

CHALLENGING  
**AUTOCRACY**  
FROM THE FRONT LINES

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**Nicolás Maduro's partnerships with authoritarian governments have helped preserve his dictatorial regime.**

Image Source from Top to Bottom: Government of Venezuela; Government of Russia; Government of Venezuela.

## DETAINED

In 2014, after calling for non-violent protests against the corrupt and autocratic regime of Nicolás Maduro, I was arrested and sentenced to 14 years in prison after a sham trial concluded I was guilty of inciting violence through “subliminal messages” during my public speeches. I was then sent to a military prison and kept in solitary confinement for almost four years.

That year, Maduro had shown the ugly face of his criminal dictatorship; thousands were injured, arrested and tortured in response to prolonged street protests calling for a transition to democracy. My political party, Voluntad Popular, became the main target, accused of being a terrorist organization. Our elected mayors were arrested and dozens of our activists, including many personal friends, were detained, tortured and killed.

In late 2017, to pacify protests, the regime transferred me to house arrest. After continuing to support the protests, I was sent back to military prison and then again to house arrest. In 2019, following Maduro’s fraudulent reelection, Juan Guaidó became president of the democratically elected National Assembly and following a constitutional mandate,

was sworn in as interim president of the country. The United States and more than 50 other nations recognized him as Venezuela’s legitimate leader. To the surprise of many, this ignited another cycle of massive, nonviolent protests calling on the Maduro regime to permit free and fair elections. In April of that year, I escaped house arrest and sought refuge at the Spanish Embassy in Caracas. The security services surrounded the embassy, cut its electricity and deployed drones for surveillance. I lived at the embassy until late 2020, when I escaped Venezuela to reunite with my family in Spain. I never wanted to leave my country; for more than two decades, I had been dedicated to the dream of a free, prosperous and democratic Venezuela. In that period, like millions of Venezuelans, I was gradually deprived of basic rights and witnessed the destruction of a democracy. I now know that my story is only one of thousands around the globe.

## FRIENDS IN AUTHORITARIAN PLACES

I am often asked how a dictator like Maduro can hold on to power even when his government and that of his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, plundered their country, causing living standards to fall to the lowest level of any nation in Latin Amer-

ica and the Caribbean. There are many ways to answer this question. Some say it is the government's access to natural resources, in particular oil. Others attribute the regime's resilience to the support it receives from the Venezuelan military. However, there is one reason that stands above the rest: The support Maduro receives from other autocratic regimes including China, Russia and Iran. In fact, selling oil and gold, maintaining the military's support, manipulating social media with fake news and censorship, using sophisticated equipment for internal repression, and avoiding international isolation are only possible because of the support of this autocratic network. These friendly regimes provide funding, technology, military supplies, and know-how, all of which are ruthlessly deployed against those campaigning for human rights, democracy and freedom in Venezuela.

To be clear, the aforementioned factors – access to oil and loyalty from the military – contribute to the status quo in Venezuela. However, these factors are best understood as a product of the autocratic network. For example, starting in 2007, Russia and China began supplying the Venezuelan military with materiel and today, the Venezuelan armed forces are fully dependent on Moscow for supplies, maintenance and training. Cuban

intelligence officials are embedded in the army's command structure. Similarly, the Maduro regime has circumvented sanctions on its oil exports thanks to Iranian assistance; the Iranian regime has pioneered the use of false documentation to conceal the origins of Venezuelan oil exports.<sup>1</sup>

Since leaving Venezuela, I have had innumerable conversations with democracy defenders living under autocratic regimes. They tell the same tale of governments propped up by like-minded autocrats. Exposing this network, and dismantling it, is one of the challenges of our time. An alliance of democracy defenders must take on this challenge, supported by the world's democracies, to help billions of people recover the freedom, democracy and human rights autocrats have stolen from them.

## AUTOCRACY RISING

The backdrop to this urgent challenge is the decline of democracy throughout the world. The first quarter of the 21st century has not yet seen a stable transition to democracy. On the contrary, autocratic regimes are multiplying. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was symbolic of the growing conflict between democracy and autocracy, but it was only the most visible offensive in a protracted,

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coordinated effort by autocrats to kneecap democracies. Their approaches are ruthless; they do not respond to condemnations or moral appeals. They believe that if they remain united, they can succeed. In the absence of any coordinated effort to counter them, they may be right.

The rise of autocracy is well documented, but cooperation among autocratic regimes has received less attention. They have become a network focused on preserving power and expanding their authority and influence. This is an interest-based union that seeks to foster impunity for mutual benefit. They not only violate the human rights of the people living in their countries, but also export human rights violations by cooperating with their partners globally. This cooperation has created an autocratic playbook.

In this paper, I draw on labels used by Freedom House, a leading pro-democracy research organization. The three categories are “free,” “partly free” and “not free.”<sup>2</sup> My focus in this paper is the 56 countries, representing 38 percent of the world’s population, Freedom House classifies as “not free.”<sup>3</sup>

Billions of people are now living under autocratic regimes, as documented by independent research institutions. Freedom House, for example, finds that

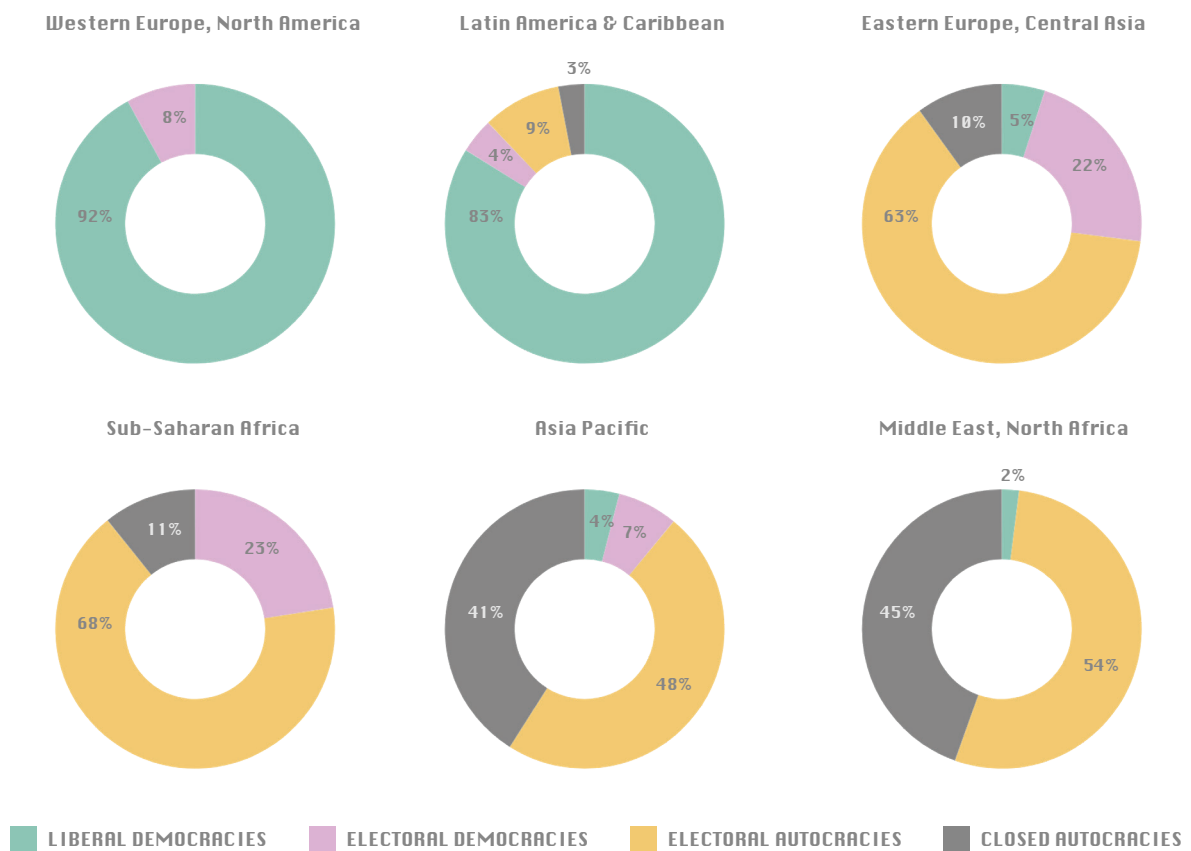
global freedom has been declining for 16 years in a row.<sup>4</sup> Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) reports that 72 percent of the world’s population lives under some form of autocratic regime, including hybrid regimes. This number is up from 49 percent in 2011.<sup>5</sup> Their reports include numerous chilling statistics:

- There are only 34 liberal democracies – the lowest number in more than 25 years – and they are home to just 13 percent of the world population.
- There was less movement toward democracy in 2022 than in any year since 1978.
- A record 35 countries suffered significant deteriorations in freedom of expression in 2022 – an increase from only five countries ten years ago.
- In Africa, only 7 percent of people live in free countries.
- In the Asia-Pacific, only 5 percent of people live in free countries.
- In the Middle East, only 4 percent of people live in free countries.

## VISUALIZED: A TROUBLING GLOBAL TREND

The expansion of autocracy is particularly pronounced in regions plagued by political instability, economic downturns or armed conflicts.

**FIGURE 1: REGIONAL SHARES OF POPULATION BY REGIME TYPE**

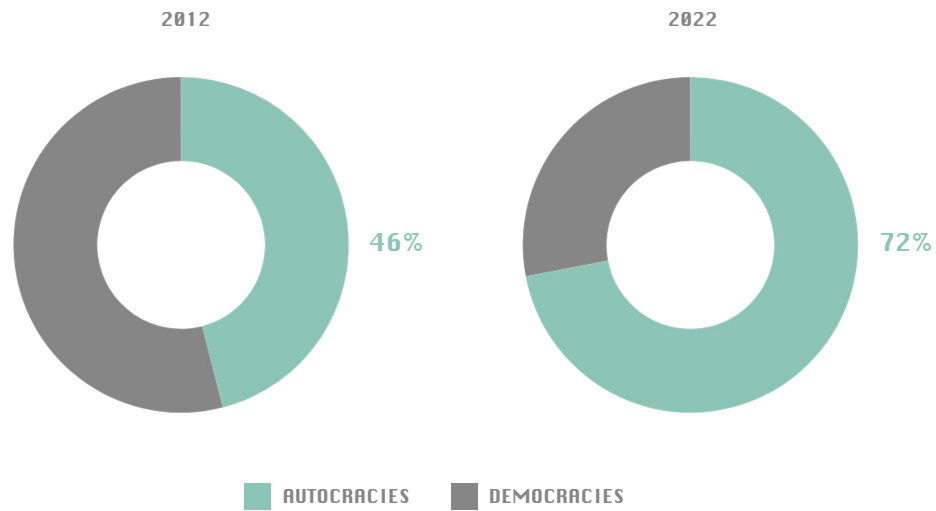


Source: Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization, V-Dem Institute, March 2023.

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The last decade has seen the consolidation and expansion of autocratic regimes under an interest-based, covert alliance to undermine democratic movements. The surge of Russian and Chinese influence in the last decade, particularly in Latin America and Africa, coincides with rapid democratic backsliding in both regions.

### FIGURE 2: SHARE OF WORLD POPULATION LIVING IN AUTOCRACIES



Source: Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization, V-Dem Institute, March 2023.

Freedom of expression is the bedrock of any free society. It is a fundamental human right and necessary for a democratic system. The weakening of free expression is necessary for the consolidation of an autocratic regime. It is no surprise that the past decade has seen the number of countries suffering from a deterioration of free expression skyrocket, in tune with the global trend of democratic recession.

### FIGURE 3: DETERIORATION OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION



Source: Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization, V-Dem Institute, March 2023.



## SAME STORY, DIFFERENT VOICES

This paper exposes some of the tactics used by autocrats and suggests how to combat them. I argue that the decline of democracies and the consolidation of autocratic networks highlight the urgent need for global cooperation among pro-democracy movements. I propose an alliance for freedom focused on strengthening cooperation among pro-democracy movements by supporting, connecting and advocating for them, with the objective of restoring democracy, free and fair elections and the rule of law.

I approach these issues not as a policy analyst, but as someone who has challenged autocracy from within. I am not alone. The persecution I faced was straight from the autocrat's playbook. Over the past year, I have talked with dozens of freedom defenders from all over the world. These conversations made it clear to me that the strategies and tactics used by the world's autocratic regimes are similar – and sometimes identical. This is not a coincidence; these regimes share information as part of their common objective of undermining liberal democracy. To be clear, this alliance is not branded as anti-democratic; indeed, its members often claim to be running

democratic systems. However, the cooperation of nations like Venezuela, Iran, Russia, Cuba, China, Belarus, Zimbabwe and others should be recognized as an interest-based, transnational attempt to undermine democracy and make the world safer for authoritarianism.

**“The cooperation of nations like Venezuela, Iran, Russia, Cuba, China, Belarus, Zimbabwe and others should be recognized as an interest-based, transnational attempt to undermine democracy and make the world safer for authoritarianism.”**

Over the past year, working alongside Iranian women's rights activist Masih Alinejad and Russian chess grandmaster and freedom activist Garry Kasparov, we brought together activists opposing autocratic regimes. These conversations led us to the conclusion that if autocrats are united, democracy defenders must be united too. In November 2022, over 180 activists from over 40 countries controlled by autocratic regimes gathered in Lithuania at the World Liberty Congress to talk about how we can collaborate, strengthen our movements and bring about democracy. It was non-ideological, but we shared a set of values – democracy, human rights and the rule of

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law. During the first day of our gathering, representatives from each country recounted their experiences. It was eye opening that for hours, we heard the same story in different voices, the stories from the frontlines. It is from that perspective that I write this paper, from the viewpoint of men and women willing to risk their freedom and lives to achieve democracy.

Tens of thousands of other freedom activists throughout the world have suffered the same fate, or worse, as those who attended the World Liberty Congress. We live with the consequences, and painful reminders, every day. Still, our young organization has had moments to celebrate. We have, alongside the families and friends of political prisoners within our network, witnessed the release of people such as Paul Rusesabagina of Rwanda and Felix Maradiaga of Nicaragua. This is our motivation: to strive for political change in the world's autocratic countries and restore the freedoms and human rights that dictators and despots have crushed.

## THE STATE WE'RE IN

Autocratic regimes come in different shapes. Many hide under a facade of democracy. That was clearly the case in Venezuela. Its democracy did not evap-

orate in a single day; it was a gradual process that took years. In fact, it was not until 2014, 15 years after Chávez's first election as president, that the Venezuelan people and the international democratic community recognized Venezuela as a dictatorship.

The world today is plagued by what Venezuelan journalist Moisés Naím labels the three Ps: populism, polarization and post-truth. Each one of these is troubling. Together, writes Naím, they are "malign [and] incompatible with the democratic values at the center of any free society."<sup>6</sup> In *The Revenge of Power: How Autocrats are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century*, he contends that autocrats are pioneers in reshaping global power dynamics, cultivating and exploiting distrust in the media, experts and authorities while inventing enemies, manufacturing truth and using legal pretexts to consolidate power. Naím defines this as "stealthocracy," a form of maintaining the structure of liberal democracy while abandoning democratic accountability and fostering public discord. In other words, although democratic and multilateral institutions may look the same, the values, norms and freedoms that make them function are debilitated. In sum, as Naím notes, the world has been reshaped and "made safe for autocracy."

Part of the challenge for freedom defenders is that their struggle often gets wrapped up in the ideological polarization of democratic countries. Figures on the left may be reluctant to criticize socialist or communist regimes and figures on the right may ignore rights abuses committed by conservative regimes. This dilemma underscores why it's important not to look at autocrats through an ideological lens. The real issue is not liberal or conservative, left or right, but rather autocracy versus democracy. Political divisions within pro-democracy oppositions have also crippled their effectiveness. I don't know of a case where there are no divisions *within* opposition movements. Part of the strategy of autocrats is to exacerbate these divisions. If we are to unify democratic oppositions across the globe, it's important that we find ways to maximize their internal cohesion as well.

It is against this backdrop that non-violent freedom movements and opposition leaders within autocratic regimes face a fundamental challenge: they are receiving limited support from democratic countries. Moreover, it's common to hear from activists that the type of external support they do receive is limited to activities unrelated to their strategic needs to organize and mobilize the people to promote a transition to democracy. Au-

torocratic regimes, by contrast, tend to be swift in their actions and well-equipped to deal with any uprising. Thus, while despots collaborate and grow in numbers and strength, those who confront them remain disjointed and ill-equipped.

That is one reason why freedom movements have had less success in recent years than in decades past. From the 1960s until about 2010, nonviolent campaigns seeking regime change succeeded more than 40 percent of the time – and 65 percent of the time in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> But since 2010, less than 34 percent of nonviolent protests have succeeded.<sup>8</sup> The New York Times reported in September 2022 that “nonviolent movements are today more likely to fail than they were at any other point since at least the 1930s.” The article referenced a political scientist who said that 2020 and 2021 were “the worst years on record for people power.”<sup>9</sup> This backsliding is taking place at a time when 84 percent of people across the globe say democracy is important to have in their countries.<sup>10</sup>

The Times article pointed to several reasons why protest movements are not succeeding. One is increased polarization within countries – over inequality, geography and ideology – that divides opposition movements over a range of issues, including the value of protests. Another

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factor is social media, which can mobilize people rapidly, but sometimes too rapidly, not giving protest movements time to organize properly. Clearly, another reason for the lack of success of democracy movements is the collaboration network among autocrats. They harass and intimidate their opponents online, and use tactics such as surveillance and counterintelligence to depress activist energy and arrest critics.

I have talked to many activists who, like me, have been subjected to character assassination on social media. Women, in particular, are targeted with a variety of sexualized attacks. Men and women have told me about the psychological toll of these campaigns. Many said they had become less active in their fight against autocracy. The American journalist Thomas Friedman described this challenge by telling me about an Egyptian freedom activist who said, “the Arab Spring would have been impossible without Facebook. But the transition back to democracy will be impossible with it.”

The other clear threat to nonviolent movements is that their opponents are unafraid to use violence to silence critics. According to a September 2022 report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, for example, “the Venezuelan state relies on the intelligence

services and its agents to repress dissent in the country. In doing so, grave crimes and human rights violations are being committed, including acts of torture and sexual violence.”<sup>11</sup> Another UN report, released two years earlier, had similar findings.<sup>12</sup>

Another fundamental challenge facing nonviolent freedom movements is organizing enough people to pressure regimes through protest, and mobilizing people to vote in massive numbers when autocrats permit elections.

## THE TYRANNICAL TIES THAT BIND

It is no coincidence that autocrats have been emerging throughout the world. A network is working to support them. They are united less by ideology than by greed and a desire for power. This is why Iranian theocrats, Chinese communists and Russian nationalists have embraced one another in a flexible and ideologically irrational alliance. Russia has poured billions of dollars into propping up leftist regimes in Nicaragua and Venezuela though the Putin regime is generally regarded as conservative. It is clear that Russian support is not tied to admiration for *Sandinismo* or *Chavismo*; it is simply practical for dictators to defend one another’s interests. Russia has also been

supportive of the Chinese government's threats against Taiwan and China's repression in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong. In February 2022, 20 days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin and Xi Jinping met in Beijing and signed an agreement pledging cooperation on a wide range of issues. Notably, the two countries said they would "stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions" and "oppose color revolutions."<sup>13</sup> By explicitly mentioning their opposition to so-called color revolutions, their objective was clear: undermine and crush democratic movements.

Anne Applebaum, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, has concisely captured how the autocratic network functions:

Nowadays, autocracies are run not by one bad guy, but by sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial structures, security services (military, police, paramilitary groups, surveillance) and professional propagandists. The members of these networks are connected not only within a given country, but among many countries. The corrupt, state-controlled companies in one dictatorship do business with corrupt, state-controlled companies in another. The police in one country can arm, equip and train the police in another. The propagandists share resources – the troll farms that promote one dictator's propaganda can also be used to promote the propaganda of

another – and themes, pounding home the same messages about the weakness of democracy.<sup>14</sup>

In previous decades, networks like these would have been countered by multilateral institutions in a bipolar international system. The financial, military and moral strength of democratic countries outnumbered and outmatched the resources of most autocratic regimes. Lacking the sophisticated technology of today, dictators had limited capacity to collaborate. But times have changed, and democracies have not adapted. Over the past decade and a half, the tools and mechanisms used by democratic nations are no longer up to the task. Autocrats make better use of technology, for example. That has allowed them to protect their money in the kleptocratic network, spread disinformation and conduct cyberwarfare to repress domestic critics and outmaneuver democracies.

## SMEARING DEMOCRACY

Russia and China are at the center of the autocratic network, and both countries have been among the most aggressive in working to destabilize democracies and build influence abroad. Their overseas disinformation campaigns, for example, have dramatically increased over

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the past decade, sometimes in coordination with others within the autocratic alliance.<sup>15</sup>

When I was in prison, I experienced how autocrats cooperate in delivering their messages. I was occasionally permitted to watch television, but I could only watch regulated channels, a reality for most Venezuelans. All of these channels are produced by autocratic regimes: HispanTV, a Spanish-language network operated by Iran; Cubavisión, operated by the Cuban government; and RT, Russia's state-controlled TV news network, which produces Spanish-language content. These international media outlets are skillful at dividing democratic opposition movements. They undermine democracy and are mouthpieces for their autocratic sponsor. In September 2022, The New York Times reported on Russia's determination to expand its political influence globally. The paper reported on a confidential U.S. State Department cable revealing that since 2014, the Kremlin had spent at least \$300 million to support friendly political parties, politicians and institutions in more than two dozen countries: "Russia has relied on state-owned enterprises and large firms to move funds covertly across a number of regions including Central America, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and on think tanks and foundations that

are especially active across Europe."<sup>16</sup>

This is part of a broader effort by the autocratic network to fund divisive rhetoric that chips away at the foundations of democracy. A report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies observed that Russia and China are aligned in presenting authoritarianism as an alternative model to democracy. There is less coherence of "capitalism versus socialism" or "left versus right" than in the 20th century. Rather, the overarching debate has evolved into autocracy versus democracy.<sup>17</sup> The countries in the autocratic network, which is not a formal club but rather a stealthy partnership, are also aligned in multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations. In a March 2022 UN vote condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, for example, members of the autocratic network – such as Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea and Syria – all stood with Russia. Abstainers included autocratic nations such as China, Cuba, Iran, Nicaragua and Zimbabwe.

The success of these efforts is a product of the post-Cold War focus on globalization, which operated under the premise that the expansion of the market economy would lead to democratization globally. It was "the end of history."<sup>18</sup> That optimism continued through the 1990s, and indeed, the world saw a "third wave"

of democratization. Support for bringing democracy to non-democratic countries typically went to civil society organizations involved in non-political efforts. The strategy, still popular today, was to support democratization by preparing civil society for the moment when democracy knocked on the door. Now we know that democracy will not gently knock on the door, but rather the door will have to be kicked open. We need to actively spur, instead of passively wait for, popular pro-democracy mobilizations. Democratization occurs only when critical masses are willing to take risks.

The political climate began to change around the turn of the century. More autocracies started to emerge, along with a support network for implementation of the autocratic playbook. We now know that supporting non-political civil society activities is insufficient to spread democracy. For that reason, we need to consider the concept of a “freedom society”: an extension of civil society that includes individuals and movements whose main objective is to bring about democracy, including through explicitly political actions such as popular mobilizations and other direct confrontations against authoritarian regimes. These activists, typically excluded from international support, often form the vanguard of what becomes massive pro-democracy pro-

tests or strong, opposition electoral participation.

I have heard from civil society leaders throughout the world that many development organizations withdraw support when activists become “too political.” I was told by activists in our network of a recent case which occurred after the World Liberty Congress, when a non-governmental organization working in Uganda pulled its funding from a democracy initiative because of a picture taken by a funding recipient with the democratic Ugandan leader Bobi Wine. These kinds of limitations on pro-democracy support consolidate the position of autocrats. A “freedom society,” in contrast to traditional civil society, is unapologetically about political change towards democracy. It is willing to pay high costs, both in terms of finances and political capital, to fight for democracy. For that reason, it deserves international support.

The traditional strategy for promoting democracy involves a vicious cycle within the civil society-donor ecosystem, where democracy-promotion organizations prioritize a working relation with autocratic rulers and maintaining an on-the-ground presence rather than supporting “freedom society” movements. That is in part because some governments and non-governmental organizations fear



Venezuelan soldiers parade commemorating the first anniversary of President Hugo Chávez's death in Caracas, Venezuela. Source: Cancillería del Ecuador, March 5, 2014

losing their ability to support local actors. Thus, one of the main obstacles to overcome is the control dictators maintain over their nation's financial systems. We have seen in recent years how autocrats limit NGO activity by eliminating access to external financing. A step in the right direction would be establishing mechanisms, using financial technologies, to liberate citizens from financial systems controlled by dictators.

## THE AUTOCRATIC ARSENAL

The breadth of initiatives, campaigns and agreements unleashed by autocrats to aid one another is nothing short of breathtaking. What follows is a summary of just some of what these regimes are pursuing, and there's undoubtedly activity underway that has yet to be detected.

### 1. MILITARY COOPERATION

The autocratic network uses military cooperation to impose its will. Military cooperation includes, but is not limited to: sending troops, providing materiel, giving tactical support, and training the police or military of another state for the purpose of repression. This type of support has been on display during Russia's war against Ukraine. An example is the Belarusian regime of Alexander Lukashenko, which has aided Putin in his attempts to seize Ukraine by allowing Belarus to be used as a launching pad for attacks. In doing so, Lukashenko became an accomplice to the Russian atrocities in Ukraine. Similarly, Iran has sold Russia drones that have been used against Ukraine, and The Washington Post reported in October 2022 that Iran was also planning to sell Russia surface-to-surface missiles.<sup>19</sup> Another example is the case of Syria, where dictator



Bashar Al-Assad has received immense military support from Russia and Iran to crush Syrian democratic forces.

Military cooperation was also a central feature of the agreement Russia and China signed in February 2022, amid Russia's saber rattling against Ukraine. (Russia launched its invasion just 20 days later.) In the agreement, both countries "reaffirm their strong mutual support for the protection of their core interests, state sovereignty and territorial integrity, and oppose interference by external forces in their internal affairs."<sup>20</sup> (There were also pledges to cooperate in areas such as artificial intelligence, climate change, the internet and space.) Military cooperation among autocrats is also multinational. The International Army Games is a platform created in 2015 by Russia's Defense Ministry to exchange experiences and strengthen military cooperation among autocratic regimes and countries suffering from considerable democratic erosion. Between 2015 and 2019, Moscow signed 19 military collaboration agreements with African governments, all with the goal of expanding Russia's weapons sales and the use of Russian private security companies to deliver counterinsurgency and counterterrorism training.<sup>21</sup> Military collaboration among autocratic regimes is a formidable security threat to democratic coun-

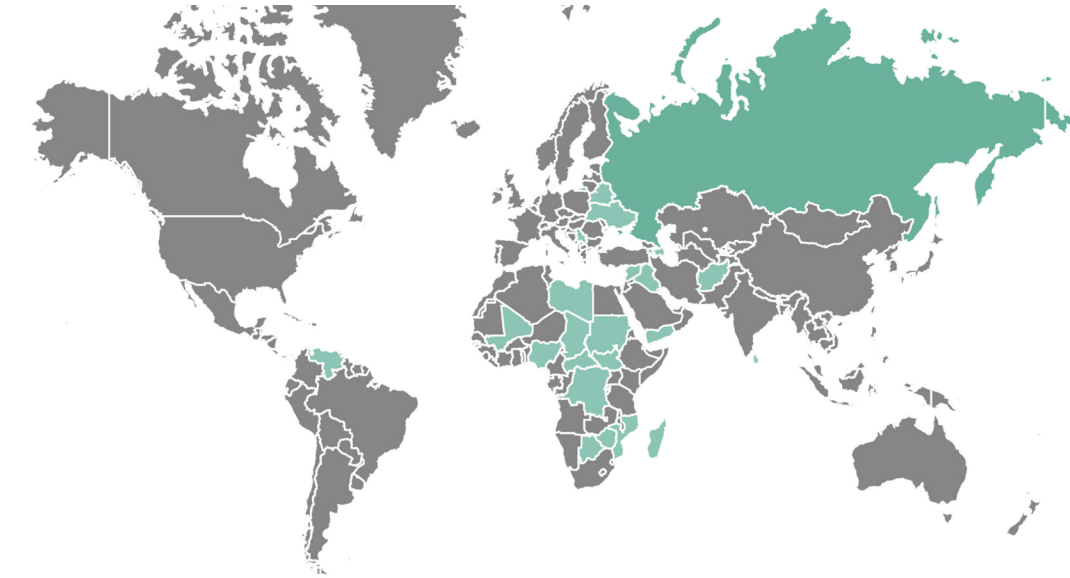
tries. It is also detrimental to freedom fighting movements, as dictatorships frequently deploy the armed forces to quash dissent.

## 2. NON-STATE ACTORS

Military cooperation extends beyond state-to-state partnerships and includes illicit non-state armed groups such as drug cartels, criminal gangs and terrorist groups. While democracies typically view these illicit non-state actors as a threat to internal and international security, for autocrats they can present an opportunity for a low-cost and sometimes effective partner to pursue a dictatorship's domestic and international interests. The Wagner Group is an emblematic example of a non-state actor that advances the goals of autocratic regimes. It is a Russian-based paramilitary organization founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Putin associate. Its troops have fought in civil wars in several countries, always in support of Russian economic and political interests, and are active in Ukraine. Russia has also drawn on Wagner as part of its military support in Africa,<sup>22</sup> where the Kremlin is working to create African dependencies in countries with fragile governments and abundant raw materials.

In Venezuela, the Maduro regime has partnered with a variety of non-state ac-

## MAP 1: COUNTRIES WHERE RUSSIAN PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES (PMCS) OPERATED FROM 2016 TO 2021



**Countries Where Russian PMCs Operated from 2016 to 2021:** Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Botswana, Brunei, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Iraq, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Serbia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, Yemen, Zimbabwe

**Source:** Putin's Proxies: Examining Russia's Use of Private Military Companies, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 15, 2022.

tors, including Hezbollah. It was recently revealed that Venezuelan gold had been discreetly transferred to Iran, who then transferred the funds to the Lebanese terrorist group.<sup>23</sup> The Maduro regime's partners also include the Colombian guerrilla groups National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); the Wagner Group; and local crime networks. In Venezuela's urban centers, non-state armed groups called *colectivos* terrorize local populations to exercise social control.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. TECHNOLOGICAL REPRESSION

Technology was glorified for the role it played in ousting autocrats in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen during the Arab Spring. Times have changed. In 2014, when we called for protests against the Maduro regime, we were banned from mainstream media, leaving us with Twitter and Facebook. Back then, those spaces were mostly open and democratic. Today, with the rise of bots and other tools, technology is increasingly used by autocrats as a tool of repression. For example, by facilitating surveillance, the security services gain access

to real-time information on anyone who speaks out against the regime.

Technologies that enable repression are widely shared among autocrats. The Chinese Communist Party has been pioneering in this area of social control, using nationwide digital ID cards to track its citizens, as well as advanced fingerprint identification and authentication and facial recognition. In 2008 Hugo Chávez dispatched Justice Ministry officials to China, tasking them with learning about China's online repression.<sup>25</sup> Today, every Venezuelan citizen is assigned a QR code that includes his or her identity, biographical information and participation in social programs. As noted in the Wilson Center report, *Food, Technology and Authoritarianism in Venezuela's Elections*, these QR codes have now been in use for more than a decade and are a tool for social control used to influence elections.<sup>26</sup> Democracy activists are dependent on the internet to communicate with supporters, both within and outside their country. Furthermore, massive grassroots demonstrations require online coordination. Autocrats have responded with a variety of measures that limit internet access. This includes blocking websites and deepening censorship and surveillance. The net effect is that internet freedom around the world has declined for 12 years in a row, ac-

ording to Freedom House.<sup>27</sup>

While Twitter and Facebook are banned in China, the Chinese government operates extensive smear and disinformation campaigns on those platforms with the goal of creating confusion and distrust.<sup>28</sup> There is evidence that technology companies have catered to autocratic regimes by blocking the accounts of freedom activists or limiting access to them.<sup>29</sup> In July, for example, when Masih Alinejad, a leading Iranian dissident, was posting videos of women defying the country's strict dress code, her account was inexplicably shut down by Instagram. It was later restored, but her account has also been invisible in search engines, even though she has more than eight million followers. "Many Iranians have been accusing Instagram and Facebook content moderators of deleting or censoring accounts that track the regime's human rights abuses,"<sup>30</sup> she wrote. Other activists report their accounts being flooded with tens of thousands of bots which report their posts en masse and result in their removal from the platform.<sup>31</sup> Worse, the spread of online disinformation has ignited some of the worst contemporary atrocities committed across the globe. In Myanmar, for example, Facebook was used to incite violence against a religious minority.<sup>32</sup>

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Sophisticated techniques to spread disinformation are devastating to pro-democracy movements. When autocrats and their armies of bots and digital propagandists fabricate grassroots support for their policies on social media, regimes create a perception of popularity. In doing so, they can more easily excuse repression of opposition movements. Moreover, online attacks on democracy activists can have a profound impact. I've heard from activists in Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia that they are no longer publishing on social media because of the hostile environment, depriving them of an important tool for influencing public opinion.

### 4. KLEPTOCRATIC NETWORK

One of the defining features of autocracy is the high level of corruption.<sup>33</sup> Undisturbed by the rule of law or democratic accountability, regime officials use the power of the state to enrich themselves and their entourage. In the case of Venezuela, over 20 percent of GDP is reportedly tied to illicit enterprises such as narcotrafficking, smuggling and illegal extraction of gold and minerals.<sup>34</sup> The Maduro regime is among the chief beneficiaries of these practices.<sup>35</sup>

This system, known as kleptocracy, is akin to the internet's "dark web," an un-

regulated environment that enables a wide range of illicit activity. Kleptocracy is often enabled by Western financial tools and practices. It involves real estate, private equity and auction houses, often facilitated by consultants, lobbyists and lawyers in Western countries.<sup>36</sup> Money stolen from public coffers is moved, hidden and laundered so that it remains beyond the reach of regulatory authorities and resistant to international sanctions. While kleptocrats criticize the democratic world, they utilize the financial systems of democracies. That was clear following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With greater scrutiny of Russian finances, the world learned that Russian oligarchs had crafted networks of companies and assets – including yachts, palaces, businesses and even soccer teams – in Europe and the United States. As much as we have learned, it's likely just the tip of the iceberg.

### 5. PRIVILEGED ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIPS

Through the transfer of funds and the exchange of natural resources, these regimes support and sustain each other. In the first half of 2020, Venezuela shipped \$348 million worth of oil to Cuba.<sup>37</sup> The exchange of Venezuelan oil for Cuban medical and military assistance is a long running practice, extending back to a

pact signed in 2000 by Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro. Especially noteworthy is that the Maduro regime, in the midst of a humanitarian catastrophe, is selling their Cuban allies discounted oil, often at a loss.<sup>38</sup>

These intimate economic relationships between dictatorships are critical to their resilience from international pressure. China, for example, has loaned \$62 billion to Venezuela since 2007 – money that is unlikely ever to be paid back.<sup>39</sup> Of course, China does not only loan money to dictatorships. Beijing is Latin America’s primary trading partner. It is worth emphasizing, however, that Venezuela is the recipient of nearly half of Chinese loans in the region.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, because Chinese loans come with few restrictions or conditions for transparency, they appeal to unstable economies and corrupt leaders. Those loans are often difficult to repay, which gives China political leverage through a system sometimes described as “debt trap diplomacy.”

## 6. SANCTIONS EVASION

The autocratic network is also critical for evading sanctions. In 2019, for example, the United States imposed sanctions on Venezuela’s state-controlled oil sector. However, the sanctions had limited im-

pact, owing to support from Iran, Turkey, Russia and other autocratic countries. Russian banks were used to circumvent the US banking system, and the Maduro government uses Russian oil companies’ routes to keep selling crude oil.<sup>41</sup> Iran, as previously mentioned, has been instrumental in using fake documentation on Venezuelan tankers to avoid sanctions. Turkey has been accused of “sanctions-busting” because of its enormous purchases of Venezuelan gold.<sup>42</sup> This does not mean that sanctions cannot be effective. Sanctions are one of the few peaceful diplomatic tools free nations can employ to punish dictators for repression and corruption. Instead of abandoning sanctions, we must rethink the way they are implemented. We must acknowledge the complex international web which creates opportunities for sanctions evasion, and work with our international allies and partners to close them.

**“Sanctions are one of the few peaceful diplomatic tools free nations can employ to punish dictators for repression and corruption. Instead of abandoning sanctions, we must rethink the way they are implemented.”**



## 7. WEAPONIZING MIGRATION

Autocrats have begun turning to an especially inhumane practice: the weaponization of migration. This strategy seeks to destabilize democratic countries by overwhelming their capacity to absorb migrants and provoking internal divisions over migration policy. In Belarus, Lukashenko has mastered this practice. In cooperation with his autocratic counterparts in the Middle East, Lukashenko's government lies to migrants from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, promising that upon arrival in Belarus, they will be granted access to the European Union (EU). However, once flown into the country, they are bussed to its western borders, dropped off at encampments and left to fend for themselves in sometimes frigid conditions. Despite EU legislation granting protection to asylum seekers, neighboring EU countries often respond to the overwhelming number of migrants

by either pushing them back into Belarus or imposing various deterrent measures. As a result, Lukashenko has created a humanitarian crisis and divisions in the EU. The EU's commissioner for home affairs, Ylva Johansson, accused Lukashenko of using "human beings as an act of aggression."<sup>43</sup> Although the EU has been a main target of the weaponization of migrants, it is not the only region that suffers from it. And with far more than 89 million people forcibly displaced across the globe, this tactic could continue to haunt democratic countries.<sup>44</sup>

Autocratic regimes also intensify global human displacement challenges by incentivizing their own populations to migrate; migrants can be a valuable source of income for autocracies through cash transfers known as remittances. Moreover, those who leave are often the most vocal about their dissatisfaction with a regime. Additionally, authoritarian regimes

often employ “dispossessive migration,” chasing away citizens in order to appropriate their possessions and land.<sup>45</sup> Finally, migration leaves behind a smaller population to support through increasingly scarce state resources. Nearly eight million people have left Venezuela since 2014, a quarter of its population.<sup>46</sup>

## 8. DIPLOMATIC COOPERATION

While autocrats thrive through illicit means, the diplomatic support they have extended to each other has become critical to legitimizing their regimes. Autocratic regimes understand that the rules-based international system no longer presents a hurdle for them to reach their objectives. They have learned to cooperate in multilateral institutions such as the UN, Organization of American States (OAS) and others. Led by Russia and China – two of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – they have hijacked portions of the UN system. For example, a resolution to expel Iran from the UN Women’s Rights Commission faced stiff resistance. Those who voted against the resolution included Bolivia, China, Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Russia and Zimbabwe.

An increasing number of human rights abusers are represented in the UN, and they are becoming more cohesive. Voting

blocs such as the so-called “Like-Minded Group,” which accounts for approximately 50 percent of the world’s population and consists of countries such as Cuba, China, Iran, Myanmar, Venezuela, Syria and Zimbabwe, is an example of this political solidarity. Groups like these work together to weaken human rights standards and curtail the UN Security Council’s ability to adopt country-specific approaches to issues on its docket. In October 2022, for example, the UN Human Rights Council – a body made up of 47 countries – voted against even holding a debate on China’s atrocities against ethnic minority groups in the Xinjiang region.<sup>47</sup> As a result of these voting blocs, multilateral institutions have a diminished ability to prevent atrocities from being committed or to address abuses that do occur. This bilateral and multilateral cooperation creates an international environment in which autocrats evade scrutiny, sanctions and condemnation. It also reveals how democracies across the globe often lack the unified message needed to counter autocratic collaboration.

Democratic nations are often more focused on protecting their own democracy than safeguarding it in places where it is in danger of being lost. An example of this trend was the Biden Administration’s “Summit for Democracy” in 2021.

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Although this gathering focused on coordination between established democracies to better address rising authoritarianism, it did not include pro-democracy movements in countries controlled by autocratic regimes. Fortunately, the summit in 2023 did involve these movements. However, in general, their involvement in the international conversation is insufficient. There needs to be an effort by free countries to not only keep the needs of dissidents in mind, but to establish an action-oriented strategy to provide multilateral support to activists. We need to bridge the gap between democratic governments and pro-democracy dissidents to better coordinate internal and external pressure on dictators.

## 9. INTERNAL REPRESSION

I have experienced internal repression, including persecution, incarceration, legal manipulation, character assassination and the killing of fellow dissidents. Over the last year, I have shared experiences with activists from Hong Kong, Russia, Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, Cuba and elsewhere. It has been eye opening to see the similarities in the tactics used for repression, fear and social control. Repression is an increasingly brutal and inhumane tactic used and emulated by autocrats. It includes the use of lethal weapons by security services, technol-

ogy to surveil people and spread disinformation, and arbitrary detentions and arrests of political activists. Although internal repression has been used throughout history for despots to stay in power, it has expanded to include tools given to regimes by other autocrats, from repression equipment provided by China<sup>48</sup> to torture tactics used by Cuba and Russia.<sup>49</sup> Hundreds of thousands of people have perished as a result of this repression, and there has also been a sharp increase in the number of people imprisoned for political reasons. Autocratic countries use similar tactics against their political prisoners.

In May 2015, when I was imprisoned, I went on a hunger strike in hopes of pressuring the regime to set a date for parliamentary elections. The regime did set a date, but not before my hunger strike lasted 28 days. Soon thereafter, six guards were assigned to me. My interactions with them started out routine, but then there was an abrupt shift. Rather than address me by my name, they simply called me “Prisoner 1.” They would also record every interaction with me on video. They started taking away my books, my pens, even my watch. I asked one of them why their behavior had changed. He initially didn’t respond. But a few weeks later, he said that during my hunger strike he had been taken to a



military base, where he was trained by members of the Cuban military on how to treat me. I have since learned from other political prisoners that they had similar experiences, with prison guards in one autocratic country getting guidance from other autocratic countries.

International collaboration for internal repression is clearly observable. When the United States stopped providing Venezuela with hardware that could be used against protesters, Maduro's government found an enthusiastic partner in Beijing; crowd control equipment quickly arrived from China and was brutally employed against demonstrators.<sup>50</sup> Following Alexander Lukashenko's theft of the 2020 election, massive protests broke out across Belarus, threatening Lukashenko's vulnerable position. Putin promptly responded by bestowing \$1.5 billion to the Belarusian regime and announcing that, at Lukashenko's request, he had established a "reserve police force" to intervene if needed.<sup>51</sup>

The similarity in repression techniques used by Daniel Ortega to crack down on protests in 2018 and Maduro for the same purpose the year before makes me look back at this episode and wish we had the opportunity to share our experience with the Nicaraguan opposition. Similarly, today, it is clear that Mad-

uro is using the Ortega playbook to hold an election with limited participation of serious opposition candidates. In 2021, Ortega imprisoned all of his electoral rivals. In Venezuela, it appears likely that for the 2024 election, Maduro will use the same tactic, limiting the registration of any candidate that represents a serious challenge. Fortunately, thanks to the World Liberty Congress, we are in contact with the Nicaraguan opposition and working together to learn from their experiences.

As pro-democracy movements became more active in recent years, autocrats became swifter and more brutal in their responses. In 2019, there were several nonviolent pro-democracy protests across the globe, but few of them led to democratization. I learned from my discussions with other freedom activists at the World Liberty Congress that we have all been subject to similar tactics by autocratic regimes. Many have been unlawfully detained. Nearly all have been branded as spies and terrorists, with fabricated evidence used against them by weaponized legal institutions. One of our founding members, Thulani Maseko from Eswatini, was murdered in his home earlier this year for speaking out against human rights violations. The autocratic network, led by Russia and China, sees freedom movements as their biggest

## MAP 1: MEMBER STATES OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION



**Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization:** China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan

**Source:** Member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Shanghai Cooperation Organization Secretariat, 2022.

threats, which was clear in their bilateral statement in February 2022.<sup>52</sup> This explains the ferocity of their crackdown on these movements, and is another reason why the success rate of non-violent protests has been declining. It is a reminder that while internal movements are critical to progress, the need for these movements to garner external support is only going to grow.

### 10. TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Along with repressing pro-democracy movements and dissent at home, autocratic regimes collaborate to silence dissent abroad. A Freedom House report points out that, “as more countries

fall under the control of nondemocratic governments, authoritarian leaders will gain more willing partners for cross-border persecution,” as “they operate according to a shared set of illiberal values.”<sup>53</sup> This cooperation is facilitated by enhanced surveillance and monitoring capacities. Transnational repression can include assassination attempts, kidnapping plots and extensive physical and online harassment. All this repression has a primary goal: to prevent dissidents from shining a light on the atrocities autocrats commit. According to Freedom House, 36 governments have perpetuated physical acts of transnational repression,<sup>54</sup> with 735 incidents of direct, physical transnational repression between

January 2014 and December 2021.<sup>55</sup> This was a product not only of increased cooperation among autocrats, but also the manner in which they use globalization to their advantage.

I experienced this recently, while on a Zoom call with the Iranian dissident Masih Alinejad and Garry Kasparov. During the call, Alinejad said she had learned from the FBI that a man carrying an AK-47 assault rifle had been outside her home in Brooklyn and that he had been hired by the Iranian regime to murder her.<sup>56</sup> Previously, the Iranian authorities had allegedly plotted to kidnap Alinejad, take her to Venezuela and then fly her to Tehran. Another example is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, led by Russia and China and including most central Asian countries. According to political scientist Alexander Cooley, the SCO “maintains a common blacklist of individuals and organizations under the auspices of its regional antiterrorism structure.”<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Russian and Chinese law enforcement cooperate in the arrest and persecution of their pro-democracy enemies.<sup>58</sup>

By taking advantage of the autocratic network, autocrats have become more effective in their transnational repression of dissidents. Furthermore, by leveraging fraudulent accusations of terrorism,

dictators have been able to frighten other countries into facilitating their return to their respective countries, with some even granting extradition despite little evidence to back the claims against dissidents.

## 11. KILLING DEMOCRACY FROM WITHIN

Autocrats utilize state tools to retain power and repress those who speak out against them. This practice has become prevalent in the digital realm, where autocrats have enacted legislation that permits monitoring and curtailing online activity. They also amend constitutions, pack courts with friendly judges and curtail the rights of their citizens. By weaponizing state institutions, the rule of law is broken, and the systems meant to maintain checks and balances on those in power are weakened or even obsolete. In many cases, laws and institutions are amended to fit the needs of an authoritarian agenda, manufacturing vague statutes related to criminality and security designed to isolate dissidents and maintain a tight grip on power.

These tools are often used to silence the press and repress political opposition. This makes it challenging for opposition movements and leaders to organize, given that autocratic regimes can fast-

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track legislation deeming them terrorist groups. Furthermore, it makes democratic countries less willing to pressure these regimes because the repression of dissent occurs under a veneer of constitutionality. In this way, autocrats leave little leeway for both domestic opposition to organize and international condemnation to function. Although this may not seem like autocratic collaboration, it comes directly from the autocratic playbook – an implicit step-by-step guide on how to erode democratic norms and institutions. The playbook's danger lies in its transnational capability, as it is not limited by ideology.

Democracy does not disappear overnight; it is typically a gradual process. I served as the mayor of a Caracas municipality from 2000-2008. But when I set my sights on higher office, the government disqualified me. Next, I was censored, and banned from the national media. Later, the regime put me under surveillance, people around me were arrested and I was arrested and sentenced to 14 years in prison.

## THE PATH FORWARD

The path forward is strewn with challenges, but progress depends on understanding precisely what is at stake. The world's autocrats are determined to

crush democracy, both in the countries they rule and throughout the world. They are playing hardball, and the world's democracies need to do the same. For now, the autocrats are winning. Progress is going to depend on collaboration among pro-democracy movements in countries under autocratic control, as well as support from democratic governments, international democracy advocates, companies, and many more.

There is much to be done, but I want to highlight a few critical actions as a starting point.

### 1. BUILDING AN ALLIANCE: FREEDOM SOCIETY

An alliance of democracy defenders is needed to counter the autocratic network. Its focus needs to be promoting political change, and it must be built around free and fair elections, respect for the rule of law, protection of human rights, and the restoration of democracy. The recent World Liberty Congress (WLC) was an important step in building this alliance. As a non-ideological alliance, the WLC has created a global network of democracy defenders that transcends cultural, religious and ideological differences, and has a clear goal: to unite pro-democracy movements for a more free and democratic future.

In addition to the activists who are willing to risk their lives and freedom in the pursuit of democracy within authoritarian states, this coalition for democracy must include organizations, governments, philanthropists, and experts who are unapologetic and unwavering in their support. This concept was previously mentioned as a “freedom society.” Members of this freedom society are political, but they are not bound ideologically. They, unlike the network of dictators that oppose them, are bound by a shared set of values. Whereas dictators unite to foster impunity for their crimes, the freedom society is cemented by a common belief that democracy is a precondition for freedom and human dignity. A government which kills and maims its citizens for the preservation of its corrupt power is illegitimate and must be resisted. Thus, a freedom society transcends differences in religion or opinions on policy. It is a group of people who demand democracy and freedom not only for their own countries, but for all peoples around the world.

## 2. STRENGTHENING NON-VIOLENT PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVISM

Autocrats fear democracy movements and demonize them under the framing of color revolutions. They fear them because they fear the power of the peo-

ple. The fundamental element of any transition to democracy is organization, communication and advocacy to secure democratic change. That depends on having people who can train others in the different dimensions of activism. This includes community organizing, but also the capacities and tools required to protest and mobilize people against autocratic regimes, drawing on lessons from historic and recent non-violent protests. To do so, we must rethink our approach to organizing on the streets by learning from our shared experiences. According to the Atlantic Council’s report, *Fostering a Fourth Democratic Wave*, community organizing and training are critical for forming cohesive, transnational fronts to confront autocracy.<sup>59</sup> With this in mind, the World Liberty Congress recently launched the Freedom Academy (FA). The program will initially train pro-democracy activists from across Africa, Latin America and Asia on non-violent methods of resistance. The FA’s goal is to train 1 million people in the next five years.

## 3. TARGETED SANCTIONS AND DISMANTLING THE KLEPTOCRATIC NETWORK

A kleptocratic network underpins the world’s autocracies. The inner workings of this network need to be exposed,

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along with the entities that enable it. It requires naming and shaming, while coordinating sanctions in a strategic, multilateral manner that reaches enablers within democratic countries and impedes them from assisting autocrats. Democratic countries should regularly publish studies about transnational kleptocracy and how corrupt money flows through their financial systems.

The discussion around sanctions shouldn't be about whether or not we use them, but rather how to make them more effective. Investing in capacity building in how to make sanctions more effective should be a priority of democratic governments. In 2019, internal and international pressure against Maduro was building up. At the time, I was under house arrest and had first hand experience in talking with military, police and high level political members of the Maduro inner circle who wanted to take steps to remove the regime. In these conversations, I always asked why they had decided to act against Maduro. After mentioning the dire situation of the country, they all revealed that one of their main motivations was the pressure imposed on them, their families and relatives through international sanctions. Sanctions can be used as a means to change behavior or allegiances if they are strategically imposed. In my conversations

with activists opposing autocrats, I have not encountered one person who is not in agreement about the importance of identifying and sanctioning corrupt individuals and human rights violators.

Sanctions should take into account the complex web that sustains dictatorships. Instead of "blanket" sanctions that broadly target a nation's economic assets, they should instead target the enablers – the companies, individuals and kleptocratic networks that operate in autocratic states. In the United States, Magnitsky legislation was a breakthrough, allowing for the targeting of corrupt individuals by freezing overseas assets and restricting travel.<sup>60</sup> Kleptocracy is not about ideology; it is about the theft of public funds for private gain. We must continue to explore ways to target the autocratic network and more effectively levy sanctions.

## 4. SUPPORT FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The plight of the world's political prisoners has gone largely unnoticed by the international community. According to the US State Department, there are currently more than a million political prisoners around the world.<sup>61</sup> These people have been imprisoned for expressing opposition to brutal regimes. The vast majority of them remain nameless. Highlighting



Activist waving Ukrainian flag at pro-Ukraine demonstration in Tallinn, Estonia. Source: LeStudio/Shutterstock.

the imprisonment of innocent people living under autocratic regimes can help rally support for their freedom. Creating a common playbook for how to better advocate for the release of political prisoners and supporting their families and relatives is necessary.

## 5. ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The struggle for democracy needs to include the private sector. We have seen the consequences of tying the economies of free nations to autocratic ones like Russia and China. The war in Ukraine demonstrated the danger of European dependence on Russian gas. We have also seen how investment under the environmental, social, governance (ESG) criteria has channeled trillions of dollars into projects that might not otherwise have attracted significant capital. However, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which were approved in

2015 and help shape ESG investment, make absolutely no mention of human rights, democracy, the rule of law, or freedom. There is only one mention of transparency, in a footnote. The reason is simple; the Sustainable Development Goals were approved with the votes of many autocratic regimes who used their influence in the UN to ensure that human rights principles were not part of the “sustainable future” SDG seeks to create. For that reason, I propose the inclusion of an “F” for freedom in the ESG framework. This will guide investment to promote pro-democracy initiatives in sectors such as communications, secure internet and access to financial services.

It is also important to make consumers aware that some of the goods and services they are consuming were manufactured or extracted by autocratic regimes. For example, in Xinjiang, the slave labor of Uyghurs is involved in the

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production of many consumer goods.<sup>62</sup> Corporations that operate in autocratic countries should be exposed for their complicity in human rights violations. In China, their economic activity is instrumental in propping up the regime of Xi Jinping, and U.S. consumers and investors should be aware of that reality.

## 6. REPOSITION INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The value of international institutions in promoting democracy and human rights is called into question when China and Russia exercise so much power within international bodies. The ascension of Russia to the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council was the most recent example of autocrats using the institution to legitimize their violations of human rights and international law. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov unsurprisingly used his position at the Security Council to espouse Putin's rhetoric related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, blaming U.S. and NATO "aggression" for the war. Lavrov also appealed to Asian, Latin American and African countries to gain international sympathy. Putin's envoy alleged that the United States and its allies were attempting to prop up a "racist regime" in Kyiv to "eliminate competitors" on the international stage. The fact that Lavrov presided over a meeting

titled, "Defense of the Principles of the UN Charter" was an insult to the people of Ukraine who are bravely resisting Russian aggression.

Another recent example of the deliberate undermining of the UN Charter is the appointment of Iran to a leadership role within the Human Rights Council Social Forum. The Iranian ambassador will preside over a meeting titled "Technology and the Promotion of Human Rights." Hillel Neuer, head of UN Watch, pointed out that "Iran just hanged Yousef Mehrad and Sadrollah Fazeli Zare for using social media to criticize religion."<sup>63</sup> These flagrant attacks on the integrity of international organizations cannot be allowed to continue. The UN has increasingly become a tool for the legitimization of despots and killers.

Democratic nations need to explore how they can make these institutions more effective, or focus their energies on other institutions where there is a united front against autocracy, such as the International Criminal Court. Democratic movements and countries have been losing ground to autocrats for years. Among the many reasons why, one stands out: autocrats play by a different set of rules, developing mechanisms that circumvent existing norms and institutions designed to safeguard freedom across the globe.



## 7. ACCESS TO INTERNET AND SMART-PHONES

Autocratic systems are closed societies. Dictators spend much effort restricting outside information to prevent any challenges to the official narrative of the regime. Dictatorship is far more difficult to maintain with a well-informed populace. Restrictions on the free flow of information constitute an enormous challenge for democracy advocates. To mobilize large numbers of people for demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, activist leaders need uncensored and widespread methods of communication that circumvent the control of autocrats. Access to affordable and uncensored internet in autocratic countries should be a priority. Technology like Starlink exists and it is a matter of making it widely available. Also a program to distribute affordable smartphones in autocratic countries is a practical way to achieve this. It would assist not only in effective communications and combating misinformation, but also assure access to services that could be provided directly.

## 8. INNOVATIVE FINANCIAL SUPPORT

We must use new technologies to move resources into autocratic countries without the surveillance of dictators. That should involve the use of financial tech-

nologies to transfer resources to activists. Autocratic regimes limit the activity of NGOs by controlling their access to external financing. Providing reliable financial support is critical for democratic movements' success, so new methods of financing that circumvent the financial systems of autocrats are required.

Bitcoin/Lightning and other financial technologies present a real opportunity to provide direct, unmediated support to the activists who need it most. Blockchain technology allows for transactions without the interference or monitoring of corrupt financial systems managed by autocrats. Donations go straight to the beneficiary without intermediaries.<sup>64</sup> Bitcoin and crypto adoption rates are higher in places where there is high inflation and restrictions in the financial sectors and these two conditions are mostly present in autocratic countries.

## 9. WINNING THE NARRATIVE

Dictators have invested heavily in misinformation campaigns. According to the Oxford Internet Institute, 81 governments have used social media in campaigns to spread disinformation, often in coordination with Moscow and Beijing.<sup>65</sup> Authoritarian regimes benefit from using digital platforms to sow confusion among their citizens, especially in regards to dividing

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their opposition. They also benefit from spreading lies about the nature of this struggle, and perpetuate the myth that what happens in Venezuela or Belarus is not the business of other nations. They seek to create a state of quietism where the international community is indifferent to authoritarianism. It is our duty to awaken and mobilize not only those suffering under the boot of dictators, but also those living within democratic countries. A violation of human rights anywhere is a violation of human rights everywhere.

The battle is between truth and falsehood, freedom and bondage. It is widespread globally, and under autocratic regimes truth, facts and alternative narratives have very narrow windows that must be widened.

Dictators rely on terror, extortion, and weapons to maintain control. Their only motivations are to expand their influence and enrich themselves from their positions of power. Their opponents have a much more powerful rhetoric: human emancipation, liberty and justice. Wherever and as often as possible, we must repeat our mission to anyone who will listen, and pioneer new ways to do so in the digital age.

## 10. MARKETPLACE FOR SUPPORTERS AND DEFENDERS OF DEMOCRACY

Civil society organizations have been under siege in autocratic nations, where regimes restrict their activities, persecute their members, and undermine their ability to secure funding from abroad. The Putin regime, for example, has branded civil society organizations unfriendly to the government as “foreign agents.”<sup>66</sup> The foreign agents law has been used to virtually erase civil society in Russia, with 65 organizations banned since 2015.<sup>67</sup>

As autocrats develop new ways to silence dissent and work together to limit the activities of their opponents, human rights and democracy defenders must reanalyze their approach.

*“Just continuing, or slightly expanding, existing organizations and approaches is not enough. Our tragic moment calls for bold ideas, not incrementalism.”<sup>68</sup>*

In his American Purpose article, Michael McFaul introduces the concept of an International Platform for Freedom (IPF). This would take the form of a multi-functional website which connects those seeking democracy assistance with the donors, organizations, professors, and governments who are able to provide it. The platform would organize the funding data into searchable categories based on project types, targeted countries,

grant sizes, and other variables to assist NGOs in finding suitable funding opportunities. It would also reduce transaction costs between donors and recipients. In addition to financial support, IPF could provide pro-bono legal support, technical assistance, and training programs. The goal is to streamline the NGO's ability to provide assistance, making it easier not only for organizations to find causes to support, but also for activists and those on the frontlines to articulate their needs. These kinds of innovations to the democracy support ecosystem are necessary to circumvent the restrictions and repression employed by autocrats.

## CONCLUSION: AN ALLIANCE FOR FREEDOM

A starting point for global democratic change must be an international alliance among activists throughout the world campaigning against autocracy in their home countries. We face many of the same challenges, and we can learn from each other. We can teach others about different dimensions of grassroots activism, and how to leverage modern technologies in the struggle for democracy. We also need to highlight the pro-democracy activists who have been unjustly imprisoned. Their plight needs to be publicized, which will help shine a light on

the tactics used by autocratic regimes. Cuba, for example, imprisons people based on a perceived risk of "dangerousness."<sup>69</sup> Renewed efforts must be made to liberate these prisoners, and alliance members can share experience about what has worked in their countries. We also need to showcase how kleptocratic networks function. Highlighting tactics like these will help foster understanding of the network's reach and magnitude. Understanding the network, while naming and shaming those who participate in it, will be fundamental in dismantling it.

A union of pro-democracy leaders can become a valuable source of information about shared struggles. However, this alliance of dissidents must also count on the enthusiastic support of civil society, philanthropic organizations and democratic governments that recognize that it is in their interest to embolden those who fight for liberty. Free nations must regard this struggle as central to their foreign policy, and should not be timid in opposing human rights violations and dictatorship.

How can this be done? How can pro-democracy leaders set aside their differences and come together to confront the challenges they face? We must begin by identifying what bands us together, not what separates us. We must understand

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that when fighting for democracy, ideological rifts are counterproductive. The fight for freedom in Ukraine presents a clear example of how to organize. Although there are ideological differences within the democratic world, much of the international community quickly rallied to aid Ukraine. Businesses from across the globe also acted with a decisiveness that was previously unfathomable, calling out the tyranny and imperialist ambitions of Vladimir Putin.

**“To confront these regimes, we must present a united front that includes democratic governments, international institutions and pro-democracy activists.”**

Russia has received support from many nations, which is a reminder that when pro-democracy activists on the ground are confronting a regime, they face an alliance that is well-equipped and well-funded. Thus, to confront these regimes, we must present a united front that includes democratic governments, international institutions and pro-democracy activists. All too often, pro-democracy movements do not share information. We do not cooperate. We do not support each other. We constantly seek reasons not to unite. As a result, pro-democracy movements across the globe

are disjointed and vulnerable. Despite the differences in cultures and ideologies, we all believe in free and fair elections, respect for the rule of law, respect for human rights and the restoration or establishment of democracy. And we believe in achieving these objectives through the same means: by the power of the people.

If our freedom alliance succeeds, we can roll back the gains that autocrats have achieved over the past two decades and restore the freedoms and human rights that people deserve throughout the world. But until we begin to see progress, autocratic regimes will take control of more countries and impose their dictatorial agendas on more people.



Venezuelan citizens gather in peaceful protest near the Justice Palace in Maracaibo, Venezuela. Source: Wikimedia Commons, February 18, 2014.

## ENDNOTES

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Leopoldo López is a public policy fellow at the Wilson Center, a Venezuelan opposition leader and pro-democracy activist. He founded the Venezuelan opposition party Voluntad Popular, and served as mayor of the Chacao municipality in Caracas.

In 2014, López was arrested on trumped-up charges for leading peaceful, nationwide protests denouncing Nicolás Maduro's regime. After a 19-month show trial, he was sentenced to nearly 14 years in prison.

He spent the first four years in solitary confinement in a military prison. He was subsequently placed under house arrest as a result of international pressure and outrage within Venezuela. Amnesty International named him a prisoner of conscience in 2015. López escaped house arrest and was hosted at the Spanish embassy in Caracas.


After a daring escape from Venezuela in October 2020, López was reunited with his family in Spain, where he now lives in exile.

Today, he continues to be a leading voice in calling for democracy not only in Venezuela, but also across the globe. López strongly believes that the World Liberty Congress will be instrumental in unifying pro-democracy and human rights activists to combat the global trend toward authoritarianism.





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