

# The Anti-Corruption Role of Free Media and Investigative Journalism

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Global democracy is under growing threat from illiberal actors. In response to challenges including backsliding, the United States and its partners are ramping up efforts to reinvigorate and renew democracy at the U.S.-organized Summit for Democracy in December and its follow-up in 2022. Participants will focus on defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights.

Media freedom and investigative journalism—vital for democracy, transparency, and accountability—have been targeted by illiberal forces worldwide, including autocrats in China and Russia. The United States, Europe, and democracy actors internationally need to prioritize media support or face consequences at home and abroad as disinformation deepens polarization, enables corruption, and advantages malign actors.

Journalists and independent media are outspent and face violence and even death. They need greater support, legal assistance, training, and protection on the part of donors, governments, and multilateral bodies. The summit can be a launchpad for collaboration and coordination on this front, ensuring that freedom of media and expression serve as bulwarks against rising authoritarianism and corruption.

## Introduction

Democratic governance, civil society, and media are increasingly undermined and threatened across the globe, including in the Western democracies. The rise of authoritarian-led countries, including China and Russia, has severely eroded democratic gains. The impact of illiberal forces and democratic backsliding has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, climate change, and growing economic inequality. Corruption, impacting billions globally, helps fuel the democratic spiral, and the trends in this regard point in the wrong direction.<sup>1</sup> Corruption in plain sight—but often hidden from scrutiny—has too often been a common and a successful tactic used by authoritarians and their enablers on every continent to gain and maintain power, to repress populations, and to undermine democracy. Authoritarians have increasingly deployed corruption to rot democratic institutions, liberal economies, and citizens' trust from the inside as well as to create a favorable environment for lawlessness and graft.

Free media, including investigative journalists acting as watchdogs, have been at the forefront in addressing the corruption epidemic and in seeking to provide accountability—in closing-space countries as in Western democracies. In Russia, publicity around President Vladimir Putin's seaside estate highlighted how media can work together across international boundaries to expose serious, long-term corruption in a country.<sup>2</sup> The recent release of the Pandora Papers has reaffirmed the indispensable role of media in protecting democracy and addressing the challenges posed by corruption.<sup>3</sup> The continuing release of investigative reports based on the Pandora Papers also shows how international collaboration protects journalists and improves their ability to report more

completely on the vast international networks of corruption and their enablers across the globe.<sup>4</sup>

The world is at a historic tipping point for democracy, media, and journalism. Free media will remain an essential institution to preserve and protect democracy. Investigative journalism is playing a leading role in detecting and exposing corruption. It is critical in the current global environment that media remain free and independent. When media is undermined, threatened or weaponized, this creates an environment for autocrats and their enablers to prosper. The U.S.-organized Summit for Democracy in December 2021, the subsequent "year of action," and the second summit in late 2022 provide a critical opportunity for democracies to commit to protect, promote, and support free, independent media and investigative journalism.

## The Role of Free Media and Investigative Journalism

While many corrupt individuals, corporations, and governments undermine the rule of law and fund media to create propaganda, hate, and divisions among people, independent journalism is in a threatened state operationally and economically. Solutions can be found at many different levels, but the first step is to understand the context and importance of free and independent media, including investigative reporting, as a crucial actor promoting oversight and accountability.

According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, the following four pillars are essential for addressing the nexus between authoritarianism and corruption:

- Introducing, adopting, and implementing impactful regulations to address corruption at home and abroad as well as to defend and enhance media freedom.
- Exposing corruption and its patterns by media.
- Acting on media findings by civil society and activists

1 Transparency International, "[CPI 2020: GLOBAL HIGHLIGHTS](#)," Transparency International, January 28, 2021.

2 Mary Ilyushina, "[Navalny releases investigation into decadent billion-dollar 'Putin palace'](#)," CNN, January 20, 2021.

3 Dean Starkman et al, "[Frequently asked questions about the Pandora Papers and ICIJ](#)," International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, October 19, 2021.

4 Jeremy Temkin, "[The Pandora Papers Shed New Light On The U.S. As A Tax Haven](#)," Forbes, October 12, 2021.

- Prosecuting corruption based on leads from media, civil society, and activists and enforcing anti-corruption laws.<sup>5</sup>

Exposing corruption and its patterns by media, civil society, and activists serves as a catalyst that arms others with the information needed to drive positive change and advance democracy, transparency, and accountability. Using media revelations, civil society and activists can push law-enforcement bodies to act and advocates can press for necessary policy reform. At the same time, policymakers can point to media investigations and data releases to gather support for passing legislation and advancing reforms.<sup>6</sup> The four pillars have not traditionally been interconnected, which must change if there is to be more impactful efforts at strengthening democracy by fighting corruption and the authoritarianism it supports.

Investigative journalists, civil society, and activists have critical roles to play in documenting corruption and enforcing actions against it, but they often work in silos. By contrast, tycoons, corrupt officials, and organized criminal networks are highly coordinated across borders. Corruption is a transnational issue and must be addressed through transnational cooperation. Even a handful of people can make a significant difference if they work together and amplify each other's voices, as shown by the recent reporting on corruption that have taken center stage at the global level following the release of the Pandora Papers and previous similar leaks. International groups of investigative journalists such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, and the Global Anti-Corruption Consortium are some of the prime examples of an international cooperation that leads to tangible results

On October 19, 2021, ahead of the U.S.-led Summit for Democracy, the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) and the Transatlantic Democracy Working Group (TDWG) convened an interactive workshop focused on strengthening free media, investigative journalism, countering corruption, and protecting democracy in Central Europe, the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and across the transatlantic space. Workshop participants included established journalists, experts, and government representatives to discuss the increasing challenges facing free media and to identify key recommendations for strengthening independent journalism, democratic resilience, rule of law, transparency, and accountability. GMF and TDWG greatly appreciate the support of the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Washington, D.C., in organizing the workshop. The content of this publication represents the opinions of the authors alone.

in bringing corruption to the attention of the public and law-enforcement bodies.

While sensational stories, investigations, and leaked information exposing high-level corruption have been front-page news worldwide, follow-up action to ensure accountability and to push for lasting change, including by implementing and enforcing laws and regulations have often lagged. In democratic systems, prosecuting corruption based on leads from media, activist watchdogs, and oversight mechanisms begins with training investigators, prosecutors, judges, and other governmental actors to pursue and correctly handle complex corruption cases as well as to work with journalists, civil society, and activists on efforts in promoting transparency and public accountability. For example, the Central and Eastern European Law Institute in the Czech Republic educates legal professionals across multiple geographies through innovative training programs with a focus on providing participants with tools to promote human rights, strengthen democratic institutions, fight corruption, and support

5 German Marshall Fund of the United States, Institute of Current World Affairs, and Transatlantic Democracy Working Group, "[THE CABLE PODCAST: We have the Pandora Papers... Now what?](#)" November 1, 2021.

6 Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, "[About Us](#)," August 24, 2007.

free-market economies. This includes making available lectures about how investigative journalists interact with law-enforcement bodies. The changes needed at the regulatory level are equally significant, starting with legislators and governments providing consistent resources and taking actions that advance and enforce policies preventing and addressing corruption as well as promoting media freedom.

Activists and journalists often cite transparency and accountability as essential principles for building trust in democracy and shaping the information space to the advantage of democratic actors. They encourage officials, leaders, and employees in the public and private sectors to act not only in their institutions' interest but also for the common good. Without public access to some of their essential records and information, holding them accountable is nearly impossible. And, while a lot has been done in democracies to bolster transparency and accountability, continued efforts are needed to address gaps where corruption flourishes.

***The extent to which journalists can assist in addressing corruption also depends on whether the media is free and independent.***

In addition to strengthening domestic transparency and accountability systems in line with the United Nations Convention against Corruption, there is also a need for governments to participate in various international anticorruption initiatives, to harmonize their anticorruption laws and mechanisms, and to increase enforcement activities. In particular, harmonization can remove the knowledge and resources barriers that journalists and activists encounter when engaging in preventing corruption and taking corrective actions. For example, while the establishment of registers of ultimate beneficial ownership in some jurisdictions has increased transparency about the ownership of companies, critics note the lack of their uniform adoption by more countries.

The extent to which journalists can assist in addressing corruption also depends on whether the media is free and independent. Therefore, legislative frameworks must be in place more widely to protect journalists and their sources from physical attacks, unfounded lawsuits, recrimination, and victimization.<sup>7</sup> However, there is a critical difference between the “law on the books” and the “law in action.” For example, while Europe and the Americas continue to be the most favorable continents for press freedom, they have also seen increased violence against journalists in 2021. And, throughout the world, journalists (and activists) have been killed for their role in exposing corruption.<sup>8</sup>

In President Joe Biden's words, “freedom of expression and access to factual and accurate information provided by independent media are foundational to prosperous and secure democratic societies. But the outlook for the rights of journalists today is harrowing.”<sup>9</sup> In addition to seeking accountability for all crimes against journalists and media workers, expanding existing efforts and introducing new measures that provide for their legal and physical security must be urgently accelerated. This includes leveraging sanction regimes and launching “wraparound” measures like relocation and placement programs.

For example, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) are increasingly used to silence media critics in all jurisdictions. Greater access to insurance or other resources to help defend journalists against baseless defamation suits and legal intimidation is essential for outlets that in the past have been considered uninsurable or have been unable to afford insurance and defend themselves legally due to high costs. Legislative and other policy actions can also be leveraged to help stem the tide of lawsuits following

7 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, “[The role of media and investigative journalism in combating corruption](#),” March 27, 2018.

8 Reporters Without Borders, “[Violations of press freedom barometer](#),” 2021.

9 The White House, “[Statement by President Joe Biden on the Occasion of World Press Freedom Day](#),” May 3, 2021.

an effective journalistic investigation. The recent commitment by the U.S. Agency for International Development to launch a global Defamation Defense Fund for Journalists represents a much-needed innovative approach to these challenges. The fund is intended to design an insurance system to help media address the increased number of lawsuits burdening reporters with the cost of a legal defense until they abandon their stories.

***Defending media in its global role  
in the fight against corruption  
starts with investing in it.***

Another key area for modernizing media assistance is digital security. While the promotion of a free and open Internet and the infusion of democratic values into the adoption of major new technologies, such as 5G, are already underway, the efforts to promote responsible, equitable, and safe use of artificial intelligence must be enhanced to boost the ability of democratic institutions and media to better respond and adapt to changing needs and circumstances in the digital age. What is also missing is a comprehensive mapping and strategy to address the power of new technologies as a source of autocratic wealth and investment in undemocratic media.

While many journalists invest in their digital security through best practices in encryption and other types of basic information management, there is always an “arms race” between users, governments, and the developers of technologies that can be used to break even the most secure implementations of data-security protocols. Although such protocols have been developed with law enforcement in mind, policies and other controls necessary to prevent their more nefarious use have not been put in place. The introduction, harmonization, and consistent application of such rules as well as of export controls on digital weapons are necessary to protect journalists and the public more generally.

Finally, defending media in its global role in the fight against corruption starts with investing in

it. Russia and China alone spend billions on their internal and external propaganda media outlets. For example, Russian media outlets had declared spending over \$16 million on propaganda targeting the United States alone this year up to October.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, with the rise of digital media, artificial intelligence, and distorted media markets, free journalism is in a weak state economically and overall. However, official donors spent only an average \$80–90 million each year on support for laws and policies that promote media freedom in 2010–2015. And international support to the media remains a tiny fraction of official development assistance, averaging just 0.3 percent in recent years.<sup>11</sup> Besides, this funding often does not meet the requirements of the Paris agreement on aid effectiveness on core flexible long-term financing. Democracies, including the United States, the EU countries, and their partners need to adopt a stronger and more coordinated international response to the threat to the survival of free media.

## Conclusions

Global democracy trends continue to point in the wrong direction and bold action is needed everywhere to bolster essential elements for democracies to thrive, including free media. The increasing levels of attention and collaboration democracies devote to the rapidly shrinking space for freedom of expression and increasing threats to media and journalists is welcome, but there is always room for improvement. Greater cooperation and understanding of the challenges and needs of independent media and investigative journalists in the rapidly shifting environment is essential.

Earlier this year, the United States and the European Union expressed their intention to partner at the Summit for Democracy, committing to actions to defend universal human rights, to prevent demo-

<sup>10</sup> Anna Massoglia, “[Russia is pouring millions into Kremlin propaganda targeting the U.S.](#),” Open Secrets, October 15, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Benequista, “[Confronting the Crisis in Independent Media: A Role for International Assistance](#),” Center for International Media Assistance, March 2019.



cratic backsliding, and to fight corruption.<sup>12</sup> Now they and other pro-democracy actors globally, including the summit participants, must deliver on the high expectations and come to the table with tangible deliverables and commitments, including elevating support for free media, investigative journalism, and civil society essential to the health of democracies. It is clear that investigative journalism and free media need greater attention and support to ensure that they remain bulwarks against authoritarianism and corruption. Over the next year of action and by the second Summit for Democracy in late 2022, there must be increased efforts and concrete support by democracies to strengthen investigative journalism and protect free media on the frontlines of democracy.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations for how to better promote free media and support investigative journalism, within the broader push to bolster collective anticorruption efforts, are intended to inform discussions at the Summit for Democracy and its deliverables, and to strengthen collective efforts to renew democracy.

- Increase support for free media, investigative journalists, civil society, and activists that work to reveal corruption, including with greater resources for technical assistance and activities to break down the silos they operate in and to increase cooperation among them.
  - Deploy sustainable, coordinated efforts and financing by donors to achieve long-term impact through building necessary capacities and ensuring media freedom and independence systematically.
  - Focus new media-assistance programs on countries that are simultaneously the source and the destination of wealth that fuels corruption or is generated by it.
- Radically redesign media-assistance programs to help free media and journalists work effectively, professionally, and most importantly, securely. This includes focusing on investments and assistance in physical, legal, and digital security.
  - At a minimum, democracies should enact anti-SLAPP laws, make defamation insurance available, prevent the weaponization of new technologies, and leverage sanction regimes and launch “wraparound” measures to protect journalists from all kinds of attacks.

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<sup>12</sup> EU-U.S. Summit 2021, “[Statement Towards a renewed Transatlantic partnership](#),” June 15, 2021.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

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