

Remarks by NED President Carl Gershman at the Estoril Political Forum October 19, 2020

Democracy is being challenged today as never before since the end of the Cold War – even, in fact, since the period that Samuel Huntington called the “second reverse wave” in the 1960s that ended, in his view, with the overthrow of the military dictatorship in Portugal on April 25, 1974. That event initiated what Huntington called the third wave of democratization that led to the greatest expansion of democracy in world history. The number of free countries increased from 52 to 88, and the total number of electoral democracies rose to 125. By 2005 almost two-thirds of the world’s countries had become democratic.

A reversal of this progress began in 2006, and since then political and civil freedoms globally have declined for 14 consecutive years, as noted by Freedom House. A new study by Larry Diamond emphasizes that 19 of the 29 most populous and geopolitically weighty countries have experienced substantive declines in freedom between 2005 and 2019, while only two have improved. Many of these states, he notes, remain democratic but have been deteriorating in quality, including the world’s four largest democracies – the United States, India, Indonesia, and Brazil, along with Poland which is the largest democracy in Central Europe. Diamond also points out that of the 20 countries that have experienced mass public protests or so-called “color revolutions” since the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009, only two have so far resulted in democratic transitions, and even these transitions - in Tunisia and Ukraine - are very fragile and uncertain.

The democratic recession has deepened as authoritarian powers like China and Russia have become much more assertive. In addition, many elected leaders in other countries like Turkey, the Philippines, Venezuela, and Hungary have hollowed out democratic institutions like free media, independent judiciaries, civil society organizations, and democratic elections. And as we know all too well, illiberal populism has also been on the rise in many long-established democracies, including the United States.

This convergence of factors has resulted in increased political polarization that has been fueled by the rise of social media. On top of all this, the COVID pandemic has allowed autocrats and even many less repressive governments to tighten their controls, crack down on media, and restrict the rule of law. A recent Freedom House report observes that the global pandemic has fueled what it calls a “[crisis for democracy](#),” with conditions for democracy and human rights deteriorating in 80 countries.

According to Diamond, a democratic recession that began as “a slow and quite uneven ebbing of progress fifteen years ago has now morphed into a substantial, comprehensive regression of freedom and democracy,” with the result that we are now “perilously close to and indeed have probably already entered what Huntington would have called a ‘third reverse wave,’ that is, a period in world history in which the number of transitions away from democracy significantly outnumber those to democracy.” To my knowledge, this is the first time that our friend Larry Diamond has used the term “reverse wave” to describe the current period of democratic regression.

The situation is not entirely bleak. I am impressed that the European Union is taking important steps to become more unified and address some of its own weaknesses. The Next Generation EU initiative, a \$700m plan for investment and reform in the aftermath of COVID, will create a Recovery and Resilience Facility to help poorer countries become sustainable and resilient.

At the same time, the Putin regime in Russia is showing increased signs of paralysis and vulnerability. The sustained popular uprising in Belarus in reaction to the stolen election on August 9 is an epochal event that is an existential crisis not just for Lukashenka but for Putin as well. The same kind of movement that emerged in Belarus of young people, women, technologically savvy activists, small entrepreneurs, and workers has also appeared in Khabarovsk and other cities in the Russian Far East and elsewhere around the country. As *The Economist* has noted, this is the main reason the Putin regime resorted to the desperate move of poisoning the country's main opposition leader Alexey Navalny. There is also the more recent uprising in Kyrgyzstan, where Putin could not protect the country's ousted leader against another uprising of youth, women, techies, and others opposed to corrupt leaders backed by organized crime. Not least, Putin also appears hapless in trying to mediate an end to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and counter Erdogan's aggressive support of Aliiev in Azerbaijan, including through the use of Syrian mercenaries.

Third, the United States could be on the verge of changing course. I run a bipartisan organization and so won't comment on the upcoming US election, but we can all see where events are trending, and I want to put in a little plug for the **George Washington Memorial Debate** tomorrow when Bill Kristol and Bill Galston will discuss **America at a Crossroads – What Path Forward?** The path ahead will be difficult because America is a very divided country and there is [disturbing poll data](#) showing that roughly a third of Americans believe it is a good idea to have a "strong incumbent leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections." We have a lot of work to do to heal our country's divisions and revive Senator John McCain's belief that the US is "a country with a conscience." I think that's possible, and we'll discuss that tomorrow.

Even if the US returns to the path of domestic healing and democratic internationalism, it will confront the formidable challenge of a rising and very dangerous China. The late Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo warned in 2006 that if China rose as a dictatorship, it would threaten liberal democracy throughout the world, and he was right. Beijing's crackdown in Hong Kong, its aggression in the South China Sea and military clashes along the border with India, its explicit threat to invade Taiwan, its \$1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative (which is 7 times the size of the Marshall Plan in constant dollars), and its systematic effort at the U.N. and elsewhere to redefine the norms governing our inter-connected world are all deeply troubling, as is its construction of an all-pervasive surveillance state internally. The rising totalitarian dictatorship in China is the most dangerous external threat to democracy in the world today.

We are now in the middle of what the EU's Minister for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell has called a "battle of narratives" between authoritarian countries like China and Russia that espouse illiberal values, and democratic countries that need to defend the liberal values that are now under assault. The great investment that China and Russia, among others authoritarian countries, are making in media and other forms of ideological infrastructure to undermine and revise the norms of democratic societies and the international liberal order shows that the conflict over values and

the defense of freedom and the rule of law did not end with the collapse of communism. The information space has become a new arena of strategic competition. In this new period, the need for a strong alliance of democracies and a reinvigorated transatlantic relationship has become at least as important as it was during the Cold War. What's needed most of all is renewed political will and a readiness by the world's leading democracies to work together to defend freedom. Without that, the global threat to democracy is unlikely to be reversed.