

MAGA Goes Global

From Internal Contradictions to Strategic Questions for Pro-Democracy Actors

Discussion Paper by Melissa Li

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Key Takeaways

1

In recent years, Make America Great Again (MAGA) has rapidly become one of the leading voices of the new global far right. Through transnational activities such as conferences and the sharing of funding, narratives and a common playbook, MAGA challenges liberal democracy.

2

Like any political movement, MAGA's transnational activity is riddled with tensions between what it says and what it does. This paper covers three topics where there exists a clear gap between what MAGA theoretically supports and how it acts abroad: democracy support, national sovereignty and free speech.

3

At first, these tensions may look like windows of opportunity. But exploiting these contradictions in the hopes that this will help counter MAGA's influence risks backfiring on pro-democracy actors, possibly exposing them to the same accusations, strengthening or legitimizing the far right.

4

Rather than easy answers, this paper offers a set of questions that flow out of the raised dilemmas, meant to spark strategic discussion among pro-democracy actors about how to contest a far-right project that will likely outlast Trump. Crucially, doing so requires pro-democracy actors to reckon with their own weaknesses, which are all too easy for far-right actors to exploit.

Strategic Questions for Pro-Democracy Actors

Tension #1: Ending Democracy Support vs. Building MAGA Infrastructure

- 1 How should pro-democracy actors prioritize between countering the far right and promoting a positive vision of democracy across strategy, activities and funding? Which area – funding, training, networks – should pro-democracy actors focus on?
 - 2 Should pro-democracy actors adopt a more partisan approach to defending democracy – e.g., by framing it as a ‘progressive’ battle – or rally the broadest possible coalition?
 - 3 Who can fill the resource gap left by the retreat of state-backed democracy support? How can pro-democracy actors adapt operational models and strategies to the available resources?
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Tension #2: Preaching Sovereignty vs. Practicing Intervention

- 1 Are MAGA’s foreign policy divisions a permanent break or a temporary conflict? How should pro-democracy actors strategize under that uncertainty?
 - 2 Is exploiting the divisions within the global far right an opportunity to seize, or a risky move that could fuel the global anti-elite narrative and strengthen far-right groups at home?
 - 3 Should pro-democracy actors contest the far right’s use of concepts such as ‘national interest’ and ‘sovereignty,’ or should they develop and promote pro-democratic versions of their own?
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Tension #3: Language of Freedom and Democracy vs. Acts of Repression

- 1 How can pro-democracy actors design and communicate measures to protect democracy, such as rules on disinformation or party bans, without it being reframed as censorship by the far right?
 - 2 How can pro-democracy actors make the case for democracy concrete enough to reach people?
 - 3 Given that the term ‘democracy’ resonates differently across contexts, how can pro-democracy actors build coalitions broad enough to act together?
-

Introduction

“The threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia, it’s not China, it’s not any other external actor. And what I worry about is the threat from within, the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values.”¹ – JD Vance, 14 February 2025.

On February 14, 2025, United States (US) Vice President JD Vance, a leading Make America Great Again (MAGA) figure, gave a speech at the Munich Security Conference (MSC) that sent shock waves throughout Europe. In his speech, Vance accused European governments of betraying democratic values while backing political actors who undermine liberal democracy. While his words took Europeans by surprise, the speech reflected a change of course that had been building for years. Over the past decade, far-right actors² across the globe have not only grown stronger at the ballot box, but have also increasingly contested the meaning of democracy. Hungary’s former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán invested heavily in framing his own model of ‘illiberal democracy,’ following his announcement to build an “illiberal state”³ in 2014 – rejecting the premise that democracy must automatically be liberal, rooted in the protection of civil liberties and individual rights, as well as the limitation of state power.⁴ Others have since taken up this model, including the MAGA movement in the US or Poland’s Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) party. In their own ways, all these movements are working to dismantle the liberal democratic order. The way these ideas travel across borders is a telling example of how far-right movements increasingly operate transnationally, sharing funding, narratives and a common playbook.

Through transnational ties, far-right actors provide each other legitimacy, share funding, and spread a common playbook and set of narratives.

Internationally, MAGA operates as a leading force within a broader global far right that rejects the liberal international order. The US think tank Heritage Foundation led the drafting of “Project 2025,” widely viewed as the blueprint of the Trump administration’s second term.⁵ One of the places where far-right transnational ties are built are international conferences. Project 2025-affiliated groups such as the Claremont Institute and Alliance Defending Freedom rank among the most influential in the international far-right conference circuit.⁶ The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), initially a US-based conference, has expanded to Australia, Brazil and South Korea (2019), Hungary, Mexico and Israel (2022), and Argentina (2023).⁷ Through these connections, far-right actors project global strength and provide each other legitimacy, develop joint strategies, share funding and expertise, and spread a common set of narratives.

This confronts pro-democracy actors with a serious challenge. In this discussion paper, pro-democracy actors are understood as those who seek to defend and promote liberal democracy against a rollback of its pluralist, rights-based core. As such, this includes the field of

¹ Munich Security Conference, “Munich Security Conference 2025. Speech by JD Vance and Selected Reactions,” 2025, accessed May 3, 2026, https://securityconference.org/assets/user_upload/MSC_Speeches_2025_Vol2_Ansicht.pdf.

² This paper adopts the definition of the far right by Cas Mudde in using “far right” as an umbrella term for a political family which includes both the *radical right* – which accepts popular sovereignty and majority rule but rejects core elements of liberal democracy, such as minority rights, the separation of powers, and the rule of law – and the *extreme right*, which rejects democracy as such. See Mudde, Cas, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

³ Hungarian Government, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp,” 2014, accessed June 7, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/mvcd8kx8>.

⁴ Bass, Jeffrey, “Democracy, Measures of,” *Encyclopedia of Social Measurement* 1, 2005, accessed May 10, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/y5whkm93>.

⁵ Heritage Foundation, “Project 2025 Reaches 100 Coalition Partners, Continues to Grow in Preparation for Next President,” 2024, accessed May 2, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/2vts5fzf>.

⁶ Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, “Mapping The Far Right,” 2024, accessed June 1, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/ydt99heb>.

⁷ Silverman, Grant, “Rallying the Troops: CPAC and the International Far Right,” *The Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 5, no. 2, 2025, accessed May 20, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/55jjykjc>; Farivar, Masood, “Amid rising worldwide populism, US conservative conference goes global,” *Voice of America*, 2025, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/yzmt8y46>.

democracy support (donors and implementers), political actors (elected officials, parties and governments), civil society actors, and the public administrations that implement their decisions. They now face opponents who challenge the basis on which liberal democracy has been defended – its narratives, its norms, its institutions, and the vision of an international order that has upheld them. Meanwhile, these far-right actors are building their own parallel infrastructure to advance their political project and larger vision of what is in their minds a just future. Essentially, these pro-democracy actors are facing a political struggle over what democracy stands for, battled out in national and local contexts as well as within the transnational networks that connect these contexts.

This paper takes the MAGA movement in the US as its case example. It is neither the origin of the recent ‘illiberal turn’⁸ – that template was Orbán’s – nor is it the only case; we can find comparable dynamics in India, Brazil and elsewhere. However, the MAGA movement is arguably the most powerful and consequential. Not only is MAGA operating as a transnational movement, but it is currently also running arguably the world’s most influential government, with access to its treasury and wealth of resources. Shutting down the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the country’s main aid and development agency, showed how directly Washington’s decisions can affect populations around the world.⁹ Moreover, MAGA has started using public resources to amplify its project abroad, funding MAGA-aligned civil society groups in Europe to “develop civilizational bonds.”¹⁰

**MAGA’s contradictions
look like strategic
openings yet exploiting
them risks backfiring on
pro-democracy actors.**

This paper starts from the strategic consideration that what looks like an unstoppable rise of the far right is, in part, smoke and mirrors, and one the far right itself highly benefits from and tries to promote. As the far right advances transnationally and current responses from civil society actors – such as mapping funding flows and monitoring conference participation – appear to fall short, the demand for more proactive strategies is growing. MAGA’s transnational activities are full of tensions between what it says and what it does – these seem to offer windows of opportunity for pro-democracy actors who could exploit MAGA’s internal contradictions to

weaken its influence. However, as I will show, these opportunities are less clear-cut than they appear: exploiting these tensions risks backfiring on pro-democracy actors. I argue that doing so will force pro-democracy actors into a vulnerable position, drawing the same criticism back onto them, possibly strengthening the far right in the process. This paper therefore treats the tensions as dilemmas to be worked through – rather than as easy wins – so that pro-democracy actors can act deliberately in situations where every option carries a cost. Its purpose is to spark strategic discussion between pro-democracy actors about how to defend liberal democracy without falling into those traps – and, beyond that, how to work proactively toward a resilient democratic future.

The paper starts off with outlining how I conceptualize MAGA. It then examines three core tensions, selected because they map three crucial leverage points that MAGA’s transnational activities exploit: (1) the instruments of democracy support, (2) the notion of ‘national sovereignty’ and (3) the language of freedom and democracy. Lastly, the paper formulates strategic questions they should grapple with, whose answers will differ by actor and context.

The analysis focuses on MAGA, but it recognizes that the movement’s impact differs across regions; this analysis is mainly concerned with MAGA’s relations with Europe. A more comprehensive analysis, particularly one that engages countries of the Global South, would

⁸ Enyedi, Zsolt, “Concept and Varieties of Illiberalism,” *Politics and Governance* 12, 2024, accessed June 10, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/yc3uye8a>.

⁹ Feldscher, Karen, “USAID shutdown has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths,” *Harvard T.H. Chan*, 2025, accessed June 12, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/mthspfsy>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, “DRL NOFO Developing Civilizational Bonds, Democratic Resilience, and Rule of Law in Europe,” 2026, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/4cnjcvfd>.

need to grapple with the ways anti-liberal and sovereigntist narratives there interact with local actors and their specific politics and draw on historical experiences.

Who or What is MAGA?

In this paper, MAGA is defined as a diverse movement comprising both core MAGA actors and a broader range of MAGA-aligned groups. This not only includes US President Donald Trump, his administration and MAGA-aligned legislators, but also think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation or the America First Policy Institute, youth organizations such as Charlie Kirk's Turning Point USA, media and influencer networks, CPAC, and religious conservative organizations. Of the 38 primary authors of Project 2025, 31 were subsequently appointed or nominated to positions in the Trump administration or transition,¹¹ showing how closely the MAGA movement is interwoven with the current administration.

The MAGA brand may not survive, but its ideological project will likely outlast any single leader.

The sheer number of MAGA-aligned organizations and figures indicates MAGA's institutional depth; it will likely outlast Trump's presidency, all the more so because it is an ideological project, rather than a Trump personality cult. MAGA's response to recent internal divisions has shown as much. Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News host and influential far-right voice, broke with Trump over the 2026 US-Israeli strikes on Iran, accusing him of betraying 'America First,' renounced the Republican Party and has stated he would help build a third party.¹² Since then, Carlson has declared that MAGA "has no future,"¹³ while continuing to advance its core nationalist and anti-interventionist commitments under the 'America First' banner. This rift should not be interpreted as a dissolution of the MAGA ideology, but rather as a contest over ideological ownership. Figures now fight over who will embody post-Trump 'America First,' which presupposes a core that exists independently of the current president. While it is unclear whether the label of MAGA will survive, the underlying ideological project will likely outlast any single brand or leader.

It has become clear that MAGA is neither internally homogeneous nor monolithic. Analysts have identified multiple, sometimes competing, strands within the coalition: anti-interventionist populists, the religious right, a newly-influential tech right, and converted Democrats around the 'Make America Healthy Again' movement.¹⁴ These groups diverge on strategic questions directly relevant to MAGA's positions on international politics, most visibly on whether the US should militarily intervene abroad and whether to support allies such as Ukraine and Israel, but also on the question of economic nationalism versus free trade.

Still, despite these competing undercurrents, the MAGA's rhetoric is united by an 'America First' agenda, which breaks with the dominant tradition in American conservatism. The

¹¹ Legum, Judd, "What Trump doesn't want you to know about Project 2025," *Popular Information*, 2024, accessed July 2, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/3apukxc4>.

¹² Ventura, Tiago, "The Breakdown of Trump and Tucker Carlson's Alliance—and How It Goes Beyond the Iran War," *Time*, 2026, accessed July 1, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/ytxtdnj9>; Garcia-Navarro, Lulu, "The Interview. What Does Tucker Carlson Really Believe? I Went to Maine to Find Out," *The New York Times*, 2026, accessed July 10, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/5chdfmd6>; Garrison, Joey, "Tucker Carlson says he's starting a third party after break with Trump," *USA Today News*, 2026, accessed September 4, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/4vfrz5dc>; Balk, Tim, "Tucker Carlson, who broke with Trump, plans to 'help build a third party'," *The Seattle Times*, 2026, accessed August 1, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/mrx9b537>.

¹³ Sky News, "Trump left MAGA movement 'no future': Tucker Carlson tells Yalda Hakim," 2026, accessed September 9, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/bdesfttc>.

¹⁴ Blum, Julian, "Trump, The Tech Right and Christian Nationalists: an Unnatural Coalition," *Institut Montaigne*, 2025, accessed August 10, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/5khus7z9>; Blum, Natalie, "President melds a fractious coalition: The six factions of Trumpworld," *The Washington Post*, 2025, accessed August 19, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/32wpmysd>.

“three-legged stool”¹⁵ approach, the Reagan era philosophy which combined free-market economics, social conservatism and anti-communist internationalism, no longer defines the American right’s leading movement. MAGA has replaced free-market economics with nationalist protectionism, and Cold War anti-communist internationalism with a foreign policy that is (at least theoretically) based on a non-intervention principle and the withdrawal from multilateral commitments.¹⁶

Internationally, MAGA functions as a powerful, if not the central, node in the global far-right movement, a broad political family that seeks to challenge the liberal international order strongly which they associate with a corrupt transnational elite. As Rita Abrahamsen and Michael C. Williams note, for actors in this political family, “the enemy elite is not merely national, it is also global.”¹⁷ This framing is what enables MAGA to be nationalist in its domestic rhetoric but transnationally active in practice. If the adversary is a global elite, then building international alliances against the ruling class is not a contradiction with nationalist principles but rather a logical consequence of the threat perception. This also positions MAGA within a global far-right movement whose challenge to liberal democracy long predates Trump’s second term and will outlast it.

¹⁵ Field, Laura K., “An Introductory Overview of Furious Minds,” *Illiberalism Studies Program*, 2025, accessed August 11, 2026, <https://www.illiberalism.org/an-introductory-overview-of-furious-minds/>.

¹⁶ Field, “An Introductory Overview of Furious Minds.”

¹⁷ Abrahamsen, Rita and Williams, Michael C., “The Emergence of a Global Radical Right,” *Current History* 125, no. 867, 2026, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2026.125.867.3>.

Tensions and Dilemmas

MAGA's reach abroad takes several forms: it spreads a political ideology and a playbook through transnational networks and conferences such as CPAC, it builds ties with far-right parties and organizations across Europe and beyond, it channels funding and expertise to MAGA allies, and under the second Trump administration, and it now deploys the resources of the US government toward these ends, from dismantling USAID to funding MAGA-aligned 'civil society' groups in Europe.

Like any larger political grouping, the MAGA movement's transnational activities are full of contradictions. This paper focuses on three of them. First, MAGA dismantles democracy assistance as illegitimate foreign interference while constructing its own version of the same infrastructure. Second, it champions national sovereignty and non-intervention as a normative commitment among far-right allies while intervening in other states and pressuring its own partners into line. Third, it speaks the language of democracy and free speech while curtailing both, at home and abroad. Notably, across all three tensions, the principles MAGA invokes – sovereignty, non-intervention, democracy, free speech – do not function as commitments but as instruments, propagated where they serve MAGA-aligned ends and ignored where they obstruct them.

This section examines each tension and spells out the strategic questions for pro-democracy actors. These dilemmas and strategic questions are not equally relevant to all pro-democracy actors. The first tension is mostly relevant for the democracy support field – the donors and organizations whose own instruments MAGA uses as well. The second confronts political actors most directly, i.e., the governments, foreign ministries and parties that must decide how to respond to a far right that applies to the principle of sovereignty selectively. The third concerns those actors who defend democracy publicly, from elected officials, governments, and politicians to civil society and the media.

It is not enough to expose these tensions – and exploiting them is not a straight-forward option either, because doing so tends to backfire on pro-democracy actors. This is why each tension in this paper ends with strategic questions rather than recommendations: the windows of opportunity exist, but so do the risks.

Tension #1: Ending Democracy Support vs. Building MAGA Infrastructure

The first tension is rooted in how the MAGA movement has systematically attacked progressive democracy support and foreign assistance, deeming it 'ideological interference.' Much of what it targets under that label, whether that be anti-discrimination and gender programming to reproductive rights, advances the equal standing of all citizens – a core tenet of liberal democracy, not a partisan preference. Despite attacking this democracy support, MAGA actors are building their own functionally equivalent infrastructure, pursuing MAGA-aligned values and priorities. This shows that their concern was never about protecting the sovereignty of other countries from ideological interference but about spreading their own ideological agenda.

In the early days of Trump's second term in late January 2025, he ordered a near-total freeze on all US foreign assistance, directly attacking the entire foreign aid system, including funding for democracy support programs. In July 2025, USAID, the key actor for implementing US

foreign assistance programs abroad, was officially closed.¹⁸ The administration also froze the funding for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), although its funding has a legal basis different from foreign assistance, and therefore should not have been affected by the aid freeze.¹⁹ Following a lawsuit, a federal judge ruled that freeze illegal.²⁰ Even though the administration released the already congressionally appropriated funds, the plans for the 2027 budgets reveal that it wants to defund NED as part of its “Ending Weaponized Programs” cuts.²¹

MAGA’s concern was never about sovereignty but about spreading its own ideological agenda.

The Trump administration and MAGA-aligned actors justified this unprecedented decision by arguing they needed to push back against ‘woke ideology’ and foreign interference, and champion American interests and values instead.²² The dismantling of USAID and democracy support drew on ideas long promoted in MAGA circles, above all in Project 2025, which clearly criticized supporting progressive policy priorities and values abroad. It also criticized USAID for attempting “to pursue overseas a divisive political and cultural agenda that promotes abortion, climate extremism, gender radicalism, and interventions against perceived systemic racism.”²³ Relatedly, the administration further spoke about “USAID’s woke excesses” it sought to end. In a rescission package to end “woke, weaponized, and wasteful spending,” the US government decried a fund for democracy promotion as “interfere[ing] with the sovereignty of other countries.” Furthermore, the administration sought to “eliminate programs that have conducted censorship operations and meddled in elections in foreign countries.”²⁴ The executive order that announced the 90-day pause of US foreign assistance went the furthest, claiming that foreign assistance promoting ideas abroad serves to “destabilize world peace,”²⁵ clearly framing it as a security threat.

While the US government is dismantling pro-democracy institutions on the grounds of protecting sovereignty and avoid foreign meddling, it is *rebuilding* those very same structures – this time with MAGA-aligned conservative objectives and partners. Importantly, this is what a paper published by the Heritage Foundation is arguing for. To break the “normative stranglehold” maintained by “human rights and ‘democracy-promotion’ NGOs and key funding bodies like [USAID],” related actors do not only need to dismantle them but also need a broader transnational network “that extends beyond national governments to include cooperative links between conservative political parties, think tanks, NGOs, and philanthropic donors.”²⁶ In other words, Heritage makes freedom from “supranational and transnational [...] interference,” a founding principle of what is itself a transnational network of parties, think tanks, NGOs and donors seeking influence abroad. The infrastructure it condemns as a violation of sovereignty is the infrastructure it seeks to rebuild, only with MAGA-aligned conservative aims and partners. This build up can be traced across three dimensions: funding, training and networks.

¹⁸ U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, “Making Foreign Aid Great Again,” U.S. Department of State, 2025, accessed July 22, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/4esem6e2>.

¹⁹ National Endowment for Democracy, “Statement on NED’s Funding Disruption and Program Suspensions,” 2025, accessed July 13, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/yek4ndxh>.

²⁰ Tully-Mcmanus, Katherine, “Trump-backed judge rules administration’s withholding of funds illegal,” *Politico*, 2025, accessed August 8, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/2uhwajzv>.

²¹ The White House, “Ending Weaponization of the Federal Government,” accessed August 20, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/ypudcsu9>.

²² U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, “Making Foreign Aid Great Again.”

²³ The Heritage Foundation, “Mandate for Leadership. The Conservative Promise,” 2023, accessed August 1, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/58ewd3nv>.

²⁴ The White House, “Historic Pocket Rescission Package Eliminates Woke, Weaponized, and Wasteful Spending,” 2025, accessed July 30, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/ymaxdawx>.

²⁵ The White House, “Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid,” 2025, accessed July 25, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/594mks2j>.

²⁶ Levine, Nathan, “Toward a Nationalist Internationalism: The Case for Building a National Conservative Alliance,” *The Heritage Foundation*, 2025, accessed August 6, 2026. <https://tinyurl.com/23pj97hp>.

Funding

The first dimension is funding. Since Trump took office in 2025, the MAGA movement once again benefits from public resources and not only private funding, significantly increasing the available resources for MAGA's priorities. The first Trump administration was relatively unexperienced at wielding these considerable resources; the second administration has thus far been much more effective in leaving a lasting mark on institutions.

Project 2025 calls for redirecting US foreign assistance toward MAGA-aligned values and priorities.

Regarding foreign aid, Project 2025 explicitly calls for redirecting US foreign assistance toward MAGA-aligned values and priorities. This includes anti-abortion programming, religious freedom promotion and support to faith-based organizations abroad. In January 2026, the US State Department implemented the so-called Promoting Human Flourishing in Foreign Assistance (PHFFA) policy that created specific conditions for nearly all non-military foreign assistance – now, an estimated \$30-40 billion across 160 countries must flow to organizations that comply with anti-abortion, anti-‘gender ideology’ and anti-Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) requirements.²⁷ The anti-abortion component reinstates the Mexico City Policy – first introduced by the Reagan administration in 1984 and revived by every Republican administration since – which bars recipients of US family-planning funds from performing or promoting abortion. Its scope has widened with each Republican presidency: from family-planning funds, to most global health assistance under Trump I, and now, absorbed into the broader PHFFA umbrella, to most non-military foreign assistance. The gender-ideology and DEI conditions, by contrast, are new under Trump II.²⁸

Moreover, in July 2026, the US State Department opened a new funding stream, explicitly to support MAGA-aligned ‘civil society’ in Europe, with the goal of “develop[ing] civilizational bonds.”²⁹ This decision was backed by the America First Policy Institute; a representative argues this is needed to counter to the “ideological imbalance.”³⁰ Funding MAGA-aligned actors in Europe is a clear sign that the administration is investing in a transnational network attuned to MAGA's interests.

It is important to highlight that long before MAGA gained access to state resources, its institutional infrastructure was built with private money, above all from MAGA-aligned conservative donor networks. Using their exclusive access to an analysis by the watchdog group Accountable.US, NBC News reported in 2024 that groups linked to the legal activist Leonard Leo and to the Koch network channeled more than \$55 million into the organizations advising Project 2025, with Leo's network alone accounting for over \$50 million since 2021.³¹ The turn to public resources under the second Trump administration thus does not replace private funding but adds to a well-established base.

Furthermore, religious organizations linked to MAGA are also heavily investing an anti-rights agenda in Europe. According to the European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights' (EPF) *The Next Wave* report, the so-called US Christian Right invested

²⁷ Moss, Kellie, Kates, Jennifer, Rouw, Anna, and Oum, Stephanie, “The Trump Administration's Latest Expansion of the Mexico City Policy: A Funding Analysis,” *KFF*, 2026, accessed August 16, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/yh8p6pn6>.

²⁸ Moss et al., “The Trump Administration's Latest Expansion of the Mexico City Policy: A Funding Analysis.”

²⁹ Gross, Anna, Fisher, Lucy, Sheppard, David, and Mackinnon, Amy, “US government to fund Maga-aligned think-tanks and charities in Europe,” *Financial Times*, 2026, accessed August 10, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/bdka98v7>; Politico, “The MAGA-friendly European think tanks Trump wants to fund,” 2026, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/y4fcsc87>; U.S. Department of State, “DRL NOFO Developing Civilizational Bonds, Democratic Resilience, and Rule of Law in Europe.”

³⁰ Zicarelli, Kristen, “Towards an allied civil society network in Europe,” *The Critic*, 2026, accessed August 1, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/msu2j2p4>.

³¹ Doyle, Katherine, “Leonard Leo, Koch networks pour millions into groups prepping for potential second Trump administration,” *NBC News*, 2024, accessed July 30, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/3y2sd434>.

\$104.3 million in Europe between 2019 and 2023. Notably, this is only one funding stream within a documented \$1.18 billion in anti-gender funding over those five years, drawn also from European and Russian sources.³² Among these funders is Alliance Defending Freedom International, which sits on Project 2025's advisory board and forms part of a broader transnational anti-rights movement that began as an informal coalition of roughly 300 organizations across Europe, the US and Russia.³³

Compared to public funding for *pro*-gender equality, these amounts are significantly smaller. Over 2021-2022, EU institutions alone – not counting member states' own spending – directed more than \$12 billion to projects with gender equality as a significant objective, and close to half a billion more where gender equality was the primary objective. On an annual basis, that is roughly \$6 billion a year against some \$236 million in total anti-gender funding.³⁴ Importantly, this should be treated cautiously as a point of reference, as these figures are not directly comparable, not least because anti-gender funding is not tracked as systematically as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) tracks the gender equality funding of the EU member states.

Training

A second way to track the building of MAGA alternatives to the democratic networks MAGA is working to tear down is by looking at training programs. One clear indication is that MAGA-aligned organizations are investing in the capacities and qualifications of 'their' (future) activists and leaders. For example, the Leadership Institute – listed on Project 2025's advisory board – trains "conservative activists and leaders in the public policy process."³⁵ Its programs draw on the same instruments that democratic actors have used for decades: training in activism, campaigning, movement leadership, and civic engagement. European political foundations, for instance, run activities of a seemingly similar kind, from civic education to leadership development and civil society capacity-building. Crucially, these organizations only use similar tools but ultimately pursue different goals. Another way they differ from traditional pro-democracy groups is that organizations like the Leadership Institute are explicitly political. It describes conservatives as engaged in a political contest with 'the left,' which is "using its positions of influence to change [American] economy, [...] culture and [...] way of life."³⁶ Except for party-affiliated political foundations, most pro-democracy actors have avoided such explicit political framing.

Networks

Third, MAGA-linked actors have built a transnational conference and network infrastructure to enable exchanges and partnerships between far-right actors. The transnational anti-rights movement, mentioned above, is one example. A more prominent one is CPAC, established in 1974 as a domestic conservative conference in the US. Over the past decade, CPAC has expanded massively in other countries. It launched its first international event in Japan in 2017 and now operates in more than 10 countries, including Hungary, Mexico, Brazil, South Korea, and Argentina, with its entire international expansion being concentrated in the post-2016 MAGA period. Moreover, the National Conservatism (NatCon) conference began in 2019 and now holds events in the US, London, Rome, and Brussels. These conferences and networks

³² Datta, Neil, "The Next Wave: How Religious Extremism Is Reclaiming Power," *European Parliamentary Forum for Secual & Reproductive Rights*, 2025, accessed August 10, 2026, https://narod.hr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/EPF_NextWaveReport-9-1.pdf.

³³ Datta, Neil, "Restoring the Natural Order," *European Parliamentary Forum for Secual & Reproductive Rights*, 2018, accessed August 9, 2026, https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/rtno_epf_book_lores.pdf.

³⁴ OECD, "Development Finance for Gender Equality," accessed September 1, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/3xzb43hr>.

³⁵ Leadership Institute, "Where Conservative Leaders are Made," accessed September 22, 2026, <https://leadershipinstitute.org/about/>.

³⁶ Leadership Institute, "Where Conservative Leaders are Made."

function as spaces for building connections, agenda-setting, crafting shared narratives for influencing audiences, and alliance-building across countries. Viktor Orbán urged conservatives at CPAC in 2022 to “make friends,” because “the progressive liberals and the neo-Marxists have unlimited unity.” And as the closing statement of CPAC Budapest 2024 duly declared, “an international coalition of national forces has been established.”³⁷

Strategic Implications

Overall, the second Trump administration has dismantled US democracy support as part of its fight against what it deems to be a global liberal elite using foreign assistance to spread ‘woke’ values abroad. Tearing down the sector is part of the culture war MAGA has been waging. As the Heritage Foundation and America First Policy Institute’s own papers show, it is also a step toward building an infrastructure to pursue MAGA-aligned priorities. For pro-democracy actors, the immediate consequences, in particular the withdrawal of resources and increased political attacks, have already forced them to scale down their efforts or change the way they operate.

Documenting far-right activity does little on its own: much of it is legal, and mapping is not countering.

Moreover, MAGA is building its own infrastructure to spread its own ideas, values and priorities, confronting pro-democracy actors with a contest over who sets international norms, which is exactly the “normative stranglehold” that Heritage seeks to break. Because MAGA increasingly uses the same tools traditional pro-democracy actors have been using – funding, training, networks – pro-democracy actors’ criticism of the far-right activities risks undermining the legitimacy of their own decades of practice. Documentation alone therefore does little, as the activities it tracks are often legal and mapping them does not, in isolation, counter them.

The impact of this parallel infrastructure lies in its ability to generate broader public support for far-right ideas and policies, feeding into the process of normalization. Pro-democracy actors thus face a far right with growing resources, working directly against their endeavors to safeguard and expand liberal democracy and protect vulnerable groups from far-right policies which make the impact they seek to achieve more unlikely. When pro-democracy actors themselves become the target of direct attacks, achieving a positive impact becomes even less likely, as they will have to invest limited (and often shrinking) resources into crisis response and their own safety.

This increasingly polarized context will force pro-democracy actors to prioritize strategically. On the one hand, they could focus their strategy on countering far-right actors, tracking their networks and counter-balancing their narratives. This, however, could backfire, as far-right

Defending democracy can sound abstract, while the far right offers a story of belonging and identity.

actors can frame themselves as the victims of suppression and grow stronger as a result. It also risks letting MAGA voices dominate the debate, crowding out pro-democracy actors’ own priorities. On the other hand, they could focus on making a more compelling case for their vision of a liberal democracy, irrespective of what the far right is doing. This, however, risks leaving the far right unchallenged.

Pro-democracy actors are also confronted with increasingly limited resources. Funding for external democracy promotion is decreasing, as donors scale back foreign assistance, raising the question of who, if anyone, could fill the gap. Finally, as some pro-democracy actors will be direct targets of far-right pressure, they will have to spend resources they do not have defending themselves and their partners.

³⁷ Abrahamsen and Williams, “The Emergence of a Global Radical Right,” pp. 3.

A further dilemma concerns the political character of pro-democracy actors' response. MAGA-aligned organizations such as the Leadership Institute are explicitly political, framing their work as a contest against 'the left' and organizing on that basis. Most pro-democracy actors have avoided this kind of open alignment, presenting themselves as defenders of a shared democratic order rather than as partisan. The party-affiliated political foundations are an exception: they are openly aligned with a political agenda while remaining committed to the democratic order, which shows that explicit partisanship and a commitment to liberal democracy are not mutually exclusive.

In practice, however, partisan pro-democracy actors often stay in their own camp and do not work across political currents. Such an approach risks confirming the far right's claim that defending democracy is only a progressive agenda and limits the coalition to a single political camp. In contrast, refraining from partisan stances protects their claim that defending democracy is for anyone, whether progressive or conservative, but risks sounding like a defense of institutions and procedures – courts, election rules, oversight bodies – if not clearly tied to values. Such technocratic rhetoric can feel very far removed from most people's lives – meanwhile, the far right offers a compelling story about identity and belonging.

Strategic Questions for Pro-Democracy Actors

- 1 How should pro-democracy actors prioritize between countering the far right and promoting a positive vision of democracy across strategy, activities and funding? Which area – funding, training, networks – should pro-democracy actors focus on?
- 2 Should pro-democracy actors adopt a more partisan approach to defending democracy – e.g., by framing it as a 'progressive' battle – or rally the broadest coalition possible?
- 3 Who can fill the resource gap left by the retreat of state-backed democracy support? How can pro-democracy actors adapt operational models and strategies to the available resources?

Tension #2: Preaching Sovereignty vs. Practicing Intervention

The second tension holds two related inconsistencies. The first is between the MAGA movement's nationalist orientation and its efforts to collaborate with far-right partners across the globe: a politics centered on the nation that nonetheless organizes transnationally. The second lies between principle and practice. Non-intervention and the protection of national sovereignty are among the main through-lines of the global far right, yet the second Trump administration has openly intervened in other countries' affairs and pressured sovereign partners – even MAGA-friendly allies – to subordinate their interests to 'America First.'

Pro-democracy actors have long feared a unified global far right, variously described as a 'nationalist international' or 'illiberal international,' on the grounds that it would strengthen efforts to undermine liberal democracy and human rights.³⁸ That fear is not unfounded. As mentioned above, transnational networks have expanded, partially spurred on by conferences such as CPAC and NatCon. At the CPAC conference in Budapest in 2022, former Hungarian

³⁸ Szalay, David, "The Rise of the International Nationalists," *The New York Times*, 2022, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/j88hmyxu>; Ross, Jacob, "The Other Transatlantic Alliance," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 2025, accessed August 8, 2026, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/other-transatlantic-alliance>.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán called for a closer coordination between allies to fight the “ultraprogressive ‘woke’ revolution.”³⁹ The need for such an alliance was also pronounced by the Heritage Foundation and the America First Policy Institute.⁴⁰ The Heritage Foundation advocates for an international nationalist alliance that will “defeat the Left’s international networks and free the United States to pursue its national interests.”⁴¹ As such, the MAGA movement has proactively built-up MAGA’s transnational ties. For example, Heritage frequently travels to other countries to meet with far-right think tanks and political actors.⁴²

**It is important not
overstate the coherence of
a global far right.**

Although these connections exist, it is important not to overstate the coherence of a global far right, as divergences over a range of issues persist.⁴³ In this light, the implementation of ‘America First’ foreign policy has also shown the limits of a far-right transnational alliance. Specifically, when ‘America First’ touches upon sensitive issues such as the protection of national sovereignty, far-right allies openly opposed American interventionism. The Trump administration’s military intervention in Venezuela, the threat against Greenland and most recently, the US-Israeli war on Iran have sowed discord among far-right allies.

The US military intervention in Venezuela in January 2026, which resulted in the capture and removal of then-President Nicolás Maduro, triggered loud criticism from MAGA’s far-right allies. Jordan Bardella, president of the popular far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN) in France, acknowledged that “no one will miss” the Maduro regime, but insisted that “respect for international law and the sovereignty of states cannot be applied selectively” and that “the forcible overthrow of a government from the outside cannot constitute an acceptable response, only exacerbating the geopolitical instability of our time.”⁴⁴ RN’s Marine Le Pen – as of the time of writing, the presidential candidate for the national French elections in 2027 – went further, stating that “the sovereignty of states is never negotiable, regardless of their size, power, or continent,” and warning that “to renounce this principle today for Venezuela, or for any other state, would be to accept our own servitude tomorrow.”⁴⁵ United Kingdom’s Nigel Farage, leader of Reform UK and a key MAGA ally, described the operation as “unorthodox and contrary to international law,” though he hedged by adding that if it made Russia and China “think twice, it may be a good thing.”⁴⁶

Trump’s threats against Greenland also produced strong reactions from MAGA allies. For example, Bardella criticized the threats against sovereign Denmark as “a direct challenge to the sovereignty of a European country.”⁴⁷ Similarly, Alice Weidel, leader of the German far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) also criticized the threats,⁴⁸ describing Trump’s threat to impose tariffs over the Greenland issue as “very hostile act”;⁴⁹ she warned this behavior could seriously hurt transatlantic relations. In response to the Greenland affair, far-

³⁹ CBS News, “Hungary’s Orban opens CPAC by telling conservatives “we need to coordinate the movement” of allies,” 2022, accessed July 30, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/crkdcsc5p>.

⁴⁰ Zicarelli, Kristen, “The Transatlantic Alliance Needs Strong Partners, Not Sentimentality,” *RealClear World*, 2026, accessed July 30, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/5fu8mynx>.

⁴¹ Levine, “Toward a Nationalist Internationalism: The Case for Building a National Conservative Alliance.”

⁴² Roberts, Hannah, “The Heritage Foundation goes from MAGA to MEGA — Make Europe Great Again,” 2025, accessed July 22, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/bdzneyh7>.

⁴³ Abrahamsen and Williams, “The Emergence of a Global Radical Right.”

⁴⁴ Erlanger, Steven, “Shock and Skepticism in World’s Capitals After U.S. Seizes Maduro,” *The New York Times*, 2026, accessed August 11, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/r5m95x2h>.

⁴⁵ Sollety, Marion, “Trump’s strikes on Iran pose a puzzle for Europe’s far right,” *Politico*, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/5ufzhp7>.

⁴⁶ Le Monde, “Venezuela: From Orban to Farage, Europe’s far right is unsettled by Trump’s new imperialism,” 2026, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/mw85jftc>.

⁴⁷ Sollety, Marion, “French far-right leader Bardella slams Trump’s ‘imperial ambitions’ in Greenland, Venezuela,” *POLITICO*, 2026, accessed August 20, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/9nz9yx5x>.

⁴⁸ Steffen, Tilman, “Jetzt wird Trump selbst der AfD suspekt,” *DIE ZEIT*, 2026, accessed August 10, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/3tw7j9u4>.

⁴⁹ Honeycombe-Foster, Matt, “Farage challenges top Republican Mike Johnson over Trump’s Greenland threats,” *POLITICO*, 2026, accessed September 1, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/5796kb9j>.

right members of the European Parliament supported freezing the EU-US trade deal in response.⁵⁰

The US-Israeli attack on Iran arguably produced the sharpest fractures, not only between Washington and its European allies, but also within the MAGA movement. The war led European allies to distance themselves from American interventionism, partly because its consequences – above all, soaring energy prices – were directly felt by their own electorates. For example, AfD leaders Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla heavily criticized Trump’s approach as a violation of international law, arguing that regime change contravenes the very principle of non-intervention that made MAGA attractive to European sovereigntists.⁵¹ Furthermore, the AfD leaders also warned that a “destabilization of the Middle East is not in the interest of Germany,”⁵² because it would fuel migration flows to Europe – a concern that strongly resonates with their own voters. Notably, the war also exposed fractures within the AfD itself. Foreign policy spokesman Markus Frohnmeier praised Trump, while another AfD politician publicly criticized the party’s leadership.⁵³

Notably, the division also ran through the MAGA movement. The war reopened an underlying division within the movement over whether ‘America First’ is compatible with military engagement on Israel’s behalf. Prominent voices such as Tucker Carlson broke with Trump, leaving the Republican Party over this question; the movement’s isolationist wing argued that intervention betrayed the non-interventionist promise at MAGA’s core. This suggests that the tension does not only run between the MAGA allies and the US government but also has the potential to exacerbate existing tensions between different actors in far-right movements that have so far been in the background.⁵⁴

Strategic Implications

Overall, the frictions over Venezuela, Greenland and Iran show that the global far right is not the unified bloc that the language of a ‘nationalist international’ implies. When American interests collide with those of its allies, ‘America First’ turns out to mean exactly that – even if it is at the expense of MAGA’s closest ideological partners. Two considerations should be weighed before concluding that these divisions work in democracy’s favor.

Frictions between far-right allies do not automatically work in favor of liberal democracy.

First, it remains unclear whether these frictions represent a structural rift or only a temporary division. Some analysts judge the transnational connections to be very resilient, strong enough to overcome such friction.⁵⁵ Notably, as discussed earlier, the ideological underpinnings of the MAGA movement will likely outlast Trump and its administration, even if actors such as previous prominent MAGA figures and the transnational networks may regroup under a new label. The implication for pro-democracy actors is that a ‘wait-and-see’ approach of hoping the far-right will become weaker under its own

⁵⁰ Henley, Jon, “‘Enemy of Europe?’ How Trump’s push for Greenland spooked far-right allies,” *The Guardian*, 2026, accessed September 4, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/msvutbsy>.

⁵¹ Weidel, Alice and Chrupalla, Tino, “Lage im Nahen Osten erfüllt uns mit Sorge,” *AfD*, 2026, accessed July 30, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/y72jprkc>; ZDFheute Nachrichten, “AfD-Chef Chrupalla über Trump und Iran-Krieg: Bin maßlos enttäuscht | Markus Lanz vom 11.03. 2026,” *YouTube*, 2026, accessed July 22, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9D75ga3-A8>; Diekmann, Nicole, “Verhältnis zu US-Präsident Trump. In der AfD brechen alte Grabenkämpfe wieder auf,” *ZDFheute*, 2026, accessed July 2, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/yebmuper>.

⁵² AfD-Fraktion, “Positionierung der AfD-Fraktion zum israelisch-iranischen Krieg,” 2026, accessed August 12, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/y8y69hnp>.

⁵³ Hillebrand, Fabian, “Wie der Irankrieg die AfD spaltet,” *Der Spiegel*, 2026, accessed August 5, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/4sxwwswv>.

⁵⁴ In the case of the AfD, these tensions exacerbated pre-existing internal tensions within the AfD around the party’s geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis the U.S. and Russia, see for more: Hillebrand, “Wie der Irankrieg die AfD spaltet.”

⁵⁵ Zerka, Pawel, “Trump’s culture war on Europe is far from over,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2026, accessed September 1, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/5e9h4trZ>.

contradictions is unlikely to pay off, as the movement has invested in a dense network with ideological overlaps that will likely survive such tension.

Second and more importantly, these fractures do not automatically work in favor of liberal democracy. When Bardella denounces intervention in Venezuela or the AfD condemns the Iran war, this does not mean that they are moving *toward* policies in line with liberal democratic principles. Instead, they are reinforcing their own nationalist and sovereigntist credentials before domestic electorates increasingly wary of Trump.⁵⁶ A far-right actor that distances itself from the Trump administration may well become more popular at home, demonstrating that it only answers to national interests, and will assert them even vis-à-vis a far-right US government.

**A strategy defined mainly
against the far right leaves
pro-democracy actors
without their own vision.**

Finally, these considerations define a strategic dilemma for pro-democracy actors. They could leave the far right to its own contradictions, reasoning that intervening would do more harm than good by rallying otherwise-divided actors against a shared external threat. The cost of that restraint is that far-right activity goes unchallenged. Alternatively, they could deliberately act in ways that would widen divisions in the global far right. Confronting them, however, carries its own risk. Engaging MAGA actors as interlocutors

can help to legitimize them as peers worthy of attention. Moreover, since pro-democracy actors are liberal and often part of international networks, far-right actors can easily fuel the narrative of the common enemy of the ‘global liberal elite.’

Either way, there is an additional risk, as discussed previously: a strategy defined mainly *against* the far right leaves pro-democracy actors without a clear vision of their own. Such a reactive strategy is easily countered and leaves developing positive visions of the future to the far right. For example, the terms ‘sovereignty’ and ‘national interest’ (or in MAGA’s words, ‘America First’) have effectively become largely recognized as the far-right terrain, so that pro-democracy actors are left reacting to the far right’s definitions rather than offering their own. The more demanding response would be to not only contest how these concepts are used, but to reclaim them – to define and promote what national interest and sovereignty mean from an internationalist, rights-based standpoint, rather than just pushing back against the far right’s version.

Strategic Questions for Pro-Democracy Actors

- 1 Are MAGA’s foreign policy divisions a durable rift or a temporary fracture? How should pro-democracy actors strategize under that uncertainty?
- 2 Is exploiting the divisions within the global far right an opportunity to seize, or a risky move that could fuel anti-elite narratives and strengthen far-right actors at home?
- 3 Should pro-democracy actors contest the far right’s use of ‘national interest’ and ‘sovereignty’ or develop and promote pro-democratic versions?

⁵⁶ Pew Research Center, “Low confidence in Trump across Europe,” 2026, accessed September 4, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/yx2ekxaa>.

Tension #3: Language of Freedom and Democracy vs. Acts of Repression

The third tension concerns the language deployed by MAGA and its repressive actions at home. MAGA's transnational activities are conducted using the language of democracy, freedom and most importantly, free speech; these rhetorical themes function as justifications for its policy decisions. However, in practice, the same movement is attacking these freedoms at home and seeks to do so abroad. Ultimately, MAGA is redefining the concept of free speech and democracy, as it reframes actions aimed at protecting liberal democracy – such as the classification of the AfD as an extreme right-wing party – as attacks against democracy itself.

Reframing

'Free speech' has become MAGA's core transnational frame to justify interference in European countries. In his speech at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, JD Vance presented free speech supposedly being under attack as Europe's greatest threat, stating that "across Europe, free speech [...] is in retreat."⁵⁷ Vance accused European governments of censorship, meddling with elections in Romania – which the EU had postponed, but this was in response to Russian interference⁵⁸ – and retreating from shared democratic values.

An essay by a Trump administration political appointee in the US Department of State published a few months later, furthermore, reveals that the Trump administration holds global liberalism accountable for the deterioration of democracy: "The global liberal project [...] is trampling democracy." More specifically, the essay invoked free speech to defend the AfD and Marine Le Pen against what it called European "democratic backsliding." Notably, the piece emphasizes that these "concerns are not partisan but principled," and that "Europe's democratic backsliding not only impacts European citizens but increasingly affects American security and economic ties, along with the free speech rights of American citizens and companies."⁵⁹

As such, it was not surprising that the 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) then turned these words into an official policy. The NSS emphasizes that the US will reject "anti-democratic restrictions on core liberties in Europe, the Anglosphere, and the rest of the democratic world."⁶⁰ More so, "rebuild[ing] the civilizational alliance with European states"⁶¹ features as one of six goals in the State Department's Strategic Plan for the years 2026-2030. As outlined earlier, the State Department also recently made funding available to achieve this goal.

Repressing

The contradiction between rhetoric and practice is striking, and the list of examples is long. Domestically, the same administration has attacked the freedom of speech and press significantly, while accusing Europe of silencing voices. According to the NGO Freedom of the Press Foundation, in the first two months of 2026, the number of press freedom violations

⁵⁷ Munich Security Conference, "Munich Security Conference 2025. Speech by JD Vance and Selected Reactions," 2025, accessed May 3, 2026, https://securityconference.org/assets/user_upload/MSC_Speeches_2025_Vol2_Ansicht.pdf.

⁵⁸ Anghel, Veronica, "Why Romania Just Canceled Its Presidential Election," *Journal of Democracy*, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/53eyb2p3>.

⁵⁹ Samson, Samuel, "The Need for Civilizational Allies in Europe," 2025, accessed September 9, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/mv8me99>; Secretary Marco Rubio, X Post, 2025, accessed August 15, 2026, <https://x.com/SecRubio/status/1918344238468649055>.

⁶⁰ The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," 2025, accessed September 2, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/5hbr8rn7>.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of State, "Agency Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2026-2030," 2026, accessed August 30, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/5c3ym964>.

were the highest since 2017.⁶² One of the most arresting examples of domestic repression is the way in which the Pentagon is severely limiting access to its press office by imposing barriers for credentialed journalists.⁶³ At the same time, the Pentagon has made access easier for far-right media outlets.⁶⁴ Moreover, the administration also barred the Associated Press (AP) from the White House press pool over AP's refusal to adopt the term "Gulf of America" for the Gulf of Mexico, which Trump ordered immediately after returning to office for his second tenure.⁶⁵ A federal judge, appointed by Trump, later ruled that the administration must grant AP access to the White House press pool, based on the US Constitution's First Amendment which protects the freedom of speech and press.⁶⁶

Internationally, under MAGA ally Elon Musk, the social media platform X has suspended journalists, throttled links to critical outlets and pursued litigation designed to fight critics. In November 2023, for example, X sued the watchdog Media Matters for publishing a report on the links of antisemitic content next to advertisement on the platform.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the platform amplifies far-right voices in European election campaigns. For instance, Musk openly supported the AfD on the platform, significantly increasing engagement numbers for the AfD's X reach.⁶⁸ A privately-owned global platform is thus deployed to amplify MAGA-aligned voices and suppress critics – transnationally and under the banner of free speech.

Strategic Implications

Overall, MAGA's use of the term 'freedom of speech' is purely instrumental; it is invoked when it protects MAGA-aligned speech and discarded when it does not. Two features make it especially difficult for pro-democracy actors to counter this. First, the framing has been deliberately constructed to be difficult to contest. By insisting that European "democratic backsliding" is "not partisan but principle," MAGA presents its interference in European politics as a neutral defense of universal values, rather than the partisan intervention it is. Anyone who pushes back can easily be framed as opposing free speech. Furthermore, the risk of being labeled as censors may incentivize pro-democracy actors to not speak out anymore.

Second, this tension shows that the language of democracy and freedom is contested – increasingly so, following decades of relative stability.⁶⁹ Inspired by Orbán's illiberal democracy model, MAGA advances its own version of democracy which strips liberal democracy of the institutional protections, minority rights and independent media that constrain the will of the majority. Thus, it is a movement that combines mass reach, transnational networks and the power of government, and uses them to redefine what democracy means.

⁶² McCudden, Kirstin, "Record number of violations mar first two months of year," *U.S. Press Freedom Tracker*, 2026, accessed September 1, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/ceh9aub5>.

⁶³ Reporters Without Borders, "The US war on information access: the Pentagon's shrinking space for independent reporting," 2026, accessed September 2, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/bdf56w8t>.

⁶⁴ Nowell, Cecilia, "Pentagon bars journalists from entering its press office, citing re-designation," *The Guardian*, 2026, accessed August 20, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/jc99rb5j>.

⁶⁵ The White House, "Restoring Names that Honor American Greatness," 2025, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/bwdyrx4x>; David Bauder, "The Associated Press, banned from White House press pool, renews request to court for reinstatement," *Associated Press*, 2025, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/yf7s7yxs>.

⁶⁶ Gerstein, Josh and Cheney, Kyle, "Trump must reinstate Associated Press to White House press pool, judge rules," *Politico*, 2025, accessed August 18, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/y7p8s4tb>; Constitution Annotated, "First Amendment," accessed September 4, 2026, <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/>.

⁶⁷ Deutsche Welle, "X sues media watchdog for report on antisemitism and ads," 2023, accessed September 3, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/47vznfyn>.

⁶⁸ Scott, Mark and Marsh, Oliver, "The Musk Effect: Assessing X's impact on Germany's election discourse," 2025, accessed August 13, 2026, <https://dfrlab.org/2025/02/20/the-musk-effect-xs-impact-on-germanys-election/>.

⁶⁹ As Jan-Werner Müller has shown, antiliberal regimes across the twentieth century, both fascist and communist, laid claim to democratic values and sometimes presented themselves as democracy's truest form, making the struggle over the "true essence of democracy" central to the politics of the age. See for more: Müller, Jan-Werner, "Contesting democracy: Political ideas in twentieth-century Europe," Yale University Press, 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/ymsn2t83>.

Outside the Global North, criticism of liberal democracy also comes from perspectives highlighting enduring colonial power imbalances.

This challenge is not confined to the transatlantic context; the slipperiness of a contested concept takes different forms in different places. In many countries outside the Global North, criticism of the liberal international order comes not only from the far right but from perspectives highlighting enduring colonial power imbalances, which associate liberal democracy with Western conditionality, double standards and geopolitical self-interest. In the Sahel, for instance, the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have expelled Western partners and framed their break with France using language of sovereignty and anti-colonialism. This stands on the shoulders of a long pan-Africanist and anti-imperial tradition, associated above all with Thomas Sankara – a legacy that predates MAGA and owes nothing to it.⁷⁰ There, anti-elitist and sovereigntist arguments resonate on their own terms, and the labels ‘far right’ or ‘MAGA-aligned’ carry little of the weight they holds in the Global North. In Europe, where, like elsewhere, the meaning of democratic participation has constantly evolved throughout recent history, the contest over democracy comes from within, as far-right parties claim the democratic label for themselves, as shown above, while liberal democratic forces lose ground.

In both cases, pro-democracy actors are confronted with the challenge of finding enough common ground to act together, meanwhile dealing with vocabulary that means different things to different actors, which makes that common ground hard to establish in the first place. One way around this is to organize less around the abstract and potentially contested concepts like ‘democracy,’ and instead organize around concrete shared interests: whose voice is heard, who decides what a newspaper can publish, the fact that the same rules should apply for everyone. These are things partners can rally behind without subscribing to a shared understanding of ‘democracy.’

Strategic Questions for Pro-Democracy Actors

- 1 How can pro-democracy actors design and communicate measures to protect democracy, such as rules on disinformation or party bans, without the response being reframed as censorship by the far right?
- 2 How can pro-democracy actors make the case for democracy concrete enough to reach people?
- 3 Given that the term ‘democracy’ resonates differently across contexts, how can pro-democracy actors build coalitions broad enough to act together?

⁷⁰ Aina, Folahanmi, “Ibrahim Traore: Burkina Faso’s saviour, dictator or revolutionary anti-imperialist,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 37, no. 6, 2026, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2026.2656299>; International Crisis Group, “A Course Correction for Mali’s Sovereign Turn,” 2024, accessed September 1, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/3evyrrdz>.

Conclusion

Pro-democracy actors are confronted with a global far-right that both works to undermine a liberal understanding of democracy and the rules-based international order, and that clearly invests in transnational activities by organizing international conferences and sharing narratives and a common playbook. MAGA is one of the most powerful and visible movements within this broader trend. In the face of this global rise, pro-democracy actors are left to figure out how to best safeguard essential elements of liberal democracy and push for their own visions of the future.

Each of the above-mentioned core tensions showed there are holes to poke in MAGA's story. Crucially, however, pro-democracy actors cannot simply exploit MAGA's contradictions – each contradiction generates a dilemma for them in turn. When MAGA dismantles US democracy assistance, regarding it as illegitimate interference, while building its own functionally equivalent infrastructure of funding, training and networks, pro-democracy actors cannot object to the instruments without delegitimizing decades of their own practice. When fractures appear within MAGA's nationalist coalition – over Venezuela, Greenland or Iran – driven by appeals to sovereignty and international law, pro-democracy actors cannot straightforwardly celebrate those divisions, because the same sovereigntist language is being used to undermine liberal norms. Finally, when MAGA frames its interventions in European politics as a defense of free speech, those who push back risk being cast as opponents of 'freedom.' In each case, exploiting the tensions could backfire. Sometimes the instruments and language MAGA uses are the same ones pro-democracy actors rely on, so the critique rebounds onto their own practice; in others, attacking the contradiction strengthens or legitimizes the far right rather than democracy.

Unless pro-democracy actors reckon with their own weaknesses, defending democracy will remain an uphill battle.

Exploiting these tensions is further limited by pro-democracy actors' own inconsistencies, e.g., working with authoritarian partners when necessary or applying democratic norms unevenly across regions. This is difficult to counter by defending democracy in the abstract or the existing order as it stands, because MAGA can simply redirect attention to that incoherence. MAGA's critique also resonates because democracy support indeed has genuine shortcomings – it is often top-down and externally driven, and more accountable to donors than to the societies it was meant to serve. To acknowledge this does not mean

accepting MAGA's aims: some of these flaws are about how measures and instruments were designed and governed; others are about purpose – democracy support was at times bound up with geopolitical interests and applied selectively.

It is worth defending what democracy support is meant to serve: pluralism, rights and the equal standing of all citizens – even if programs have fallen short of these ambitions in the past. It is important for pro-democracy actors to reckon with the weaknesses of their own approaches. Otherwise, defending a democratic system whose flaws are easily exploited by the far-right becomes an uphill battle.

Importantly, these dilemmas will not be resolved with any single election. The ideological movement, its networks and its playbook reach well beyond Trump and will outlast his presidency; these dilemmas inherently occur whenever the far right uses the same instruments as democracy supporters, builds transnational networks and contests the meaning of democracy. How much to focus on countering the far right at the expense of investing in a compelling pro-democracy case, whether to adopt a more partisan or inclusive approach; whether to exploit the far right's divisions or leave them be or how to defend democracy without being framed as censors – these are the questions pro-democracy actors will be facing for years to come when developing their own visions for a democratic future.

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Reinhardtstr. 7, 10117 Berlin, Germany

Phone +49 30 275 959 75-0

gppi@gppi.net

gppi.net