

**Testimony of Leopoldo Lopez**  
**Venezuelan Freedom Activist,**  
**Co-Founder of the World Liberty Congress, Wilson Center Fellow**  
**US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing**  
**“U.S. Support of Democracy and Human Rights”**  
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In February of 2014, after calling for non violent protests against the corrupt and autocratic regime fo Nicolás Maduro, I was arrested, sent to a military prison, kept in solitary confinement for almost four years, and sentenced to 14 years of prison after a manipulated trial concluded I was guilty of inciting violence through subliminal messages during my public speeches. In 2017, I was sent to house arrest until I escaped in April of 2019 to seek refuge at the Spanish Embassy in Caracas, where I stayed until late 2020 when I escaped Venezuela to meet my family that had been in Spain since 2019. My struggle against the regime has now spanned decades. I was elected mayor of Chacao in Caracas in 2000, reelected in 2004, and since then I was banned from running for office and became the target of widespread attacks that included two murder attempts. My story is one of many; I have not been alone in this struggle. Hundreds of activists, social leaders, journalists, union leaders, business people, students, military officers, and common citizens have been the targets of the Maduro regime. After being in exile and learning first hand the testimonies of hundreds of democracy defenders, I now know that far from being an isolated case, this is the story of millions of individuals willing to stand up and fight for freedom around the world.

Last November, we launched the World Liberty Congress to gather pro-democracy leaders from more than 40 autocratic countries. The first day, we heard 40 delegations. It was eye opening that for hours we heard the same story repeating itself in different contexts and voices, the stories at the frontlines. It is from that perspective that I speak to you today, from the viewpoint of men and women who are willing to risk their freedom and lives to achieve freedom and democracy. The WLC is a non-ideological action oriented alliance of democracy

defenders and freedom activists. We seek to provide pro-democracy movements with political, legal, financial, and strategic assistance to enhance their effectiveness. The idea of the WLC was initially spearheaded by Masih Alinejad of Iran, Garry Kasparov of Russia, and myself, but today counts among its membership hundreds of activists from across the planet.

According to Freedom House, 2023 marked the 17<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of democratic recession. This rise of autocracy has reached a level where 70% of the world population now live under some type of autocratic regime (According to V-Dem). However, this should not be confused with the will of the people; global polling reflects that 80% of the world's population wants to be free and live in a democracy. The recent and surprising protests in Iran, China, and Cuba to mention just a few, show that despite the efforts of dictators and despots, the will to be free remains consistent. However, it is also true that these movements have become less successful given the capacity of autocracies to repress and contain the transition to democracy through civil protests. Nonviolent pro-democracy movements went from a 60% success rate in transition to democracy in the 1990s to less than 5% today according to a recent study from Harvard University.

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, have plundered the country and caused living standards to fall to the lowest of any nation in Latin America or the Caribbean. There are many ways to answer this question. Some say it is because of the government's access to natural resources, in particular oil, and the support from the military. Some even say it is because of divisions within the Venezuelan opposition. But in my view, there is one reason that stands above the rest: Maduro gets support from autocratic regimes throughout the world. These regimes provide funding, technology, military supplies, and know-how – all of which are ruthlessly deployed against those who are campaigning for human rights, democracy and freedom. In my conversations

with freedom fighters living under other autocratic regimes, they tell the same tale of governments propped up by like-minded autocrats.

Autocracies have aligned their efforts to support each other in a non ideological but very pragmatic alliance to learn from and support each other. This concept, called “Autocracy Inc.” by Anne Applebaum, is a complex web of transnational corruption and criminal affiliations. Twenty days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin was in Beijing solidifying his partnership with the Chinese regime, and both states released a joint statement declaring their alliance in international relations.

These partnerships are a critical component of the resilience of these regimes. Russian oligarchs, anxious to prevent democratization in Latin America, routinely send delegations to Havana, Caracas, and Managua to discuss mutual “security.” The most recent visit was that of Nikolai Patrushev, a Russian General, intelligence officer, and orchestrator of war crimes in Ukraine. The topic of discussion was the suppression of “color revolutions.” Disguised as a diplomatic mission, this was a blatant Russian intervention in Latin America with the specific purpose of sharing methods of repression to terrorize and intimidate any possible dissenters. Putin, often considered to be a traditionalist, nationalist, and right-winger, has thrown massive support behind Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega, who styles himself as a socialist and a hardline left-winger. It’s important to realize that these despots’ “ideologies” are actually a thin facade for transnational corruption and the exportation of human rights violations. Putin will face no domestic backlash for his ideologically incomprehensible support of Ortega; Russian support is not rooted in admiration for Sandinismo in Nicaragua. It is merely a strategy to make the world less safe for those who respect human rights, the rule of law, and democracy.

Democracy is in retreat. Whether we want to accept it or not, there is a global battle being waged against liberal democracy by the forces of autocracy.

Dictators recognize that their enemy is the system of democracy itself, because where it exists and thrives, it provides indisputable proof that the corrupt and decrepit ideals of autocracy are hollow and inferior. However, I want to stress that the fight against liberal democracy is also a fight against the United States, who is the principal defender and proponent of democracy on the global stage.

This is why Chinese communists, Russian nationalists, and Iranian theocrats have wholeheartedly embraced one another. They are not tied together by ideology or principles. They are united merely by a fear of popular grassroots mobilization which is the primary challenge to their illegitimate rule, as well as a desire to undermine US influence across the world. They are thus willing to support each other unconditionally, because they recognize that they face an existential threat. If there is one purpose of my visit to this chamber today, it is to convince you, and freedom loving nations everywhere, that the political developments in Caracas or Khartoum or Hong Kong have direct implications for the security of the United States. We, too, face an existential threat.

There can be no delusion that sitting out of this fight is an option. A passive United States which is content to do business with dictators, and which shies away from doing everything possible to embolden and empower freedom fighters is making the world safer for human rights violators and kleptocrats. With or without the participation of the US, this battle is being fought. It must be understood that losing a square inch to autocracy outside of the US is a square inch closer to autocracy inside of the US. Those who seek to spread autocracy and undermine democracy are not short of funds or weapons. They have found new ways to protect their interests, exchanging resources, intelligence, military support, and methods of repression regardless of their supposed ideologies. This is why the US must take an active role in leading the creation of a parallel alliance, which is held together by a shared commitment to protect the values which we in this chamber hold dear.

Imposing sanctions on human rights violators is logical and necessary, but because of the criminal transnational support between dictatorships, there must be a comprehensive re-examination of the policy tools available. Most importantly, we must realize that we don't have the luxury of "losing patience," or giving these grotesque regimes even a shred of legitimacy on the international stage. To do so not only condemns the people trapped inside to live in poverty and persecution in perpetuity, but it also makes the world safer for those who seek to replicate the Venezuelan tragedy, and I can say to you that there is no shortage of these people around the world.

It must also be spoken out loud and plainly; the United Nations has allowed some of the world's most rampant human rights violators to masquerade as statesmen and honest members of the international community. Last week, I testified at the UN Human Rights Council, where the fact finding mission stated that Maduro is responsible for committing crimes against humanity. It was striking to hear the chorus of autocratic nations defending the Maduro regime. Once again, irrespective of ideology, human rights violators align to present themselves as legitimate governments and vote to protect each other's interests. The resolution to expel the Iranian regime from the UN Women's Rights Commission, for example, faced stiff resistance. Those who voted against the resolution included: Bolivia, China, Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Russia, and Zimbabwe. Journalist Hillel Neuer dubbed this group the "Axis of Shame." I will note that Venezuela does not vote on these matters since it is not up to date with its dues payments to the UN, but we can say with certainty that if it could, it would be a part of this cohort.

Authoritarianism is a hollow and decrepit ideal. It is incompatible with the human spirit, which innately yearns for freedom. Dictators intensely fear bottom-up popular mobilization, which is why they invest so heavily in suppressing it. By definition, authoritarianism centers itself around the suppression of basic human rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly,

thought, and religion. This means that authoritarians will always have enemies, both within and beyond their borders. Dictators must always direct most of their energy, funds, and influence into terrifying and suppressing the will of their people, or their grip on power will slip.

We have spoken of the advantages autocrats have over democrats. This, however, is an inescapable disadvantage of the dictators. They rely on terror, extortion, and the steady flow of funds and weapons to remain in power. Their opponents, however, are motivated by much more powerful, incorruptible ideals. Victims of authoritarianism have had their basic humanity stolen from them. This is why across the world, pro-democracy demonstrators are willing to take to the streets week after week, willing to be shot at, beaten, imprisoned, and tortured. In many places, dictators are finding that their habit of abusing and humiliating their populations creates a determined, and with the help of free nations, increasingly organized and well funded resistance. Even after 7 months, the people of Iran continue to fill the streets. When we see the images of Iranian women resisting a brutal theocracy, I ask you; what could be a better use of US influence and leadership, than to embolden these people? What is a better demonstration of the American ideals of democracy and liberty than the Iranian, or indeed the Cuban, Hong Kongese, Sudanese, or Venezuelan people at this moment?

## **Policy Recommendations**

### *Recommendation #1: Secure Bipartisan Support for Global Democracy Assistance*

It is critical that the issues of human rights and democracy not become caught up in partisan politics. For the US to lead a sustained multinational effort to confront this issue, it is essential that within all elements of the US government, there be a unified front and commitment to preserve freedom and democracy at the global level. This includes law enforcement agencies, the presidential administration, congress, and the judicial system. Facilitating the conditions for people to elect their own leaders and to not be subjected to human rights violations should not be partisan. The US must speak with one voice on this issue.

### *Recommendation # 2: Support Civil Resistance and Democracy Initiatives*

Research shows that the most effective engines to transition to democracy are nonviolent popular grassroots movements. External pressure is necessary, but should be viewed as complementary to pro-democracy and civil resistance movements. It's key to understand that internal pressure requires the mobilization of large numbers of people, either protesting or voting. We need to find innovative ways to provide resources, strategies, and coordination assistance to make these movements more effective. The US and its allies should assist civil society initiatives which participate in community organizing and provide training in nonviolent methods of resistance. These kinds of initiatives are critical in not only getting people on the streets but also increasing their effectiveness.

### *Recommendation #3: Declare Democracy a Central Foreign Policy Focus*

The United States Government should make supporting organic, localized pro-democracy movements a central focus in its foreign policy. In other words, irrespective of political denominations, the US should seek to identify pre-existing movements who are struggling for democratic change and provide them with technical and financial support. All foreign policy decisions should take into account potential consequences for human rights and democracy. It is necessary to coordinate efforts within and beyond the US government. Different US departments and agencies should be working in conjunction toward the same goal. Simultaneously, coordination with civil society and NGOs is critical in expanding the reach of pro-democracy policies.

*Recommendation #4: Incorporate the Private Sector*

The struggle for freedom and democracy should also 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 many European governments' dependence on Russian oil. We have also seen how guided investment in the ESG framework (Environment, Social, and Governance) has generated trillions of dollars into more conscious investors. However, the SDG (Sustainable Development Goals), which are the 17 goals approved by the UN in 2015 on which ESG is based, makes no mention of human rights, freedom, democracy, and has only one mention of transparency. This is because the UN framework for SDG was discussed and approved with the vote of many autocratic regimes. The issues of human rights, democracy, and freedom are absent from the ESG framework, and we therefore propose the inclusion of the "F" for freedom in the ESG. This will guide investment and promote incentives for different initiatives that would promote freedom in different areas, such as communications, secure internet, and access to financial services.



Simultaneously, it's important to make consumers aware that the goods and services they are consuming are manufactured or extracted in autocratic regimes. For example in Xinjiang, the slave labor of Uyghurs is widespread in the production of consumer goods. Corporations which operate in autocratic countries should be exposed as being complicit in these human rights violations. Their economic activity is instrumental in propping up the regime of Xi Jinping, and US consumers and investors should be confronted with this reality.

*Recommendation #5: Consistency in Denying Legitimacy to Dictators*

The US should not send any financial or military assistance to regimes who are anti-democratic and commit human rights violations. For example, the US enjoys a beneficial military partnership with Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, who is the world's longest installed dictator, ruling the country with an iron fist since 1986. If the US is to credibly stand up for democratic ideals on the world stage, there can be no double standard or deviation for the sake of US interests. All dictatorships are incompatible with human rights, and the US should make it clear that it opposes dictatorships everywhere. Similarly, the US should use its influence with the European Union to adopt a similar stance. The US cannot democratize the world alone; the full cooperation of free nations is critical if the authoritarian threat is to be countered.

*Recommendation #6: Massive Access to Internet. Smartphones*

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 constitutes an enormous challenge for democracy advocates within autocratic nations. To successfully mobilize large numbers of people for demonstrations and acts of civil

disobedience, activist leaders need uncensored and widespread methods of communication which circumvent the control of autocrats.

A program to distribute smartphones en masse in autocratic countries is a practical way to do this. It would assist not only in effective communications and combating misinformation, but also for access to different innovations and services that could be provided directly. There are also new technologies such as Starlink which can gravely undermine autocrats' controls on access to information.

#### *Recommendation #7: Support for Exiles*

As the US repositions its foreign policy to prioritize pro-democracy and pro-human rights work, it should simultaneously take into account the lives of activists who have been subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances, and assassination attempts. The US has traditionally offered asylum to many of these people, but the process must be expedited. The circumstances on the ground often change rapidly, and the US needs a process which rapidly assists human rights defenders who will face arrest if they are not quickly removed from the country. Bureaucratic steps in the visa granting process must be removed.

Another way to assist democracy defenders is with stable migration status. There are thousands of exiles in the US who have a fragile status, which restricts their ability to travel. One of the main challenges we have is to coordinate the efforts of those who are exiled and those who are still in the country. Political refugees in the US should be able to move freely to coordinate pro-democracy efforts with their colleagues who are still inside the dictatorship.

#### *Recommendation #8: Support and Visibility for Political Prisoners*

The Department of State estimates that there are over one million political prisoners around the world. These people are not afforded legal protections and are regularly subjected to heinous forms of physical and psychological torture. They are not allowed visitation or the right to appeal, and are frequently unaware of what they have been charged with. We should elevate the voices of these people whenever possible. The US should apply diplomatic, economic, and political pressure to countries who have political prisoners. It should also highlight their names and facilitate international awareness of their plight. These brave people cannot be forgotten or allowed to rot away in prison cells for speaking out against dictatorship. Additionally, the US can also provide legal support to the families of political prisoners for them to advocate and communicate on their behalf more effectively.

*Recommendation #9: Support International Enforcement Mechanisms like the ICC*

The US and other democracies should explore ways to make international institutions more effective. The supposed mission of the United Nations of promoting global peace and protecting human rights is gravely undermined when countries like Russia and China exercise such massive influence in UN decision making. The potential for international enforcement mechanisms is immeasurable, but needs to be re-evaluated.

The US should support the international institutions which identify, investigate, and punish crimes committed by autocrats. Organizations like the ICC are critical in the prosecution of these crimes, as we have seen in the recent decision by the ICC to issue a warrant for the arrest of Vladimir Putin to be tried for war crimes. It also initiated an investigation against Nicolás Maduro for crimes against humanity. I will also reiterate that the fact finding mission of the UN Human Rights Council also identified Maduro as having committed crimes

against humanity. It's critical that the US and allied countries support these institutions so they can be more effective in their work.

*Recommendation #10: Rethink Sanctions and empower Magnitsky legislation*

The imposition of sanctions has been a consistent tool for democracies to prosecute authoritarians for human rights violations. The US should lead the way in pioneering new forms of targeted sanctions for corrupt officials in countries such as Venezuela. Magnitsky legislation has been a breakthrough on this front, denying Russian oligarchs or Venezuelan regime officials the ability to purchase properties or move with their families to live in free nations. Kleptocracy is not about ideology; it is about the theft of funds for private gain. By finding new ways to deny corrupt officials the ability to spend their ill-gotten monies, the appeal of transnational corruption is lessened.

The Venezuelan regime pedals the lie that sanctions are the cause of the humanitarian catastrophe in Venezuela, which we know to be untrue. In 2019, before the imposition of sanctions, the Venezuelan economy had collapsed by more than 60%, and 4 million people had already fled the country. Let's be clear; the situation in Venezuela is the result of government mismanagement and corruption.

Sanctions are one of the few peaceful diplomatic tools which can be used to consequence regimes which violate human rights. Without them, the autocrat has no reason to restrain his behavior. To increase the effectiveness of sanctions, we should take into account the transnational systems of corruption which prop up these regimes. They should confront the enablers- the individuals and companies which continue to do business with autocrats. Simply sanctioning regime officials will be insufficient in orchestrating political change.

*Recommendation #11: Respond Effectively to Transnational Repression*

Transnational repression is the attempt by autocrats to commit crimes against their opponents outside of their borders. This is an extremely common occurrence, and methods can include kidnapping, murder, extortion, unlawful deportations, coercion by proxy, or assault. Within our activist network at the World Liberty Congress, Masih Alinejad was subjected to an assassination attempt in New York earlier this year. Paul Rusesabagina, who we are glad to report was released from prison this week, was kidnapped in 2020 by the Rwandan government, boarding a plane he believed would take him to Burundi, but instead flew him to Kigali where he would be imprisoned. Another case within our network is that of Palestinian activist Fadi Elsalameen, who has been subjected to assassination attempts by the Palestinian Authority despite being a US citizen and living in Washington. US security and intelligence services should find effective methods to protect human rights defenders whose lives are threatened by dictators. There should be efforts to pre-empt attacks, and also to provide consequences for dictators when they send their agents to commit crimes against people in other countries.

*Recommendation #12: Use of FinTech and Bitcoin/Lightning to overcome the obstacles of autocracies to bring financial support*

We must use new technologies to move resources inside autocratic regimes without the surveillance of dictators. This includes using FinTech and Bitcoin/Lightning to transfer resources to activists. We have seen in recent periods that autocratic regimes seek to limit the access of NGOs by controlling their ability to use external financing. Providing reliable financial support is critical for democratic movements' success, so new methods of financing which circumvent the financial systems of autocrats are required.

*Recommendation #13: An Alliance for Freedom*

The cooperation of autocrats has been spoken about extensively. The central thesis of the World Liberty Congress is the need to articulate a global alliance of activist leaders who not only advocate for freedom internationally, but are willing to risk their lives inside their countries to achieve a democratic transition. We seek to identify concrete ways in which we can empower one another and cooperate to make our own movements more effective. By pooling together our experiences, resources, and strategies, we form a much more formidable threat to dictators. The membership of the WLC is extremely diverse—religiously, culturally, ethnically, geographically, and ideologically. However, because we have all faced the same brutal methods of repression and are all advocating for democratic transition, we are able to form a cohesive front. This is an excellent starting point, but is insufficient without the backing of a multinational alliance of sympathetic governments.

The US should empower activist movements like the WLC and cooperate with our initiatives to advocate for the liberation of political prisoners, coordinate sanctions against kleptocratic networks, and train activists in nonviolent resistance. It should also use its global influence to enlist other governments who value freedom to do the same. Uniting freedom movements who are committed to fair elections, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the restoration of democracy is essential in this fight, and the US has an enormous leadership role to play in making this a reality.