WORLD LIBERTY CONGRESS · PLAYBOOK FOR LIBERTY

PILLAR I · PRINCIPLE 2

A Compass, Not Recipes

How pro-democracy movements learn from each other without imitating each other

A training essay for members of the World Liberty Congress and the World Liberty Academy. Second principle of the WLC Adaptations to Counter-Autocracy Strategic Framework (Berlin, November 2025).

The principle, in one sentence. Every authoritarian system is different, so imported blueprints often fail. Strategy is a compass, not a recipe. The discipline of the World Liberty Congress is to learn intensively from movements in other countries while staying grounded in our own realities, turning shared knowledge into adaptive strategy rather than into imitation.

INTRODUCTION

Why this principle matters now

Pro-democracy movements have a well-known habit. When a campaign somewhere in the world succeeds, activists in other countries try to copy it. When it fails, they conclude that nonviolent resistance no longer works. Both responses are mistakes.

Mistakes of this kind have a cost. They send activists into the street with the wrong tactics. They make movements predictable to regimes that have already studied the previous case. They produce burnout when imitation does not deliver the result that the original campaign delivered. And they produce despair when the failure of an imported strategy is read as proof that democratic struggle itself has reached its limits.

The second principle of the World Liberty Congress strategic framework was written to interrupt this pattern. The principle does not say that movements should ignore each other. It says the opposite. It says that comparative learning is essential, but that comparative learning is a discipline, not a download. A compass tells you which

direction is north. It does not tell you which road to take, what shoes to wear, or how to cross the river. Those decisions belong to the people who live on the terrain.

This essay explains why this distinction matters more today than at any point in the modern democratic struggle, and it offers a practical methodology that members of the WLC can use to learn from other movements without imitating them, and to share what they themselves are learning so that the rest of the network can benefit.

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SECTION I

The dictators' learning curve

In 2012 the journalist William J. Dobson published a book that has become required reading in this field: The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy. Dobson's argument was that the authoritarian regimes of the early twenty-first century are not the brutal, ideologically rigid dictatorships of the twentieth. They have learned. They watch what happens when other dictators fall. They study which tactics of repression generate international backlash and which do not. They pay close attention to the methods of pro-democracy movements, and they design countermeasures before those methods reach their borders.

The result is a generation of regimes that are more adaptive, more informed, and in many ways more dangerous than the dictatorships of the past. They hold elections, but manipulate the rules. They tolerate civil society, but starve it of funding and infiltrate it. They allow some independent media, but capture the most-watched outlets. They permit travel, but track dissidents abroad. They use the language of legality, sovereignty, anti-imperialism, faith, or order to wrap repression in legitimacy. Dobson called this the dictator's learning curve. The decade since he wrote has only confirmed his diagnosis.

The political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have analyzed the same phenomenon under the label of competitive authoritarianism: regimes that retain enough democratic procedure to claim legitimacy while tilting every meaningful institution in favor of the incumbent. Larry Diamond has documented the same dynamic in his work on democratic recession. Anne Applebaum has shown, in Autocracy, Inc., that the autocrats are not only learning individually but coordinating internationally, sharing surveillance technology, propaganda templates, financial networks, and even personnel.

“If the dictators are learning from each other, pro-democracy movements that refuse to learn from each other are not maintaining purity. They are surrendering an advantage.”

The implication for our work is direct. The tactics that worked in Belgrade in 2000, in Kyiv in 2004, in Tunis in 2011, or in Yangon in 2007 may no longer work in the same form in any country today, because the regimes have read the same case studies the activists have. A movement that arrives at a confrontation with a closed dictatorship using a tactic from a textbook the regime has already studied is a movement that will be defeated faster than it expects. This is not an argument against learning from other movements. It is an argument for learning from them at a deeper level than the visible tactic.

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SECTION II

Autocrats already share. Democrats must too.

The second reason this principle matters now is that the autocratic side of the global struggle has built a working international infrastructure for cooperation, and the democratic side has not yet caught up. Russia trains the security services of Belarus, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. China exports its surveillance and digital control architecture to several dozen countries. Iran provides drones, technical support, and propaganda templates. Cuba sends intelligence advisors. The authoritarian states share lists of dissidents, harmonize their narratives at the United Nations, and coordinate their responses to sanctions and accountability efforts.

This international did not exist twenty years ago at this scale, and it changes the strategic context for every national movement. A democratic struggle in any one country is no longer a duel between an opposition and its own regime. It is a contest between a national movement and a regime that is plugged into a global infrastructure of repression.

The democratic response cannot be to retreat into national isolation. It must be to build, with the same seriousness, a working international infrastructure for pro-democracy cooperation. This is precisely the project the World Liberty Congress was created to advance. The WLC is not a conference. It is the connective tissue of a working network that allows movements in different countries to share intelligence about regime behavior, tactics that have worked, tactics that have failed, lessons

learned in real time, and protection capacity for activists at risk. The Compass principle is the doctrine that makes this network function. Without it, an international network becomes a contagion machine, spreading tactics that worked once and now do not. With it, the network becomes a learning organism.

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SECTION III

Why imitation fails: the visible and the invisible

The most common strategic mistake in democratic struggle is copying what was visible in another movement without understanding what was invisible. Every successful campaign in another country has two layers. The visible layer is the tactic: the march, the strike, the slogan, the symbol, the moment of confrontation. The invisible layer is the set of conditions that made the tactic possible: a particular regime structure, a particular civic ecosystem, a particular international moment, a particular generation of leaders, a particular history of trust or distrust between sectors, a particular legal architecture, a particular religious geography. The visible layer travels easily. The invisible layer almost never travels.

Three concrete examples illustrate the point. Activists in many countries have tried to copy the tactics of Otpor, the Serbian student movement that helped end the Milosevic regime in 2000. Some of those imports have produced real results, often through the deliberate adaptation work of CANVAS, the training organization founded by Otpor veterans. But other imports have failed badly, because the activists copied the visible tactic (the symbol, the street action, the humor) without grasping the invisible conditions: the existence of a relatively independent media space in late Milosevic-era Serbia, the presence of a still-functioning election architecture that could be used as a target, the religious and civic networks that gave Otpor cover, and the international moment in which Western actors were prepared to support transition. Drop the visible tactic into a closed dictatorship without those conditions and it does not produce the same result.

A second example. The 2014 Maidan revolution in Ukraine was studied carefully by movements elsewhere, and many tried to apply its tactics in their own contexts. But Maidan rested on a specific civic infrastructure (Ukrainian volunteer battalions, religious institutions across multiple confessions, an emerging middle class with international ties, a regime that had already lost its security services), which simply did not exist in the countries trying to copy the model.

A third example. The Hong Kong protest movement of 2019 produced tactical innovations (the “be water” dispersion model, leaderless coordination through encrypted messaging) that activists around the world tried to adopt. The innovations were real, but they depended on a particular technological environment, a particular density of urban geography, and a particular trust within a generation of young activists, none of which can be exported by simply renaming a Telegram channel.

The lesson is not that movements should ignore each other. The lesson is that the unit of learning is not the visible tactic. It is the underlying logic of why a tactic worked in its specific context, and what would be the equivalent logic in our context. That is the work the Compass principle asks us to do.

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SECTION IV

How comparative learning actually works

Effective comparative learning operates at three different layers, and a disciplined movement keeps them clearly separated.

Layer 1: Principles

Principles are the most portable layer. Insights such as “movements need broad coalitions,” “nonviolent discipline preserves legitimacy,” “regimes depend on pillars of support,” “movements that fail to plan transitions inherit chaos,” and “repression backfires when properly documented” have proven robust across many contexts. They are the universal patterns that decades of comparative research and lived experience have validated. These are the lessons most worth importing wholesale.

Layer 2: Strategies

Strategies are partially portable. Approaches like “use elections as a target for civic mobilization,” “build a parallel civic infrastructure that can survive a wave of repression,” or “maintain a single coordinating body across sectors” travel reasonably well between similar regime types, but require careful adaptation when transferred to a different type of regime, a different civic landscape, or a different international moment. Activists should treat strategies as starting hypotheses to test, not as imports to deploy.

Layer 3: Tactics

Tactics are the least portable layer. The specific march, the specific symbol, the specific timing, the specific framing, the specific use of social media or street art are

highly context-dependent. Tactics from another country should almost never be copied directly. They should be studied as evidence of what is possible, and then redesigned from scratch using local knowledge of culture, geography, language, and regime behavior.

A useful rule of thumb. If you are about to import something from another movement, ask which of the three layers you are importing. If it is a principle, you may import freely. If it is a strategy, you may import as a hypothesis to test. If it is a tactic, you should not import it. You should let it inspire a new tactic of your own.

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SECTION V

A practical methodology for learning from other movements

The following seven-step methodology is meant to be used by national movements, country teams within the WLC, and individual activists who have a specific challenge they want to address. It is the same method the World Liberty Academy uses in its case-study workshops. It can be done in a single afternoon by a small leadership group, or stretched across several sessions for a more careful diagnosis.

1. Name the specific challenge you are facing. “We want to bring down the regime” is too vague to learn from other cases. “We need to maintain unified communication across an exiled diaspora and an internal underground when our public spokespeople have been jailed” is precise enough that you can find comparable cases and ask comparable questions.
2. Identify two or three movements that have faced a similar challenge. They do not need to be in similar countries. They need to have faced a similar problem. A movement in Myanmar facing internal-exile coordination and a movement in Belarus facing the same problem may have more to teach a Nicaraguan movement than a movement in a country that looks geographically similar but had a different problem.
3. Map the visible and the invisible layers in each case. What did the movement do (visible)? What conditions made that action possible (invisible)? Conditions to map: regime type, civic space, repression level, religious and ethnic geography, economic structure, international moment, leadership capacity, generational profile, and the role of the diaspora.
4. Compare those conditions to your own. Where are the conditions similar? Where are they different? The differences are not obstacles to learning. They

are the most important information you have, because they tell you which parts of the case will not transfer.

5. Extract the principle, not the tactic. State in one or two sentences what the underlying logic of the successful action was. “The Belarusian opposition kept a unified public face by rotating spokespersons in a predictable schedule across multiple secure platforms” is a tactic. “Movements under heavy repression preserve legitimacy by ensuring that no single spokesperson becomes indispensable” is a principle.
6. Design a new tactic for your own context that follows the same principle. The new tactic should reflect your geography, your culture, your regime’s behavior, your moment, and your movement’s capacity. It should not look like the original tactic. If it does, you probably copied rather than adapted.
7. Test the new tactic at small scale before deploying it broadly. Run it with one community, one city, one constituency, or one cycle of action. Document what happens. Adjust. Then scale, if it worked. Discard, if it did not. The discipline of testing before scaling is the difference between a movement that learns and a movement that hopes.

This methodology is not bureaucratic. It is what the most effective democratic movements have always done, even when they did not have a name for it. The WLC simply gives the practice a name, a sequence, and a community of peers who can help you do it well.

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SECTION VI

How the World Liberty Congress supports comparative learning

The World Liberty Congress was built precisely to make this kind of learning possible at scale. The network exists so that no movement has to discover, alone, what others have already discovered, and so that the things others have discovered are translated into the languages and contexts where they can be useful. Three concrete sets of resources are available to every WLC member.

Regional Secretaries

The WLC has Regional Secretaries covering the major regions in which the network operates. Their role is not ceremonial. It is operational. A Regional Secretary is the first point of contact for any activist or country team that wants to:

- Identify comparable cases from other countries that match a specific challenge.
- Connect with peers in the network who have faced the same problem and are willing to share what they learned.
- Request support from the WLC Academy in running a case-study session, a coalition diagnostic, or a comparative analysis exercise.
- Receive guidance on how to document a lesson learned in their own movement and contribute it to the network safely.
- Access protection resources when an activist or organization is at acute risk.

Regional Secretaries operate under confidentiality. A request to a Regional Secretary should not place an activist or organization in greater risk than they were before. If you do not know who your Regional Secretary is, contact the WLC Secretariat directly.

The World Liberty Academy

The Academy is the WLC's formal training and learning platform. It convenes workshops, online courses, peer-learning circles, and case-study seminars. Its function in relation to this principle is twofold: to help members learn from external cases through structured comparative analysis, and to help members convert their own experience into transferable knowledge that the rest of the network can use. Members are encouraged to contact the Academy when they want to:

- Run a comparative analysis on a specific challenge with peers from two or three other countries.
- Build a curriculum for a national movement that integrates international lessons without importing tactics directly.
- Train a new generation of leaders in the discipline of comparative learning itself.

The Playbook for Liberty

The Playbook is the living, AI-supported reference platform that holds the WLC's accumulated knowledge in usable form. It is not a static archive. It is a working tool. Members should treat the Playbook as a first stop, not a last one, when facing a strategic question. The Playbook can:

- Surface principles, strategies, and tactics that other movements have used to address a similar challenge.
- Show the comparative conditions under which those approaches succeeded or failed.

- Direct the user to specific Regional Secretaries, Academy resources, or peer organizations relevant to the question.
- Receive new lessons from members and integrate them into the available knowledge base, with appropriate protection of identities.

The Playbook only becomes more useful as more members contribute to it. The next section explains how members can do that safely.

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SECTION VII

How to document and share your own lessons safely

The most valuable knowledge in the WLC network is the knowledge being generated, right now, by members operating in the most difficult contexts. The challenge is that those are also the contexts in which sharing knowledge can be dangerous, both for the people who experienced the events and for the broader movement. The Compass principle therefore requires a discipline of safe documentation. This section sets out a method that any member can use.

Before you document anything, read this. If you are currently in active danger, are operating clandestinely, or have just been through a moment of acute repression, do not document immediately. Wait until you are physically and digitally safe. Documentation is a long-term contribution to the movement, and it is not worth doing if it places you or others at greater risk. The Regional Secretary can help you decide when and how.

A simple methodology for converting experience into transferable knowledge

8. Decide what is worth documenting. Not every event is a lesson. The events worth documenting are those that produced unexpected outcomes, those that revealed a regime tactic the network has not seen before, those that produced an innovation in your own response, and those where something failed in a way that other movements could learn from. Routine successes and routine failures are usually not worth the risk of documentation.
9. Wait for the safe window. Documentation should happen when the immediate operational moment has passed and you are in a setting where digital and physical security are reasonably assured. The general rule: if you would not

be willing to discuss the content openly with a trusted peer in person, you are not yet ready to document it in writing.

10. Strip identifying details from the start. Do not write the document with real names and then plan to remove them later. Write it from the beginning using pseudonyms, generic role descriptions (“the community organizer in the western region”), date ranges rather than exact dates, and locations described only at the level of detail strictly necessary for the lesson to be intelligible. The Playbook does not need to know that the conversation happened in a specific cafe at a specific hour. It needs to know what was decided and why.
11. Write at the level of the principle and the strategy, not at the level of the specific tactic. A document that says “we learned that public-facing leaders should rotate to reduce decapitation risk” is more useful and far safer than a document that lists exactly who rotated, when, and how. The principle is the part that travels. The operational detail is the part that endangers.
12. Use the WLC documentation template. The Academy provides a simple structured template for case documentation. It asks five questions: What was the challenge? What did we try? What happened? What do we now believe is the underlying lesson? What would we recommend to a peer movement facing a comparable challenge? Members are encouraged to use this template because consistency makes the resulting knowledge easier to retrieve and compare across cases.
13. Submit through secure channels only. The WLC operates encrypted submission channels for case documentation. Never send sensitive case material through ordinary email, public messaging apps, or open social media. If you do not know which channel to use, ask the Regional Secretary, who will route you appropriately.
14. Allow the Academy to anonymize and integrate. Once received, case documentation is reviewed by the Academy team, further anonymized if needed, and integrated into the Playbook either as a standalone case or as part of a thematic synthesis. Members may always request that their submission be treated as fully confidential and used only for the Academy’s internal training, without public publication. The default is conservative: if in doubt, less public detail rather than more.

What never goes into a case document. Real names of people still inside the country, exact addresses, telephone numbers, dates that pinpoint a specific clandestine action, photographs that identify locations or faces, references to ongoing operations that have not concluded, names of insiders or defectors who shared information, and any detail that would allow a regime analyst to reconstruct who was involved. If a piece of information is critical to the lesson and

> you cannot disguise it, that piece of information probably should not be in the document at all.

A simple case-documentation template

Members are welcome to use the following template, adapted from the WLC Academy training materials. It is short on purpose. Brevity reduces risk.

1. CONTEXT · ONE SHORT PARAGRAPH

Type of regime, type of civic space, broad geography, broad time period. No identifying detail beyond what is strictly necessary for the lesson to be intelligible to a peer in another country.

2. THE CHALLENGE

What specific problem was the movement trying to address? State the challenge in one or two sentences.

3. WHAT WE TRIED

What strategy or tactic did the movement attempt? Describe at the level of approach, not at the level of operational detail.

4. WHAT HAPPENED

Outcome, including unintended outcomes. Honest about both success and failure.

5. WHAT WE NOW BELIEVE IS THE UNDERLYING LESSON

State the principle in one or two sentences. This is the most valuable part of the document and the part that travels.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEER MOVEMENTS

What would you tell a movement in another country facing a comparable challenge? What conditions in your context made the lesson work, that they should check for in theirs?

7. WHAT YOU WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY

Honest reflection on what the movement would change if it could repeat the experience. This is often the most generous gift to a peer movement.

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SECTION VIII

Key questions to systematize your success and your failure

The discipline of comparative learning depends on the discipline of self-examination. Movements that do not honestly review their own experience cannot contribute meaningfully to the wider network, and cannot improve their own practice. The following questions are adapted from the after-action review traditions used by movements such as Otpor, by professional facilitation organizations, and by the WLC Academy. They are organized in three groups.

DIAGNOSIS QUESTIONS · WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

- *What did we set out to do?*
- *What actually happened?*
- *Why was there a difference between what we expected and what occurred?*
- *How did the regime respond, and was that response anticipated or unexpected?*
- *Did the action build power, expand the coalition, and increase protection, or did it only express frustration?*

EXTRACTION QUESTIONS · WHAT IS THE LESSON?

- *What invisible conditions in our context made this outcome possible (or impossible)?*
- *What is the underlying principle, separate from the specific tactic we used?*
- *Which part of this experience is unique to our country, and which part might transfer to peers?*
- *What did we believe before the action that we no longer believe?*
- *What did we not believe before the action that we now do believe?*

CONTRIBUTION QUESTIONS · WHAT IS WORTH SHARING?

- *Is this experience genuinely useful to peer movements, or only meaningful to us?*
- *What can we share now without endangering anyone, and what must wait?*
- *Who in the WLC network would benefit most from learning what we learned?*
- *What format is most useful: a written case, a private peer conversation, a workshop, a synthesis with other cases?*
- *What protection does sharing this lesson require, both for those involved and for the future of the work?*

These questions should be revisited at the end of every campaign cycle and after every major action. The work of asking them honestly is the work that converts a

movement's experience into the network's knowledge. It is also the work that protects the movement from the most common pathology of long-running struggles: the gradual replacement of clear thinking with familiar habits.

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CONCLUSION

The compass we share

The dictators have built a learning curve. They watch each other, support each other, and adapt before our movements have finished celebrating the last victory or mourning the last defeat. The democratic answer to that learning curve is not isolation. It is a learning curve of our own, built on a discipline that imitation cannot reach: the discipline of learning from each other at the level of principle and underlying logic, while designing tactics that fit the country we actually live in.

The World Liberty Congress is the infrastructure of that discipline. Through Regional Secretaries, the World Liberty Academy, and the Playbook for Liberty, every member of the network has access to the cumulative experience of dozens of movements operating under conditions of authoritarian pressure. Every member also has the responsibility to contribute back, safely and rigorously, what their own experience is teaching them. The compass works in both directions.

Principles travel. Tactics rarely do.
Imitation feels efficient and almost always fails.
Adaptation feels slow and almost always works.
The dictators are learning together; so must we.
The compass is shared, but the road is ours to walk.

For WLC members, this principle is both an invitation and an obligation. The invitation is to draw freely on the knowledge of the network whenever a strategic question arises. The obligation is to contribute, safely and disciplined, what your own work is teaching the rest of us. This is how a network of movements becomes more than the sum of its parts.

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CONTINUE TO PRINCIPLE 3

Principle 3 of the Playbook for Liberty is The Right Mindset. It addresses why courage alone is not enough, and how movements cultivate the humility, empathy, and curiosity that sustain leadership over the long struggle.

Fuerza y fe.

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