

Concluding Remarks: Call to Action<sup>1</sup>  
9<sup>th</sup> Ministerial of the Community of Democracies  
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I would like to begin by thanking the Department of State, and particularly the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, for their devoted work in organizing this meeting. When the Community of Democracies first gathered in Warsaw seventeen years ago, no one could be certain that the Community would continue for very long, not to mention that it would develop and grow now through nine ministerials. Both for its symbolic value and for the work it does in defending and advancing democratic values and practices, the Community of Democracies is very much needed, now more than ever.

It is a difficult time for democracy globally. In fact, I believe that democracy is more challenged now than at any time since the Third Wave of global democratization began in the mid-1970s. We are now in the twelfth year of a global democratic recession. During this period of time, more countries each year have been declining in freedom than have been gaining (as Freedom House has documented). For most of this period, the recession has been subtle and even debatable: average levels of political rights and civil liberties have declined only modestly, and a majority of the world's states, including many of the world's largest emerging markets (such as India, Indonesia, and Brazil) remain clearly democratic.

However, there are many signs that the global democratic recession is deepening. If the mounting negative trends are not addressed, they could converge into a "reverse wave" of democratic breakdowns unlike anything we have seen since the 1960s and early 70s. I would like to note seven trends that require from us close scrutiny and a concerted, collective response.

First, the pace of democratic breakdowns has been accelerating in the last decade. In particular, we are seeing a growing number of silent deaths of democracy. These are not heralded by an overt military or executive declaration seizing power, suspending the constitution and closing down the parliament. Rather they strangle democracy slowly, by gradually eroding checks and balances that constrain the exercise of executive power. The cutting edge of this strategy is the subversion of judicial independence and in particular that of the constitutional court, which gets stacked with loyalists or otherwise neutralized. But the effort also subdues the autonomous power of the legislature and various other oversight agencies and regulatory bodies. Increasingly, power becomes concentrated in the

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<sup>1</sup> This is an extended version of remarks delivered at the conclusion of the Ninth Ministerial of the Community of Democracies

office of the elected president or prime minister. Opposition parties and critical voices in civil society are harassed and victimized. Freedoms of expression, association, and assembly are progressively squeezed, along with the increasingly crucial freedom of the internet. Businesses come to learn that they had better stop funding parties and organizations critical of the government, or they could lose government contracts, licenses, and even the right to operate. Tax and prosecutorial authorities become weapons of the ruling party. Eventually, the constitution may be amended to codify the concentration of power, undermine accountability, and entrench unassailable political and electoral advantages for the ruling party. Without a shot being fired, or one day's lapse in the formal functioning of the constitutional system, the political system goes from being a democracy to an increasingly illiberal and at-risk democracy, and then to being not a democracy at all, but rather a "competitive authoritarian regime."

This playbook was executed rapidly and mercilessly by Vladimir Putin and Hugo Chavez in Russia and Venezuela in the early 2000s. Democratic destruction followed a slower, more cautious trajectory in Turkey after Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party came to power in 2003. But Turkey had crossed the line into authoritarianism well before the sweeping crackdown that crushed all sources of opposition or even independence in the state and civil society following the July 2016 coup attempt. Most disturbingly, this trajectory is now evident within the European Union itself.

One thing we learn from all these cases is that it is vital to call out and condemn these incremental abuses of democratic norms and constraints early on, before an incipient autocrat becomes entrenched. Early resistance and condemnation is needed from democratic actors (from across the spectrum) within these at-risk countries, but it is equally need from the international community. It is easier to stem these authoritarian projects early on than later, when they have compromised and damaged numerous institutions and distorted the information landscape.

Second, I want to underscore the need for special attention to a small set of vulnerable but important post-transition democracies, in particular today, Ukraine and Tunisia. The fate of each of these democracies could have significant implications for the future of democracy within their regions (in the case of Tunisia, far in excess of its small population size relative to the rest of the Arab world). Each of these two democracies is fragile, facing severe economic difficulties, daunting security challenges emanating from neighboring aggression or state failure, and the tenacious persistence of rent-seeking networks that have historically engaged in corruption on a level of state plunder. In their trade, aid, investment and lending policies, the established democracies should bet heavily on the success of these two crucial cases, but not unconditionally. Unconditional aid and debt relief risks perpetuating the patterns of state capture, gross corruption, and abuse of power that undermined political stability in the first place. The message should be: Commit to the comprehensive economic and governance reforms necessary to

attract investment, unleash entrepreneurship, build infrastructure, and create jobs, and we, in the international community, will offer in partnership transformative levels of assistance. Continue on the path of cronyism and corruption, and we will not be able to help you turn the corner. There is of course a broader message here for the aid community about building institutions and incentivizing reforms for sustainable development.

Third, we need to pay focused attention to the increasingly manifest difficulties of the long-established, liberal democracies—and we need to be ready to be self-critical and thus humble in doing so. Increasingly our own democracies are functioning poorly and losing both public confidence and international esteem. The causes are several. Many of the advanced democracies have failed to address the social and economic grievances of working and middle class voters, who have experienced a prolonged period of flat or declining real incomes and growing anxiety about job security, immigration, and rapid social and cultural change. This in turn is fanning political cynicism and political polarization, which (in the age of social media and cable television) is now being intensified by the growing separation of society into isolated spheres of intense, self-reinforcing opinion. In many liberal democracies, a core element of democratic culture—tolerance for and willingness to engage differing points of view—is being eroded. Political beliefs and preferences of voters are being pushed to the extremes by the disappearance of what social scientists call “cross-pressures,” the experience of living and working with—and more importantly, talking to—people with different interests and preferences.

If the domestic processes of social and political polarization and disaffection were not serious enough, we now know that Russia has mobilized a vast network of Internet trolls and robots to manufacture and intensify new and false grounds for citizen doubt, distrust, alienation, and anger. Fake news and organized efforts to manipulate the digital information space to damage the culture and functioning of democracy—and even to tilt its electoral choices—now constitute one of the serious threats to the future of democracy everywhere. It requires a multifaceted, nimble, and far-reaching set of responses to identify, stigmatize, counter, and degrade these multifold efforts at subversion.

Rejuvenating the culture of democracy in all its aspects is an urgent priority for the established democracies. This means going back to basics by reviving civic education—instruction in the norms, information, and skills that constitute effective democratic citizenship—as a core element of primary and especially secondary education. But it also requires new forms of instruction to prepare young people for the captivating but harsh realities of the digital age. Most people in the United States today—not to mention globally—are not well able to distinguish real from fake news and information. There is an orienting approach to the Internet, and a specific set of skills, that could help them to do so. The foundation is not technical but psychological: A healthy skepticism about all assertions, a propensity to question and explore, to demand and seek out evidence. In the specific case of the

Internet, this requires breaking out from the boundaries of a specific post or thread or website, and searching around to investigate empirical claims and seek out alternative points of view. Of course, this requires freedom of the Internet, and a posture from the Internet platforms that does not deliberately plunge the user ever deeper into the downward spiral of reinforcing opinion and political alignment. But it also involves skills and values that can and must be cultivated.

More broadly, democratic humility and self-care requires periodic self-inspection. Political scientists and democracy practitioners have collaborated to develop good tools for assessing the quality and health of democracy. International IDEA has published a handbook for doing a democracy assessment.<sup>2</sup> Civil society, including not least think tanks and foundations, should come together to conduct periodic audits of the health of their democracies.

Fourth, democracies need to gird themselves against a new generation of threats to the single most vital aspect of democracy, the electoral process. We now know that Russian hackers probed and in some cases penetrated the voter registration databases of a number of American states. We do not yet have evidence that they tampered with those registration lists in a consequential way, but there were some disturbing reports of confusion and difficulty in voting. More importantly, in the digital age of hacking and foreign aggression, every digital step in the electoral process may be vulnerable to digital subversion or disruption from a variety of actors, domestic and international, with political or even simply criminal intent. It is imperative that we develop stronger standards and tools to detect and defend against these new threats. And one standard is very simple and widely endorsed by computer scientists who have examined and worried about this issue: Do not ever hold a consequential democratic vote that cannot be audited and verified. In a popular election, this urges particular caution against electronic voting machines, not to mention forms of Internet voting, that do not leave a paper trail or other verifiable means that can enable a recount or audit. One good way of doing so is with paper ballots that can be optically scanned for automatic counting, and then stored for future auditing or recounting. Technical experts in the scientific community stand ready to work with democratic governments, new and old, to ensure that voting systems meet these basic standards of integrity and security.

Fifth, democracies must place a high priority on combatting corruption, particularly on a grand and increasingly internationalized scale. Bad, self-interested, corrupt governance is almost always a leading factor in the decay and demise of democracy, by robbing democracy of the core foundation for its stability—popular legitimacy. It drives citizen alienation from the democratic process—in revulsion against a political class that is seen to only care for its own interests—and a readiness to accept or embrace military or civilian authoritarian alternatives. And it also gives elected leaders, or autocrats waiting in the wings, a

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/assessing-the-quality-of-democracy-a-practical-guide.pdf>.

powerful incentive to seize perpetual control of the state. We need to ramp up vigorous, sustained global efforts to combat corruption and its extreme form, kleptocracy. There is growing analytic consensus on the kinds of laws and institutions that are required. These include:

- Strong, well-resourced, and politically independent domestic institutions of accountability, such as counter-corruption commissions, supreme audit agencies, ombudsmen, and parliamentary investigative committees.
- Requirements for high elected and appointed government officials, including members of parliament, to declare their assets regularly, and to make those declarations available for public scrutiny.
- Transparency in budgeting, contracting, and government expenditures, hopefully reaching down to the local levels.
- Transparency in all aspects of the development, management, and sale of natural resources, especially oil.
- Freedom of information laws, and institutional means to make government information available in ways citizens can readily access and understand.
- Greatly enhanced international efforts to track and identify the flows of ill-gotten assets, to close off a vital link in the modern-day chain of grand corruption: the ability of corrupt officials in one country to launder stolen wealth through offshore havens and anonymous businesses, and then convert it into real estate and other legal assets in the world's richest countries.

We cannot stabilize and secure democracy globally, and defend against its erosion even in the most liberal and developed democracies, if we do not pursue a resolute and smart agenda to fight global corruption. Increasingly, this requires global tools and strategies to fight all links in the chain of corruption, and generous but tough-minded strategies to incentivize the political will to improve the quality of governance.

Sixth, democracies—both the tenuous and less liberal ones, and the liberal democracies long presumed to be stable—are threatened by rising inequality and a sense of social injustice. The challenges that globalization poses to economic equality and social cohesion are too complex to address here, but it needs to be underscored that the only kind of democracy that is sustainable in the long run is one that works to deliver reasonably broad and fair improvements in the lives of its citizens. This requires economic growth but also inclusive growth, with investments in health, education, public infrastructure, and job training that target the poor and the marginalized. Obviously this has to involve development strategies that promote youth and gender inclusion in access to knowledge, capital, and political voice and power.

Seventh, democracies have always faced, but in this era of intense globalization, perhaps now more than ever, the challenge of cultural inclusion as well. As the former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz has stressed on many occasions, the overarching challenge of our times is “governing over diversity.” This means learning not just to respect but to celebrate pluralism. And it requires vigilance against all forms of prejudice and discrimination. Democracies cannot be stable, and they certainly cannot achieve the quality we seek, unless they promote inclusion on racial, ethnic, religious, and other lines of identity cleavage. Given the pace at which people are moving across borders, this will be a growing challenge that we must meet together. And as the Malian Foreign Minister remarked here earlier today, it means not only respecting different religions but supporting moderate and democratic expressions of religion in the battle against extremism.

We hear these days growing pessimism and even despair about the future of democracy. Certainly the global trend in recent years, as I’ve suggested, has been one of eroding freedom and democracy. Commentators say it is now the authoritarian regimes, such as Russia, China, and Iran, that are dynamic and self-confident, while democracies seem mired in polarization and self-doubt.

But this is a very partial view, and a poor guide to the future. All authoritarian regimes face a common institutional weakness and anxiety: The lack of truly durable and reliable foundations of popular legitimacy. We know this, because otherwise they would not need to go to such lengths to prevent their populations from having access to alternative sources of information. Various autocracies may enjoy popular support at one time or another, but since they allow no peaceful and institutional alternative, they face an existential risk: If people lose confidence in them, the whole political edifice is at risk of collapse, not just the government of the day. By contrast, democracies have the intrinsic advantage that they enable people to change the government but keep the constitutional system in place. And if the system is flawed, they enable people to advocate and mobilize to correct it by peaceful and institutional means.

Democracies also have an intrinsic normative advantage. If we look at the evidence from the various regional barometers of attitudes and values, we do not find much popular desire to live under dictatorship. In fact, it is in the poorest and least educated region of the world, Africa, where we find some of the most widespread and even sophisticated popular sentiment in favor of democracy—and not just a democracy in name, but elections with real choice, and government under a rule of law, with real accountability. In a number of countries, the stated preference to live in a democracy may have eroded a bit in recent years. Certainly, trust in political institutions has fallen. But there is no broad *public* desire for authoritarian rule sweeping the world. People want to live in freedom. They want the predictability and elementary justice that comes under a rule of law. They want political choice, and they want their leaders to answer to them. Even when, in frustration and anger, voters opt for authoritarian populist alternatives, it is typically with widespread caveats and divisions, and those populists are hard-

pressed to win even half the vote in subsequent elections, because they abuse power and generally rule quite badly.

One of the core human needs, shared across cultures, is for dignity—or in Arabic, as we heard so often during the Arab Spring, “karama”. People want to be respected and valued, as individuals and as groups. Democracy is the only system of government that provides institutional means to ensure respect for human dignity—by giving individuals power and rights—and to redress grievances and injustices when dignity is violated. It is heartening that we find much evidence of this desire even in very poor countries. But as people become richer and better educated, they become more inclined to want to live in a political system that allows for self-empowerment, individual dignity, and accountability. This is why democracy is not passé, and why we should take pride in being part of an international Community that affirms these universal values and aspirations.