

America's Enemies Are Rooting for the Death of the National Endowment for Democracy

By PETER ROSKAM

February 26, 2025

<https://www.nationalreview.com/2025/02/americas-enemies-are-rooting-for-the-death-of-the-national-endowment-for-democracy/>



A woman walks past a mural showing the U.S. flag with barbed wire and the Statue of Liberty with skull face in Tehran, Iran, in 2019. (*Nazanin Tabatabaee/Nazanin Tabatabaee/West Asia News Agency via Reuters*)

Some of the loudest voices applauding NED's struggles are those who wish to see freedom fail. That should tell us everything we need to know.

In recent days, America's most dangerous adversaries have been celebrating what they see as a major victory: a funding freeze that has effectively halted the work of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), America's foundation for freedom abroad. Authoritarian regimes in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Havana, the Taliban in Kabul, and terrorist networks are crowing. They're doing so not just because NED has paused its grantmaking but because its worldwide network of grantees, who fight for freedom in their own societies, has been forced to halt critical work.

Cuba's foreign minister mocked NED on social media. The Taliban cheered the defunding of a leading NED-backed independent media outlet, declaring it "the end of an illusion." Iran's state-affiliated media boasted that the "business of overthrowers has slumped." And Chinese state media noted that "although NED is much smaller in size than USAID, it is more ideologically aggressive and absolute. . . . The sensation of it being cut off from funding is not small at all."

These regimes understand what's at stake: a weakened NED means local citizen groups will be less effective in challenging authoritarian crimes.

We have also faced criticism closer to home — from Elon Musk and others — who question the value of Americans' supporting those who seek freedom. Some argue that NED shouldn't exist. This is a debate worth having. Indeed, NED is eager to share its story of modest investments with big dividends for the American people. But as Noah Rothman recently wrote in these pages, "proponents of governmental efficiency should not dismiss the extent to which the enemies of America — indeed, of the civilized world — are relishing their good fortune."

Following President Trump's reelection, I was honored to be chosen as chairman of NED. And I take these reactions as proof that our work is as vital as ever. At a time when America is debating how best to align its assistance with national interests, some of the loudest voices applauding NED's struggles are those who wish to see freedom fail. That should tell us everything we need to know.

As a congressionally chartered and supported private foundation dedicated to strengthening freedom worldwide, NED is one of the most cost-effective tools in America's toolkit.

We invest in those willing to invest in themselves. Even in countries of immense oppression, there are brave individuals fighting for the freedom to think, speak, support their families, and worship without fear.

In repressive societies, we invest in those who have the guts and ingenuity to challenge dictators peacefully, and who seek to secure their fundamental human and political rights. In more open societies, we support citizens working to strengthen institutions and processes essential for free and prosperous democracies. We provide support to grassroots citizen groups who are already on the front lines taking the initiative — and often, the risks. That's for good reason. We're not in the business of nation-building or exporting American democracy. Nor do we hand out charity. NED is venture capital for freedom.

At his confirmation hearing, now-Secretary Marco Rubio laid out three criteria for any U.S. dollar spent on assistance: Does it make America safer? Does it make America stronger? Does it make America more prosperous?

These are the right questions to ask. And when it comes to NED, the answer to each is yes. The United States advances President Trump's America First agenda by supporting those who are actively seeking democracy and freedom in their own homelands.

This isn't just about values. It's about strategy. In China, Iran, Russia, North Korea, Cuba, and Venezuela, we're witnessing the rise of authoritarian adversaries who work together to challenge the United States in unprecedented ways. They seek to not just compete with us but to attack and undermine the

foundations of free societies altogether. Iran has even threatened to kill President Trump and several of his top advisers.

President Trump has indicated that dealing with this “Axis of Aggressors” is among his foreign policy priorities. And he has promised to keep us out of foreign entanglements. How can he achieve both goals?

The best way to challenge tyrants is to empower their citizens. That’s exactly what NED does. People everywhere want to live in freedom. As President Trump has said, “above all, we value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person, and share the hope of every soul to live in freedom. It is who we are.”

NED grantees ensured that the world learned the story of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman from northwest Iran who died in police custody after being detained for not wearing a hijab. Amini’s tragic experience embodied the reasons behind the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement that has rocked the brutal Iranian regime. NED partners exposed the Uyghur genocide and revealed the worldwide network of “secret overseas police stations” the Chinese Communist Party operates right under the nose of democratic countries — including in America. Today, a new generation of Chinese activists is exposing even more of the Communist Party’s crimes.

NED isn’t a “democracy is good” bumper sticker. It’s an agile institution doing the long-haul work of advancing American interests toward a more democratic, stable, and prosperous world. Many of the nations in which NED and its core institutes (the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, the Solidarity Center, and the Center for International Private Enterprise) have strategically invested ultimately made the transition to democracy: Chile, countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Taiwan, the Philippines, Mongolia, Ghana, and others.

When dictatorships transition to democracies, adversaries become allies. They pick up more of the slack on the international stage, so we don’t have to shoulder the full burden. They become transparent and accountable trading partners, contributing their own resources to support and defend the cause of freedom.

It’s no coincidence that the world’s most volatile global hot spots are nondemocratic. In addition to harboring terrorists and drug traffickers, these places spawn the chaos and repression that fuel mass waves of migration, spur wars, and create crises that invariably lead to demands for U.S. aid and military intervention. Making preventive investments to stop these places from melting down in the first place, as NED does, is not just smarter but cheaper. The cost of a single advanced fighter jet exceeds NED’s budget.

As a fiscal conservative, I believe firmly that the Endowment is a smart investment with a great return. NED gets funds to where they are needed, when they are needed, consistently over time. It acts quickly to help partners take advantage of openings and do some of the toughest work in some of the most repressive societies on Earth.

In this moment of reexamination, NED’s way of doing business can become a model. NED’s unique public-private structure enables it to combine entrepreneurial efficiency with a singular focus on its

public-interest mission of advancing freedom. NED aims to pioneer the efficient delivery of targeted assistance by adopting digital currencies and lean management practices and by incorporating secure AI.

I welcome debates about the role and impact of U.S. spending. I agree that every dollar spent must be rigorously scrutinized for impact and accountability. NED is subject to congressional oversight, GAO audits, and the Freedom of Information Act. Independent auditors have given NED a clean bill of health, reflecting NED's financial integrity, compliance, and accountability.

NED's operations and its stewardship of funds are fully transparent to Congress and through them to our investors: the American people.

President Reagan and Congress first conceived of NED's mission four decades ago, when communist authoritarianism was on the march. The Cold War may be over. But the challenges we face today are eerily similar. A sharpened NED — and a sharpened approach to U.S. assistance — is exactly what we need to prevail.

PETER ROSKAM, a former six-term Republican Congressman from Illinois, is chairman of the National Endowment for Democracy.