

Statement of Tom Malinowski
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
May 8, 2025

Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, thank you for having me back today.

Before getting to the urgent matters at hand, I want to make sure we remember why this topic matters. For decades now, one of the few issues Democrats and Republicans have agreed on is that the United States of America is not just a bunch of people defending a piece of land; it is a nation defined by ideals of freedom and human rights that we defend at home and advance throughout the world.

When crowds of freedom loving people breached the Berlin Wall in 1989, when a brave young man in China stopped a column of tanks sent to kill pro-democracy protestors, when young women in Iran and Afghanistan said they wanted to be treated like human beings not property, when people in Venezuela rose up to demand the right to choose their leaders in free and fair elections, we might have debated what policies to pursue to help them. But there was never any question among us in this room that America was supposed to be on their side.

We understood that supporting human rights and freedom is the right thing to do. And we learned that standing for principles that are universally attractive in the world confers on the United States an enormous comparative advantage over our cynical and nihilistic authoritarian adversaries — an advantage we would have to be crazy to surrender.

For this reason, Congress has for decades passed law after law to make human rights a priority in American foreign policy. Congress restricted arms sales and military aid to abusive governments. It empowered presidents to impose sanctions on foreign officials responsible for human rights abuses and corruption — you and I teamed up on a lot of those bills when I was in the House Madam Chairwoman. Congress required the State Department to issue annual reports on human rights in every country in the world, so that our government would at least speak honestly about how their people are treated, even if our diplomats wanted to be chummy with their leaders. It created a family of broadcasting organizations like Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Asia to penetrate closed societies with uncensored news. It appropriated funds to monitor elections, investigate atrocities, and support human rights and democracy activists challenging authoritarian regimes, and created institutions like the National Endowment for Democracy to manage them. Congress actually increased that funding several times over during the last Trump administration. It also adopted multiple bills to advance democracy in specific countries — just this week, for example, you all passed my dear friend Congressman Wilson's legislation in support of democracy in Georgia.

It was also Congress that created the democracy and human rights bureau at the State Department (or DRL), as well as offices to defend religious freedom and to fight human

trafficking. Congress created DRL for two main reasons — number one, to ensure that the laws it had passed would be implemented and that the funds it appropriated would be effectively spent — in that sense, when I ran the bureau I felt that I reported to Congress as to the president and the Secretary of State. And number two, so there would be an independent voice for strong democracy and human rights policies inside the State Department. This was vital because the natural tendency of diplomats responsible for managing our day to day relationships with foreign governments is to avoid friction on sensitive issues like human rights. Having a DRL bureau ensures that when there is tension between defending liberty and some other U.S national interest, the Secretary of State will at least hear competing views from officials of equivalent stature and rank, and can make a fully informed decision.

I understand that the Committee is interested in how this system for promoting human rights and freedom, which the Congress created and the State Department implements, can be improved. Do we have the right priorities? Could there be a better organizational structure? Those are perfectly fair questions. But the most important point I want to make to you today is that those are not the most pressing questions for today. The question for right now is whether this mission of our government will survive at all. For even as we speak, the administration is racing to eliminate it.

We've seen the State Department submit a sworn statement in court promising to end all grants supporting what it referred to as "regime change, civic society, and democracy promotion" — not some, but all — and please note here the Department's use of the phrase "regime change," which is normally how dictatorships like China and Russia slander America's support for human rights around the world, not how we talk about ourselves.

And in fact, the Department has followed through on that pledge. The work it was doing to champion democracy and anti-corruption in Russia — all that is finished. Key programs backing activists in countries like China, Iran, and Venezuela, and countering Chinese influence in Africa, have been terminated. I mentioned Congressman Wilson's Georgia democracy bill earlier, and noticed that every Republican member of this subcommittee voted for it, so I assume you all don't think that's a "woke" priority. Yet the State Department has canceled all of the support for Georgian civic groups that your legislation calls for.

A vital program of small emergency grants that DRL used to help activists at immediate risk of being arrested or killed get to safety has been ended. Election observation missions have been defunded. The key organizations that implemented these American programs, like Freedom House, the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute, have been blacklisted and publicly disparaged (even though Secretary of State Rubio was himself on the board of the International Republican Institute).

And while some democracy programs have survived a first round of review, the president's FY '26 budget proposal looks like it would finish them off completely as part of an 83% cut to foreign assistance — again, to be clear, that would mean no more American support for people challenging authoritarian regimes from China to Iran to Cuba to North Korea.

The administration is also trying to defund the broadcasting agencies delivering uncensored news to people living in dictatorships — despite the bipartisan support they enjoy in Congress. This would be a huge gift to Putin, to Xi Jinping, and to all of our authoritarian adversaries.

We're seeing few if any public statements from Secretary Rubio or the Department for political prisoners, for freedom of expression, or for free elections anywhere in the world — the main exception seem to be relentless advocacy for the neo-Nazi party in Germany and for Afrikaners in South Africa, which communicates a disturbing message of its own.

The State Department has said it is narrowing the focus of its annual human rights reports to the bare minimum required by law, which is a way of saying they'd rather not do them at all — and it's subjecting chapters on dictatorships with which President Trump has wanted to improve relations to unprecedented political scrutiny.

On top of that, Secretary Rubio has said he wants to move all the DRL staff whose job is to influence our policies towards authoritarian countries into the Department's regional bureaus, where their voices will be muted, and which raises the question of what DRL would have left to do, if stripped of its funding and its policy functions.

Madam chairwoman, one reason I find all this so bewildering is that when I was Assistant Secretary for DRL, no member of Congress was more interested in our work than Senator Marco Rubio, because he was genuinely and passionately committed to the cause of freedom everywhere. Had I proposed any of the things his Department is now doing to retreat from that mission, and to eviscerate DRL's human rights and democracy reporting, assistance, and policy functions, he would have demanded my resignation, and rightly so. Yet here we are.

So, again, I would say that the issue of the moment is not how to fix DRL. You can't reorganize the number zero. There has to be something still there to fix for that discussion to be meaningful.

It's essential now for members of Congress of both parties who care about defending human rights and freedom in the world — even if you have disagreements about how best to do it — to insist that the State Department stay in the fight. You can't make administration officials believe in something they clearly don't care about. But you can preserve the institutions and programs that you believe in and that continue to serve America well.

There are things you can do in an authorization bill, such as protecting DRL's policy responsibilities, the staff and authority it needs to implement laws adopted by Congress, and the integrity of the annual human rights reports.

There's more you can do through appropriations — to maintain support for the activists fighting oppression and corruption in dictatorships around the world, and for international broadcasting, though direct allocations to the entities doing the work if the State Department continues to express disinterest in supporting it.

But since authorization and appropriations bills take time, we also need your voices to be raised now against what can only be called an attempt to end America's bipartisan tradition of defending human rights and freedom in the world. Speak out now, before it's too late. And then we can have a healthy debate about how to do the work better.