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***Panel on Democracy Promotion
Remarks by NDI Senior Associate Robert Benjamin***

By way of introduction, NDI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supporting democratic transitions around the world. We provide technical assistance to political and governmental actors: political parties, civil society/citizen political participation, parliament/legislative strengthening, election processes, including nonpartisan monitoring, and to particularly under-represented groups, such as women, youth, and ethnic minorities. The objective is to build participation, transparency, and accountability in politics, which in turn provide the best possible chance for government to serve the public interest and to regulate conflict by peaceful means. NDI technical assistance includes training, mentoring, internships, public opinion research, comparative institutional and systemic research, cross-border exchange and study trips, and manuals and guidebooks.

NDI works in nearly 80 countries around the world in post-conflict and consolidating democracies, such as those to be found south of here, in the Balkans, in autocratic societies, and, more recently, in countries confronting war and/or failed state structures. Our democracy assistance programs, accordingly, are calibrated to match the political, cultural, and other factors shaping particular environments. NDI programs are funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, State Department, the National Endowment for Democracy, non-U.S. international donors, including UNDP, the World Bank, and the Open Society Institute, and a variety of bilateral, mainly European donors such as DFID. It is important to note NDI's affiliation as an observer with three political party internationals, the Christian Democratic, Liberal, and Socialist Internationals, and the Institute's close working relations with their corresponding European political parties--European People's Party, the European Liberal and Democratic Reform, and the Party of European Socialists.

Below are general comments on the orientation and salience of U.S. democracy promotion, as seen from a nongovernmental perspective:

Democracy is home-grown. Democracy's foundation is fundamental human rights. Its function is politics. Democracy is a universal concept while its manifestation in institution, system, and custom can and does vary. Democracy, in other words, is like DNA; everyone has a set but it's different. Culture, history, economy, geopolitics, colonialism, and conflict all create different democratic pathways. But democratic systems are all marked by government legitimately derived from the will of the people through periodic elections, respect and promotion of human rights, and the separation of institutional power and government accountability. Democracy promotion, by

consequence, relies on fundamental concepts but at the same time recognizes differences in form and structure.

Democracy promotion is not a mission of proselytizing, nor modeling, nor persuasion, nor, to be sure, coercion. It's not an export-import business. Democracy promotion is a concrete way to express solidarity and support to those seeking by their own initiative to develop their own systems of democracy, be it in Zimbabwe or Belarus or Burma, or in Indonesia, Serbia, or Ukraine. I use the word "support" to underscore that it is not up to us but rather to those whom we support to build democracy on their own soil.

Evolutionary, not mercurial. Notwithstanding rhetorical flourishes of transformation heard in some quarters of the U.S. government, a country's democratization process is long-term as it concerns fundamental political change. For those of us who work in this arena, it's a one-step forward, two-steps back proposition, and over time things advance. This perspective sometimes does not find favor among policymakers or budget appropriators who are rightly concerned with short-term imperatives and cause-effect policy instruments—which democracy promotion is most decidedly not. There is then a natural tension between short-term interests and long-term realities, as there should be. That tension is, in point of fact, a reflection of the importance that democracy promotion has assumed, over time, as a fundamental pillar of U.S. foreign policy and its placement alongside and indeed embedded in national security policy.

Bipartisan: The evolution of democracy promotion as an enterprise of U.S. foreign policy is reflective of both major American political parties. It has as its origins President Carter's human rights policies and Ronald Reagan's 1982 Westminster speech in which he issued a challenge to the world's free countries of expanding freedom to those denied it. There are, to be sure, strains from nearly all presidential administrations in the 20th century—Democrat and Republican—that in retrospect laid the cornerstones of today's democracy promotion work. There are also voices on U.S. foreign policy that do not favor such work, antagonists on both the left and the right who decry what is characterized, but turns, as imperialistic hubris or naïve liberalism in a realist world. In this decade such criticism has been leveled at democracy promotion efforts in the greater Middle East, and not without some cause. But that criticism has perhaps less to do with the goals of democracy promotion than with the means by which it is undertaken. Mainstream, moderate thinking in both parties tends to predominate focused on encompassing within U.S. foreign policy both a moral and realistic dimension, a combination esteemed by many Americans, if neither always understood nor accepted worldwide.

Centrality. Democracy promotion is increasingly recognized in Washington as essential to stability and security. Here are a few basic reasons why:

- Political participation and economic development are increasingly seen as interwoven and mutually reinforcing. For example, UNDP linked the two in its 2002 Human Development report, noting that democratic participation is a critical end of human

development, not just a means of achieving it. And it asserted that ‘politics’, not just civics, is vital to economic development.

- Promoting open, pluralist and accountable political systems, accommodating dissent, experiencing alternation of power, and protecting minority rights helps societies to become less susceptible to radical, populist, or extremist ideologies.
- Democracy promotion is vital when considering the global challenges of this century: terrorism, climate change, public health threats, trade, energy security, natural resource depletion, and the global financial crisis. The degree to which countries can build internal political consensus on these critical issues has much to say about negotiations among them to produce constructive global action.
- It might be seen as delusional to assert that supporting others in achieving their own democratic political system is something that many people look to the U.S. to provide. After all, charity begins at home. But, as long as we live up to that maxim I think the U.S. can live up to its role as a beacon for democracy.

So if democracy promotion is a good thing, how should it function?

- ...with a multilateral toolbox. The U.S. constitutional structure and our political party system differ from those of most countries. Ours is a nation of immigrants and our social and political structures are more fluid as a result. The American ‘model’ is hard to emulate in parliamentary systems with more than two political parties, in societies with traditional forms of social cohesion and political organization, and in countries with longstanding social practices and cultural traditions, many of which are rooted in religious precepts.. The U.S. has much to offer with respect to ideals, perhaps the most salient (and epitomized in the 2008 presidential election) that the more people enter the political process the stronger a country’s political fabric and the more real its democracy. And we can talk about robust grassroots involvement in politics. Other countries, to be sure, have other things to offer that are equally compelling, about how to marry centuries-old social structure with more democratic forms of decision-making, how to build democratic politics in war’s aftermath, etc.
- ...as a nongovernmental enterprise. Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, a longstanding member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has termed democracy promotion the ‘nongovernmental form of statecraft’, by which he means nongovernmental groups, rather than governments, are in a preferable position to undertake this work, particularly when taking into account that one’s interlocutors are many times nongovernmental bodies, such as media, political parties, and civic organizations. In many countries transitioning to democracy, where opening political space to nongovernmental actors is key to creating democracy, the last message that one wants to convey is that democracy is derived through acts of the government rather than an expression of the will of the people. So a bit of distance from the U.S. government is needed in implementing democracy programs, even as the U.S. government funds and supports them. This distance can also be helpful to U.S.

diplomatic missions, which are at pains not to be seen as getting directly involved in supporting political parties and other political and representative institutions.

- ...with the emphasis on 'delivery'. If a country is fortunate enough to experience free elections leading to a government founded on the will of the people and the installation of a parliament representing mainstream political options in both government and opposition, along with a measurable degree of access for civil society groups, particularly independent media as advocates and watchdogs, one should ask the question: What does this democratic arrangement produce or deliver? How does democracy deliver, with respect to people's well-being, their material security if not prosperity, their equal treatment as citizens, and the protection of their individual human rights? In wider Europe, from Serbia to Georgia to Ukraine, and even in so-called 'consolidated democracies', we see that you can have a democratic political process but it hasn't sufficiently delivered on rule of law, or government services, or even political stability. Parliament can pass a good law, sometimes at the behest of international actors like the EU, and the government can cross it off its list, but there's no funding or not enough political will to implement it. People go on voting on the one hand and bribing doctors on the other. "So what?" becomes the question.

Democracy Support Inescapably Involves Politics

What the "Color Revolutions" affirmed, in addition to the clear yearning of people for political stability based on liberty and dignity, is that the day after elections is as important as election day. Certainly that means getting government right by reforming court systems, improving customs procedures, creating anti-corruption agencies, building regulatory bodies, etc. Indeed, for countries transitioning to democracy, a preponderance of U.S. government assistance, particularly through USAID, has focused on creating good government, because it's a good thing to do and because it's measurable. You can chart improved tax collections, judicial cases completed, and customs revenues, and this pleases policymakers and budget appropriators.

That said, we run the risk of overweighting democracy assistance to government. There are two problems: it can inadvertently send the wrong message, mentioned earlier, particularly in countries with long traditions of communism or autocracy, that democracy is somehow generated by or derived from government, when in fact the opposite is true. Second, it's not entirely effective. The counterweight of intermediary institutions—civic groups, political parties, media, and parliament, chief among them—is needed to provide venues for participation that can meaningfully orient government to the public interest.

So after the elections, as countries move toward good governance, we shouldn't forget about politics. Politics obviously doesn't end with those first transitional elections. It's taken inside government, inside parliament. The challenges are how to build sufficiently constructive government-opposition relations so the country is not paralyzed by boycott; how to negotiate stable coalition agreements among governing parties; how to depoliticize civil society that has only known political opposition to an autocratic regime to

become issue-driven advocates and neutral government watchdogs; and perhaps most important, how to elevate parliament, standing as it does at the confluence of government, political parties, and civil society, to become a truly representative political institution and an effective lawmaking body, representing constituents and overseeing the executive branch of government, in a constitutional separation of powers that protects judicial independence, forges the rule of law, and creates sufficient independent space for non-governmental actors to participate in political debate and legislative affairs.

All of these elements, at their core, speak to healthy politics, marked by participation, transparency, and accountability, which paves the way for good governance. Here in Central and Eastern Europe and indeed elsewhere, democratic transitions that have started with international acclaim and high domestic hopes, find themselves stuck in neutral, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that countries' political systems have not adequately matured to resolve political conflicts, combat corruption and other ills, and ensure that the public interest is sufficiently articulated by the citizenry through media, NGOs, and of course elected representatives, and that it is addressed by government, and protected by the rule of law.

Democracy promotion, then, is long-term support for building political institutions and then connecting them with each other, to stitch together a democratic political fabric that is durable so that government becomes accountable. This is the cornerstone of what we at NDI are doing these days, so that democracy doesn't just exist on paper, or benefit a few, but provides for all in society.