small number of founding member states, so long as they include several of the major financial hubs and other jurisdictions where kleptocrats routinely launder and hide their illicit wealth. Pooling their sovereignty to establish an IACC is one of the most potent ways that concerned states can honor the fierce anti-corruption sentiment of global publics and greatly alter the international system that enables kleptocracy. Operating on the principle of complementarity, the Court would only prosecute if a member state were unwilling or unable to prosecute a case itself. Any country that joins the IACC will be deciding to share some of its authority to prosecute kleptocrats, in limited circumstances, in order to give integrity to the domestic laws it enacted as a party to the UNCAC. The purpose of international institutions in general is to help states navigate the tensions between sovereignty and threats such as transnational corruption arising from global interdependence.

PILLAR 5: Defend Good Governance and Pluralism

Further, to respond to the increasingly critical threat of toxic "otherization" politics to democracies, these European states can expand the dense web of democracy-supporting institutions already in existence by enhancing coordination on migration and refugee crises. International coordination should be forged over increasing humanitarian support for civil society organizations and municipalities that are working to house and assist refugees. Additionally, intelligence-sharing among these democratic states can help focus the target of legitimate concerns over politicized concerns about vulnerable and exploited communities.[711]

C. U.S. DIPLOMATIC AND ECONOMIC TOOLS—THEORY AND PRACTICE

Turning now to the lessons from the history of global democracy promotion originating on other side of the Atlantic, the United States[712] has a mixed record of advancing democratic reforms and preventing rule of law and democracy erosion. These fluctuating policies, resources, and commitments to democracy support by the U.S. have, at times, contributed to the multi-year democracy slide we see today. Autocrats and illiberal actors have been quick to fill in the gaps when democracy retreats, furthering their own interests at the expense of the democracy in the U.S. and globally. This is especially true when the U.S. relinquishes its leadership in this space or when other strategic priorities leapfrog advancing liberal reforms.

From 2021 to early 2025, the Biden Administration prioritized global democracy promotion, such as by launching the first ever Summit for Democracy in 2021 focused on combating autocracies, fighting corruption, and standing up for human rights.[713] The administration was vocal about calling out democratic backsliding, autocrats (Biden even called Putin "a killer"[714]), and corrupt actors (even NATO member states, like Hungary, Poland, and NATO aspirant Georgia). In other instances, the administration took a more indirect approach: For example, Biden subtly criticized PiS by emphasizing the importance of press freedoms and rule of law to democracy—two areas where Poland had come in for sharp rebuke by Polish civil society and the EU.[715]

But the remarks could have been more direct. The Biden administration has not infrequently been critiqued for pulling its punches. Some scholars and experts in the U.S. and globally are critical of the Biden Administration for placing national security interests ahead of democracy promotion and human rights. Others claimed there was a "disconnect between the foreign policy rhetoric of the Biden Administration and its foreign policy practice."[716] This discord was in response to the Administration's engagement in the Middle East, Indo-Pacific, and elsewhere. One example is criticism of Biden's cultivation of the U.S. relationship with India's leader Narendra Modi, despite democratic backsliding. In 2022, Biden was also criticized about going "soft" on Polish leaders responsible for democratic and rule of law backsliding given Warsaw's prominent role in support of Ukraine.[717] There was also criticism of the Biden Administration's decision to invite illiberal governments to the Summit for Democracy.

The first Trump administration's positions on illiberal governments were at times enabling for regressing regimes, and concerns are widespread about its second coming.[718] Trump 45 did not completely abandon U.S. democracy promotion and continued to fund, with strong bipartisan congressional support, some activities to strengthen democracies, civil society and free media.[719] For example, USAID during Donald Trump's first administration launched the framework for Countering Malign Kremlin Influence (CMKI) to build the economic and democratic resilience of countries targeted by Russia.[720] Trump's administration also went after human rights violators using Global Magnitsky to pursue offenders in authoritarian countries, including China, Russia, Syria, and Cuba.[721]

However, the prior Trump administration's policy of engagement with U.S. adversaries, including autocrats, lent credibility to the likes of Hungary.[722] Trump's affinity for autocrats has remained pronounced and he has more allies in Congress who may be ready to echo him and support policies that imperil U.S. interests[723] and bipartisan support for Ukraine in its fight against Russia.[724] Moreover, the steady erosion of diplomatic capabilities within the

U.S. government[725] in Trump's first term eroded trust and cooperation, including with democratic partners globally.[726] So too did his attacks on the media,[727] judges,[728] political opposition,[729] and use of racist rhetoric.[730] Threats to fire civil servants across the federal government could further imperil democracy and assistance programs.[731] U.S. democratic allies may need to adjust their posture to fill in gaps on democracy leadership, promotion, and funding.

The United States has far-ranging and effective economic, diplomatic, and development tools at its disposal to advance democratic progress, if it has the political will. We doubt the extent to which the executive branch will evince that will in a second Trump administration. Nevertheless, we here catalog accomplishments and possibilities should pro-democracy actors within the new administration be able to seize opportunities, as well as for posterity (no administration is forever)—and for the inspiration they may provide to other pro-democracy powers.

Democracies should more closely coordinate and collaborate on aid and investments in developing countries for greater coherence and impact. This could effectively limit China's capacity (and other malign actors including Russia) to roll back democratic governance, including rule of law and anti-corruption reforms, in developing countries and preserve democratic countries' economic interests in developing markets.[732] The G7 launch of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, with strong U.S. leadership, is an example of a collaborative approach with democratic allies to advance values driven investment in low to middle income countries, although the potential absence or counterproductivity of U.S. leadership going forward should temper expectations for the success of this initiative.[733]

PILLAR 7: Make Democracy Deliver

Other new developments that further democratic promotion globally and that allies may need to pick up include the 2022 launch of Democracy Delivers Initiative (DDI) by USAID—a prime example of a targeted approach to democracy aid. By supporting countries with democratic openings, like Moldova, Guatemala, Malawi, Fiji, Armenia, this initiative can help cement democratic gains in regions critical to U.S. interests.[734] USAID has used the moment to encourage private sector, philanthropies, and development partners to provide support and partner to encourage economic growth and drive sustainable development.[735] Breaking new ground, USAID appointed its first Chief Digital Democracy and Rights Officer and advanced several digital democracy initiatives.[736]

PILLAR 3: Fight Corruption

Furthermore, proactive measures like the Biden Administration's development and implementation of the first-ever, whole-government approach to countering corruption are exemplary, even if unlikely to continue in their current form. The United States' Strategy on Countering Corruption

elevates and provides a roadmap to the fight against corruption.[737] The Strategy rightly recognizes corruption as a critical threat to American national security interests and democracy globally.[738] In calling for the creation of USAID's Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Bureau with a dedicated Anti-Corruption Center, the Strategy built upon existing anti-corruption work in the agency and takes a longer-term systemic approach to combating corruption.[739] Continuing the work of the Strategy will be critical as corruption accelerates global democratic backsliding, although our allies may need to carry the baton.

Among punitive measures, tracking corruption and issuing targeted sanctions is one effective tool. Democratic states should agree to a common set of anti-money laundering and anti-corruption standards that surpass current international best practices. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an example of best practices and multilateral anti-money laundering efforts.[740] Deterrence of illicit finance and corruption needs to be strengthened by ensuring that corruption-related financial crimes are not de-prioritized relative to terrorism and narcotics. A greater provision of protections and incentives for whistleblowers in cross-border corruption cases is needed. This is an example of the critical role that whistleblowers can play generally in revealing fraud, waste, and abuse, and in doing so strengthening democratic functioning if they are afforded legal safeguards and encouragement.[741]

Democracies and international actors should coordinate with intelligence and diplomatic efforts to call out governments on illicit practices and identify, seize, and track ill-gotten wealth. Additional options include asset freezes and restrictions on the ability of corrupt or illiberal elites to travel, purchase luxury goods, and send their children to private schools overseas. Travel bans should include spouses, families, and supporters of regime elites.[742]

Sanctions, when applied appropriately, can also be an effective tool to ensure national security or to deter illiberal actors, but they are not by themselves foolproof. We highlight a few recent examples of U.S.-issued sanctions. For example, at the close of 2024 the U.S. Treasury Department utilized the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017 (CAATSA) to sanction Russian entities that used generative AI to create and distribute disinformation in a fashion meant to corroborate false stories, heighten "socio-political tensions and influence the U.S. electorate during the 2024 U.S. election."[743] In Dec. 2024, the U.S. sanctioned Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder and honorary leader of Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream Party, along with previous sanctions of other Georgian officials for undermining democracy—including through brutal crackdowns on media members and peaceful protestors in 2024.[744] The Jan. 2025 sanction of Antal Rogán, a key

member of the Hungarian government,[745] marks the first time a high-ranking Hungarian official has been sanctioned by the U.S.[746]

The private sector can also be effective in opening space for democracy, and global financial institutions cutting off credit can drive a wedge between authoritarian governments and economic elites. It is important to note, however, that unilateral sanctions or blanket sanctions that punish entire sections of a society tend to be less effective, allowing regimes to project themselves as defenders of the people against outside punishment.

PILLAR 1: Protect Elections

In addition, transatlantic governments could consider imposing targeted sanctions against foreign officials, or officially sponsored, purveyors of disinformation. To offer another U.S. example, and one that came under the first Trump administration, in 2018, the U.S. provided for sanctions against individuals and entities involved in operations to interfere in the U.S. elections. This included individuals and companies that were part of the so-called "troll farm" in St. Petersburg that produced and distributed disinformation during the 2016 presidential elections. More recently, in 2024, the governments of the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom came together to reveal the extent of the Kremlin's propaganda and covert influence activities leading up to the pivotal EU referendum vote and elections in Moldova.[747] This joint statement shed light on Russia's attempts to undermine Moldova's democratic processes and was a clear démarche to protect shared values and freedom.[748] And as noted above, the Department of the Treasury has just sanctioned Russia and Iran for 2024 disinformation attacks on U.S. elections.[749] Whatever posture the second Trump administration may take, the EU must continue to step up, with the bloc levying its sanctions against Russian disinformation campaigns in Dec. 2024.[750] Such targeted disinformation sanctions will help to mitigate one of the Kremlin's key destabilization tactics in the EU. Orbán holds a veto—but will trade approval for frozen funds.[751] Such targeted disinformation sanctions will help to mitigate one of the Kremlin's key destabilization tactics in the EU and globally.[752]

PILLAR 2: Defend Rule of Law

The U.S. Congress retains independent voices and has the power to legislate, conduct oversight, and raise attention domestically and internationally to address transgressions against democracy, rule of law, and human rights. The robustness of that role remains to be seen given expanding isolationist influence in both the House of Representatives and Senate. Congress, especially the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, should hold regular oversight hearings on the state of democracy globally. The purpose of such hearings should be to raise awareness of the economic, political, and defense concerns posed by illiberal regimes to U.S. national security interests globally and to press the executive branch on its policies for countering democratic decline in these

countries.[753] The U.S. Helsinki Commission—an independent government agency set up by Congress to monitor European and Eurasian respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms—is another channel to voice concerns. The Commission can point to calls for sanctions against recalcitrant autocrats as it has done in the case of the Georgian Dream party during the Dec. 2024 crackdown on pro-European protestors.[754] However, the retirement of co-chair Senator Ben Cardin, who has been instrumental to the Commission since joining it in 1993, may harm its effectiveness.[755] As funding levels reflect priorities, it is also critical that appropriations committees and leaders in the House and Senate work in a bipartisan fashion to maintain or increase foreign assistance, including to bolster democracy globally.

Finally, America's democratic partners should not hesitate to speak out publicly or privately, to ensure that U.S. democracy does not wane. It is hardly unprecedented for America's partners to address human rights concerns on issues ranging from Jim Crow and the civil rights movement to the Supreme Court's decision to overturn abortion rights in Roe v. Wade to the response to the killing of George Floyd.[756] Other examples abound.[757] Just as the U.S. has not hesitated over the years to speak out when called for with respect to our allies, their insights are welcome and needed now.

D. BETTER UTILIZING NATO PLATFORMS

NATO is another transatlantic venue that should be better utilized in responding to democratic backsliding. While NATO as a military organization is not and should not be a leading actor in addressing democracy challenges, it is an institution comprised of member states that have committed to "strengthening their free institutions"[758] and should therefore stand by those principles whenever possible. Member states, foremost among them the United States, Turkey, Hungary, and Slovakia, are experiencing democratic backsliding that is hurting alliance trust and interoperability, potentially creating a tiered alliance in which strong democracies share more information with each other than they share with less trustworthy member states.[759] Democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law are the founding principles of NATO. Democratic backsliding and corruption within member states not only goes against these principles but also poses threats to shared security and provides more vulnerabilities for Russia, China, and other adversaries to exploit. Allies therefore have a responsibility to push back on such political developments.

That is of course not without risk when it comes to addressing U.S. democratic backsliding. In Donald Trump's first term, he frequently excoriated NATO in public and even privately considered withdrawing the United States from the alliance.[760] During Joe Biden's time in office, he

conversely reaffirmed the United States' commitment to NATO. NATO remains strongly supported in Congress, which at the end of 2023 approved a measure, introduced by Senator Marco Rubio and Senator Tim Kaine, "aimed at preventing any U.S. president from unilaterally withdrawing the United States from NATO without congressional approval."[761] There are questions whether this law will stand given presidential authority over foreign policy.[762] The law against withdrawal could be challenged and Trump could find other ways to inflict harm, e.g., by withholding American troops from participating in joint exercises or withdrawing the American ambassador to NATO.[763] Trump has also raised concerns in statements where he suggested that he would not defend any NATO allies attacked by Russia if they failed to meet required levels of defense spending.[764]

Possible steps to bolstering the democratic principles of the alliance include creating a commission or special ombudsman's office within NATO that would be responsible for identifying violations of alliance principles. The establishment of the Center for Democratic Resilience at NATO Headquarters in Brussels would help the alliance operationalize its commitment to democracy;[765] however, the Center remains an idea as the 32-vote threshold has not yet been met, with Hungary as the key holdout.[766] A more stringent step would be revising NATO's consensus voting rule in favor of a procedure that requires a qualified majority of states to agree in order to pass a proposal. This would prevent a bloc of illiberal states within NATO from shielding one another from attempts by other member states to use NATO mechanisms to apply pressure for antidemocratic practices. That was done in the case of Turkey and Hungary blocking Sweden's membership bid, although it ultimately succeeded nevertheless.[767] At a minimum, NATO's pro-democracy super majority should continue to bolster the NATO communiqué language regarding the importance of democracy to the strength of the alliance and should not hold summits or meetings in countries that have seen significant regression on rule of law.

SECTION 2.4 KEY RESOURCES:

- "Defending Democracies: A Blueprint For The Democratic Resilience Centre Within NATO." NATO. 2022. https://nato-pa.foleon.com/coordination-centre-on-democracy-resilience/the-case-for-a-centre-for-democratic-resilience-in-nato/centre-for-democratic-resilience.

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5. CONCLUSION OF SECTION TWO

This section examined the role foreign partners can play in supporting domestic pro-democracy actors. We identify four best practices of engagement for national governments and institutions, individual government officials, donor partners, and international institutions: (1) partnering with domestic civil society and nongovernmental organizations; (2) supporting nonviolent movements; (3) fighting disinformation campaigns; and (4) providing institutional support. Throughout, we advocate for an indirect approach to democracy support that prioritizes empowering domestic actors.

CONCLUSION

The battle for democracy is a long game, one that has been contested for centuries and indeed, millennia if we look back to the inchoate democracy of Ancient Greece. The word itself (from demos, "common people" and kratos, "strength") provides us the starting point for a Playbook that aims to equip diverse groups and individuals with strategies and tactics to strengthen democratic resilience, reverse regression, and fend off authoritarian resurgence.

In his initial address to the nation as the first post-communist president of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel captured the essence of why democracy is a participatory game, one with responsibilities for a broad array of stakeholders: "The best government in the world, the best parliament and the best president, cannot achieve much on their own. And it would be wrong to expect a general remedy from them alone. Freedom and democracy include participation and therefore responsibility from us all."[768]

In 2019, we opened the first edition of this Playbook with a call for democratic actors to see this competition between democracy and illiberalism as an urgent and unrelenting challenge, but a winnable one. To restore and strengthen democracy's vibrancy and resiliency, democratic actors must be prepared to compete more effectively with would-be authoritarians by demonstrating that democracies best meet the needs of their citizens. The first edition of the Democracy Playbook distilled strategic insights—drawn from social science research and case studies—and provided a broad set of methods and tactics that can help democratic actors outmaneuver illiberal forces and strengthen the pillars of liberal democracy. Our 2021 update incorporated recent developments and improved upon our original report to provide stakeholders at the Summit for Democracy in December with a concise and achievable set of commitments every democracy can pledge to pursue. This 2025 edition responds to the developments of intervening years, including recent democratic backsliding in the U.S. and strengthened illiberal and autocratic networks that are wielding and weaponizing advanced technologies to weaken democracies and polarize citizens.

But the lesson of the arc of democratic advancement is that it tends to continue over the long term despite setbacks—sometimes substantial ones. This Playbook described strategies for that continuity set forth in two main sections. The first focused on assessing the challenges and proposing a set of strategies for the direct "players," major domestic actors with the capacity to promote democracy within their own nations: the incumbent political establishment; the political opposition; civil society and independent media; and private enterprise. Mere capacity for action is insufficient. It is the strength, knowledge, and willingness of the people to wield their power to

hold leaders accountable and exercise all existing rights that can make a difference. We argued that fighting for democracy is a worthy goal and that not all strategies are created equal; some are generally more effective than others.

Democratic nations of course also exist in a contested global environment and therefore maximal attention and support must be given to protect and strengthen democracy at home and abroad. We now have a global field of competition that pits the community of democratic states against the opposing illiberal model pushed by powerful states such as Russia and China and aided by their proxies, domestic and global. External support from pro-democracy actors is thus critical but must be complementary to internal democratic bolstering and reform—this includes in the most established democracies. We must exceed the efforts of illiberal actors and networks working daily to erode freedoms, including the world's oldest democracy the United States.

In Section Two we provide a set of strategies and best practices for external actors to support pro-democracy actors on the ground, including addressing the complexities presented by backsliding in the U.S., which has led, or helped lead, so much global democratic advancement. Lines of effort include: empowering and partnering with domestic organizations; assisting lawful nonviolent and civil resistance movements; countering misinformation and disinformation; advancing responsible digital democracy, and leveraging institutional and official diplomatic and economic tools. This is necessary in order to incentivize democratic reforms, expose the fraudulent and corrupt tactics of authoritarians, and enhance the capacity and training of pro-democracy actors.

Because there are varying amounts of free space to operate in backsliding democracies, cross-cutting imperatives for both domestic and external actors should be proactive, define clear goals, and begin to map out the "plays" as early as possible. Ultimately, greater success will come from the concerted and interconnected efforts of diverse actors—the network or ecosystem for democracy to push back on illiberal activity before it becomes entrenched. That is true in the U.S. at the local, state, and federal levels no less than in other jurisdictions globally.

Appearances matter to authoritarians. They seek to operate under a Scheppele's "veneer of legality," perverting their own justice system in incremental and underhanded ways. This is exemplified in the rise of spin dictators, like Orbán and Erdoğan, who curate misleading narratives in order to maintain power and pretend their countries are governed as democracies.[769] Similarly, they seek to erode the credibility and capacity of international institutions to act as a bulwark against domestic backsliding.

Defending the rule of law is fundamental and should be a first line of defense. In the U.S. that benefits from our nation's long rule of law tradition, including as embodied in our Constitution. It remains to be seen how those guardrails will hold up.

A shared reality for domestic and international actors is that technology has and will change the game of democracy and how quickly democracies, institutions, and actors adapt at all levels matters. Elections are now increasingly complex and vulnerable to manipulation, including disinformation—and the threats shift faster than we can identify them and respond. We are only able to scratch the surface of this topic; it merits its own playbook, ongoing research, and a far greater dedication of resources. But, in order to trust elections and their outcomes, they first and foremost must be protected from interference. The U.S. election and others globally in 2024 show the threats and challenges posed to election integrity, security, and information transparency. Technology enables incredible advances in democracy and can improve its efficiency, but an ongoing challenge will be to protect the pillars of democracy from internal and external manipulation. Technology is not a stand-alone component; it is the connective tissue that can inform, connect, and mobilize voters. It can also misinform, alienate, and undermine trust in democracy as we saw vividly in the 2024 elections. Managing this tension and understanding how to harness social media, artificial intelligence, and technology to defend democracy will be part of the battlefield for generations.

Another important area that has been a theme of this report is the issue of messaging; speaking to citizens in a way that earns their trust, understands emotional needs, makes an evidence-based case for the benefits of democracy, exposes the dangerous encroachments of authoritarians, and makes people feel respected. Illiberals have been successful at using technology to better effect, channeling outrage and stoking fear—in part because social media is designed, including through algorithms to reward those messaging tactics and destructive echo chambers. Merely blaming social media is lazy—pro-democracy actors need to be self-critical, understand where they have not delivered, and how they can do better. It may be that the liberal actors have a more difficult challenge because long-term success depends on taking the high road by being truthful and inclusive in their messaging. But to resort to the toolkit of the illiberals will only undermine pro-democracy efforts in the long run.

Democracy is not perfect, but it is the best political system to legitimately hold governments accountable and to provide a more peaceful and prosperous world and future. Moreover, people are at the heart of democratic improvement and so is ensuring their freedoms which democracies over generations have fought to preserve. When it comes to

defending democracies, each person matters, as do the strategic decisions they make. Let each of us take our turn to contribute. The stakes have seldom been higher both here in the U.S., among our democratic allies and everywhere around the world.

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Katz served as a Senior Advisor in the Department of State's International Organization Affairs Bureau, writing speeches and advising on congressional strategy. He also advised the Assistant Secretary and other senior U.S government officials on various U.S. national security, multilateral policies, and development and human rights priorities at the United Nations and across the UN system.

In Congress, Katz served as the Staff Director of the Europe Subcommittee on the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs. He also served as the Legislative Director for Congressman Robert Wexler (D-FL), guiding foreign and domestic policies and managing all legislative affairs.

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