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**Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Hearing, "Spread Freedom, Not Woke
Values: An American Agenda for Democracy and Human Rights"**

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Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for asking me to testify before this Subcommittee on the critical need to reauthorize the Department of State, including programs and assistance related to democracy. My testimony will primarily focus on the efforts and jurisdiction which formerly fell under the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) and that were funded through the Democracy Fund and the Economic Support Fund; however, my testimony will also address efforts covered by State Department and USAID outside of DRL, including those countering the People's Republic of China (PRC) and other authoritarian threats, and programs promoting stabilization.

I would like to begin by applauding the Full Committee and this Subcommittee, and notably Chairman Mast, for the rigorous oversight, review, and reconsideration of U.S. foreign assistance. The Chairman's leadership has exposed misspent dollars, enhanced accountability, and ensured that programs pointed externally remain on-point and continue to be an effective soft-diplomacy tool, one that is aligned with diplomatic strategy, and one that complements military strength, statecraft, economic investment, and humanitarian aid.

As Vice President for Strategy, Innovation, and Impact at the International Republican Institute (IRI), I will focus mainly on democracy programming, particularly through DRL, which I testify contributes to American security and prosperity. When executed smartly and correctly, investments in democracy foster resilient societies abroad that align with U.S. values, reject terrorism, and resist authoritarian influence from adversaries like the PRC, Russia, Iran, and Cuba. Programs, when aligned with American values and implemented cost-efficiently, also reduce conflict, mitigate migration pressures, and promote transparent markets that drive U.S. trade and investment.

Three decades ago, the United States played a pivotal role in supporting democratic transformations in former Soviet-bloc nations across Europe. We helped establish free elections, revitalize long-dormant parliaments, and guide the shift from single-party rule to vibrant multiparty systems. We empowered citizens to form new political parties, strengthened judicial frameworks to ensure credibility, and supported non-state-controlled media in exposing the realities of communist regimes. While some bloc countries swiftly embraced democracy, others faced prolonged transitions or setbacks requiring longer-term forms of assistance.

Ultimately, most countries broke free from Soviet influence and emerged as steadfast U.S. allies. U.S.-funded democracy programs, including from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) – along with international broadcasting – served as critical soft-power instruments in fostering Europe’s democratic opening. Today, nations like Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Albania, and Romania stand as vital NATO partners, collaborating to counter terrorism, resist authoritarianism, and prevent conflicts that could involve the U.S. and take the lives of our citizens. These countries are also key economic partners, hosting American investments, engaging in robust trade, and embracing U.S. culture and values.

Poland alone, for example, conducted approximately \$24 billion in trade with the U.S. last year. If someone asks today whether helping Poland in the early 1990s was worth the investment by U.S. taxpayers, it would be impossible to say no. Does every country we invest in with democracy programs turn out to be Poland? Of course not. But not every place where we apply military might, or leverage capitalization, or apply sanctions or tariffs, or where we counter narcotics, turns out well. There are no sure bets. However, keeping tools in your toolbox, especially those that are effective and constitute relatively small investments, is a wise way to protect and advance American interests in today’s volatile world. Democracy assistance is one such tool, albeit one that we must sharpen and reorient back to the way it was designed to be wielded. This is why reauthorization is important.

In 2025, supporting democracy abroad is more complex than it was in the mid-1990s. The U.S. faces diverse threats: authoritarian regimes hostile to America compromise our borders, fuel drug trafficking and crime, attack allies, and engage in unconventional warfare, including cyberattacks. Kleptocratic states like Venezuela drive mass migration to our borders and those of our allies. Theocratic regimes like those ruling Iran, and terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, destabilize regions, kill allies, and pull the U.S. into costly conflicts that raise deficits and claim American

lives. Anarchic and destabilized regions rife with coups and warlords generate human rights abuses, waste precious minerals, and exacerbate migration. Italy's struggle with securing its border speaks to the governance and security challenges driving migration from northern Africa, for example. Nations with next to no freedoms and weak rule of law like Cuba and Belarus, for example, serve as safe havens for anti-American activity as well as illicit crime which then affect American families. Democracy programming should be available as a tool to counter these threats.

China is the preeminent challenge to the United States, and one that requires soft-power tools that democracy programs can offer to counter. As a powerful authoritarian state, China engages in cyber espionage, intellectual property theft, and influence operations that threaten U.S. national security. The PRC's territorial ambitions, particularly in the South China Sea and toward Taiwan, strain relations with allies and risk broader conflict. Like kleptocracies, China's economic coercion and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) create dependencies in less free nations, fostering environments where organized crime and illicit trade can thrive. While not a theocracy, China's suppression of dissent and control over information parallel theocratic regimes' tactics, undermining global democratic norms. These actions, combined with its global economic influence, make China a multifaceted challenge, amplifying the costs and risks for American families and businesses, and complicating democratization worldwide. Democracy programming is used to counter these actions - not exclusively, but in ways that complement other U.S. investments, such as the Development Finance Corporation.

Chairman Mast has led the campaign to call out waste in State Department democracy programs: Drag shows in Ecuador, transgender job fairs, atheism promotion in Nepal. Even before these examples were highlighted last year, true believers in democracy assistance had noted many failures where the United States misused finite taxpayer resources or executed poorly.

- In Pakistan, the State Department was investing in gender-focused initiatives instead of helping the country reform its electoral process.
- In Myanmar, overly broad program designs failed to adapt to the 2021 military coup, limiting support for pro-democracy movements.
- In Bolivia, U.S. government initiatives struggled with slow fund disbursement, delaying support for electoral reforms following the 2019 general elections.

- And for years in Uganda, State Department programs in the early 2010s prioritized broad human rights campaigns that alienated local stakeholders due to cultural disconnects – we saw this play out in 2023.

However, I would submit that there are many more programs which *have not* been critically flawed or administered problematically – and that *do benefit* the United States:

- In Kenya, State Department programs have strengthened electoral integrity, ensuring peaceful transitions in 2017 and 2022, stabilizing a key counterterrorism partner.
- Initiatives in Mongolia have empowered civil society and sustained an important democracy situated between Russia and China. In fact, U.S. funding helped Mongolia build a parliament from scratch.
- In Timor-Leste, State Department-supported projects organized elections, promoted human rights and civic participation, and facilitated peace talks, aiding the young nation’s democratic consolidation since its 2002 independence.
- In Belarus, DRL programs have provided secure communication tools to activists, sustaining resistance against Russia-backed repression.
- In the Dominican Republic, the State Department and USAID enhanced electoral transparency and civil society engagement, contributing to democratic stability in what was once a turbulent Caribbean nation.
- In Iran, State and NED initiatives have trained activists to document human rights abuses, fostering international pressure against the regime. The U.S. has this data on Iran because we support those who not only obtain it but also use it to inform the world.
- In Colombia, DRL and USAID projects, as a complement within Plan Colombia, bolstered many facets of the democratic framework in a country that today has a \$40 billion trade relationship with the United States. Despite challenges in 2025 under mismanagement and socialist aspirations of President Gustavo Petro, our past investments into democracy, human rights, and rule of law have enabled Colombians to withstand pressures that, for example, Venezuelans could not withstand when Hugo Chávez took control two-and-a-half decades ago.

Even democracy programming in regime states like Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua has been worth the investment, despite dictatorships still ruling in Havana, Caracas, and Managua. In these countries, as the Chairwoman knows, we have supported

networks of dissidents that put pressure on the regimes. We see this in Cuba right now, and we witnessed it with the elections last year in Venezuela which should have displaced Maduro. These are not regime-change programs, but initiatives that cultivate democratic values and infrastructure, and lay the groundwork for eventual political transformation when opportunities arrive. The support is based on locally-driven aspirations and requests for help to counter tyranny. Yesterday at IRI, María Corina Machado of Venezuela, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya of Belarus, and Ji Seongho – a defector from North Korea and formerly a South Korean member of parliament – all spoke about the importance of U.S. and international support to their pro-democracy work that will one day bring about democratic change in their countries.

For those who question the return on investment in supporting those who fight regimes that seem unbeatable, I would draw their attention to the case of South Africa. In the 1990s, U.S. and NED support helped those trying to end apartheid and gain universal suffrage for 17 million black South Africans. Do all of us today like what the African National Congress (ANC) has done and become? – personally, I do not. However, South Africa’s system is freer and fairer than it was under an authoritarian and racist government and the country has functioning institutions.

Further to how modest U.S. support benefited American taxpayers: the end of apartheid contributed to containing the Soviet Union and enabling what is today a healthy trade relationship which creates jobs and wealth in the United States. Is that not a return on investment, and one that ultimately made the U.S. more secure and more prosperous?

I would like to now turn to China. To compete and win against the PRC, we need a multifaceted approach. While military readiness is paramount, as evidenced by the Administration’s intended, increased defense budget, democracy programs are critical to countering Chinese influence in democratic governance. Countering PRC influence requires us to essentially reverse engineer the ways China exerts control by implementing cost-effective programs that deliver for the American taxpayer by training political parties to be responsive to citizens and not foreign masters; helping legislatures understand the costs of predatory loans; helping local civic actors keep politicians honest in the face of Chinese inducements; helping governments understand the risks of Huawei 5G; and helping students seeking accountable democratic rule, among other critical areas.

In Taiwan, DRL-funded initiatives have exposed the PRC’s meddling in elections. In Sri Lanka, assistance from State and NED has supported civil society scrutiny of Chinese

port deals, promoting transparency. Next week, IRI will be in Ecuador, helping local organizations and journalists channel their efforts to tell Ecuadorians about the PRC's exploitative business model that robs the country's citizens. Our work in Ecuador is a NED project – it is not woke; it is what I believe most Americans would support.

Madam Chairwoman, I am not here to defend DRL, USAID, or programs from any Administration. Somewhere along the line, though – and especially during the Biden Administration – these programs moved beyond what Congress envisioned democracy programs to do overseas. In my opinion, however, throwing out democracy programs as a statecraft tool is a grave mistake.

Failing to reauthorize the Department of State, including DRL programs, the Democracy Fund, and Economic Support Fund, risks ceding ground to adversaries who exploit democratic weaknesses and undermine American interests. Eliminating the National Endowment for Democracy from our toolbox does the same.

To ensure DRL and related State Department programs deliver maximum impact, I urge the Subcommittee to reauthorize these efforts with the following priorities:

1. Enhance transparency through regular audits, public reporting, and clear metrics. The Subcommittee's oversight model should guide this, ensuring taxpayer dollars deliver and that there is no harm done to Americans at home, including by censorship programs. In maximizing transparency for the purposes of oversight, we need to do so without harming those who live in autocratic states and receive support, like partners in Iran or Venezuela.
2. Improve how U.S.-funded programs are designed, implemented, and evaluated for their impact – and shift away from models grounded in practices from the 1990s. Use AI and other advanced tools to better understand the long-term impact of democracy programs on democratic growth.
3. Design programs using an approval threshold of whether they make America more secure and more prosperous. AI tools can help with this.
4. The cause and effect of democracy programs should be clearly defined at the onset and rewarded for success. Retroactive definitions of "what was accomplished" should not substitute for hard analysis of success and failure.
5. Formalize DRL as the lead coordinating body for democracy programming, ending USAID's role to eliminate overlap.
6. Identify ways to better inform State Department senior officials of NED programs. This should include better information sharing between the NED and State on program scope, program successes, and implementation challenges. The NED

should continue operating because, as a nimble and cost-effective entity, it administers and achieves in ways that larger State Department programs cannot.

7. Refocus DRL and Economic Support Fund programs on free elections, strong multi-party political systems, women's involvement in democracy, freedom of non-state-controlled media to operate, religious freedoms, and greater ability for civic groups and individuals to scrutinize and question government activities, just as they are doing here in the United States.
8. Question the point of "localization": *Accomplishing things* is what we want to do, not to say, "We put X% into the hands of locals", like the goal of the last Administration.
9. Finally, create more opportunities for competition and reward organizations for demonstrated results and prudent and accountable management of resources. Discontinue the practice of extending gigantic non-competed awards and contracts. The argument up to now is that non-competed awards save time, but AI should dramatically improve how business is done.

Madam Chairwoman, helping countries become democratic *does* make us safer at home, and *does* open economic opportunities – two outcomes that become less true if dictatorships triumph; if one-party systems like China's prevail; and if regime states like Iran and the Taliban continue to censor their people, harm women and girls, and jail political opponents.

The very institutions we promoted in Europe 40 years ago to counter the Soviets – free elections, multi-party systems, free press, free civil society – are at risk today due to well-resourced campaigns by the anti-American and authoritarian regimes in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Pyongyang to undermine and eradicate the components of democracy that are good for the United States and bad for our adversaries. I ask that you wisely evaluate the cost of eliminating an important tool from our toolbox when you reauthorize the State Department and democracy programming.