GREEN SCHOOL

STEVEN J. GREEN SCHOOL OF
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2025

MIAMI CONFERENCE ON **GLOBAL DEMOCRACY**

PROCEEDINGS

WELCOME REMARKS

Rebecca Friedman

The third annual Miami Conference on Global Democracy opened with welcome remarks from Rebecca Friedman, professor of history in the Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs. Each year, the conference focuses on the pressures and challenges that democracy faces around the world.

"I don't think anyone here is surprised to learn that democracy continues to backslide around the world," Friedman said. She cited Freedom House's annual report *Freedom in the World*, which noted that 40 percent of the global population was affected by declines in freedom and cited a recession of democracy, pressured from authoritarian forces, for the past 17 years. "Only 34 countries saw increases in political rights and civil liberties, while 60 saw declines," Friedman continued. "Many elections were marred by violence and suppression. Regional conflicts caused instability. The world is less free and less safe."

And yet, she added, "we always feel there is reason to hope that democracy can rebound and even flourish. It is our anticipation that the lessons we learn from studying the challenges to democracy can help us reverse this trend and strengthen democracy around the world."

Friedman thanked the Green School's partners in presenting the conference, the George W. Bush Institute and Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation, along with sponsors: the Dorothea Green Lecture Series and the Václav Havel Program for Human Rights and Democracy. She enthusiastically recognized the many students in the audience. "Thank you for being here," she said. "It's all in your hands."

Moderator Inga Trauthig with panelists August Cole, Donavon Antoney Johnson and Mike Asencio

The first panel of the day, "The Role of Technology in Strengthening (or Undermining?) Democracy," explored how new technology tools and platforms not only have the potential to make our lives better, but can also be exploited by antidemocratic forces. Introduced by Mihaela Pintea, professor of Economics, and moderated by Inga Trauthig of the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy at FIU, the panel featured Mike Asencio, director of the Cyber Policy Program at the Jack D. Gordon Institute; August Cole, author and senior fellow at the Atlantic Council; and Donavon Antoney Johnson of the FIU Department of Public Policy & Administration.

To kick off the discussion, Trauthig asked Cole about how rapid technological advancements could impact U.S. security. "Automation from software is already something that we're experiencing in our daily lives," Cole said. He spoke about the profound impact of automation combined with robotics on the labor market. "Because we, in our society particularly, have so much identity wrapped up in work, there's a level of instability that is portended by adoption of these technologies." He cautioned that this could lead to extremism and violence.

He said he didn't see this as a near-term risk, but added, "And yet, after COVID, when we saw an acceleration of isolation, and technological adoption of software-driven platforms, you're looking at an evolution of work that's happening much faster than we thought. Simply put, things that I thought would happen in the 2030s, I'm starting to see now."

Trauthig then asked Johnson to address cyber resilience—what it is, why it's important and how it can strengthen democracies.

"We're coming from a time when democracy may have been one man, one vote, to a point where we now understand democracy to be about improving people's lives," Johnson said. "That's the central mission of democracy: expanding the freedoms people have risen to value and enjoy, and giving people access to those freedoms so that they can improve the lives they lead."

Access to technology improves people's access to resources, he explained. "It improves their access to the things that will bring value and meaning to their lives. Cyber resilience is all about making communities and organizations more robust so they can engage safely and effectively in this digital world we live in."

Some communities, he said, are more susceptible to the downside of misinformation because they do not have access to reliable technology that they can use to curb it. "And that contributes to democratic backsliding, because if people don't have access to reliable information, what do they have access to?"

The key point of the link between cybersecurity and democracy, he continued, is that governments have gone online and are now offering public goods digitally. "If the people cannot access those public goods digitally, sharing their information online in a safe and secure way, then we are essentially compromising the ways in which they are accessing and engaging in their own citizenship."

Trauthig asked Asencio to address ways technology is strengthening democracy here in the U.S. He talked about the unique access to government that technology provides us. "Any one of us in this room can send out a tweet or a direct message on a social media platform to the head of the Department of State, to the Secretary, or to the President of the United States or the Vice President, and have somebody actually engage with you at some point. You can engage directly and voice your opinion."

He pointed to a social media account the government has created on X, called Rapid Response 47. "That's the White House's answer to misinformation: there is one account you can go to and know that that is the official messaging that they are putting out."

On the other hand, to illustrate ways in which technology is undermining democracy, Asencio mentioned an incident during last year's Super Tuesday primary. "All of the registered Democrats in New Hampshire received a call from President Biden telling them, hey, you don't have to go out and vote today. We got this. Hackers used AI to fake President Biden's voice and robocalled every Democratic voter in the state. That undermines a democracy."

PANEL 1 – Continued

The panel then turned to the question of whether AI can be neutral.

“I believe that the technology itself is neutral,” Johnson said. “It’s the motivation behind it that drives it, that causes it to have bias. The players and motivators behind it give rise to ways in which the technology might then exacerbate existing biases and widen certain gaps. Some voices get lost entirely in the process of training AI models.”

“Any AI capability is only as good as the data that’s in it,” Cole added. “Every single data set has the implicit biases and tradeoffs of the people who build, organize, steal, shape and create them.”

Asencio speculated that the range of biases among people in the technology world could organically balance themselves to achieve overall neutrality. However, he cautioned, “There are nation state actors, like China and Russia, that are putting so much propaganda into these learning models that now just by sheer volume, they can control some of these outputs when you query.”

Trauthig broadened the conversation to look at the global state of democracy.

“If we had this panel in April 2011, the vibe would have been so different,” she said. “We would be cheering on social media and how it can bring thousands of people on the streets and bring dictatorships to fall. If we look at countries where the government has been either backsliding in democracy or is almost fully anti-democratic already, like Venezuela or Iran, how does technology fit in there in terms of helping with democratic resistance?”

Cole pointed to Poland. “It’s an interesting example, because Poland has clawed back some of its democratic traditions, which are young, from a fairly authoritarian turn. And a lot of that was enabled by grassroots and street level organizing with some of these technologies.” He added, “Ukraine actually is a really great example of how technology is an essential component of their resistance. The emboldening and empowering of the population in that country, to help the effort, that could not happen without AI.”

“In many of these countries where there is democratic backsliding and there is social unrest and in many cases destitution, people, especially young people, have used technology as the way out, both politically and economically,” Johnson said.

“In democracies,” Trauthig said, “we are often concerned that we’re basically killing the innovation by over-regulation. But what regulatory guardrails would be really important to not only allow technologies like artificial intelligence to flourish, but also rein in harms?”

“We’ve seen many governments try different blends of this mix,” Johnson said. “The reality is that it’s very culturally specific. But the universal thing is that overregulation kills everything, and a lack of regulation leads to the same output, or even worse. A risk-based approach is important.”

The governments that have tried to legislate or shape policy around technology use in public service delivery on their own without collaboration are the ones that fail miserably, Johnson said. “The people have to be involved. The private sector has to be involved. Policy making and legislation should come from that multi-stakeholder place, to ensure that balance between leveraging the benefits from technology while at the same time mitigating its risks.”

“Our country is the most innovative, creative country in the world,” Asencio said. “And if you think about some of the most incredible things that we’ve come up with, none of them were regulated at the point when they were created. When you had the tinkerer in the garage who’s working on virtual reality goggles, there were no rules.” Over-regulation, he said, sets us behind and makes us anti-competitive. He argued that some of the worst-case scenarios we envision and that the U.S. regulates to prevent—for example, robots that can be programmed to kill specific individuals—are being actively pursued by other countries.

“I think we have to be clear-eyed about that risk, but also not overreact in terms of policing and enforcement,” Cole said. “Similarly on regulation, we have to have an innovative economy that can transcend the capabilities of any other country. That’s how America persists in the 21st century.”

He added, “We are seeing a new wave of defense-oriented robotics and AI companies. What kind of corporate culture do we want for those institutions? Stability and growth are really core principles for the American economy and society. How do we ensure that’s upheld in this new facet of the economy? That’s a human question, an organizational one, more than it is a regulatory or legal one. Because you are dealing with technologies that move far faster than any regulatory body can comprehend or take action on. And I do think it’s that personal accountability, which in a societal sense is something I think we all believe Americans can do really well.”

As Johnson said earlier in the conversation, “We cannot be too technologically deterministic. Technology will not solve all our problems. It is not a panacea. It comes with many drawbacks, many faults, and we should have those front and center of mind when we make the choice to utilize technology in democratic institutions and the delivery of public goods and services.”

LUNCHEON KEYNOTE CONVERSATION

Damon Wilson and María Corina Machado

The lunchtime keynote session examined a dramatic example of the collapse of democracy through a conversation between Damon Wilson, president and CEO of the National Endowment for Democracy, and María Corina Machado, leader of the Venezuelan opposition. Besiki Kutateladze, a professor of criminology and criminal justice at the Green School, provided some background to frame the conversation.

Before 1999, Venezuela was considered a relatively stable liberal democracy. However, under the authoritarian rule of President Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro, political rights and civil liberties have been severely eroded. In the most recent presidential race, "The election was outright stolen," Kutateladze said. "Evidence presented by María Corina Machado, including vote tally sheets, and findings from the UN fact-finding mission, confirmed that the electoral administration was ordered to announce a result that did not reflect the true vote count. This blatant manipulation of the electoral process underscores the collapse of democratic institutions in the country."

A native of Georgia, Kutateladze mentioned that similar events took place in 2024 during elections in his own homeland.

In Venezuela, "Machado won the opposition primaries in October 2023, but was banned from participating in the 2024 election on spurious grounds," Kutateladze said. "Due to threats from the Maduro government to arrest her, she remains in hiding and will be joining us today via Zoom from an undisclosed location."

Before Wilson and Machado's conversation began, Ofelia Riquezes Curiel, the associate director of FIU's Václav Havel Program for Human Rights and Democracy, a lawyer and a human rights and law professor, set the scene.

"As a Venezuelan and a human rights lawyer who had to leave the country amid its longstanding crisis, the critical conversation that we are about to hear now has immense personal significance for me," she said. "The current state of the world shows us that democracy cannot be taken for granted. Once lost, it is not easily regained. When threatened, it must be fiercely protected. That brings me to María Corina Machado, whose courage and sacrifice are a powerful reminder of the enduring fight for democracy."

Since Maduro's illegitimate inauguration, she said, he has arrested opposition leaders, subjecting them to prolonged incommunicado detention and torture. "María Corina Machado has assumed unthinkable personal risks in her unwavering commitment to the Venezuelan people's right to freedom and democracy. Her leadership has given a renewed sense of hope to millions, both inside Venezuela and in the diaspora."

Damon Wilson spoke briefly, before introducing Machado, about the work of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a private foundation that was created by President Reagan. "NED's creation was premised on the idea that it was in America's long-term interest for there to be greater democracy and freedom around the world. Today we provide small grants to more than

2,000 nonviolent, peaceful freedom fighters in over 100 countries. For over 20 years, we've been supporting pro-freedom allies all around the world that are struggling against oppression, helping to affect democratic change on the ground inside a country and connect them to greater assets where they need help."

Today, he said, "We're going to hear from a real freedom fighter." María Corina Machado unified the Venezuelan opposition, overwhelmingly won their primaries (93%), and led a significant democratic campaign despite being disqualified. She then supported an alternative candidate, Ambassador Edmundo González Urrutia, who won nearly 70% of the vote nationwide, even in former Chavista strongholds. Machado's team meticulously documented over 83% of precinct results, alleging the election was fraudulent and that the opposition had clearly achieved victory. "It's the greatest example of fraud, and it's one of the most challenging issues for us today," Wilson said. "If every Venezuelan now knows that María Corina Machado and her colleagues won, what is wrong? Why are they not in power today?"

Damon Wilson: María Corina, thank you so much for your courage. What you achieved exceeded everyone's expectations. In a very unfair environment with repression, with state apparatus control, and without access to media, somehow you managed to mobilize the electorate to win an election. How did you achieve that kind of victory?

María Corina Machado: This is a victory of millions and millions of citizens within and abroad. I have to give credit to our diaspora that has been huge in making this happen. Two years ago, Venezuela looked hopeless, and every single person told us it was impossible to bring the country back together on our feet with enthusiasm and hope. They told us it was impossible.

I went to places that people say, why are you going there? There are no votes there—perhaps 50 people, 150. But this is about the soul of a nation. This is about getting everybody involved and committed. And it changed everything. The fact that the regime had intentionally divided our families, and forced almost a third of the population to flee, turned out to be one of our biggest strengths because it was all about getting our families together again. And this brought the country together.

We did incredible things using technology, with the best Venezuelan engineers, who designed apps so people could get involved.

We will get rid of Maduro, have no doubt. But the most important thing is how we managed to create a movement around common values—how we value democracy, how we value freedom, how we value our families today.

DW: How did Chavez and Maduro, his successor, capture what was a relatively prosperous democratic state?

MCM: This is fascinating because it's so tragic. Venezuela used to be the richest country in the region. After all, we have the largest reserves in oil in the world, and the eighth largest gas reserves. And we had long-lasting democracy and a vibrant middle-class. At some point democracy failed to deliver and people felt excluded. Chavez leveraged that. He promoted division and distrust and revenge, and that can be very effective. When Chavez arrived, the price of a barrel of oil was eight dollars and it increased to over $150. So he was very lucky in that sense, he had a huge amount of money that he used to control a country.

Of course, they robbed and sacked the country, it's a recipe that we have seen in many other countries. There are early signals: when you go against the judiciary system, when you use populism to divide society, and when you start weakening the social organizations that can oppose the government. Freedom of expression is very important, when you start seeing it being attacked, beware. And they managed to create a coalition of other actors that wanted to weaken Western liberal democracies and used Venezuela as a safe haven for their operations.

DW: You argued that the Maduro regime is both weaker and more dangerous. A lot of people look at Maduro and they see just another dictator, a tyrannical regime. But you make the case that this is something different. This is something beyond leftist ideology; this is a criminal mafia state that's weaponizing the drug trade. Help us understand the nature of the regime that you're dealing with.

MCM: What we have in Venezuela is a criminal cartel that is in power. In Mexico, for example, there are cartels that were infiltrating and were fought by the government. Here, the cartels are in power and have given Venezuelan territory to different groups, to different networks. And this structure cannot be contained within the borders of a country. Not in this century, not a country like Venezuela. So, what does the regime do? They use their liaisons with criminal groups around the world. Drug trafficking networks that have integrated within Colombia use Venezuela today as a main passage. Estimates are around 300 metric tons a year.

And the regime, they have taken all the façade away after the election, and emerged with this criminal structure. They don't bother anymore to hide the things they're doing.

We have a window of opportunity to move ahead and to further enforce these recent decisions by the Trump administration to cut the cash flows for the regime.

DW: How do you connect the recent Trump administration policies to target the Maduro regime to your strategy for democratic transition change? What do you see as the pathway?

MCM: This has to be a multi-dimensional strike. There needs to be strength and pressure and real credible threats from within. This has to be accompanied by concrete actions that can only be taken with the international community because we're talking about an international structure. I mean, there are agents from Hezbollah and Hamas operating in Venezuela, drug cartels from Mexico, from Brazil, the Colombian guerrillas, Cuban intelligence, Russian agents, Chinese technology. So, we need to do this with coordination and synergy. And that's precisely what we are doing and moving ahead.

We're facing a criminal structure with an international network and supporters. They stay in power through a huge structure of repression that's very well-funded; by a structure of propaganda to terrify the country and mislead the international community; and certainly by corruption.

Criminal structure starts to crumble when resources stop getting in. When they stop getting resources, both from what is legal, let's say oil licenses, and from criminal networks, like the oil black market, gold smuggling, money laundering, and prostitution networks—when they stop receiving those resources, then they have less money for repression, less money for propaganda, and within the regime they start fighting among themselves and tensions turn into fractures. So, we need that to take place.

When we increase the cost of repression—and that will happen if they get less resources—then we can have our underground movement, which we never stop organizing, assuming more and more visible and stronger pressure from within. And then you have a real credible threat that will force them to accept that they have no other option but a transition. That's the strategy, and it's working as we speak.

DW: Venezuela has long been a priority of Marco Rubio. On his first day as Secretary of State, he spoke to you in a way that underscored how he cared about the future of freedom in Venezuela. Can you talk about what you would like to see from the United States, and how that relates to what more you want to see other international actors do to support the cause of freedom in Venezuela?

MCM: I believe Secretary Rubio is one of the people in the United States who better understands what's at stake here and what a free Venezuela would mean for the region, because we will go for Cuba then, liberating Cuba and liberating Nicaragua, and for the

Ofelia Riquezes

first time in a century we will have a continent free of dictatorship and communism. But at the same time, you have to go to the root of the problem of migration, which is not going to stop if people don't feel they have a future in their country.

Secondly, more information regarding the criminal structures of the regime needs to be made public. I understand there are sealed indictments that are not made public yet, not only by the U.S., even in Europe, in Latin America. Go after the financial enablers, make it clear to those who are committing crimes that they will be held accountable. Have the ICC finally make a decision regarding investigations in Venezuela. These are concrete actions that are part of a bigger strategy. And meanwhile, we have our incredible diaspora organizing, speaking out and pressing all around the world for a peaceful orderly transition to democracy in Venezuela that can take place soon.

DW: You've been in hiding for eight months. What does it mean to have been separated from your family? How do you find the strength, the courage, the resilience to fight for freedom in such a difficult circumstance?

MCM: It's a very complex question, probably an existential one. I can only conceive my life in freedom and in Venezuela because I want my children, all our children, to have a country that they can feel proud of. And at the same time, because of what I do, I'm harming my family and putting them at risk. I talked with the parents or children of my colleagues that are in prison and we feel responsible to some extent. But at the same time, there's nowhere else I would want to be. I trust so much in the Venezuelan people. That's where my strength comes from.

I think all my life it has been like swimming against the tide. But once you overcome one obstacle, the energy and the pride it gives you, it's strength for the next moment to come. I absolutely think that Venezuela will be a free, prosperous, bright country.

The Enemy Within: How Elite Capture Undermines Democratic Governance

PANEL 2

The second panel of the day, "The Enemy Within: How Elite Capture Undermines Democratic Governance," explored the way authoritarian regimes exercise influence over key groups in other countries. Introduced by Oren Stier, professor of religious studies and director of the Holocaust and Genocide Studies Program, and moderated by Eduardo Gamarra, professor of political science in the Department of Politics & International Relations, the panel featured John Clark, from the Department of Politics & International Relations; Nicole Bibbins Sedaca from the George W. Bush Institute; Sarah Cook, an independent researcher and consultant; and Nino Evgenidze from the Economic Policy Research Center.

Gamarra started the conversation by asking the panelists to define the concept of elite capture.

Cook, whose area of expertise is China, began by using that country as an example. "Leveraging its significant economic power, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs a strategy of offering incentives or imposing restrictions to influence foreign elites—political, business, academic, cultural, and media figures," she said. "This aims to create economic interests that lead these elites to act in ways that benefit the CCP, potentially at the expense of their own country's interests."

"What about the uses of social policy as co-optation mechanisms?" Gamarra asked. "Is this occurring in other places in the world?

"What we're seeing, particularly from Russia and China, is a use of whatever tools would work," Bibbins Sedaca said. "So, in some places it's a political co-optation, economic, or cultural. In some places it's the media, some places it's the academic institutions, and some it's the social institutions." She talked about the range of tools Russia uses in Africa. "The Wagner Group, an independent group that is really an extension of the Russian intel services, provides security to the elite in different places, while perpetrating human rights abuses across the board in countries across Africa." The goals: "To keep in place leaders that are sympathetic to the Russian government, to have control over the resources, and to have a foothold in the continent for their own purposes."

Clark, a specialist on African politics, reflected on the impact of this. "In some of my recent work, I've been describing some African governments as mafias. And I don't use this analogy flippantly. It's more than just buying them off; it's giving them control over a state-owned enterprise or giving them a cabinet ministry that allows them to steal some money that's passing through that ministry. It's also like a personal loyalty pledge to a mafioso leader that you're making, so crossing that leader is threatening to your health and well-being."

"In the panel this morning, we talked a lot about disinformation and misinformation," Gamarra said. "To what extent is elite capture related to this use of the media and use of disinformation and misinformation?"

"What we see in Latin America is an extension of that type of elite capture, particularly in the media and academic spaces," Bibbins Sedaca said. TV stations that appear to be local and that broadcast in Spanish, like RT Actualidad and Sputnik Mundo, are actually part of a Russian state-controlled international news television network. "They have put into the media market what look like legitimate media outlets. And there's no problem with external media outlets being in the country, but these types of outlets are there not to add to the diversity of the voices, but really to start to capture it. It is propaganda and it's an arm of the government." As a result of the steady stream of positive propaganda about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, blaming it on the Ukrainians and the U.S., she said, the narrative about Russia and Ukraine has begun to shift significantly in Latin America.

Gamarra added that Chinese TV has also infiltrated Latin America. "It's not just that they're involved in producing material to be broadcast, but they've also hired very prominent Latin American journalists to be part of the staff. These people have a lot of credibility."

Evgenidze, a native of Georgia, said of the media environment in her home country, "The free space for the free media is really squeezing because of independent media already shut down in Georgia —not only outlets but the TV companies. Some others have very heavy financial problems because of the government, not because of their business model. We, the population, are paying for our taxes to maintain the public broadcaster, which is used against us, spreading Russian disinformation."

She added, "In Georgia we never thought in our entire history that we would face this kind of authoritarian, pro-Russian, mafia regime in our country, because we were one of the beacons of democracy. And I see some signs here [in the U.S.] as well. It's an everyday fight for freedom."

At Freedom House, Cook led a project that looked at the way the Chinese Communist Party and its proxies influence media in other countries. "We did case studies on 30 countries and we found unequivocally that Beijing is increasing its efforts to influence media and information around the world. We counted 130 outlets just in these 30 countries where Chinese state-backed content was being inserted either in print or in television and radio. It's not clearly labeled; you don't know that this is actually Chinese state propaganda."

She gave the example of a writer in Romania who was being paid by the tech company Huawei. The writer wrote an op-ed urging the Romanian government to allow Huawei to participate in developing the country's 5G network, from which the Chinese

Moderator Eduardo Gamarra with panelists John Clark, Nicole Bibbins Sedaca, Sarah Cook and Nino Evgenidze

company had been barred. “But it didn’t say that the person was being paid by Huawei,” she emphasized. In social media too, she added, influencers are being coopted by being offered money by foreign governments to insert content, often disinformation.

Cook’s Freedom House study found examples of some kind of censorship in 24 of the 30 countries. In some cases, media owners who have business interests in China can become gatekeepers domestically, influencing their own journalists. “In about half of the countries, it was the Chinese ambassador picking up the phone and bullying an editor to take the content down,” Cook said. “But we actually found in 17 countries that it was the local media owner or the local editor suppressing content.” Sometimes they had received a call, but sometimes they acted out of their own political or economic interest.

Bibbins Sedaca added, “We’re seeing media markets hit very, very hard around the world, and keeping media open and keeping it free is a very expensive undertaking. Russia and China particularly have been able to take advantage of the financial challenges that media outlets are facing.”

In Africa, Clark said, autocratic countries tend to be very connected either to China or to Russia, and much of the media is state controlled. “We’ve seen almost a 180 change since the democratic opening of the early 1990s, where the state has taken back control of most of the media and pushed out most of the private media outlets. The Chinese feel very, very comfortable working in these de facto one-party states. That’s what makes sense to them—you have a one-party state, and the state controls the media.” He said that China also tries to penetrate the media space in democratic countries, but is most comfortable working in autocratic countries.

“We are in a moment in which it seems like person-to-person contact between leaders is more important than multilateralism. In this new context,” Gamarra asked the panel, “what can the international community, and what can we as Americans, do to target elite co-optation?”

Bibbins Sedaca mentioned María Corina Machado’s compelling remarks in the previous section. “People like her, maybe not with her absolute stunning brilliance, are in every single country. And we have an opportunity and a responsibility as Americans to support them. That can come from our government. But we also have a very wealthy, engaged philanthropic sector. We have individuals. We have corporations. We have diaspora communities who understand the difference between living in an autocracy and living in a democracy. There are lots of opportunities for us to come together to figure out how we support the María Corinas in whatever country they might be. Investment in that is not elite capture,” she highlighted, “it is investing in the diversification of power in their country.”

Bibbins Sedaca also addressed the work being done to address kleptocracies—corrupt governments in which officials use their power to enrich themselves and their networks at the expense of the people they govern. “A regime like Maduro’s cannot function without Russia or China and the kleptocratic engine that it has built behind it, but we have ways that we can break that.

PANEL 2 – Continued

We have a ton of tools that are in our hands, and we have an opportunity to figure out how to partner more assertively with people in those countries who are working very hard to build a democracy."

Cook cautioned students to be aware that many of them are likely to be offered, at some point, an opportunity to go to China. "It might be through something that seems innocuous. And I'm not saying don't go—these are sometimes really great opportunities—but go open-eyed. Talk to a Uyghur before you go. Talk to a Tibetan. Talk to a Chinese dissident. Read about these junkets. Take an open-eyed decision of whether you go or not, but when you're there also be really careful. It's a very carefully cultivated view. There's only certain people you're allowed to meet in certain places you can go. And some of the content being shared is also very likely manipulated." It's a matter, she said, of being aware that this is an offer made by a very deeply authoritarian regime that may result in very clear quid pro quos later.

She talked about Ghanaian journalists who were interviewed about participating in junkets to China. "In a democratic setting, sometimes it backfires for regimes like the Chinese Communist Party. Some of them went and were like, well, I kind of knew China was repressive, but until I went, I didn't realize it. They wouldn't let us ask questions. And we had the CCP minder with us all the time." On the other hand, she said, visitors from countries that are less democratic have a different experience and can be more impressionable.

Cook talked about the importance of good investigative journalism, and Clark mentioned "heroic NGOs like Transparency International that do what you might call forensic accounting, who are tracking the money, such as stolen oil wealth."

He also pointed out that "autocratic governments want to close off any other avenues of professional success. So it's not only that they're trying to lure you into the government and make you a made man, in mafia speak, but they also want to close off the possibility that you could become a successful professional lawyer or journalist, to close down all those opportunities for an aspiring, intelligent person to get somewhere in life. From the vantage of Europe or the West, is there anything that we could do to keep those professional spaces open, where people could have an alternative life, where they're not connected to the state, where they can quietly be a dissident? I recently read an article on quiet, informal ways of resistance in Central African autocracies, within families, within NGOs, within community groups that go beneath the radar of the state. Supporting those non-state, non-elite captured spaces within society, where people could thrive and live, maybe that's something positive we could do."

CLOSING REMARKS

At the close of the conference, Professor Jazmine Exford, who teaches linguistics in the Department of Modern Languages at the Green School, offered some brief reflections on the day's discussions. "With all the uncertainty facing democracy globally," she began, "I am reassured by the knowledge and efforts of the amazing individuals that we've heard from today and the organizations that they represent. They are at the forefront of not only helping us all make sense of the challenges we are currently facing, but also demonstrating ways we can build resistance and resilience."

When democracy is in crisis, as it is today, Exford noted, we see its threat manifest in injustice, economic inequality, authoritarianism, marginalization of minority groups, and both physical and psychological violence. She encouraged the conference participants, especially the students, to move forward with more questions and answers.

"How can we leverage technology to ensure secure and more transparent interactions between governments and their citizens? How can we develop models that critically examine how individual and institutional biases shape the efficacy and effectiveness of technology and artificial intelligence used to mediate those interactions? How can we avoid placing in conflict the needs of people locally or nationally and the needs of communities and organizations internationally who rely on international support in their pursuit to protect their democracy? More broadly, how will increasing financial constraints on our organizations and educational institutions impact the future of democracy and human rights moving forward?"

Lastly, she pondered, "How can we at FIU and beyond reinforce the importance of collaboration in shaping policies and ethical guidelines for democratic issues like voting, protesting, and justice systems?"

As we continue to grapple with these questions and others, she concluded, what we know for sure is that democracy is not a fixed destination but an ongoing continuous pursuit that we must protect, strengthen, and uphold in this ever-changing world.

Mitzi Uehara Carter, director of FIU's Global Indigenous Forum, closed the conference by thanking the guests and speakers for their participation and urging them to stay engaged in confronting the global threats facing democracy.

Jazmine Exford

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

MIKE ASENCIO

Mike Asencio, acting director of cybersecurity policy at the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy at FIU, manages the statewide CyberSecureFlorida Training Initiative, funded by Cyber Florida. His expertise spans AI, cybersecurity, cyber infrastructure resiliency, cyber safety, and public policy in the cyber domain.

From 2015 to 2022, Mike held pivotal roles at FIU, including director of the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC). He transformed the dLOC into the world's leading digital library of Caribbean content, expanding partnerships with over 80 regional collaborators and enhancing global access to its vast collection. As program manager of the FIU Office of Engagement, he led community projects centered on emerging technologies like Blockchain and Web3 and supported tech startups, fostering innovation and economic growth.

Asencio has extensive expertise in working with government and the private sector to develop innovative solutions for complex challenges. His work in cybersecurity resiliency and policy-making has been instrumental in shaping robust cybersecurity strategies and public policies.

MITZI UEHARA CARTER

Mitzi Uehara Carter is an assistant teaching professor of anthropology and the director of FIU's Global Indigenous Forum (GIF). Her approach to interdisciplinary research is shaped by her research and joint appointments in Global Sociocultural Studies, Asian Studies, and African and Africa Diaspora Studies, as well as her own lived experience as a person of Black and indigenous descent. Her current book project traces her mother's journey from war torn Okinawa to a racially segregated U.S. South. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Princeton University Press, University of Southern California Press, and University of Tokyo Press.

As GIF director, Carter organizes career readiness workshops for students at FIU and development opportunities for faculty and graduate students. As a member of the Mellon Foundation-funded project Commons for Justice, Carter is producing the Global Indigenous Podcast Network, which highlights indigenous perspectives on environmental disaster risks and resilience in South Florida.

JOHN CLARK

John Clark is a professor of Politics and International Relations at FIU. He specializes in the state-society relations of African polities and the international relations of sub-Saharan Africa, and is currently studying the foreign policies of African states. He is co-editor of "Political Reform in Francophone Africa" (with David Gardinier), editor of "The African Stakes of the Congo War," author of "The Failure of Democracy in the Republic of Congo," and co-author of the "Historical Dictionary of Congo" (with Samuel Decalo) and "Africa's International Relations" (with Beth Whitaker). He has also published articles in *African Affairs,* the *Journal of Democracy,* the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *African Security*, and the *Africa Spectrum*.

Clark has been a Fulbright lecturer and research scholar at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, and a Fulbright specialist consultant and visiting professor at the Mbarara University of Science and Technology. He served six years as chair of the Department of International Relations at FIU and four years (2016-2020) as chair of the Department of Politics & International Relations.

AUGUST COLE

August Cole is a nonresident senior fellow in the *Forward* Defense practice of the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. He directed the Council's Art of Future Warfare Project, which explored creative and narrative works for insight into the future of conflict, from its inception in 2014 through 2017.

Cole also leads the strategy team for the Warring with Machines project on artificial intelligence at the Peace Research Institute of Oslo. A founder and managing partner at Useful Fiction, he has given talks, written short stories, and led workshops around the world.

Previously, Cole reported on the defense industry for *The Wall Street Journal*, helping to break many major national-security stories including foreign cyber spies hacking into the U.S. Joint Strike Fighter program. Prior to that, he worked as an editor and a reporter for MarketWatch.com. With P.W. Singer, he is the co-author of a new type of novel that uses the format of a technothriller to communicate nonfiction research. Their latest book is "Burn-In: A Novel of the Real Robotic Revolution."

SARAH COOK

Sarah Cook is an independent researcher and consultant. She launched the Substack newsletter *UnderReported China* in September 2024 to inform public and policy debates, while amplifying voices and stories from marginalized communities in China. Until 2023, Cook served as research director on China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House, where she directed the China Media Bulletin, a monthly digest providing news and analysis on media freedom developments related to China. She is also the author of several Asian country reports for Freedom House's annual publications, as well as four special reports about China.

Her comments and writings have appeared on CNN and in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Policy*, and the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China.

Before joining Freedom House, Cook co-edited the English translation of "A China More Just," a memoir by prominent rights attorney Gao Zhisheng. She was twice a delegate to the United Nations Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva for an NGO working on religious freedom in China.

NINO EVGENIDZE

Nino Evgenidze is executive director of the Economic Policy Research Center in Tbilisi, Georgia. She is a co-founder of the Tbilisi International Conference, together with the McCain Institute for International Leadership and Leadership Academy for Development and the Stanford University Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (CDDRL).

Evgenidze is also a co-founder of the Democracy Frontline Centre. She was a visiting scholar at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and a Stanford University fellow in the CDDRL program. Evgenidze was an anchor of the daily morning economic show at Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty. She has extensive experience working in the governmental and non-governmental sectors. She was an advisor at the Center for Economic Reforms of the State Chancellery of Georgia and head of the Public Outreach Department of the Anti-Corruption Policy Coordination Council of Georgia.

JAZMINE EXFORD

Jazmine Exford is an assistant professor of Spanish sociolinguistics at FIU. As an anthropological and applied sociolinguist, she uses interdisciplinary frameworks to examine a range of topics, including racio-gendered sociolinguistic choices of non-Latinx Spanish learners, discourses of second language learning and education abroad, Spanish as a local language, Blackness in the Americas/Mexico, and transnational identity construction.

Exford relies on various qualitative research methods, including digital, auto- and institutional ethnography; sociolinguistic and ethnographic interviews; field observations and notes; focus groups; questionnaires; archival and narrative inquiry; and multimodal discourse analysis of texts, images, and forms of embodiment. She creates courses that are rooted in community practice and center the experiences and concerns of marginalized language varieties.

REBECCA FRIEDMAN

Rebecca Friedman, a professor of History at FIU, focuses her research on the history and culture of modern Russia. Her 2006 book, "Masculinity, Autocracy and the Russian University, 1804-1863," examines behavior, loyalty, and sociability among a generation of Russian university students that would reshape the Russian social and political landscape for decades to come. She edited (with Barbara Clements and Dan Healy) the collection "Russian Masculinities in History and Culture," the first volume in English to focus on the growing field of Russian masculinity studies. She has also written about Russian childhood and the gendering of the Cadet Corps.

Friedman is currently working on a larger book project tentatively entitled "Time at Home," which highlights how, in a period of tremendous upheaval from about 1890-1930, Russians embraced notions of the home that reflected new ideas about the flow of historical time.

Friedman's teaching interests include Imperial Russian and Soviet gender, cultural, social history; European women's history; the history of childhood; material culture and the home; and nationalism in East Central Europe.

EDUARDO GAMARRA

Eduardo Gamarra is a professor of political science at FIU. He directed the Kimberly Green Latin American & Caribbean Center from 1994 to 2007 and was founding director of the Latino Public Opinion Forum.

Gamarra has conducted research and consulted in the U.S., Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago. He has served as the principal consultant on security sector reform, foreign policy, campaign strategy, and strategic communications to heads of state and governments in the Americas. He has also served as a consultant on Andean-related projects to the World Bank, the U.N. Development Program, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Organization of American States, and the European Union.

Gamarra has published many books and scholarly articles on Latin American and Caribbean affairs. He is a frequent commentator on leading media outlets and lectures at leading universities, think tanks, and other organizations.

DONAVON ANTONEY JOHNSON

Donavon Johnson, an assistant professor of Public Policy and Administration at FIU, researches the impact of administrative burdens on governance and democracy. He explores how bureaucratic processes and policymaking affect program implementation, evaluation, and social equity, questioning whether these burdens hinder public administration's role in good governance.

Johnson's second research area focuses on digital transformation and governance. His book "Cryptocurrency and Public Policy" examines the intersection of digital transformation with race, citizenship, governance, and social equity. He has also published on digital transformation in tourism recovery post-COVID-19 and its potential in higher education. His work appears in several journals, including *Government Information Quarterly* and *Administration and Society*. Johnson consults with government and private sector organizations in the Caribbean and provides data management consulting to international bodies like the OAS, USAID, EU, and World Bank.

BESIKI KUTATELADZE

Besiki Luka Kutateladze is a professor in FIU's Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice. He is also a founder and co-manager of Prosecutorial Performance Indicators, a national research and technical assistance project focusing on prosecutorial reform. Kutateladze specializes in performance indicators, prosecutorial discretion, racial disparities, and hate crime reporting and prosecution. His scholarship has been featured in publications including *Criminology, Justice Quarterly,* and *Law & Human Behavior*. His work has been referenced by *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Miami Herald, The Tampa Bay Times, The Orlando Sentinel, The Huffington Post,* and *The Crime Report.*

Kutateladze was the founding research director at the Institute for State and Local Governance of the City University of New York. From 2008 to 2013, he played a crucial role in the development of the United Nations Rule of Law Indicators and their implementation in Haiti and Liberia. In 2002, Kutateladze was the U.S. State Department fellow from the Republic of Georgia.

MARÍA CORINA MACHADO

María Corina Machado, a politician and industrial engineer, is the founder and national coordinator of VENTE, a Venezuelan political party established in 2012. She is the leader of the democratic movement in Venezuela, following her resounding victory in the primary elections on October 22, 2023, where she secured more than 92% of the votes. Despite her undeniable triumph in the primaries, the Maduro regime upheld her disqualification from running in the presidential elections on July 28, 2024.

Today, in hiding and under intense persecution by the regime against her and her team, Machado continues to lead efforts alongside Venezuelans and the international community to achieve a democratic transition. She has been recognized as one of the 100 most influential and inspiring leaders by the BBC. In 2024, she was awarded the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize by the Council of Europe and the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament.

MIHAELA PINTEA

Mihaela Pintea is associate professor of Economics at FIU and the department chair. She has been a visiting scholar at the International Monetary Fund and held a teaching position at the University of Maryland. Her research interests span macroeconomics, economic growth, development, and demographic economics.

Pintea has worked on public policy and the way governments can affect welfare and growth through taxation and the provision of public goods; how R&D, learning, structural change, and international trade affect aggregate labor productivity; and how family structure affects female labor participation and household welfare. Her research has been published in leading peer-reviewed journals including *Review of Economic Dynamics, Journal of Macroeconomics, Journal of Economic Dynamics and Control,* and *Economic Modelling.*

OFELIA RIQUEZES

Ofelia Riquezes is a visiting assistant teaching professor in the Department of Politics & International Relations at FIU and associate director of the Václav Havel Program for Human Rights & Democracy. Her research focuses on transitional justice processes in Latin America and international human rights law.

Originally from Venezuela, Riquezes was a human rights and civil law professor at Universidad Metropolitana's Faculty of Legal and Political Studies for several years. Prior to that, she practiced as an attorney in a well-known legal firm in Caracas. Riquezes continues to contribute to research projects led by Universidad Metropolitana's Human Rights Center, of which she is a founding member.

NICOLE BIBBINS SEDACA

Nicole Bibbins Sedaca is the Kelly and David Pfeil Fellow at the George W. Bush Institute and previously served as the executive vice president for strategy and programs at Freedom House.

Previously, she taught at Georgetown University's Master of Science in Foreign Service program, and served as the deputy director and chair for the Global Politics and Security Concentration, as well as a professor in the Practice of International Affairs.

Bibbins Sedaca has held numerous positions in the public and non-governmental sectors in the U.S. and Ecuador. She served for ten years in the U.S. Department of State, working on democracy promotion, human rights, human trafficking, religious freedom, refugees, and counterterrorism. Following her governmental service, she opened and directed the International Republican Institute's local governance program in Ecuador. She also taught

at the Universidad de San Francisco de Quito on democratization and conflict resolution. Prior to returning to Georgetown full-time, she served as the director of the Washington Office of Independent Diplomat, a diplomatic advisory group.

OREN STIER

Oren Stier is a professor of Religious Studies at FIU. He directs the Jewish Studies Certificate and serves as the director of the FIU Holocaust & Genocide Studies Program, which sponsors lectures and funds the creation of online courses. He served as Graduate Program director in the department of Religious Studies from 2007-2016.

Stier's main area of interest is Jewish cultural studies, with a special emphasis on the contemporary period and all aspects of present-day Jewish life and thought. Other research interests include Hasidism and South African Judaism, the latter growing out of his experiences living and teaching in Cape Town from 1996-1998. His current research concerns Holocaust memory and representation. He has authored two books on this topic: "Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust" and "Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory." He has published articles in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Prooftexts, Jewish Social Studies*, and *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, and chapters in a number of edited collections.

INGA TRAUTHIG

Inga Trauthig is a research professor at the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy at FIU. A security studies scholar, her research interests include disinformation, hybrid warfare, terrorism/counterterrorism, and emerging technologies. She works to understand the societal impacts of emerging technologies, particularly regarding political competition, democratic backsliding, shifting power dynamics, and related security implications.

Previously, Trauthig was the head of research of the Propaganda Research Lab at the Center for Media Engagement at University of Texas at Austin. She conducted original research and helped lead the lab's strategy and management as co-principal investigator. Prior to that, she was a research fellow with the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King's College London.

Her writing has appeared in both popular and scholarly outlets, including *The Hill, Lawfare, New Media & Society,* and *Political Research Quarterly*. Her work and comments have been featured by outlets including Al Jazeera, BBC, CNN, *Foreign Policy*, and *The Washington Post*. She co-edited a special journal issue on conspiracy theories for the *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*. She consults regularly with policy and security professionals and has given oral evidence in the U.K. Parliament.

DAMON WILSON

Damon Wilson is president and CEO of the National Endowment for Democracy. Prior to joining the NED, he helped transform the Atlantic Council into a leading global think tank as its executive vice president. Previously, he served as special assistant to the president and senior director for European Affairs at the National Security Council.

An American foreign policy expert, Wilson has helped shape U.S. strategy and national security policy throughout his career. He served as the executive secretary and chief of staff at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq, where he helped manage one of the largest U.S. embassies during a time of conflict. He worked at the National Security Council as the director for Central, Eastern, and Northern European Affairs, helping to enlarge NATO, partner with Germany, and support a democratic Ukraine. From 2001 to 2004, he served as deputy director in the private office of NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson, playing a lead role in NATO's response to 9/11 and its operations in Afghanistan and the Western Balkans.

ABOUT THE STEVEN J. GREEN SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL & PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs at FIU educates the leaders and changemakers of tomorrow through innovative teaching and research that advance global understanding, contributes to policy solutions, and promotes international dialogue. One of the leading schools of its kind in the world, the Green School is a full member of the prestigious Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA), one of only 25 in the U.S. and only 38 in the world. The Green School is the only APSIA member school in Florida. The school, which offers programs at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, encompasses eight departments that bridge the social sciences and humanities, and is home to some of the university's most prominent international centers, institutes, and programs.

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