

MCCAIN GLOBAL LEADERS ALUMNI DECLARATION ON DEMOCRACY



Preamble

We, the undersigned McCain Global Leaders alumni, gathered in Budapest, Hungary, to reflect on the state and future of democracy in Eastern Europe and beyond.

Drawing on our diverse experiences as leaders, advocates, policymakers, and changemakers across different regions and contexts, we came together to listen, learn, challenge assumptions, and consider how democratic values can be strengthened in an era of rising authoritarianism.

Through our discussions, we identified two critical themes that emerged from our conversations:

Theme 1: The Erosion of Democratic Trust, Unity, and Public Engagement

Theme 2: The Consolidation of Power Through Corruption, Capture, and Lack of Accountability

While our experiences and perspectives differ, we share a fundamental belief that democracy depends not only on institutions, but on individuals and communities who are willing to defend democratic values, uphold human rights, and act when those values are threatened.

What We Believe

We affirm that:

Democracy must be actively defended.

We must be proactive in making the case for democratic values, strengthening the institutions and communities that sustain them, and standing together against authoritarianism. This requires solidarity among all of us—across sectors, borders, and communities.

Trust is the foundation of democratic societies.

When people can listen to one another, participate meaningfully, and see their ideas reflected in public life, democracy becomes not only something to defend, but something to believe in.

Public institutions exist to serve the people.

They must be transparent, accountable, and protected from capture by political or financial interests. No individual institution or authority is above the law.

Corruption undermines democracy by weakening state institutions, shrinking civic space, and eroding public trust.

It also carries a direct economic and security cost, diverting public resources away from citizens, limiting opportunity, deepening inequality, and weakening the resilience of societies.

Democracy is a shared responsibility. No country or community can take democracy for granted, and no single institution or leader can protect it alone.

Our Commitments

Recognizing that a declaration is meaningful only when accompanied by action, we commit to translating our discussions into concrete efforts in our own communities, organizations, and countries.

As McCain Global Leaders alumni, we commit to:

1. Build solidarity for democracy.

We will work across civil society, government, the private sector, and the public to build broad coalitions in defense of democratic values. We will use our networks to connect people and organizations, share knowledge and resources, and turn solidarity into a coordinated action to strengthen democracy.

2. Create spaces for dialogue and connection.

We will serve as bridges between communities, organizations, advocates, and governments by creating spaces for meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding. We will translate complex democratic ideas into language that inspires and engages the public, while bringing the experiences, concerns, and ideas of communities to those shaping policy and advocating for democratic change.

3. Ensure transparency, responsibility, and accountability of public institutions.

We will use our voices, platforms, and networks to consistently raise concerns around transparency, accountability, and the responsible use of public power. We will advocate for stronger safeguards, and reforms that ensure institutions remain answerable to the people they serve, while supporting efforts that expose abuse, strengthen public trust, and push for meaningful change.

4. Mobilize cross-sector action for stronger anti-corruption safeguards and accountability.

We will use our roles, networks, and platforms to advance a whole-of-society approach to confronting corruption, recognizing its democratic, economic, and security costs. We will advocate for stronger prevention, transparency, accountability, and independent oversight, while supporting efforts across democratic government, civil society, media, the private sector, and communities to expose misuse of public resources and advance reforms that ensure public funds and institutions serve citizens and protect their dignity.

5. Strengthen our network.

We will use the McCain Global Leaders alumni network to share knowledge, connect one another to relevant expertise and resources, and support fellow leaders working to strengthen democracy.

Final Declaration

We believe that the future of democracy will not be determined solely by the strength of democratic institutions, but by the choices individuals make when those institutions and values are tested.

We therefore choose to act by building solidarity for democracy, creating spaces for dialogue and connection, strengthening transparency and accountability in public institutions, mobilizing cross-sector action against corruption, and supporting and strengthening our global network.

We choose to lead with courage, integrity, and character.

And we choose to stand together in support of those working to build societies that are free, open, inclusive, and democratic.

Signed,

McCain Global Leaders Alumni

Budapest, Hungary | September 17, 2026