

A Democracy's Guide to Foiling Autocrats:
**HOW DEMOCRATIC STATES CAN EFFECTIVELY
SUPPORT PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENTS**



"Fair elections. Tribunal. Freedom to the political prisoners." Nonviolent demonstration against Lukashenko, August 16, 2020. Minsk, Belarus. Source: [Wikipedia/Homoatrox](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0, unedited).

Dr. Maciej Bartkowski
ICNC Senior Advisor
December 2020

This guide is also available on [Minds of the Movement](#),
the blog of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC)

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqueue

INTRODUCTION

It took more than a month of nonviolent pro-democracy protests by Belarusians—met consistently with vicious repression by the Lukashenko government—before some democratic countries selectively imposed sanctions on key perpetrators of the regime. Two months after the emergence of the national movement amid rigged elections and regime violence, the European Union, as a block, imposed sanctions on the top members of the Belarusian regime, adding to its sanction list its ruler Alexander Lukashenko a few days later.

In addition to sanctions on individuals (at a time of this writing entities enabling the regime were not yet sanctioned), a number of democracies also rejected the “official” election results (Lithuania went so far as to recognize opposition leader, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, as the legitimate president), provided shelter to forcefully exiled Belarusian oppositionists—including Tikhanovskaya—and showed international solidarity by having [diplomats visit the home of Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich](#), who subsequently fled Belarus.

Yet despite these efforts, it is hard to conclude that democratic countries were adequate in their bid to support democracy. With more preparation and political will, comprehensive sanctions against Belarus’s autocratic regime could have been put in place in a coordinated manner soon after the August 9, 2020 elections, which were predictably marred by major voting irregularities followed by brutal repression of protesters.

Instead, external support for the pro-democracy movement was often late, remained reactive to the actions of the regime, and relied on limited tools.

This case provides an important point of reference for considering how democracies can improve their repertoire of actions in support of people who are nonviolently fighting for their human rights and democracy in other countries.

Currently, democracies lack a developed toolkit of steps and actions for supporting pro-democracy movements that they could routinely consult as part of their daily political, bureaucratic, and diplomatic work and deploy them rapidly when the need arises.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

If devised beforehand, a wide-ranging toolkit of actions will help democracies quickly operationalize and implement various initiatives supportive of people even prior to their mass mobilization against an autocrat and before they face predictable repression.

Without such an operational toolkit, democracies are left on the defensive when an authoritarian regime initiates a crackdown on its resisting population.

Democracies can and must do better in providing support and concrete assistance to pro-democracy movements and thus mitigate violence against unarmed people and, in the long run, help increase the chances of success for the pro-democracy resistance.

A Democracy's Guide to Foiling Autocrats: How Democratic States Can Effectively Support Pro-Democracy Movements offers a curated and comprehensive list of tools for democracies and their representatives to conduct an effective assistance program to nonviolent pro-democracy movements.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

A Democracy's Guide to Foiling Autocrats:
**HOW DEMOCRATIC STATES CAN EFFECTIVELY
SUPPORT PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENTS**

This guide offers a toolkit that democratic states can use to provide more effective support for pro-democracy movements in countries ruled by authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning governments.

The recommendations in this guide are organized based on *where* democratic states apply such actions in support of the pro-democracy movement.

This includes:

1. Inside the country with the pro-democracy movement.
2. In the democratic state itself.
3. On the international level.

The actions listed in this guide can be further divided based on the *target* of the actions, namely states, institutions, and people. They may also be further organized according to the *nature of various actions*—be it to coerce or entice (the carrot or the stick)—and the *goals* of such actions, among others:

1. To build movement capacity.
2. To solicit loyalty shifts among the regime's allies.
3. To mobilize domestic or international sympathy and solidarity.
4. To mitigate regime repression.

This is a guide for the actions of states in support of nonviolent movements. It does not consider the myriad of supportive actions that non-state actors can take as well. Their actions deserve an entirely separate guide.

To decide which actions states should take, and when they should take them, it is of primary importance to listen to the needs of activists on the ground. They are

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

best positioned to request the type of external aid they consider most helpful. At the same, even while listening, states need to uphold standards, such as insisting that their assistance supports *nonviolent* movements, as they have historically proven more [effective in confronting authoritarian regimes](#) and [building democracy afterwards](#) than armed insurrections.

The end of the guide includes a compilation of relevant literature for readers who wish to dive deeper into the subject of external assistance to nonviolent movement.

1. Undertake actions in the country where the pro-democracy movement is taking place, and which can be spearheaded by your diplomatic missions abroad

Activate your diplomats to be advocates for individuals and groups facing repression

Diplomats and consular personnel can:

- ✓ Quietly reach out to long-term dissidents and key activists in an emerging movement to establish channels of communication.
- ✓ Inform the movement that they are ready to offer material and/or non-material support to nonviolent activists if the activists specify their needs.

Send your diplomats into action if the movement requests and if the strategic benefits outweigh the risk of becoming persona non grata

Diplomats and consular personnel can:

- ✓ Attend pro-democracy marches if the movement requests their presence, even though diplomats might be expelled from the country later.
- ✓ Work with the movement to join their protests in symbolic places, including in front of prisons where protesters are known to have been jailed or tortured.
- ✓ Attend trials of movement members.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoguide

Turn your embassy and consulate(s) into bridgeheads for communication support

Embassies and consulates can:

- ✓ Open their grounds to movement members and become sanctuaries for activists to rest, hide, and seek asylum, if needed.
- ✓ Provide unrestricted internet access for activists and local journalists reporting on the movement and regime repression. This can happen from within or just outside of embassies/consulate(s) via satellite-based or drone-run internet hotspots available on diplomatic grounds.

Coordinate with diplomats from other democracies

Diplomats and consular personnel can:

- ✓ Reach out to their counterparts from other democracies and meet regularly to coordinate actions in support of the pro-democracy movement.
- ✓ Coordinate with their counterparts from other democracies' efforts to bring together and unite opposition groups.

Offer protective accompaniment

Diplomats and consular personnel can:

- ✓ Coordinate a diplomatic presence in the homes or workplaces of movement members in order to dissuade the regime from arresting the members or to embarrass the authorities if they attempt to do so.

Offer symbolic support

Diplomatic missions can:

- ✓ Fly symbols appropriated or created by the pro-democracy movement and have their diplomats wear symbols of the movement, including t-shirts, pins, or ribbons, particularly if they venture outside of the diplomatic compounds.

Magnify repression when it happens

Diplomats and consular personnel can:

- ✓ Help magnify the moments of particularly repulsive repression (e.g., against children or youngsters) that have the best chances of raising rapidly international sympathy and placing pressure on other democracies to devise, deploy, and

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

coordinate solidarity actions. This may also help trigger greater domestic mobilization in favor of the pro-democracy movement and elicit defections within the regime.

Use military-to-military contacts

Defense attaché staff from diplomatic missions can:

✓ Liaise with the autocrat's military, in coordination with the attaché's counterparts from embassies of other democracies. During such communication the defense attaché could share privately with individual officers from the autocrat's military the [Guide for Members of Security Forces](#) (available in a number of languages).

Have your diplomatic representatives prompt the movement to consult the [strategic checklist](#) on the progress of their resistance

Diplomats and consular personnel can:

✓ Query how the nonviolent movement is prepared for a protracted struggle and the day after its victory. Do its members have a plan for what happens when the autocrat steps down and what the transition will look like?

✓ Query how the movement tries to reduce or mitigate regime repression, including deployment of less risky tactics such as stay-at-homes, boycotts, occupation strikes at workplaces, or national-level noncooperation.

✓ Ask whether the movement is mobilizing different social and professional groups across the country and if not, how it can be more effective at doing so.

✓ Ask what the movement's sustained strategy is for reaching out to the regime's allies to bring at least some of them on its side.

2. Undertake actions in your own country to effectively support the pro-democracy movement abroad.

Using a coordinated strategy across different branches of government, top political leaders, senior decisionmakers and career civil servants from relevant government agencies should:

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

Develop the right movement mindset as part of your government position and responsibilities and become a strong advocate for the pro-democracy movement

- ✓ Expect without exception that autocrats will always use repression when unarmed people rise up against them.
- ✓ Be outspoken on social media and via diplomatic channels about the events in the autocrat's country, issue public statements and/or démarche in response to state repression of the movement, demand the release of imprisoned protesters and remain adamant about your support for the nonviolent dissidents.
- ✓ Be the first to recognize the pro-democracy movement as a representative and legitimate voice of the people that an autocrat must listen to.

Shape international discourse on what the repressive regime must do

- ✓ Insist in private and in public that the regime stops violence against the movement and enters into good-faith and fair negotiations for a peaceful transition and a time-bound transfer of power, or immediately steps down and paves the way for the leaders of the pro-democracy movement to take over.

Build organizational capacity for assistance to pro-democracy movements

- ✓ Set up a permanent task force on supporting pro-democracy movements in other countries within your government that will liaise easily with other key government agencies and staffed with experts and veterans of civil resistance struggles. Task it with anticipating the emergence of nonviolent pro-democracy movements around the world, preparing a toolbox of available actions to support such movements, becoming a driving force behind their rapid deployment, and harnessing and coordinating available resources within the government to support that deployment.
- ✓ Develop predictive mechanisms to gauge the factors that increase the likelihood of movement emergence and popular upheavals. Learn to recognize the signs when people no longer fear the regime.
- ✓ Always plan for post-election popular resistance and autocrat's violence in response to it.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoguide

Consider actions for today that can help movements a few years down the road

- ✓ During peaceful times, sign bilateral agreements with the autocrat's government that include support to its civil society. You or the movement members can cite these agreements if, years later, the regime represses the latter.
- ✓ Help build the organizing capacity of activists in the autocrat's country by facilitating or underwriting trainings and workshops on nonviolent resistance.
- ✓ Help build or expand the capacity of local journalists and independent media to provide accurate and timely reporting on the situation in the country with the pro-democracy movement.

Send warnings to the regime members and its allies before repression happens

- ✓ Draft a blacklist of all key regime members, their close business allies and entities who will face automatic travel and financial sanctions as soon as repression is used against protesting civilians. Make that list public or use private or diplomatic channels to relay the list and your intended actions to the regime members and its allies—and do so prior to the anticipated repression.
- ✓ Include on that sanction list spouses and immediate adult family members of the key regime members and their business allies, keeping in mind the timeless maxim: “Angry spouse, troubled house.”
- ✓ Declare you will withdraw your country's citizenship from any dual nationals serving in the repressive regime and that you will ask other democracies to do the same.
- ✓ Communicate to the military officers that if they or their subordinates shoot at unarmed protesters they will be automatically added to the black list and will face sanctions and prosecution.

Liaise with diasporas

- ✓ Provide support to key diaspora groups that might play a supporting role for the nonviolent pro-democracy movement in their country of origin.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

Help with unrestricted communication

- ✓ Offer and provide communications equipment for movement members and their domestic allies to ensure fast and secure digital communication in the country (despite expected regime measures to shut down or monitor such communication).
- ✓ Work with social media and communication companies to circumvent regime attempts to shut down the internet and mobile networks and to provide the movement with easy alternative and secure communication access.

Offer financial and material support

- ✓ Set up a mechanism for streamlined and rapid disbursement of small operational grants to the movement and/or its individual members.
- ✓ Provide material support in the form of computers, cameras, cell phones, etc. as requested by the movement.

Impose financial and travel sanctions

- ✓ Freeze the autocrat's and his business allies' resources in your country, introduce travel bans and financial sanctions on perpetrators of repression, including their family members, and coordinate similar actions with other democracies around the world.

Issue demarches demands

- ✓ Condemn repression against the movement and activists
- ✓ Demand the release of imprisoned activists

Deploy government resources to disrupt

- ✓ Use your government's cyber resources and prowess to disrupt the regime's anti-movement actions, help deanonymize regime loyalists involved in movement repression, collect evidence on who stands behind human rights violations, and magnify repression to ensure [violence backfires](#) on its perpetrators.

Arrange for humanitarian assistance

- ✓ Offer humanitarian assistance in the form of medical supplies, food, fuel, and/or electricity to the population with the pro-democracy movement.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoguide

Demonstrate solidarity to the autocrat's population

✓ Particularly when the autocrat feels he needs to boost his international credibility, facilitate travel to the autocrat's country of well-known people who have been awarded prizes, including the Nobel peace prize and prizes for human rights and justice; arrange for them to speak with movement members and civil society in general to demonstrate outside solidarity with, and offer the inspiration to the repressed people.

Display symbolic solidarity

✓ Encourage cities and towns in your country to fly or display symbols and colors of the pro-democracy movement.

Set up a strategy for people-to-people contact

✓ Appeal to the population in your country to reach out to citizens of the repressive regime to offer individual help, form a human solidarity chain across borders, provide material—and if needed, humanitarian—assistance, and explore opportunities for individual and non-political communication around sport, art, music, and science. Include members of the regime in these efforts in order to establish trust, facilitate conversations, and yield information useful for the resistance.

✓ Appeal to the diaspora in your country whose family members might work in the bureaucracy or government of the repressive regime to convince them to switch sides.

✓ Work with celebrities in your country who are particularly recognizable in the society of the repressive regime and invite them to get involved in a solidarity campaign, including releasing public statements on behalf of the repressed people.

✓ Explore apolitical contacts within the autocrat's society through researchers, medical professionals, artists, singers, musicians, and faith-based representatives, who would offer expressions of solidarity and ask the regime's allies to support the people on the streets.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

Disseminate information about effective nonviolent resistance

- ✓ Share translated strategic material on effective nonviolent organizing and resistance actions and facilitate additional translations in local languages of similarly relevant material; disseminate these materials in the country where the pro-democracy movement is taking place.
- ✓ Deploy government resources to rapidly deliver online webinars, podcasts, and videos with experts on and veterans of nonviolent resistance, together with simultaneous interpretation and/or subtitling into local languages of the country with the pro-democracy movement.

Set up retreats for activists and civil resistance veterans

- ✓ Bring movement members to your or a neighboring country for retreats to provide them with a secure space for reflection and training in nonviolent organizing and resistance, particularly if this action is deemed strategically helpful. Take necessary precautionary measures to protect the identity of the participants and plan for their safe return to their country.
- ✓ Facilitate contact between veterans of successful pro-democracy movements and activists who are currently challenging an autocratic regime.

Develop support strategies applicable in different movement phases

- ✓ Gauge and devise different types of support to pro-democracy movements most impactful at different phases of the struggle: during movement emergence and its ascendance, during the peak of the resistance, and during the post-revolutionary transition period.

Use your military to facilitate contact and conversations with the regime's military

- ✓ Ask your military to reach out to individual officers in the autocrat's military who might have at one point attended war colleges in democracies or trained or communicated with members of the military from democracies, to encourage them to shift their behavior and emphasize that they serve their people, not the autocrat.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

✓ Have your military use their contacts in the autocrat's military to disseminate the [Guide for Members of Security Forces](#) translated into a local language.

Offer a way out and facilitate defections, particularly military defections

✓ Offer political asylum or refugee status to key figures in the regime who have not yet been accused of human rights violations.

✓ From the onset of the conflict, offer safe passages to an autocrat and his key associates if they decide to leave the country and transfer power peacefully to a pro-democracy movement.

✓ Offer a way-out, in coordination with the movement, for key police and military officers to leave an autocrat's regime and/or the country. Help them and their families obtain temporary refugee status and/or secure visas to leave the country.

✓ Consider establishing a special passport regime for those who want to leave the autocrat's military and are not involved in human rights violations and for whom the opportunity to leave the country offers further incentive to abandon the regime.

Stop any military aid

✓ Any military aid to the regime should be put on hold in anticipation of the crackdown and should be cut entirely if the regime uses violence against the movement. Request other countries to do the same.

Help reveal the identities of individual repressors

✓ Use your government resources and work independently or with the pro-democracy movement to reveal the identities of those who use repression against unarmed people in the country.

Dissuade the autocrat's international allies from helping the regime

✓ Politically and diplomatically isolate state allies of the repressive regime and, if necessary, threaten to impose sanctions on them if they do not comply.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

Be a mediator

✓ Keep offering mediation between the regime and the pro-democracy movement with the goal of a peaceful transfer of power.

Offer educational resources to the movement on making its resistance more strategic

✓ Emphasize to the movement the importance of [maintaining a robust discipline](#) in order to be able to effectively advocate on its behalf in international fora and among democratic states. Explain that without nonviolent discipline, pro-democracy assistance and international solidarity will be problematic to secure.

✓ Point out to the movement the importance of building a liberated society with [alternative structures and networks](#) for communication, information production and sharing, propaganda-free education and entrepreneurial activities, political organizing and governance driven by the principles of democratic and deliberative participation, non-discrimination, non-repression, consensus-building, and conflict-resolving nonviolent actions.

Be smart about awards and recognitions for the movement

✓ Nominate the pro-democracy movement as a whole or its unifying collective (e.g., “all brave resisting women”) for any international or domestic awards. Do not favor or recognize just one individual so as to reduce the chances for dividing the movement at a time when it needs unity the most or to avoid later disappointment with the actions by the awarded individual that go contrary to the spirit of the award.

3. Undertake international actions in support of the pro-democracy movement in various inter-state and intergovernmental fora and as part of inter-agency collaboration across democracies

Using a coordinated strategy across different branches of government, top political leaders and diplomats should:

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

Make international support to pro-democracy movements the new norm

- ✓ Normalize and popularize actions by democracies to assist nonviolent movements in other countries.
- ✓ Push back against the autocrats and their allies when they insist on non-interference in their internal affairs and emphasize not only the democracies' [right to assist](#) but their obligation to support the nonviolent pro-democracy movements wherever they occur.

Mobilize international non-state allies

- ✓ Reach out to recognized and reputable faith-based organizations, international workers' unions, transnational business groups, international advocacy and human rights organizations, and others to launch a coordinated global network of stakeholders in support of the pro-democracy movement.

Rely on international organizations

- ✓ Use international bodies to press for fact-finding and investigative missions in the country and international nonviolent accompaniment for the movement leaders.

Launch inter-state coordination for societal support, global sanctions and incentives

- ✓ Set up an intergovernmental task force with other democracies responsible for development and rapid deployment of tools—some of them specified in this guide—to provide coordinated support for the pro-democracy movement and arrange for and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the repressed society.
- ✓ Reach out to your democratic state allies and their relevant executive agencies to begin planning and coordinating actions to implement comprehensive sanctions on the key perpetrators of violence.
- ✓ Coordinate with your democratic state allies to develop a transparent global system of “golden parachutes” that could be offered to autocrats if they decide to leave power peacefully after no longer than two terms in office and do not use

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

repression against a pro-democracy movement.

Assist in setting up international solidarity funds

- ✓ Help set up an international support network for defectors from the regime, including a public-private defectors' solidarity fund to solicit major shifts in loyalty among regime members.

- ✓ Help set up an international public-private fund in support of strikers, including striking workers who decide to join the pro-democracy movement in the country.

Expand global infrastructure for documenting human rights violations

- ✓ Support initiatives, together with other democracies, for international public hotlines and designated global digital spaces where activists can document and submit evidence of state repression for use by domestic and international courts and tribunals in future trials against the autocrat and its lieutenants.

In conclusion

Democracies have a myriad of ways that they can support pro-democracy nonviolent movements in authoritarian countries. This guide has offered a starting place for democracies to devise and deploy their own toolkit for the diplomatic corps stationed in the authoritarian country and for the state officials domestically. By using this guide to support nonviolent movements abroad, democratic countries can mitigate or even prevent violent repression of movements and become a proactive player in helping pro-democracy movements win against the most brutal despots around the world.

It is important to demonstrate to those who take up the beacon of freedom in the unfree society that they are not alone in their struggle. This guide shows how democratic countries can extend their solidarity with those fighting nonviolently in tangible and timely ways.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqguide

Relevant literature on external assistance to nonviolent movements:

- [An Outsider's Guide to Supporting Nonviolent Resistance to Dictatorship](#), October 21, 2012.
- Ackerman, Peter, and Merriman, Hardy, [Preventing mass atrocities: From a Responsibility to Protect \(RtoP\) to a Right to Assist \(RtoA\) campaigns of civil resistance](#). ICNC Special Report Series, May 2019.
- Blair, Dennis. *"Military Engagement: Influencing Armed Forces Worldwide to Support Democratic Transitions"*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013.
- Chenoweth, Erica and Stephan, Maria, [The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?](#) Forthcoming ICNC Monograph.
- Community of Democracies. [The Diplomat's Handbook for Democracy Development and Support](#), 2010. [Introduction and Chapter 1](#) and selected chapters on [Ukraine](#), [China](#), [Chile](#), [Zimbabwe](#), [Belarus](#), [Burma](#), [Russia](#).
- Dudouet, Véronique and Howard Clark. [Nonviolent Civic Action in Support of Human Rights and Democracy](#). Brussels: European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, 2009.
- Johansen, Jorgen. "[Analysing External Support to Nonviolent Revolutions](#)." In *Experiments with Peace, Celebrating Peace on Johan Galtung's 80 Birthday*, ed. Jorgen Johansen and John Y. Jones, 103-14. Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2010.
- Palmer, Mark. "Embassies as Freedom Houses, Ambassadors as Freedom Fighters." In *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025*, 92-146. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.
- Stephan, Maria J. "Checklist for External Assistance to Nonviolent Movements" in *Is Authoritarianism Staging a Comeback*, 207-221. Washington, DC: Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoqueue

Atlantic Council, 2015.

- Stephan, Maria J.; Lakhani, Sadaf, and Naviwala, Nadia, [*Aid to Civil Society: A Movement Mindset*](#), United States Institute for Peace Special Report, February 2015.
- Wilson, Elizabeth, [*People Power Movements and International Human Rights: Creating a Legal Framework*](#), Monograph, International Center on Nonviolent, 2017.

Share this guide: bit.ly/icncdemoguide