New Technologies for Democracy – Panel
Community of Democracies High Level Democracy Meeting
Krakow, Poland
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Introduction

Good morning. I'd like to start by thanking the Community of Democracies for the opportunity to share some of NDI's thoughts and experiences related to the role of technology on democracy and democratic development.

At NDI we've recently celebrated our 25th anniversary. Through these years we've seen tremendous changes in how technology both empowers and challenges aspiring democrats and democratic institutions. In the early 1990s, NDI began to recognize the important role technology plays in politics and in democratic development, and we began to develop creative ways to integrate technology tools and approaches into our democracy support programs to improve the impact of activists, civic groups, political parties, governments and legislatures around the world for almost two decades.

This morning, keeping with the theme of the panel I'd like to share our views and a few examples of using technology in fragile or young democracies as well as in closed societies.

Role of Technology in Democracy

A question often raised is: Was the introduction of the Internet and related technologies a net positive or negative for democracy and freedom? This question is often reduced to the corollary questions: Have these technologies been helpful to aspiring democrats and the struggle to attain basic rights and democracy? Or have they provided authoritarian states and entrenched regimes with more power to suppress political and other human rights?

Our view is that technologies are clearly a net positive for democracy, not because technology tips the balance of power to citizens in closed societies – I don't think they do – and I'll come back to that point momentarily. **Technologies are a net positive for democracy because of the important role they can play in consolidating democracy in fragile and transitional democratic states where space for civic and political engagement exists, but where democracy hasn't fully taken root and risks backsliding toward authoritarianism if nascent democratic institutions are not strengthened.** Creative uses of technology in these environments can and do help make these institutions more efficient, accessible, transparent and effective and thus help democracy deliver for their citizens.

So rather than focusing exclusively on the most closed societies, we need to recognize the important role technology can play in supporting fragile or young democracies before they backslide and become more closed.

I'd like to provide two of our current program examples that demonstrate some of the most promising new technologies and approaches for democratic development:

- The first example is Afghanistan: We created a tool for analyzing Afghanistan election data in the aftermath of last summer's flawed presidential election that was developed to pinpoint fraud and try to hold the government accountable for better elections going forward. The hope is that by illustrating the widespread fraud using the advanced visualization and data filtering tools built into this mapping application the regime will be compelled to hold a better parliamentary election this September, and parties and election monitoring groups could better prepare to oversee the process. We're also extending this platform with additional data sets, and we'll see how this approach works.

- The new technologies here worth noting that are widely applicable are the "open data" movement, essentially a push to encourage governments and other organizations to make their data not only available, as the Afghan election commission did in the 2500 page PDF document, but make it accessible so the anyone, including civil society groups pushing for more transparent and accountable government, can use the data for their own purposes and analysis.

- The other key innovation are new visualization tools - including but not limited to maps, that are becoming cheaper and easier to use and help take large data sets and make them much easier to comprehend, especially combined with multiple open data sets that get "mashed up".

- The second example that demonstrates this point is our partner in Uganda that is monitoring the upcoming election. The Uganda Citizen Hotline program allows citizens to report any problems they have with voter registration during the pre-election period via text message, and will be combined with a domestic election monitoring program using a national network of trained observers for election day.

- The Citizen Hotline program uses citizen reporting through crowdsourcing for data collection, which is an evolving new approach to increasing citizen participation and oversight of elections and other political processes including areas such as human rights monitoring, budget monitoring, and any number of others. We're working to make these approaches more secure in challenging environments where organizing and training monitors isn't possible, and also to include other forms of data collection such as pictures and video. And these approaches often use nice visualization tools like maps to share the information.713

Now I'd also like to share some thoughts about working in non-democratic environments and the role of circumvention tools and other technologies put to use in these societies.

Democratic Development Strategy

First, it's important to recognize that **building circumvention tools and playing the "cat and mouse" game with technologically savvy authoritarian regimes isn't a democratic transition strategy**. While useful and frequently necessary – and also very risky – it's important to place these tools in the context of the factors to affect change and recognize that **to be most effective in bringing about political reform, they must be used to support well-organized political activities by strong organizations, typically civic groups or political parties, with long-term plans for change**. The introduction of these

tools in the absence of good civic or political organization is not enough.

Program Approach for Closed Societies – Security and Risk

This leads to my last point: In **strong and sophisticated authoritarian states, the state will usually have the technological advantage over citizens** because there is no such thing as fully secure communications – which are critical for effective political organizing. These regimes can easily control access to and monitor the Internet as well as both mobile and fixed-line phone networks, allowing them to block or conduct surveillance at their leisure. Some have even "outsourced" these activities to private or state-owned companies, typically mobile and Internet service providers, by using them as intermediaries responsible for the implementation of their repressive policies.

In addition, sophisticated states like China and Iran, among others, have increasingly clever ways to gain access to individual computers either physically or remotely and monitor the location of phones so that an individual's security and communications cannot be guaranteed even when using sophisticated encryption, proxy/routing or satellite technologies.

For these reasons, NDI takes a very tempered and cautious approach to introducing technologies in these environments and only by **fully assesses and understands the risks** and building comprehensive communications plans that pair technology and detailed procedures to avoid putting partners or citizens in harm's way.

There is much more to say on these topics, but I'll close and be happy to extrapolate if there are questions, and leave you with a really funny but telling comic.

Read Comic

11:00

Closing

Thank you.

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2 Minute closing statement

Just restate my main points:

- that technology is a net gain for technology because of it's important contribution to strengthening young and weak democracies and prevent backsliding;
- that gains in political reform in closed societies are most impactful when moments of opportunity are paired with good technology and strong political movements;
- in closed societies citizens and civic groups are at a technological disadvantage and need to be very deliberate in building communication strategies that take into account a full understanding

of risk, and must include a combination of the right technologies and procedures that are designed for their specific environment.