

Establishing a “Resisting Authoritarian Pressure” Cohort

in the Year of Action for the Summit for Democracy

Democratic values and the rules-based international order have not been more threatened worldwide since the Cold War. According to Freedom House’s annual [Freedom in the World](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf) report, we are in the 16th consecutive year of democratic decline. Democracies at home risk stagnation due to corruption, declining public confidence, instability from fringe/extremist movements, as well as authoritarian or populist temptations by those in government. This democratic decline is exacerbated by a sharpening of autocratic repression both domestically and abroad, as authoritarians increasingly learn from one another to brazenly challenge international norms and systems. An international democratic diaspora now exists, as many have been forced to relocate due to the politically sensitive nature of their human rights work.

Democracies and democrats should not be daunted, however. Ukraine’s staunch resistance to Russia’s invasion shows that democracies can win, and authoritarians’ claims to a superior model of governance are nothing but a myth. Authoritarians make a great show of strength, but their bluster masks corruption, incompetence, toadyism, and fragility. We draw courage from those who tirelessly fight for democracy and human rights against the most oppressive regimes of the world.

Pursuant to the Year of Action for the Summit for Democracy, likeminded governments and civil society representatives are establishing a cohort on **Resisting Authoritarian Pressure**. The purpose of the cohort is to build resilience to authoritarian coercion and offer a hand to democrats and human rights defenders from non-democracies.

The “Resisting Authoritarian Pressure” cohort will focus on the following **priority areas**:

1. Seeking Release of Political Prisoners
2. Sheltering and Protecting Democratic Activists Fleeing Authoritarian Regimes
3. Countering the Phenomenon of Transnational Repression
4. Building Resilience to Economic Coercion by Authoritarian Regimes

The “Resisting Authoritarian Pressure” cohort acknowledges and supports the efforts of the **Media Freedom cohort**, with its undertakings to assist journalists working in closed and closing political environments, the **Information Integrity cohort**, with its aims to build resilience to mis/dis/mal-information emanating from authoritarian regimes, and the **Financial Transparency and Integrity Cohort**, with its endeavors to target transnational networks of corruption through which autocrats often exercise their influence within democracies. These three areas are of paramount importance in resisting creeping authoritarianism, but they will remain outside of the scope of this cohort so as not to duplicate efforts.

**Deliverables** from this cohort include the following:

1. **Seeking Release of Political Prisoners**

On or before the second Summit for Democracy:

* To raise government awareness, develop a succinct briefing memo overviewing:
  + 1. The types of individuals that governments are targeting around the world, as well as the myriad tactics used by governments to restrict their freedom of movement and political and/or civic activism (e.g., detention, visa bans, asset freezes, etc.).
  + 2. Best practices and tactics that governments can implement to push for the release of political prisoners (e.g., a sanctions regime, conditions upon foreign assistance, raise political prisoners in bilateral and multilateral engagement, supporting those who need relocation, etc.).
* Increase attempts to raise awareness of political imprisonment and a diplomatic campaign to lobby for release of political prisoners. Align the campaign with **December 3**, the International Day of Solidarity with Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War.

Following the second Summit for Democracy:

* Document the number of human rights defenders, pro-democracy activists, and journalists who are being deprived of their liberty around the world because of their work, searchable by country. Freedom House will maintain the data for research and advocacy purposes.
* Publish an annual report with trend data on political prisoners worldwide, including the total number of political prisoners in each country, whether the number has increased or decreased in recent years, and thematic trends such as the types of legislation used to crack down on activists, human rights work that is most targeted by authoritarian regimes, best practices for obtaining the release of political prisoners and holding perpetrators accountable, as well as recommendations for post-detention support to strengthen human rights defenders and their communities.

1. **Sheltering and Protecting Democratic Activists Fleeing Authoritarian Regimes**

On or before the second Summit for Democracy:

* Compile for discrete sharing a list of proven practices to harbor human rights defenders threatened by authoritarian regimes. Provide the list of recommended measures to the participants of the S4D.
* Strengthening cross-border and cross-sectoral cooperation among democracy activists.
* Invest additional resources in or seek new government supporters of the [Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund](https://freedomhouse.org/programs/emergency-assistance-and-thematic-programs/lifeline-embattled-cso-assistance-fund), which provides emergency assistance funds to human rights-focused organizations under threat.

Following the second Summit for Democracy:

* Work with individual governments that expressed interest before or during the Summit for Democracy to share best practices from Lithuania's model of to protecting victims of transnational repression and others fleeing political persecution.

1. **Countering the Phenomenon of Transnational Repression**

On or before the second Summit for Democracy:

* Develop and publicize a government pledge recognizing the threat of transnational repression and expressing intent to build resilience to the phenomenon domestically.
* Develop a handbook template for governments and/or civil society partners to complete with local information and resources for diaspora communities to be more aware of transnational repression and better protect themselves.
* Launch a civil society working group to coordinate advocacy efforts addressing the phenomenon of transnational repression, which will continue after the second Summit for Democracy.
* Develop a training manual for civil society on how to document and respond to transnational repression.

Following the second Summit for Democracy:

* Raise awareness of transnational repression at the UN Human Rights Council and within the European Parliament by working with government and civil society partners, with an eye toward eventually introducing a resolution seeking to codify a common definition of transnational repression.
* Initiate discussions of a framework for collective, emergency responses to transnational repression through consultations with likeminded governments and civil society partners. Possible workstreams under this effort include:
  + Facilitating inter-governmental communication to identify vulnerable communities and individuals.
  + Collaboration with tech companies to allow activists to immediately report harassment or possible targeting.
  + Emergency relocation assistance for victims of transnational repression.
* Approach the Government of Canada to develop a joint action plan for expanding the list of 67 countries currently supporting the [Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations](https://www.international.gc.ca/news-nouvelles/assets/pdfs/arbitrary_detention-detention_arbitraire-declaration-en.pdf) and take joint actions to encourage other democratic countries to join.
* Commit to supporting reforms to eliminate Interpol abuse, whereby authoritarian governments manipulate the Interpol notification system to have individuals spuriously harassed, detained, or extradited.
* Propose an action plan to Summit for Democracy participating governments to coordinate the use of targeted sanctions on perpetrators and enablers of serious human right violations through transnational repression, including the full enforcement of Global Magnitsky-type laws by countries that possess them, and adoption of Global Magnitsky-type legislation by countries that lack such legal authorities.

1. **Building Resilience to Economic Coercion by Authoritarian Regimes**

On or before the second Summit for Democracy:

* Promote collective responses to authoritarian economic coercion, such as an economic Article 5 – similar to NATO when it comes to its capacity for deterrence and solidarity – among democracies. It would empower democratic states, acting in concert, to apply trade and investment restrictions, export controls and divestment in certain sectors, as well as restrictions on access to public procurement markets towards any authoritarian state unduly interfering in the policy choices of any democratic country through the levers of economic coercion.

Following the second Summit for Democracy:

* Develop and seek for adoption Anti-Coercion Instruments including the EU’s legal efforts in that direction and other like-minded partners such as Australia.
* Adopt – and where it already exists, upgrade to rigorous standards – an investment screening mechanism to prevent authoritarian states from acquiring levers of economic pressure including critical infrastructure within democratic countries.