



Ten Ideas for Governments Working to Safeguard Civic Space

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✓ Safeguarding Civic Space A Checklist for Governments

- 1. Enlist the head of government and other senior officials to publicly outline a policy on the importance of safeguarding civic space.**
 - 2. Appoint a senior official with access to political capital and resources to coordinate diplomatic efforts to protect civil society.**
 - 3. Harmonize diplomatic efforts and development funding related to civil society and civic space.**
 - 4. Establish a process to reconcile competing interests when efforts to protect civil society run up against other priorities.**
 - 5. Engage in international initiatives to support civic space through the United Nations, Community of Democracies, and other multilateral bodies, and invite UN Special Rapporteurs working on related issues to visit your country.**
 - 6. Develop a strategy to help civil society organizations secure access to resources that support their work.**
 - 7. Conduct regular dialogues with civil society organizations at home and abroad to evaluate efforts to safeguard civic space, solicit feedback, and promote accountability.**
 - 8. Align the launch of initiatives that support civil society with annual performance reviews so that outstanding efforts by individual diplomats can be reflected and rewarded in career evaluations.**
 - 9. Recognize effective diplomatic action to strengthen and engage civil society with high-profile awards.**
 - 10. Require government institutions engaged in international affairs to issue regular reports on how their actions are helping to strengthen civil society worldwide.**
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Dedicated to Raoul Wallenberg,
Who harnessed the power of diplomacy for good

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Introduction

My first real job in Washington was working for Joe Biden, a man who relishes meetings with civil society. He began most conversations with civic activists by donning a wry smile and invoking a line from Ronald Reagan: “The nine most dangerous words in the English language,” he’d say, “are: ‘I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.’” The joke always drew a laugh – and it acknowledged what is often a painful reality.

Even with the best intentions, governments struggle to translate aspirations into effective action. In most countries, creating a better *domestic* environment for civil society is challenging enough. Supporting an enabling environment for civil society organizations (CSOs) abroad is markedly more difficult. Beyond reduced access to information and context, factors that inevitably complicate the conduct of foreign policy, government officials working to create space for civil society in other countries often find themselves in uncharted waters. There is no instruction manual for how to address the issue and, in the absence of clear policy guidance, significant uncertainty among diplomats about how to carry out the mission.

Once governments commit to help safeguard civic space, they frequently fail to deploy enough personnel and resources in support of the issue. Even talented, well-funded officials may still have trouble projecting their agenda across a vast bureaucracy. The job usually requires coordinating vertically between capitals and embassies, horizontally with competing policy interests, and diagonally across international organizations. These requirements can tax the skills of the ablest masters of the dark arts of bureaucracy.

Finally, if these obstacles are not enough, practitioners quickly realize that diplomats and development professional working to protect civic space suffer from a lack of

professional incentives. Like many worthwhile things in life, international engagement in defense of civil society often means incurring short-term costs in the interest of greater long-term benefits. In the moment, diplomats risk strained bilateral relationships, the contempt of colleagues concerned with competing interests, or economic fallout. Long-term improvements in governance, sustainable development, and political stability made possible through the work of civil society rarely materialize quickly enough to be reflected in the annual evaluations that determine the fortunes of individual careers.

Together, these dynamics constitute four of the most common obstacles to effective diplomacy on the issue. Again:

- An inadequate or nonexistent policy on defending civil society;
- The failure to provide staff, resources, and structure to work the issue;
- Flawed coordination between capitals, embassies, competing interests, and international organizations; and
- The absence of professional incentives for individual officials to take action on behalf of civil society.

In 2010, Hillary Clinton asked me to serve as her Senior Advisor on issues related to civil society. Whatever my personal shortcomings when I started the job – and it remains a long list – I assumed the assignment with several distinct structural advantages. I had a mandate from a senior political leader who cared deeply about the work of civil society. I led a team of outstanding, committed professionals. And I represented a country with an extensive, albeit imperfect tradition of values-based diplomacy. In time, our work led to some important successes. However, along the way, we came to appreciate how intensely difficult it was to mobilize the resources of our own government – let alone others' – to protect the rights that support the work of civil society.

This paper represents a modest attempt to catalogue solutions to challenges that we and colleagues in other countries encountered in our work. The paper is intended to serve as a tool for officials that want to bridge the gap between their country's *aspirations* to help safeguard civic space and the *actions* required to realize that goal. By design, it is narrowly focused on concrete policies, practices and personnel decisions that can strengthen diplomatic efforts to safeguard civic space.

The paper does not attempt to provide a framework for addressing the myriad of strategic challenges confronting civil society organizations around the world or a detailed guide for diplomats on the ground in countries adopting repressive measures. The work of other authors on civil resistance and the *Diplomat's Handbook* provide resources for further study in these areas.

However, leaders that apply the ideas within this paper judiciously should find that their diplomatic and development efforts are more likely to support, sustain, and defend the work of civil society worldwide. The recommendations in this document are delivered on paper, not stone. Each can be adapted to the circumstances of individual countries. As leaders do so, they will help make Joe Biden's joke about government's failings a bit less funny – and help preserve the indispensable role of civil society in forging a better future.

A Note on Methodology and Disclaimer

The findings in this document are grounded in experiences, interviews, research, and insights assembled from over 30 countries. The paper draws on the pooled knowledge of individuals and organizations that are using diplomacy to create an enabling environment for civil society. It also seeks to identify failings in existing practice that could be addressed with new practices. I owe a special thanks to diplomats from Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, South Korea, Finland, Estonia, Mongolia, Lithuania, El Salvador, and the United States and civil society leaders from dozens of countries who contributed ideas and insights that helped shape this work.

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Challenges of the Status Quo

A tremendous number of things have to go right in order for governments to help safeguard civic space. The chain of actions that leads to diplomatic engagement on the issue stretches across multiple organizations and around the world. For example:

- Local civil society organizations gather information on draft laws that could affect CSOs.
- International CSOs analyze potential measures to determine if they constitute a threat.
- International working groups review these findings and, if persuaded that a draft measure presents a danger to civil society, they issue calls for diplomatic action.
- Individual governments review these alerts in capitals and initiate an internal debate on how to respond.
- If a government reaches a decision, a request for action is forwarded to an embassy.
- Diplomatic missions on the ground review these action requests, coordinate with CSOs in country, and hopefully carry out their instructions.

The fact that the process works at all is a testament to the civil society leaders, diplomats, and organizations that move it forward. However, the system suffers from a large number of what engineers call “single points of failure.” A breakdown at any juncture can prevent an effective response. Improving this process requires identifying and addressing existing impediments to progress, including the lack of policy, staffing, resources, coordination, and professional incentives for work on civic space.

The recommendations outlined in this paper are intended to help overcome these challenges. They are designed to be sufficiently specific to generate results, but modest enough in scope and ambition that any foreign ministry should be able to implement them in under one year.

Policy Recommendations

1. Enlist the head of government and other senior officials to publicly outline a policy on the importance of safeguarding civic space.

Implementing a strong policy to defend civil society begins with *articulating* a strong policy to defend civil society. Especially in the world of diplomacy, words matter. Foreign ministries have no battalions, no levers of monetary policy, and modest budgets. Their primary currency is rhetoric. As a result, speeches often provide a necessary cornerstone for more comprehensive efforts to safeguard civic space.

Some governments, of course, have inherently hostile relationships with CSOs, viewing engaged citizens as potential threats rather than potential partners. However, many countries that are otherwise open to civic engagement simply fail to emphasize the issue of civic space in their foreign policy. Without a clear indication of where political leaders stand, the default position in most bureaucracies is inaction. When leaders in democratic governments speak out about civil society – at least at the level of political principle – they usually come out in favor of defending civic space. Statements by political leaders that support the work of CSOs provide cover for diplomats and development professionals in the field to take action.

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Successful speeches on the importance of defending civil society must convince officials to support the agenda, outline a plan of action, and establish a framework to ensure follow through and accountability. Leaders should also try to link work on civic space to other key dimensions of foreign policy.

- *Security* – In many cases, the tipping point between stability and chaos within a nation is a function of whether citizens feel they can work through the system to bring about change. Preserving civic space is essential to balance and offers
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insurance against the collapse of authority and chaos that occur when individuals decide to abandon existing structures for engaging government.

- *Prosperity* – Civil society plays a crucial role in ensuring the protection of private property and the rule of law. Emerging economic research shows progress in governance is directly correlated with the growth of equity markets relative to GDP and should be a key priority for anyone investing for the future.
- *Democracy* – Defending civic space can infuse a nation’s foreign policy with deeper purpose. The moral authority that comes with such decisions provides a source of soft power and national identity.

Again, the most critical element of a policy on civil society is for it to exist in the first place. Currently, many battles for diplomatic engagement are lost when governments simply look away. Once leaders establish the defense of civil society as a priority, it provides committed officials in government and activists on the outside with leverage to push for further change.

2. Appoint a senior official with access to political capital and resources to coordinate diplomatic efforts to protect civil society.

STAFFING MODELS

In diplomacy, staffing is a direct extension of policy. Unfortunately, even the best speech is not self-executing, and the implementation of instructions given by senior leaders depends on having individuals with a mandate to follow through. There are two primary models for how to staff the issue of civic space:

DEDICATED SENIOR OFFICIAL (*U.S. and Slovakia*) – One of the most reliable ways to prioritize the task of defending civic space is designating a senior official whose sole or primary responsibility is working on issues related to civil society.

- **Pros:** In a world where diplomats and development professionals are constantly pulled between competing crises, this approach helps ensure that the issue of civic space receives sustained, high-level attention. It also promotes clear lines of accountability. One person knows that they are ultimately responsible for the success of the agenda. A senior official can help cut through bureaucracy and harness a broad cross section of a country's foreign policy institutions to support an agenda. Lastly, in cases where the official reports directly to a minister, it helps imbue the issue with added political gravitas.
- **Cons:** It may be difficult to integrate the issue of civic space into other work streams if it “lives” outside the bureaucracy. This approach is time and resource intensive, and may require provisions for additional staff beyond the senior official. Also, a senior official operating above normal administrative structures may not have easy access to the financial and programmatic resources needed to support his or her work. Finally, the approach is heavily dependent on the entrepreneurial talents of the individual assigned to the role. If they cannot or do not take the initiative to advance the agenda, it is unlikely that others will.

DOUBLE-HATTING (*Canada, the Netherlands, Chile*) – Many countries that engage on the issue of civic space designate a lead official with other responsibilities related to human rights, international organizations, or development.

- **Pros:** Officials within the bureaucracy may have easier access to administrative resources and funding. This approach usually entails less startup time and fewer costs than creating a new office.
 - **Cons:** The challenge of protecting civic space can quickly get lost among competing priorities. The approach may exacerbate existing tensions with other
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interests. For example, if the office that has responsibility for civic space is already on bad terms with the office responsible for regional political or economic affairs, the agenda can fall victim to internal disputes.

PRACTICES

Regardless of how a country decides to staff the issue of civic space, the individual responsible for the agenda will need to use their position to leverage other centers of power. Political leaders can take several steps to help these efforts succeed:

- *Confer political authority* – Use senior leadership meetings, annual ambassadorial conferences, and other high-level discussions to highlight the role of the official responsible for civil society issues within the bureaucracy and emphasize the importance of preserving civic space. Shortly after my appointment, Hillary Clinton devoted an entire senior staff meeting to civil society issues. The Dutch Foreign Minister recently took advantage of an ambassador’s conference to highlight the importance of defending civil society. These investments of political capital highlight a leader’s personal commitment to an issue and help convince other officials to get on board with efforts to defend civic space. Such meetings often pay dividends for years afterwards.
 - *Building Civil Society into the Agenda* – Every major summit, visit, and ministerial conference should include opportunities for engagement with civil society. Adhering to this practice establishes a precedent for leaders in other countries. It is particularly valuable when high-level events occur in states with questionable records on civic space. Highlighting engagement with CSOs as part of an official program sends a powerful message to host governments.
 - *Program funding* – Providing the official responsible for civil society with adequate access to resources is important for both practical and political reasons. To state the obvious, it is hard to address a complex global challenge without funding. Program resources can help support critical global efforts to safeguard civic
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space and subsidize entrepreneurial programming by embassies and officials in the field. Allocating funding also sends an important message to those engaged on other issues and the bureaucracy as a whole. In determining which issues matter to superiors many officials adopt an attitude of: “show me your budget, and I’ll show you your priorities.” While clearly imperfect, the approach has the advantage of offering an easy metric for prioritization in a world where officials face multiple demands on their time. In this sense, providing adequate resources not only helps fund work to safeguard civic space but also endows the issue with legitimacy. Funding helps convince others to take the issue seriously.

3. Harmonize diplomatic efforts and development funding related to civil society and civic space.

In countries with scarce resources, advocates for civil society need to maximize the impact of all the assets at their disposal. Yet, too often, there is a wall of separation – or even outright animosity – when different ministries are responsible for diplomacy and development work related to civil society. This dynamic is certainly not unique to the task of defending civic space, but advocates for civil society have a special responsibility to overcome this challenge. A unified approach to defending civic space that harnesses the full capabilities of diplomats and development professionals has a far greater probability of success than the fragmented efforts that occur in the absence of effective coordination.

In countries where civil society organizations struggle to secure basic funding, development resources can help build the civic infrastructure that enables domestic organizations to collaborate in defense of civic space. Diplomatic action to create an enabling environment for CSOs provides top cover for these efforts and can also help sway the behavior of governments that no longer listen to the voices of their own citizens.

Well-coordinated efforts do not occur by accident. In most cases, they require sustained work by the senior official responsible for civil society. In some instances, officials that report to heads of government – rather than individual ministries – may need to broker compromises and delineate lines of responsibility. The policies that emerge from these processes can have a significant impact on a government’s ability to provide effective, sustained engagement to support civil society. It is no coincidence that countries with the strongest foreign policy records defending civic space, including Sweden, the Netherlands, Canada, and the United States, all have coordinated policies designed to support the work of CSOs.

**Examples of Policies on
Civil Society**

[The Netherlands](#)

[Sweden](#)

[Canada](#)

[The United States](#)

Ideally, a policy on civic space should situate the defense of civil society within an overall development and security framework. The policy should establish the central role of civil society in achieving broader political and economic goals, and create linkages between respect for civic space and issues such as trade and investment policy. Whenever possible, governments should spread resources related to civic space initiatives among global, regional and local grants. The challenge of shrinking space for civil society requires coordinated action across all three spheres.

When designing their efforts to protect civic space, governments should recognize the distinction between tactical responses that treat the symptoms of government crackdowns and strategic efforts that work to cure the disease. Both are necessary, but they are often conflated. For example, providing assistance to CSOs facing unjustified pressure is a very worthwhile priority. However, it does little to address the underlying conditions that precipitated the crackdown. Conversely, investing in international efforts to establish norms that protect civil society can help change government behavior over time, but it provides little comfort to CSO representatives if they are unjustly imprisoned. A balanced policy should seek solutions to both sets of challenges.

Beyond items elsewhere in this paper, additional responses may include:

- Improving legislation that could affect the legal environment for civil society;
 - Delivering demarches (official diplomatic messages) and joint demarches with other countries in defense of civic space;
 - Engaging the media to highlight the benefits of a vibrant civil society;
 - Offering training and capacity building for CSOs;
 - Building bridges between civil society organizations working on development challenges and those engaged in political advocacy;
 - Sponsoring exchange trips or visitor programs to facilitate CSO engagement with broader networks of activists and government officials;
 - Ensuring regular ambassadorial participation in CSO events;
 - Funding innovative initiatives, legal research and analysis related to civic space;
 - Supporting civil society coalitions; and
 - Providing informal support such as invitations to national day celebrations or embassy events.
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4. Establish a process to reconcile competing interests when efforts to protect civil society run up against other priorities.

Governments that commit to standing up for civil society inevitably find themselves balancing opposing interests. There can be real diplomatic and economic liabilities associated with taking action on behalf of civil society. These costs often dissuade officials from defending civic space, even when a policy supporting civil society is in place.

When facing off against significant economic and security interests, advocates for civil society will usually find themselves at a bureaucratic disadvantage. Regardless of how noble the cause, the other side will almost always have more people, more resources, and more political capital. In order to overcome this challenge, advocates for civic space should push for a formal process that allows a senior official at the political level to resolve disputes over competing priorities. If debates are settled through bureaucratic slugfests, civil society will usually come out the loser. However, if decisions are elevated and placed before a single decision-maker, then advocates for civil society have a chance to argue their case on the merits. Creating such a process will not assure advocates for civil society a victory in every dispute. However, the right process provides a more promising path to success than simply digging in to wait out a much larger bureaucratic opponent.

In framing their approach to these debates, it is important for civil society advocates to recognize the diplomatic and economic price tag that sometimes accompanies action to defend civic space. Activists may be prone to dismiss legitimate concerns, minimize the potential for diplomatic fallout, or question the motives of their opponents. These tendencies make it easier for decision makers to write off advocates for civil society as unrealistic or naïve. Instead of ignoring the liabilities that sometimes accompany efforts to assist civil society, it may be more effective to acknowledge the challenges and reframe the benefits of safeguarding civic space to correspond more directly with potential costs.

In cases where governments face potential economic consequences as a result of standing up for civil society, it is important to emphasize the financial benefits of safeguarding civic space. Countries with strong civil society are more likely to respect private property, attract high-quality foreign investment, and maintain the rule of law. Politically, states may be more willing to taking diplomatic action on behalf of civil society if the action is presented as an opportunity to deepen ties with other democratic governments. The most compelling arguments for action will often transcend the realm of human rights and incorporate broader strategic and economic interests.

5. Engage in international initiatives to support civic space through the United Nations, Community of Democracies, and other multilateral bodies, and invite UN Special Rapporteurs working on related issues to visit your country.

The challenge of safeguarding civic space is too large for any country to tackle on its own. Over the last five years, a number of important international mechanisms have emerged to facilitate cooperation and coordination among governments looking to address threats to civil society. Due to the relatively modest number of governments that participate in these efforts, small countries – especially those from the global South – can have an outsized impact and exert significant influence if they help lead these initiatives. For example, the President of Mongolia was the only other head of government on stage with President Obama to launch the Stand with Civil Society agenda in 2013. This role was an outcome of Mongolia’s successful presidency of the Community of Democracies (CD).

KEY INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES AROUND CIVIC SPACE INCLUDE:

- **THE COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACIES’ WORKING GROUP ON ENABLING AND PROTECTING CIVIL SOCIETY** – The Working Group helped pioneer international collaboration to combat legal restrictions on CSOs, and the body still provides a first line of defense against restrictive laws. Through close collaboration with civil
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society organizations, the working group has been able to alert governments and other stakeholders when CSOs are under threat from harmful legislation. The body also leverages the talents of the International Center for Not-for-profit Law to provide analysis that can form the basis of effective diplomatic pressure.

- **THE GOVERNING COUNCIL OF THE COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACIES** – When engagement by the CD Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society is unable to resolve a problem quickly, cases can be referred to the CD’s Governing Council, the Community’s highest decision-making body. Civil society representatives from affected countries and experts testify before the Council and provide recommendations on how the international community should respond to specific challenges confronting CSOs. The Governing Council then works to prepare and approve a plan of action based on recommendations provided by civil society. In the year since the Governing Council began to play this role, the CD has taken on tough cases, including Egypt, Russia, Thailand, Ukraine, and Hungary. The mechanism is still evolving, but as it is utilized more frequently, joint action by the 24-member Governing Council should become routine.
 - **THE LIFELINE EMBATTLED CSO ASSISTANCE FUND** – Lifeline is funded through a consortium of 17 governments and foundations. The fund provides both emergency financial assistance and advocacy resources to help respond to specific threats against CSOs. Lifeline has provided assistance to over 400 organizations and provides a useful instrument for tactical responses in cases where strategic efforts to counter threats to civil society have failed.
 - **THE UNITED NATIONS AND UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL** – The UN system provides another important platform for efforts to safeguard civic space. For example, a group of likeminded countries at the UN Human Rights Council have created a quick reaction team that can mobilize in minutes when civil society comes under attack in UN HRC sessions. By filling a conference room with diplomats who will speak out in defense of civil society, governments can turn the
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tide against proposals that would restrict the voice of CSOs within the body or limit scrutiny of crackdowns on civil society. Governments that share a commitment to civil society should join these and related efforts in Geneva and New York.

- **UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE FREEDOMS OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY AND OF ASSOCIATION** – In October 2010, the United Nations Human Rights Council established a mandate for a special rapporteur on issues related to civic space. Maina Kiai, a civil society leader from Kenya, has held the position since its inception, and is currently nearing the end of his final term. The special rapporteurship has emerged as an important platform for engaging the Human Rights Council, the General Assembly, the Community of Democracies, and individual governments on violations of civic space and fundamental freedoms. However, under the terms of his mandate, the Special Rapporteur can only carry out official visits to countries in response to an official request, and many governments have refused to provide this invitation. Countries that care about creating an enabling environment for civil society should lead by example in welcoming visits from any UN special rapporteur whose work relates to civic space.
 - **THE WORK OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS** – Civil society participation in most regional organizations is underdeveloped. However, there are a handful of regional bodies such as the OSCE that have created platforms for regular engagement with CSOs. Governments should use these structures where they exist to push for coordinated regional action to defend civic space. In other regions, the emergence of new civil society architecture such as the Asia Democracy Network may provide an opportunity for governments to incorporate the defense of civil society into regional organizations and broader discussions of regional affairs.
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6. Develop a strategy to help civil society organizations secure access to resources.

Many governments go to extraordinary lengths to encourage foreign investment in the private sector and secure external budget support for their own operations even as they fight to prevent investment in civil society. A successful strategy to safeguard civic space needs to address this challenge and help ensure that civil society organizations have access to resources to carry out their work.

In recent years, scores of governments have imposed restrictions on external funding for civil society. Advocates for civic space are rightly seeking to counter these measures and have undertaken extensive work toward this end. Yet, for both practical and political reasons, governments should also look beyond direct financing of civil society to identify other potential sources of support. Strategies that can help ensure civil society organizations have access to resources include:

- **SUPPORTING THE GROWTH OF DOMESTIC PHILANTHROPY** – Most countries have a limited regulatory and social framework for domestic philanthropy. Embassies and diplomats can play an important role in expanding local support for CSOs. Ambassadors are well positioned to convene potential funders and connect them with outstanding civil society organizations. Embassies can encourage tax and regulatory reforms that incentivize contributions to civil society. For example, in several European countries donors to civil society face financial penalties in the form of value added tax assessments on contributions. Constructive diplomatic engagement by countries that value the work of civil society has opened the door to reforming these provisions.
 - **FACILITATING CROSS-BORDER PHILANTHROPY** – In many countries, including those with mature philanthropic institutions, domestic regulations may hinder the flow of non-governmental support for civil society organizations around the world. In the United States, CSOs had to work for seven years to secure one change in
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the tax code that reduced regulatory costs associated with foundation grants to international CSOs from roughly \$10,000 to as little as \$350. Governments should consult with philanthropic donors in their country to determine what types of reforms can facilitate support for civil society overseas.

- **ENCOURAGING INNOVATIONS IN SOCIAL FINANCE** – In recent years, a handful of civil society organizations have started using financial instruments that were previously reserved for actors in the private sector to support their work. For example, the International Rescue Committee has utilized political risk insurance from the Overseas Private Investment Corporation to support its work in challenging environments. Other organizations have leveraged partial bond guarantees provided by foundations to raise up to \$300 million on private capital markets to provide critical services or purchase humanitarian supplies in bulk. And crowd funding is emerging as a promising new tool to support the work of CSOs. For the moment, few civil society organizations have the financial know-how to tap into these resources. However, governments can help build the capacity to use these tools and unlock sources of capital that may be more challenging for governments to restrict through regulation without imperiling access to capital by the private sector.
 - **CREATING LINKAGES TO TRADE AND INVESTMENT** – Whenever possible, governments should incorporate the right of civil society organizations to seek funding for their work into bilateral trade and investment treaties. In virtually all countries, civil society represents a significant sector of the economy. Bundling discussions about access to resources for both the social sector and the private sector into a single conversation may provide advocates for civil society with additional leverage. It also catches governments at a moment when they are usually attempting to maximize cross-border revenue flows.
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7. Conduct regular dialogues with civil society organizations at home and abroad to evaluate efforts to safeguard civic space, solicit feedback, and promote accountability.

Successful, long-term engagement on any diplomatic issue depends on establishing feedback loops. Officials need regular input from outside the diplomatic bubble to determine whether their work is generating the intended results. Governments should seek advice on how to calibrate policy and innovate in response to changing dynamics. This is especially true when they are working to defend civic space. Most foreign ministries have hundreds of years of experience collaborating with other governments. However, diplomatic engagement with civil society organizations is comparatively new. Without routine consultations with civil society, there are few mechanisms available to determine if diplomatic efforts are working.

Successful dialogues with civil society have been conducted in countries ranging from Morocco to Mongolia, and there is a significant body of literature on strategies for government engagement with CSOs. For purposes of this paper and the task of safeguarding civic space, three features of successful dialogues stand out:

- **START FROM THE TOP** – Most foreign ministries are exceptionally good at reproducing behavior on a global scale. Ambassadors will replicate the behavior of foreign ministers and junior officers in the field will model the behavior of ambassadors. As with any aspect of diplomacy, some of the most important action will come at the working level, but it is much easier to spread the practice throughout an institution if dialogue begins at the top.
 - **TALK MUST PROVIDE A CATALYST FOR ACTION** – Both sides should come to the table with concrete ideas about what they hope to accomplish. Civil society representatives that meet with diplomats should have confidence that their input will be incorporated into the policy process. Whenever possible, CSOs should have the opportunity to make formal recommendations to policymakers and receive a response back on their proposals.
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- **GO BEYOND THE USUAL SUSPECTS** – When diplomats seek to engage civil society, they frequently suffer from the STP problem – the same ten people are invited to every meeting. Building an accurate assessment of efforts to safeguard civic space requires reaching beyond capitals and connecting with civil society organizations across a country. Frequently, the greatest abuses of rights and the greatest opportunities for progress are far outside political and commercial centers.

8. Align the launch of initiatives that support civil society with annual performance reviews so that outstanding efforts by individual diplomats can be reflected and rewarded in career evaluations.

Despite popular folklore to the contrary, foreign and development ministries are exceedingly human institutions. As such, they respond to incentives. At the operational level decisions about whether to prioritize civic space are not made by anonymous committees but by career diplomats who are – inevitably and understandably – focused on their next promotion. This is no knock on diplomats. Rather, it is a reminder that governments need to structure career incentives in such a way that they mobilize personnel to address the daunting challenge of defending civic space.

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD TAKE TWO BASIC PERSONNEL ACTIONS TO ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE IN DEFENSE OF CIVIC SPACE:

- **INCORPORATE CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT INTO PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS** – In some cases, existing processes are adequate to highlight the value of effective work with civil society. However, it may also require modifying the metrics by which employee performance is assessed. For a foreign ministry, the benefits of prioritizing work with civil society go beyond the issue of safeguarding civic space. A diplomat that knows how to engage networks, reach out beyond governments, leverage technology platforms, and construct broad coalitions is a diplomat that has mastered core components of 21st century
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statecraft. Emphasizing work with civil society is an easy way to help future-proof the skills of a nation's diplomatic corps.

- **COORDINATE CIVIC SPACE INITIATIVES WITH ANNUAL EVALUATIONS** – By launching new initiatives related to civic space a few months before evaluation season, leaders increase the odds that employees will put in their best efforts. This tactic is most effective when combined with instructions to consider CSO engagement as part of performance evaluations. However, it can work in isolation.

9. Recognize effective diplomatic action to strengthen and engage civil society with high-profile awards.

In too many countries – including the United States – courageous work to defend civil society has sometimes hindered diplomats' careers. The legendary ambassador Mark Palmer helped defend civil society in Hungary from literal and figurative attacks during the late 1980s. However, he was admonished for his work by his superiors and eventually forced out of the Foreign Service.

The civil society steering committee of the Community of Democracies awards the Palmer Prize every two years to recognize diplomatic efforts on behalf of civil society. Yet, there are few other initiatives within government or civil society to highlight exceptional diplomatic work in defense of civic space. Creating and expanding recognition opportunities for officials that defend civil society would be an exceptionally good investment.

Foreign ministries tend to be staffed by highly motivated individuals. The potential for recognition can serve as a powerful incentive for action. Junior officers will work around the clock for months in difficult assignments in hopes of receiving a minor award for their work. By making broader use of high-profile awards to recognize effort to advance the cause, civil society advocates in and out of government could create a new generation of officials that identify themselves as champions for civic space.

10. Require government ministries and agencies to issue regular reports on how their actions are contributing to efforts to strengthen civil society.

Just as the task of safeguarding civic space is too complex for any one country to address alone, it is also too complex for any one government ministry or agency to address alone. Foreign ministries or development ministries usually assume leadership in efforts to strengthen civil society abroad. However, finance ministries often have jurisdiction over cross-border financial transfers, defense or interior ministries may supply weapons or training used by another government to suppress peaceful protests, and trade authorities negotiate agreements that can help ensure CSOs' access to resources. Government is a plural noun. In many cases, different ministries end up working at cross-purposes on issues related to civic space.

The term “whole of government approach” is overused, but it is a necessary component of a comprehensive effort to defend civil society. As part of an overarching policy agenda, governments should ask every ministry or agency involved in international affairs to provide regular reports on how they are working to safeguard civic space. Establishing clear metrics for evaluation and an annual calendar for these reports will help institutionalize the agenda and coax agencies with different equities to adopt a common purpose.

Final Thoughts

The task of safeguarding civic space worldwide comes down to two simple questions:

1. What are the costs incurred by governments that crack down on civil society?
2. What are the incentives for countries to engage constructively with CSOs?

Governments remain uniquely positioned to improve both sides of this equation. However, even governments that do everything right will struggle to sustain their efforts over time unless actors in civil society provide reinforcement, encouragement, pressure, and incentives to advance this agenda. While government remains both the biggest problem and the only solution for many challenges confronting civil society, governments cannot do this work alone.

Both sides also need to be empathetic when dealing with the others' failings. Too often, we hold civil society and government to unobtainable standards of virtue. Individual representatives of each sector may be deserving of high praise, but creating a false expectation of perfection around the collective work of either group will lead to disappointment and disillusionment. Both civil society and government are an exceedingly human phenomenon. We should view them accordingly.

However, these institutions do not need to be perfect in order to be successful. Working together, they are arguably the last, best hope for addressing many of the challenges confronting humankind. Ensuring that both sectors have the space to collaborate constitutes one of the world's greatest opportunities to foster progress.
