



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Laws Regulating Foreign NGOs: Human Rights Implications

Tuesday, September 9, 2025

2:00 – 4:00 p.m.

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Co-Chair James P. McGovern

As delivered

Good afternoon everybody, I want to welcome you to this afternoon's hearing on the human rights implications of anti-foreign non-governmental organization (NGOs) laws.

Threats to civil society have long been a focus of this Commission. We held hearings on laws restricting NGOs in 2012 and 2017, as well as many other country-specific hearings.

We revisit this issue today because of the recent proliferation of laws targeting foreign NGOs. Their purpose is clear. I quote Senator James Risch, now Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who said at their hearing on this very topic last September:

“The tool of choice for authoritarians these days is anti-nongovernmental organization laws, also referred to as foreign agent laws. These laws claim to stop foreign influence but in reality are used to close the space for civil society and opposition. Autocrats fear the loss of control, and this ensures opposing ideas are neither seen nor heard. It should not surprise anyone that the model anti-NGO law was first designed by Vladimir Putin.”

Chairman Risch is right. He shows the bipartisan consensus. Anti-foreign NGO laws restrict people's freedom of association, undermine civil society and weaken democracy.

As he noted, Russia was the first. The European Court of Human Rights ruled that its 2012 “foreign agent law” violates fundamental rights and bears “hallmarks of a totalitarian regime” by creating an environment of suspicion toward independent voices.

Next was China. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China, which Co-chair Smith and I have been proud to chair, documented how its 2016 foreign NGO law serves “as a

tool of intimidation and suppression of dissenting views” and “treats many groups and individuals operating in this space as security threats rather than important contributors to Chinese society.”

Co-Chair Smith criticized China’s law. I agree.

Russia’s and China’s laws are models for many governments— some authoritarian, others on their way — who restrict foreign NGOs: India, Nicaragua, Kyrgyzstan, Hungary, Slovakia, Israel, Venezuela, Georgia, El Salvador, and others.

Today we seek an update on where and how these laws are spreading. We want to understand their impact on people’s ability to exercise their basic human rights.

Congress charged the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission with promoting and advocating internationally recognized human rights norms as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international law. That is the lens we apply to anti-foreign NGO laws.

Last year, five human rights experts—two from the United Nations, one each from regional human rights bodies in the Americas, Africa, Southeast Asia, and an organization in Europe—provided that answer.

Their *Joint Declaration on Protecting the right to freedom of association in light of “Foreign Agents”/ “Foreign Influence” laws* states that anti-foreign NGO laws “cause unjustified and discriminatory interference with the enjoyment of the right to freedom of association and related rights and freedoms, which is disproportionate and unnecessary in a democratic society.”

We are fortunate to have one of those experts with us here today, Gina Romero, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. I look forward to her sharing their recommendations.

There are some who believe that laws regulating foreign NGOs are a good thing. Just like autocratic governments do.

The Congressional-Executive Commission on China summarized the Chinese government rationale by noting “[t]he Party increasingly promoted the notion that civil society, including religious groups, was especially susceptible to ‘foreign influence’ and ‘infiltration.’”

We hear this same justification today. Protection against so-called foreign influence is a pretext to close NGOs, shrink civic space, and enhance a government’s social control.

Let us be skeptical of arguments praising laws passed by governments who model theirs on the Chinese Communist Party’s. That is the opposite of human rights advocacy.

At these hearings, we ask for ideas for how Congress can best promote human rights. But our moral authority is undermined when our country engages in the same behavior that we criticize of others. Several U.S. states have enacted legislation against “foreign influence.” Many of these bills target non-profits. Is this a pretext too?

There are many people in many countries who still fight to protect civil society from laws intended to diminish it. I hope to learn from these brave people.

I look forward to hearing the recommendations of today’s experts. I will be listening closely to them.