

# Defending Democracy with Political Party Network Collaboration



Copyright © 2022 The National Democratic Institute (NDI)

All rights reserved.

Portions of this work may be reproduced and/or translated for noncommercial purposes provided NDI is acknowledged as the source of the material and is sent copies of any translation.

# Defending Democracy with Political Party Network Collaboration



---

NATIONAL  
DEMOCRATIC  
INSTITUTE

---

## About the National Democratic Institute

NDI is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental organization that works in partnership around the world to strengthen and safeguard democratic institutions, processes, norms and values to secure a better quality of life for all. NDI envisions a world where democracy and freedom prevail, with dignity for all. NDI works with political parties, civic groups, parliaments, and other organizations and individuals in more than 60 countries to strengthen democratic institutions, safeguard elections, advance citizen engagement, and promote open and accountable government. We establish trusted relationships with our partners and these relationships set us apart from other groups and give us a key, competitive advantage. NDI operates in the belief that a more democratic world is a more peaceful and prosperous place.

## Acknowledgments

Kellor Yde, NDI Program Officer for Political Party Programs, served as the manager and technical lead of this project with support from Birgitta Ohlsson and Hedvig Tindberg at NDI. NDI extends its thanks to Eric Sundström for drafting this publication, as well as Tamara Sartania for conducting the survey research and focus groups for this publication. The following NDI staff made valuable contributions during the research and implementation of the project: Markus Barnevik Olsson, Taylor Murray, Dana Radejovic, Makala Forster, Olivia Hoffman, and Peeter Boldt-Christmas. Special recognition goes to the guests and speakers who presented at NDI's Political Party Network Collaboration Congress, including Laura Thornton, Dr. Annika Silva-Leander, Benjamin Press, Stephanie Rust, Olya Catto, Ken Wollack, Sarah Moulton, and Molly Middlehurst. Finally, NDI is grateful to the party international representatives who participated throughout the launch of this initiative: Amanda Kanange, Antonia Verstappen, Astrid Thors, Bruno Gonçalves, Conny Reuter, Jesús Tapia, Dr. Luis Fernando Blanco, Michel Nentwig, Riccardo Pozzi, William Townsend, and Janmejai Tiwari.

## FOREWORD

Democratic political parties are in the midst of a perfect storm of populism, extremism, nationalism and authoritarianism. Even before the war in Ukraine started—when COVID brought the world to its knees—authoritarian political parties, governments and leaders were on the rise. Corruption, indifference to voters and opaque party organizations have undermined public confidence in political parties, fueling democratic instability and weakening global institutions. Illiberal actors and malign influences from foreign governments like China, Russia and Saudi Arabia are likely to continue escalating their attacks on democracies in the years to come.

However, the response to the war in Ukraine and recent key victories against authoritarian leaders have demonstrated the importance of cross-party collaboration to reinvigorating democracy around the world. Cross-party collaboration that unites political parties across ideological and national boundaries can provide a powerful defense against democratic backsliding. Defeating the growing storm of extremists and authoritarians will not be possible without a coordinated democratic response. To defend democracy in Ukraine and other countries under authoritarian threat, democratic political parties around the world must unite. And, as we are witnessing in Ukraine, when democracies unite, it changes the course of history.



Birgitta Ohlsson

Director of Political Party Programs, National Democratic Institute  
Former Swedish Minister and Member of Parliament



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>The Background: Party Internationals—and Why We Need Them</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Case: Transnational Alliances and Cross-ideological Cooperation</b>	<b>4</b>
The need for new democratic arenas in the age of permacrisis	4
The multilateral arena: Existing high-level initiatives and examples	5
<b>The Study: The Political Party Network Collaboration Initiative</b>	<b>7</b>
Methodology and limitations	7
The result: Seven key findings	9
<b>The First Step: The Inaugural Conference of the Political Party Network Collaboration Initiative</b>	<b>15</b>
Collaboration Session 1: Challenges and barriers to cross-party collaboration	16
Collaboration Session 2: Solutions for improving cross-party collaboration	16
Collaboration Session 3: Recommendations and future planning	17
<b>The Recommendations: The Necessary Road From Here</b>	<b>18</b>
Guidance for political parties: Navigating challenges and seizing opportunities	18
Guidance for party internationals and other party networks: Collaborate and educate	19
Guidance for facilitators: Creating opportunities for cross-party collaboration	20



# THE BACKGROUND

## Party Internationals— and Why We Need Them

The Willy-Brandt-Haus is located close to Brandenburger Tor in Berlin, right where *Wilhelmstraße* meets *Stresemannstraße*. This impressive building is not only the home of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD); it is also an art gallery open to the public. If you can visit—it is free of charge—make sure to look out for a booklet called *Pictures Documenting the History of the International and of Willy Brandt's SI-Presidency*.

The booklet is a guide to an exhibition consisting of pictures illustrating the best days of Socialist International (SI); one of several worldwide organizations of political parties. Willy Brandt—the former German Chancellor who was the chairman of SI from 1976-1992—is quoted throughout the booklet. A couple of Brandt's reflections illustrate the function that these global party networks can play—regardless of their ideological base.

In a retrospective statement made in 1986, Brandt talks about the relevance that SI had in the 1970s when new challenges emerged: the North-South conflict, the global arms buildup (including nuclear weapons), a dysfunctional world economic order, and a threatening human rights situation.<sup>1</sup>

If you then add the pictures—depicting meetings in Bamako, Mali as well as in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic—and consider that a statesman like Nelson Mandela passes before your eyes, the potential of **party internationals** should become evident. Because if a family of political parties have a transnational home where global developments can be analyzed; where ideological discussions can flourish; where emerging leaders can meet and become friends; where more developed parties can help their developing sister-parties; where like-minded parties can share their problems without fear of reprisal; where best practices can be shared and improved; where common challenges are matched with adequate policy solutions—democracy itself becomes stronger. Not least since during this process of learning and cooperation, political parties develop guidelines and benchmarks on democracy and human rights.

It should be noted that SI is just one of several **party internationals**, which can be described as transnational organizations of political parties that have a similar ideology or political orientation. Other party internationals have their own stories of important meetings and memorable personalities. Liberal International (LI), for example, cherishes their foundation in 1947 when the so-called **Oxford Manifesto** was drafted by 19 liberal parties under the guidance of the Spanish

diplomat and writer Salvador de Madariaga. LI returned to Oxford in 1997 and adopted *The Liberal Agenda for the 21st century*; a supplement to the original manifesto. It would be no surprise if LI celebrates their centenary at Wadham College in Oxford—the place where the original Oxford Manifesto was written.

Today, Wikipedia lists no less than 26 active **party internationals**. Some are operating on a true global level, while others are regional associations. Six **party internationals** can be regarded as the largest and most well-established:

- CDI: Centrist Democrat International (Christian democracy), founded in 1961.
- GG: Global Greens, founded in 2001.
- IDU: International Democrat Union (conservatism), founded in 1993.
- LI: Liberal International (liberalism), founded in 1947.
- PA: Progressive Alliance (social democracy and progressivism), a network of center-left parties founded as an alternative to SI in 2013.
- SI: Socialist International (democratic socialism), founded in 1951.

We must however acknowledge that these party internationals exist in a global environment where democracy's foundational principles of pluralism and international cooperation are consistently attacked, maligned and even ridiculed. Believers and defenders of a unified global order that is critical for safeguarding democratic actors, institutions and values face more challenges in the current moment than they have in decades.

Thomas Wright, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, noted already in 2018 that: **“Russia and China are very different powers with very different strategies, but they share the objective of targeting free and open societies to make the world a safer place for authoritarianism.”**<sup>2</sup> These strategies were thought to focus mainly on undermining and influencing democratic elections, combined with economic force and coercion. Special attention should also be given to the role of disinformation, not least in social media where “seeding” is combined with “echoing” (the former being the insertion of fake news, the latter describing how disinformation ends up as your own opinion). But on February 24th, 2022, it became clear that even war has once again become a lethal weapon in the authoritarian toolbox.

Long before the war in Ukraine, an expanding coalition of influential anti-democratic and authoritarian groups in nascent democracies had been fervently expanding their efforts to undermine democratic standards and spread distrust of institutions and multilateral bodies. Alongside this coalition exists a rising cohort of nationalist leaders from the world's largest democracies—for example India and until recently Brazil—that are championing the erosion of multilateral cooperation and norms by stoking nativism and embracing illiberal policies. It should come as no surprise that when the editors at the Collins Dictionary had to choose their word of the year 2022, “perma crisis” was their choice.<sup>3</sup>

We should also remember that the Freedom House's 2021 *Democracy Under Siege*-report highlighted that a key trend in 2021 was the persistent attack on pluralism from authoritarian leaders and nationalist coalitions—a popular tactic driving forward the world's current 15-year democratic decline. Without investing in new approaches, it is likely that traditional transnational

alliances and ideological or geographic-based coalitions will struggle to meet the challenges democracies and their institutions face during the 21st century.

Political parties will be increasingly reliant on their ideological family groups and regional support networks as democracy continues to be in flux throughout the world. However, there are few spaces for these groups and their networks to collaborate in international, cross-party spaces with each other and build democratic solidarity and support for their members. This is a case for concern, since reliance solely on your own ideological group will not be sufficient.

Moreover, and most tellingly, if you ever visit the Willy-Brandt-Haus and browse through the history of his presidency of SI, you are not likely to encounter many faces from other party internationals—if any at all. But if our present future can be described as a state of permacrisis where we feel the threat to democracy is ever-present, it is necessary to identify a new direction.

Put simply: It is time to bring down the barriers between the international party networks and bring them together to defend democratic norms.



# THE CASE

## Transnational Alliances and Cross-ideological Cooperation

### The need for new democratic arenas in the age of permacrisis

Unlike in the 1970s, when Willy Brandt addressed new global challenges within **one** of the international party networks—his own, of course—cross-ideology and transnational alliances amongst party networks would build unique coalitions. In this way, the democratic solidarity needed today could be fostered and developed.

As a matter of fact, transcontinental alliances of democratic actors are one of democracy's greatest tools against rising populism and authoritarian one-party democracies. Multilateral coalitions reward deliberative and collaborative government institutions, like political parties, and systems, while creating incentives for politicians to consider the implications of their actions on others.

Furthermore, populist leaders often embrace nationalism and attack international institutions as a preface for their consolidation of power, recognizing the pressure multilateral bodies can exert on states straying from democratic norms. The global community should view actions and rhetoric taken against international partnerships and organizations as an explicit indicator of an intent to turn democracy into a less pluralistic and representative political system.

While traditional state-based solutions to this crisis are struggling, cooperation between different political actors is presenting the most interesting and effective resistance to populist takeovers. In particular, political parties are organizing the public into an effective opposition against many of these anti-democratic regimes. Unfortunately, although they are often one of the best approaches for stopping single-party abuses of power, cross-ideological collaborations between parties are exceedingly uncommon in the same country, let alone transnationally.

Similarly, these transcontinental alliances would help bolster party cooperation in defense of democratic rights and create a space for sharing strategies and best practices for coalition building. They would do so in a time when a growing coalition of illiberal leaders and authoritarian political parties are working to erode fundamental democratic institutions through attacks on political pluralism and compromise.

If we agree that democratic actors must cooperate better in this new area of permacrisis, we must start by considering the first hurdle: The lack of spaces for democratic party groups and networks to collaborate in a cross-ideological, transnational manner to build democratic solidarity.

## The multilateral arena: Existing high-level initiatives and examples

To present a complete overview of all high-level initiatives in the multilateral democratic arena is difficult. There are many on-going attempts and processes that address the current threats to democracy in different ways. Some of the most important initiatives include:

- **Summit for Democracy:** A virtual meeting attended by 111 nations, hosted by the United States.
- **Democracies-10 (D-10):** An initiative to create an expanded G7 with only democratic nations.
- **European Network of Political Foundations:** Gathers European political foundations, civil society actors and relevant EU-institutions; one working group focuses on democracy.
- **Inter-Parliamentary Union:** Global democratic advocacy organization consisting of 173 parliaments, has a Forum of Young Parliamentarians.
- **Friends in Defense of Democracy:** Multilateral partnership formed in 2020 by United Nations member states from four continents.
- **High-level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism:** Advises UN Member States on issues of key global concern where governance improvements are most needed.



In addition to these global multilateral initiatives, practitioners in the global party development space have created similar initiatives targeting political parties specifically. For example, the **The Beacon Project** created by the International Republican Institute (IRI) established a network of more than 300 active members from 27 countries to address issues primarily related to disinformation and malign influences on elections. Another IRI initiative called **Generation Democracy** gathers youth leaders, politicians and activists from more than 80 countries to share knowledge and build personal skills. The **International Coalition for Democratic Renewal (ICDR)** was formed by a prominent group of intellectuals, activists, and politicians concerned with the expansion of power and influence of authoritarian regimes. The **Annual Autumn Academy (AAA)** is by think-tank FEPS in Brussels gathers an international cohort of nominees to analyze democracy-related matters with top progressive thinkers, politicians, and academics.

Each of these initiatives has obvious strengths, but some of them are constructed only for their own political family; some are limited by geography; some are limited to a specific topic; others focus on individuals and non-party actors. None fill the niche that political parties around the world could benefit from: a global, party-focused network that unites actors across ideological lines and fosters collaboration in defense of democratic process.

NDI's research has not identified any current global initiatives with an exclusive focus on engaging global networks of political parties in a cross-partisan, collaborative manner. In other words: An initiative that regularly gathers the major party internationals to discuss democratic political party challenges does not exist.

To address this gap and create a new network within the international arena, it is first critical to identify what barriers to cross-party collaboration exist in the status quo. Addressing common challenges would allow the network to provide opportunities for knowledge sharing, creating multi-partisan solutions, and enacting joint action in defense of democratic institutions.

# THE STUDY

## The Political Party Network Collaboration Initiative

Currently, there are few spaces for democratic party groups and networks to collaborate in a cross-ideological manner to build democratic solidarity. As authoritarians around the world gain more ground, unity between democratic actors becomes more important than ever.

As such, NDI launched the “Political Party Network Collaboration” initiative to build a multilateral collaborative body of democratic political parties across the global and political spectrum. This body will act as a global knowledge-sharing network committed to creating and coordinating strategies to defend democratic institutions and uphold rule of law.

Prior to the commencement of the program, NDI’s research team conducted a short study to determine the needs and desires of political parties relating to cross-party cooperation. The purpose of the study was to gauge the interest of different party international members with regard to cooperation with other parties outside of their region and/or ideology. Further, the study identified potential topics for cooperation as well as entry points and preferred methods of engagement.

Among others, the research aimed to address the following questions:

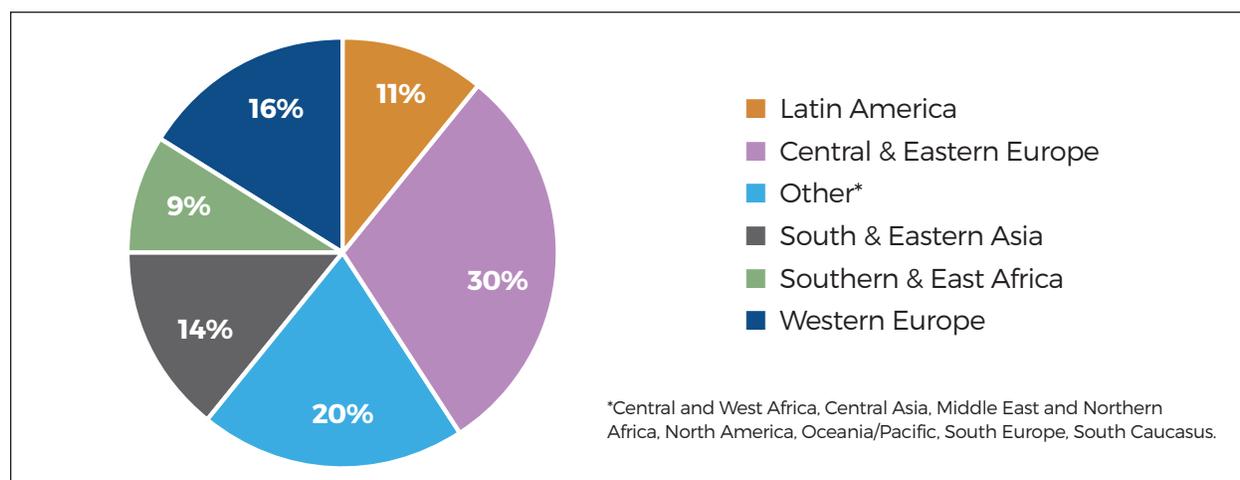
- To what extent do parties collaborate outside of their region and ideology?
- What types of collaboration are most helpful for parties?
- What issues are all parties facing today that must be addressed collaboratively across borders and ideologies?
- What collaborative activities and tools are practical for parties? What is the frequency of engagement the parties would be willing to devote to the NDI initiative?

### Methodology and limitations

The research team used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, including a web-based survey administered through the SurveyMonkey platform, to engage different members of the party internationals, as well as follow up focus group discussions (FGDs) with the survey participants. The survey and focus group guide are available in Annex 1. The online survey was made available in English, Spanish and French to accommodate participating respondents. The FGDs took place primarily in English with Spanish translation when necessary. In addition to gathering relevant insights from the party members, data from the survey helped to identify participants for the FGDs.

The link to the online survey was sent to 83 members of four party networks and their youth wings, comprising eight total ideological networks and covering a broad range of geographic regions and positions within parties. A total of 48 (58 percent) respondents completed the survey over the period of November 2021-January 2022.

**Figure 1: Regional representation of survey participants.**



Following the initial survey analysis, the research team developed semi-structured open-ended questions to guide focus group discussions to gather more detailed responses to the research questions. The team conducted four FGDs with a total of 12 participants. Participants for each focus group were selected with gender, age, geographic and party representation in mind to capture a diverse array of perspectives.

In addition, the participants were allocated to different groups based on their willingness to cooperate with parties across ideologies—open/at every opportunity; rarely/occasionally and a mixed group. The fourth—bonus group—was added for participants who expressed willingness to participate but could not do so during the allocated time slots. All focus group discussions were conducted via the Zoom platform.

**Figure 2: Regional and gender breakdown of focus group participants.**

Focus Group	Number of participants	Regions represented	Gender breakdown	Willingness to cooperate across ideologies
Focus Group 1	3	Central and Eastern Europe; Central and West Africa; Southern and East Africa	Two males One female	Often/At every opportunity
Focus Group 2	3	Western Europe; Southern and East Africa; South and Eastern Asia	Two males One female	Occasionally/Rarely
Focus Group 3	4	Central and Eastern Europe; Southern and East Africa; North America; Latin America	Three males One female	Mixed group
Focus Group 4 (Bonus)	2	South and Eastern Asia; Latin America	Two males	Bonus/Mixed group

The following limitations apply when interpreting the results of the report:

- **Selection bias:** NDI requested contact information of potential survey respondents from major party networks—among others—to ensure the diversity and a random selection of respondents. However, as not all respondents completed the survey, there is a possibility of selection bias, i.e. those respondents who choose to complete the survey might differ from those who did not in terms of their attitude towards cross-party collaboration initiative, party characteristics and experience. The same bias may apply to the focus group participants.
- **Language limitation:** As survey was only available in English, Spanish and French, this might have excluded participants who are not comfortable or fluent in either of the languages and might have resulted in the selection bias described above.
- **Sample size:** Due to the small sample size of the survey participants, percentage points should be interpreted with caution: each answer carries a weight of 2 percent. As such, in some cases, two or three answers could result in high percentage point differences among different options selected by the participants
- **Halo bias:** There is a known tendency among the participants to underreport answers they deem socially undesirable and instead provide answers they think would please the research team to read/hear. In case of this research, this may manifest itself in terms of the participants overstating their willingness to participate in the NDI-led initiative as well as their willingness to devote time to this initiative. Throughout the study, the research team tried to mitigate the halo bias by specifically underscoring the importance of honest replies and feedback.

## The result: Seven key findings

### Key finding 1: An absolute majority of the parties surveyed have experience with collaborating with parties outside of their country/region.

95 percent of the respondents claimed that their parties collaborated with other parties outside of their country/region. The FGDs confirmed these findings, whereas the participants described their experience of collaboration with other parties. However, as identified during the in-depth discussions, this collaboration is mostly spearheaded by each parties' party international or as a part of an international organization's program, such as NDI, German Party Foundations, or other practitioners.

Collaboration activities included trainings, joint workshops, knowledge sharing exchanges, working on common policy visions and issuing joint statements. Most of the parties surveyed collaborate with parties from Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe—however, this finding could

"I'd say we mostly cooperate on the European field"

—FDG Participant, Western Europe

"We try to [cooperate internationally], but we mostly engage with ourselves locally and there is, unfortunately, hardly any interaction abroad, one of the reasons being that most of the international organizations tend to be Eurocentric"

—FDG participant, Southern & East Africa

be partially explained by the fact that a plurality of survey respondents (46 percent) are located in those regions.

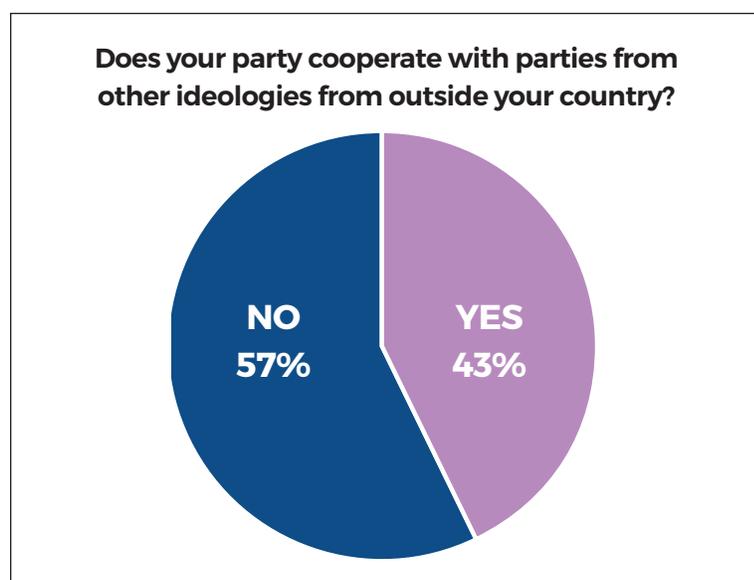
In addition, most party internationals are headquartered and/or led by European-centered parties. There are also several regional initiatives beyond Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe that unite parties based in those regions (for example, parties in Latin America, or island states).

The willingness to cooperate with parties outside of their region is also high—with 85 percent of survey respondents stating they are willing to cooperate with other parties outside their region “at every opportunity” or “often, on a somewhat regular basis.”

### Key finding 2: Currently, cooperation across ideologies is significantly lower.

Less than a half of the parties surveyed say that they cooperate with parties from other ideologies outside their country. According to FGD participants, when such cooperation occurs, it is usually with parties from similar ideologies.

**Figure 3: Party cooperation across ideology.**



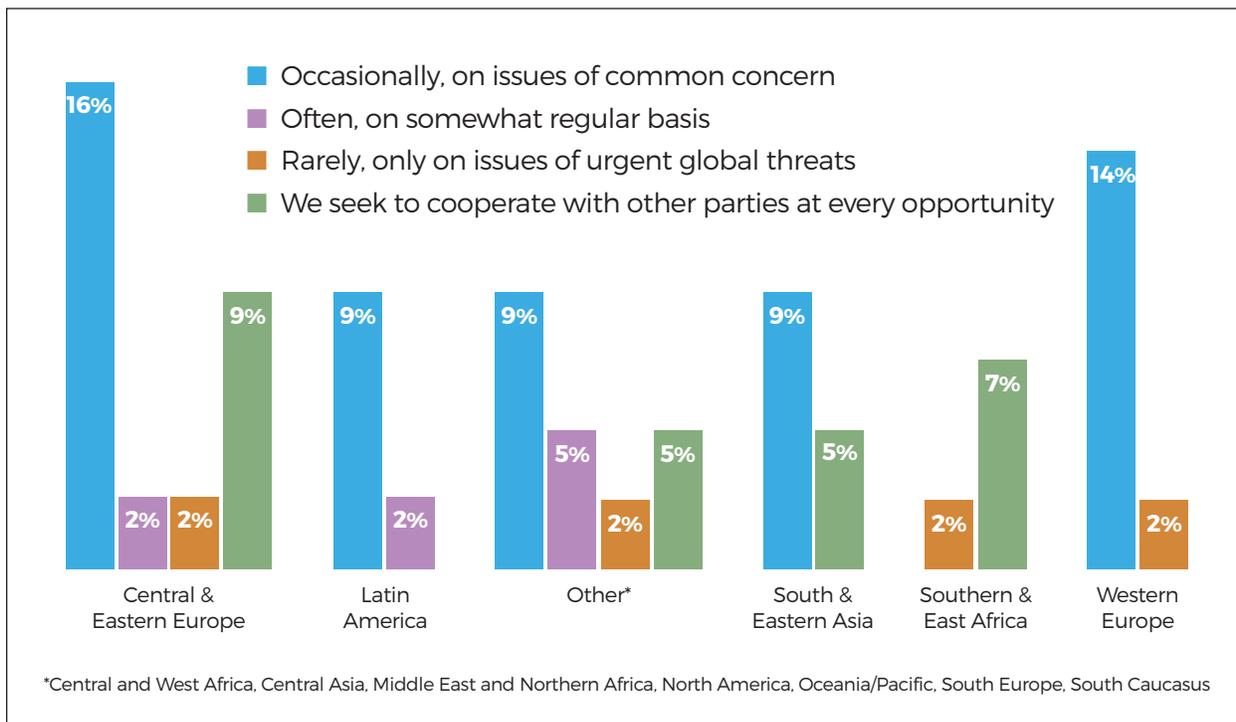
“We have very limited engagement in terms of cross ideology, except for our engagement to highlight the human rights situation in the country. In general, we do work with other political parties that are leaning towards more the left and towards promoting democracy and human rights.”  
—FDG participant, South and Eastern Asia

### Key finding 3: Parties’ willingness to cooperate with parties from other ideologies is somewhat lower than willingness to cooperate with parties outside their region.

Only 34 percent of parties surveyed express willingness to cooperate with parties from different ideologies “at every opportunity” or “often, on a somewhat regular basis,” while the majority only express willingness to cooperate “occasionally, on issues of common concern” or “rarely, on issues of urgent global threats.” On average, parties from Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe are more reluctant to cooperate with parties outside of their ideologies.

No significant differences were found in the willingness to cooperate among members of different party internationals.

**Figure 4: Willingness to cooperate across ideologies.**



However, participants of the focus group discussions were more open to the idea of cooperating across ideologies and named a few examples when such a collaboration was of benefit: for example, to raise an issue of an illegal detention of a senator in a country or extrajudicial killings. Some participants noted that in order to tackle global issues, such as defending democracy, the discussions should be broad enough to incorporate voices from different regions and ideologies.

“I think that we as liberals, we need to be more involved with other parties around the world, even with other ideologies, I mean we need to focus on the debate on ideas”  
—FGD participant, Latin America

“I can just say that we agree to this: young liberals really want to work across ideology, across party and global partnerships.”  
—FGD participant, Western Europe

**Key finding 4: Those participants willing to cooperate with parties outside of their ideologies have clear “red lines” on when they would refuse to do so.**

The most common requirement for cooperation was that all parties involved should be democratic and uphold basic principles of democracy, such as rule of law, freedom of press and respect for individual human rights. Other red lines included: extremist parties on the far left or far right; those affiliated with the Kremlin; rebel groups and armed movements; those supporting authoritarian regimes and overlooking human rights violations as well as those who consistently take “undemocratic actions.”

“On our end, a red line will be working with anti-democratic governments in the region, for example of Venezuela and Nicaragua”

—FDG participants, North America

“We are more than willing to work with other parties outside the green coalition as long as a party is promoting democratic values, but if say the party is promoting combat resistance or rebellion, then we will not be glad to cooperate with those”

—FGD participant, Southern and East Africa

### **Key finding 5: Despite less eagerness to cooperate across ideologies, parties still see value in cooperating internationally.**

FGD participants consistently expressed interest in an NDI initiative gathering political parties and party networks internationally across party lines. For some parties, respondents were interested in gaining more international partners, while others saw the value in experience sharing and jointly tackling global issues of concern.

For parties from less democratic states, joining an international initiative would be another venue to raise their concerns about democratic backsliding at home. Many parties already have experience participating in various NDI-led initiatives and have developed close ties with NDI and respect for the work the organization does across the globe.

“[What] we have learned during these years is that we cannot fight alone: When you are connected to the global community and the community is aware about what you’re facing, it makes hard for the regime to go against you,”

—FDG participant, Latin America

“Interest for us is to have cooperation through Institutes like the NDI because it gives seriousness and certainty to the work that we do,”

—FDG participant, Central and Eastern Europe.

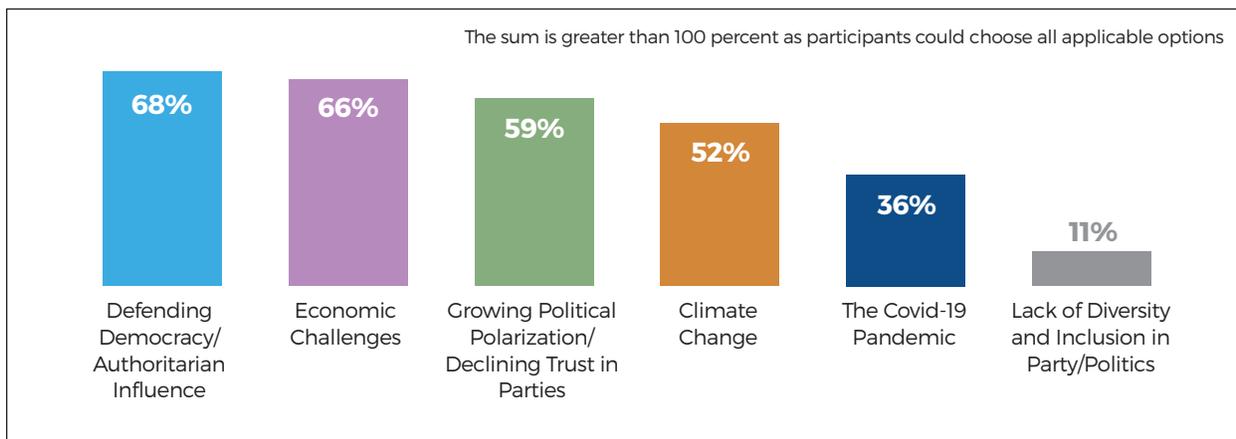
### **Key finding 6: Defending democracy is the top issue faced by parties.**

The surveyed parties identified Defending Democracy/Authoritarian Influence; Economic Challenges; and Growing Political Polarization/Declining Trust in Parties as the top three issues they face. Those naming Defending Democracy/Authoritarian Influence as their top issue further specified the Rise of Authoritarianism and Human Rights as their greatest challenges. Western European parties in particular named defending democracy as their top priority.

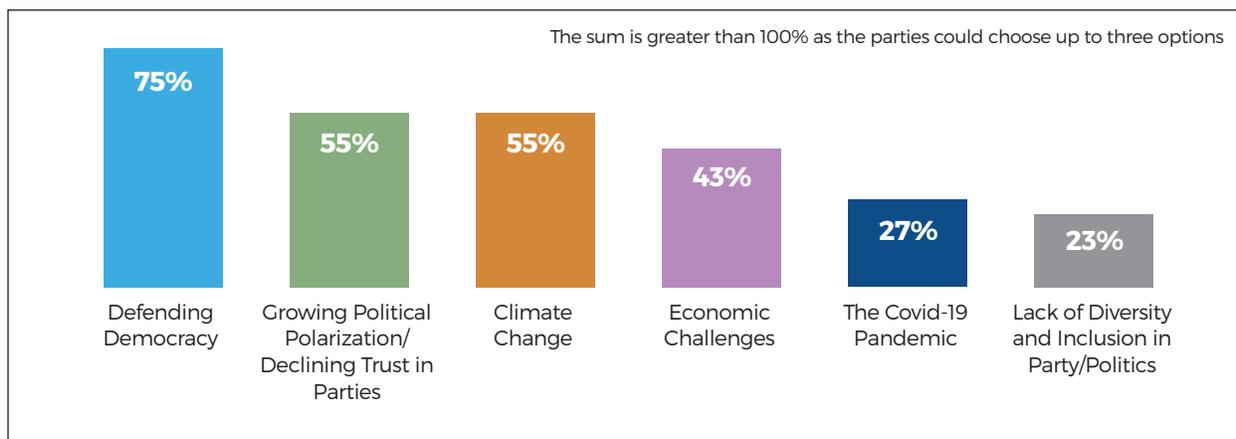
However, it must be noted that when asked to name the top three issues that require global solutions, parties prioritized climate change instead of economic challenges. This is also consistent with the opinions expressed by FGD participants who often spoke about climate change (and climate justice) as one of the topics they would be interested to discuss with other parties in a collaborative setting. Discussions in the focus groups reinforced this trend: **political parties see a distinction between the most important issues they face and the issues that require global solutions.** Addressing the

lack of diversity in parties and working toward gender equality also came up frequently during focus group discussions, in contrast to the survey responses where such answers were less common. When further probed, the FDG participants expressed willingness to collaborate on topics that may not be of immediate priority for their party—but are of global importance.

**Figure 5: Top cross-cutting issues faced by parties**



**Figure 6: Top three global issues parties need to address globally**



“I think it’s very difficult just to pick three topics, because there are many topics which are the global topics and important, but if we go by, like top three or most important three, I think that would be climate justice which I think we definitely need more collaboration from all parties because it’s a global topic, and it cannot be sorted alone,”

—FDG participant, South and Eastern Asia

“The need to defend democracy—it’s not a question of promoting democracy anymore; it’s a question of defending democracy, because there is a sort of slide backwards and we need to ensure the consolidation of democratic institutions,”

—FDG participant, Southern and East Africa

## **Key finding 7: Political parties are more likely to participate in inclusive, in-person cross-party activities.**

Currently, the parties use a variety of tools to collaborate with other parties, such as face-to-face meetings, joint events (including trainings, conferences, forums), online/Zoom meetings, social media and email communication. However, **the parties rank in-person meetings and joint events as the most useful tools**, largely due to video call fatigue inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic. FGD participants reiterated this point, elaborating that in-person interactions allow for establishing personal rapport with representatives of other parties.

In addition, the survey respondents and FGD participants **spoke in more detail about the types of events they would be interested in**: capacity-building and trainings, especially for young/women leaders and activists; exchange programs; roundtable discussions around certain topics (e.g. party finance or election strategy) and forums to work on specific policy issues or share best practices. While it is important to involve party leadership at the onset of party initiatives to obtain their commitment and buy-in, FGD participants advocated for broader involvement of other party structures, particularly youth wings and women wings.

FGD participants also highlighted the greatest barriers for political parties considering participation in crossparty initiatives. Practically, time zone differences and financial constraints were the most common challenges discouraging greater involvement in existing cross-party collaborative activities. Politically, differing electoral cycles are the greatest barriers for participating in crossparty initiatives, necessitating careful planning for the timing of such activities to avoid campaign periods ahead of important election dates. Overall, most of the parties surveyed were still willing to devote time to in-person meetings and joint events at least once quarterly.

# THE FIRST STEP

## The Inaugural Conference of the Political Party Network Collaboration Initiative

Strengthening democracy is often an arduous process that regularly feels like taking two steps forward and one step back. The first formal gathering of NDI's Political Party Network Collaboration took place in Washington DC on August 22nd and 23rd, 2022. The participants gathered represented the major party internationals:

- **Amanda Kanange**, President of International Federation of Liberal Youth, Sweden.
- **Antonia Verstappen**, International Secretary, Progressive Alliance, New Zealand.
- **Astrid Thors**, Vice President for Liberal International, Finland.
- **Bruno Gonçalves**, Secretary General of International Union of Socialist Youth, Portugal.
- **Conny Reuter**, Global Coordinator of Progressive Alliance, Germany.
- **Jesús Tapia**, President of International Union of Socialist Youth, Venezuela.
- **Dr. Luis Fernando Blanco**, General Coordinator of Centrist Democrat International, Belgium.
- **Michel Nentwig**, Secretary General of International Federation of Liberal Youth; Germany.
- **Riccardo Pozzi**, President of Youth Centrist Democrat International, Italy.
- **William Townsend**, Secretary General of Liberal International, United Kingdom.

The two-day program included presentations by established scholars and practitioners analyzing the global state of democracy, the threat of authoritarian political parties and the compounding factor of political polarization. Following these presentations were three roundtable cross-party collaborative sessions with the representatives from each party international. The sessions presented many insights into the challenges and opportunities regarding cross-party collaboration and how polarization has impacted political parties globally.<sup>4</sup>



## **Collaboration Session 1: Challenges and barriers to cross-party collaboration**

During the first collaborative session the participants were asked to identify barriers to closer cooperation between political parties and their organizations. Their answers can be grouped into three categories.

First, many delegates raised practical and logistical concerns. Participants from different internationals had simply not considered collaborating before. Covid-19 and a change of leadership interrupted on-going activities. Issues regarding financial support, where and from whom funding is achieved, and necessary bureaucracy surrounding international cooperation were also raised.

A second group of concerns had to do with how politics is often stuck in old ruts. There is always competition between parties with different ideologies and strong personalities, but healthy competition can often become too entrenched over time. Further, there is a lack of mutual understanding, old mentalities prevail, and a common denominator can be difficult to find. One example is when different party internationals have incompatible benchmarks on the level of human rights in a country, or dissimilar views on the democratic standard among member parties. This category of traditional habits also included the tendency that politics revert to what goes on “in my country;” the global north is still dominant within international party networks; the same group of top-level people tend to meet at global events; and international party collaboration is not prioritized by national parties and fail to reach rank-and-file members.

A third category of reflections were more positive and identified steps of cooperation that have already been taken. Two delegates from different party internationals had in fact collaborated since 2018, an exchange program that includes study-trips and annual seminars. Participants noted that ongoing collaboration does exist, exemplified by the initiatives in the European parliament and among parties in Latin America. Several participants raised the potential of strategically identifying key issues for cross-party cooperation and involving the larger membership base to create long-term value. It was also noted that it is increasingly common for democratic parties to form coalitions to run against ruling parties.

## **Collaboration Session 2: Solutions for improving cross-party collaboration**

The positive reflections became a natural bridge to the second collaborative session, in which the representatives brainstormed ideas to foster cross-party collaboration. Most participants suggested that common interests should be created and identified; the dialogue between leaders needs to be increased; and that a lower-investment initial pilot program could overcome initial reluctance to devote resources to cross-party work. The youth delegates urged that their structures should be used to improve participation, learning, and the promotion of ideas—and that this requires annual events and umbrella organizations for internationalism, equitable opportunities, and resources.

To set up cross-party activities for success, the representatives agreed on the importance of identifying topics that can create a common ground. Potential topics included climate, democracy

and the role of political parties, human rights, electoral integrity, and women in politics. The youth networks suggested a global youth political forum focusing on issues of global importance to young people—and the importance of top-level leaders joining and listening.

A third result of the brainstorming provided ideas about how party networks can work better together in the future. One practical suggestion was to arrange meetings during major events such as the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and the Democratic or Republican National Conventions. Increased cross party exchanges and more face time in general were also requested. The youth delegates concluded that a forum needs to be institutionalized where youth participation and exchanges can build cooperation over time.

### **Collaboration Session 3: Recommendations and future planning**

The final collaborative session was an open discussion during which participants freely debated the conclusions from the first two sessions. Most agreed that the inaugural conference was a worthwhile endeavor to gather representatives from each network in one room, and that this format should be replicated first when considering launching future cross-party efforts. Participants argued that collaborative programs would need to grow beyond the top leadership and engage network and party members at the grassroots level, as well as other experts who can identify where democracy is most at risk.

Moving forward with NDI's initiative and other future crossparty initiatives, the representatives agreed that such processes should start by identifying common ground and introducing a practical, recurring format. Following initial success, more people can be added. However, creating inclusive conversations from the onset is a must—too often party initiatives become insulated to the parties' leadership and exclusionary. In particular, the youth and women's wings of political parties need input during cross-party collaborations.

A discussion about which topics should be prioritized for cross-party collaboration—such as climate change—ended with a general agreement: The most important issue at stake is the defense of democracy against illiberal actors and authoritarian parties. This issue is not only the easiest topic to agree upon between democratic parties, it is the most pressing threat to political parties' ability to address other important policy areas.

The eagerness from the representatives of each party international to collaborate in each session exceeded expectations. The leaders of every organization agreed on the importance of building stronger, collaborative relationships between their organizations through action. Surprisingly, several of the network leaders met each other for the first time during the conference. During the sessions, several networks made plans to launch future joint initiatives between their organizations, and all representatives agreed that their networks needed to set better examples for their member parties around the world.

From their conversations and the results of NDI's research, the Institute has developed guidance for future cross-party collaborative endeavors.

# THE RECOMMENDATIONS

## The Necessary Road From Here

To dismantle the competitive internal logic of political parties and create something new and lasting in a cooperative manner is a difficult task. When approaching cross-party work, consider the following recommendations.

### **Guidance for political parties: Navigating challenges and seizing opportunities**

**Ensure that cross-ideological events and activities will be prioritized by your party. If formal decisions are not backed by leadership, new approaches are unlikely to take root.**

- Every party has its own decision-making structure and governing bodies such as an executive committee, a party board, and a congress—and this structure normally exists on local, regional and national levels. New initiatives should be introduced through these formal structures and at multiple regional levels.
- Never underestimate the importance of planning ahead and allocating necessary resources. Plan cross-party activities for the upcoming year and explicitly add them to your party's budget.
- The buy-in and commitment of the top-level leadership is key in any organization. Make sure that your arguments are heard in front of the right people.
- Pilot activities are often a successful way to show the potential of working in new ways and across the political aisle. This can be done by starting smaller—either on a local level, or between different sub-organizations within a party, such as the youth wing or women's association. If your party's organizations are doing successful events with other actors, your top-level leadership will most likely take notice.

### **Do not underestimate internal resistance to cooperating with rival political parties.**

- A natural first step is to identify a topic of common ground—such as defending democracy against authoritarian influence.
- If you organize a first meeting with another political party about defending democracy, consider meeting at a neutral and private location. A joint welcoming address could be given by someone in each party who enjoys broad support.
- Ensuring an inclusive and representative setting is even more important to secure party support for the collaboration

- Any new cooperation is vulnerable to the change of personnel. Establish clear points of contact for each party and a mechanism for replacing departing members.
- When you have started cooperating around one major political issue, such as defending democracy, it is now possible to branch into activities focusing on new shared topics of concern such as climate change. As cooperation intensifies, new topics and formats can be introduced.
- Always keep and clearly outline your “red lines” and boundaries for collaboration ahead of time internally. Should the parties you are engaging cross those lines, it’s important to immediately withdraw from the engagement and distance your party from the violation. Cooperation to defend democracy cannot involve actors who have dubious democratic standards themselves.
- When the Italian professor Romano Prodi left academia and became Prime Minister of Italy and later president of the European Commission, he remarked that he had underestimated the role of personal relations in politics all his life. If you want to make a real connection with other parties that can overcome long-held attitudes, you will need to have both lunch and dinner to make new political friends.

### **A respected international desk within any party can help facilitate collaboration with political parties outside of your country.**

- If your party does not have an international department, or it is poorly-resourced, it is important to invest in staff who are directly responsible for the party’s international engagements.
- Pitfalls to avoid when attending international activities include sending the exact same group of top-level people to every event. The need to involve rank-and-file members and send representative delegations is paramount.
- One skill that the international desk most often has is the habit of dealing with the bureaucracy that comes with political cooperation across borders. Try to ensure that the fear of red-tape, logistics and funding does not become an unnecessary obstacle. Do not underestimate the legitimacy of questions about where funding is coming from, and how it should be handled.

### **Guidance for party internationals and other party networks: Collaborate and educate**

#### **If closer and continuous cooperation between party internationals is to be achieved, each network needs to be decisive with continuity and predictability.**

- The leadership of the party internationals needs to begin seriously investing in regular communication and work with each other. Both formal and informal consultations are sorely lacking in the status quo, and the resulting lacking relationships between each organization are a missed opportunity for pursuing more effective joint action.
- A yearly congress, a convention, or at least a high-level seminar between the leadership within the different party internationals should be arranged. If such a forum is established—it must also be given high priority by your international.

#### **Consider leveraging global events as opportunities for representatives from your party international to meet with other party internationals.**

- Examples of relevant, regular events include the *UN General Assembly* or the *US Democracy Summit*

**Prior to every activity or event involving other party internationals, clearly define the criteria for participating in the initiative to ensure that the parties invited to join the initiative are democratic in nature and perceived as such, including in their home countries.**

- You do not want your event, or your cooperation with another party international, to be overtaken by discussions about democratic standards.

**Within your party network, encourage cross-party work and offer support for member parties looking to engage other political parties for the first time**

- As a party international, you have a unique influence on your member parties and set a strong example for their behavior.
- Providing resources and hosting regular conversations on the value of cross-party collaboration can go a long way toward shifting the attitude of your parties over time.

**Consider the creation of a cross-network “Academy for democracy” leadership exchange for young party members from parties and youth wings within the different party internationals.**

- As is always the case, youth are the future of any political party and party network. Building relationships across ideological lines will take time, and young politicians are often more open to collaboration

## **Guidance for facilitators: Creating opportunities for cross-party collaboration**

**Most importantly, help the political parties and party networks you’re engaging walk through the considerations and recommendations outlined above.**

- Many partners may have little experience collaborating across ideological lines. Addressing anxiety through outlining goals and drawing red lines will encourage greater participation in collaborative activities.

**When planning cross-party activities, outline and enforce clear democratic criteria that participating parties must adhere to before joining different initiatives and events.**

- This task will also include the careful consideration of each participating partner’s relationship to other parties, political actors and organizations.

**Relationships go a long way in political party work, and this is even more true in cross-party settings. Leverage any existing connections your organization has with participating parties and party networks to bring people together without issue.**

- Identify the members of each partner that are most invested in the initiative early on, and try to work with those people as the primary representatives of their organizations.

## **Establish a clear agenda, topics, and goals of collaboration activities. Political parties and politicians have a tendency to wander off topic—keep the conversation focused to avoid straying into more controversial politics.**

- As determined during NDI's research, defending democracy against authoritarian actors is likely to be the most approachable shared topic.
- Participants can approach additional issues such as climate change and inclusion after initial relationships are established.

## **During the facilitation of cross-party activities, there are several golden rules to follow:**

- Consider planning activities in advance and within predictable intervals to ensure continuity. In addition, each activity and intervention should result in clearly defined outcomes. It is nice to meet, but without clear purpose, participants will lose interest.
- Create “safe spaces” where participants can discuss sensitive topics in a discrete setting—away from media recording and following clear rules for civil discussion
- Consider utilizing a variety of collaboration tools while prioritizing in-person interactions. If you try a variety of activities, you can then prioritize methods that are most successful.
- Conduct regular “pause and reflect” sessions to adjust the program design to changing needs of the parties. Turbulent political environments can shift the dynamics between parties overnight—deciding to pause activities at the right time can avoid the total collapse of months of relationship building.
- Consider exchanging information with other party practitioners working in the field of international cross-party collaboration to share lessons learned and avoid duplicating activities with parties (especially smaller ones with limited resources).

In the spirit of collaboration, NDI strongly recommends that political parties work closely with their party network and experienced facilitators whenever possible when engaging in new cross-party initiatives. By integrating additional actors into the cooperative process, opportunities for improved learning, increased longevity, and future success are more likely. The Institute will integrate these recommendations into the future of the Political Party Network Collaboration initiative and throughout its work with political parties in polarized political environments around the world. Whether you represent a political party, party network, or party development practitioner, proper investment in cross-party collaboration will reap benefits for your organization and the future of vibrant, multiparty democracy.

## Endnotes

1 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (1992), *Pictures Documenting the History of the International and of Willy Brandt's SI-Presidency: Guide*, p. 57.

2 Thomas Wright (2018), *The Return to Great-Power Rivalry was Inevitable*, Available at: [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/liberal-international-order-free-world-trump-authoritarianism/569881/](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/liberal-international-order-free-world-trump-authoritarianism/569881/)

3 The quote by Thomas Wright and the choice of Collins Dictionary word of the year, were highlighted in the memorial "Guido Goldman Lecture on Germany" given by Constanze Stelzenmüller on November 4, 2022 at Harvard University's Center for European Studies.

4 Lectures were given by Laura Thornton (German Marshall Fund); Benjamin Press (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace); Annika Silva-Leander (International IDEA); Ken Wollack (National Endowment for Democracy, former NDI president), Olya Catto (National Democratic Institute); and Stephanie Rust (National Democratic Institute).





---

NATIONAL  
DEMOCRATIC  
INSTITUTE

---

[ndi.org](http://ndi.org)