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Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for holding this very timely and important hearing on the importance of U.S. leadership in supporting human rights and democracy in the world. As we know too well, democracy today is being challenged as never before since the end of the Cold War. The crisis has many dimensions, including the rise of ISIS and other terrorist movements; growing illiberalism in Turkey, Hungary, the Philippines and other backsliding democracies; eleven consecutive years of decline in global democracy, as measured by Freedom House; and, most importantly, what the letter of invitation to this hearing calls “resurgent authoritarianism.”

An editorial in *The Washington Post* last June defined resurgent authoritarianism as a modern-day version of the totalitarian threat that Winston Churchill decried in his famous “iron curtain” address in 1946. “No longer is it about communism,” the editorial said, “but rather the rise of despots who rule by force and coercion, from Russia to China, across the Middle East and Central Asia, to Latin America and Africa. In the past decade, these leaders have become more adept — and daring — at building a parallel universe to the liberal democratic order. In their construct, state power reigns supreme, political competition is extinguished, civil society elbowed out, and freedoms of expression, association and belief suppressed. Surprisingly, some of these leaders, particularly in Russia and China, have been wielding a sophisticated and deceptive soft power beyond their borders that is proving more enduring and effective than in the past.”

The Congress, through the appropriations process, has called upon NED to develop a strategic response to this new threat, saying that NED is “uniquely positioned” to do so because of its “decades-long experience working in the most hostile political terrain through the core institutes and its global grants and programs.” Building on work that was already being done through its ongoing grants programs and research activities, in 2016 NED was able to identify and fund start-up programs to address six key strategic challenges:

- The need to strengthen democratic unity in defense of democratic norms and values that are under assault by authoritarian regimes in international institutions as well as in public attitudes;
- The need to foster ethnic and religious pluralism to counter the spread of Islamist and other forms of religious and sectarian extremism;
- The need to help civil-society activists and organizations prevail against the concerted campaign by authoritarian regimes to repress and control them;
- The need to defend the integrity of the information space against efforts by Russia and other authoritarian regimes to use social media and other communications tools to buttress their own power and to divide, demoralize, and even destabilize democratic societies;
- The need to strengthen the capacity for democratic governance so that new and fragile democracies are able to make progress toward democratic consolidation; and
- The need to combat the rise of kleptocracy (or “rule by thieves”) – a new and systemic feature of modern authoritarianism that, due to the way kleptocrats use their illi cit funds internationally, also has the effect of eroding the integrity of institutions in democratic societies, including our own.

NED's strategic grants complement its on-going grants program in some 90 countries, strengthening its response to the formidable and integrated threat posed by the new wave of authoritarianism. We are finding new ways to tie programs together across regions, to stimulate broader international partnerships and coalitions, and to take sometimes isolated innovations and scale them up to a level that makes them more effective.

Remarkably, these programs are reaching brave activists who are fighting for fundamental rights in some of the harshest political environments. These activists include North Korean defectors who are helping to break the information blockade that Pyongyang has used to keep the North Korean people totally isolated.

They include Chinese lawyers who are defending religious freedom and the rule of law against harsh repression that is being urged on by the chief justice of the Supreme Court, who recently called upon provincial judges to "show the sword" against the idea of judicial independence.

They include Cubans who are not only fighting for basic rights and political space, but who are expanding their support networks by organizing around issues of local citizen concern.

They include Venezuelans who, in addition to their continuing programs to defend human rights and reduce political polarization, are tracking food and medical shortages to help coordinate the response of relief agencies to the worsening humanitarian crisis.

They include Iraqi community activists and members of local councils and governments who are implementing start-up efforts to rebuild governance, promote economic development and reconciliation, and build trust at the local level between the community and the security services in the areas liberated from ISIS control.

Not least, they include Russian journalists, human rights defenders, and civic activists, many of whom have been declared "foreign agents" and must defend themselves in court against crippling fines, but who still fight for basic rights and take great risks in exposing the kleptocratic practices of Russia's ruling class.

We recognize, Mr. Chairman, that the battles these activists, and others like them around the world, are fighting will be long and hard. Democracy does not come swiftly or easily. We must recognize that trying to take short-cuts to democracy is as dangerous as relying on autocrats to preserve stability. Either way, we will reap the whirlwind. And we should not forget that even when democracy is eventually achieved, it must be defended with eternal vigilance, as Thomas Jefferson once said. It must never be taken for granted, even in our own country.

Those who are fighting for democracy deserve the support of the American people, and through the NED they receive it. They are defending the values we hold dear. They are the ones who will bring real democracy and, through that, lasting stability. In striving to fulfill their aspirations, they are advancing our own fundamental national interests. They are helping us live in a safer and more peaceful world, and for that they deserve our solidarity.