

# Strategizing as a Continuous Process

*How democratic movements learn faster than the regimes they confront*

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

**The principle, in one sentence.** A plan does not guarantee victory, but the absence of one almost guarantees defeat. Authoritarian regimes evolve, and so must our strategies. Continuous strategizing is the discipline that turns reflection into action, action into feedback, and feedback into the next move, keeping a movement one step ahead of repression and disillusionment.

## INTRODUCTION

### Strategy is how courage becomes power

Pro-democracy movements are rich in courage. They are often rich in talent, sacrifice, and moral conviction. What they frequently lack is something less inspiring but equally essential: the discipline of strategy. Without strategy, courage is consumed faster than it is replenished. With strategy, courage is converted into pressure, and pressure into change. The fourth principle of the World Liberty Congress strategic framework is the principle that protects courage from being wasted.

This principle teaches that strategy in an authoritarian context cannot be a document written once and consulted later. It must be a continuous process: a working rhythm of diagnosis, action, observation, learning, and recalibration that the movement practices, repeats, and improves. The discipline borrows from many traditions, from the strategic-capacity work of Marshall Ganz to the iterative loops popularized by John Boyd in military strategy, and to the operational experience of

organizations like Otpor, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, and CANVAS. The traditions converge on a simple insight. In a contest with an adaptive opponent, the side that learns faster wins.

This essay sets out the discipline in seven sections. It explains why continuous strategizing matters, what strategy actually consists of, what the adaptive cycle looks like in practice, and what tools the World Liberty Academy makes available to every WLC member: the Adaptive Strategy Canvas, the After-Action Review template, the Signal-versus-Noise filter, and a list of common strategic mistakes worth memorizing in advance.



## SECTION I

### Why continuous strategizing matters

Authoritarian regimes are not static. They behave less like rigid pyramids and more like adaptive systems. They use surveillance, institutional capture, disinformation, patronage, outsourced coercion, kleptocratic finance, transnational alliances, and narratives of false stability. They also study democratic movements. They learn how activists organize, how coalitions fracture, how international pressure works, and how public outrage can be exhausted.

This is why purely reactive activism is insufficient. A movement that only responds to the latest arrest, scandal, election fraud, or propaganda campaign will always be one step behind the regime. Strategy is the discipline that allows movements to move from reaction to initiative.

The asymmetry is structural. Dictatorships cooperate. They share repression tactics, surveillance technology, sanctions-evasion methods, and diplomatic cover. Pro-democracy actors, in contrast, often remain fragmented by geography, language, institutional culture, funding silos, and ideological categories. Coordinated authoritarianism against fragmented democracy is not only a moral problem. It is a strategic one. Continuous strategizing is the practice that begins to correct it.

*“In a contest with an adaptive opponent, the side that learns faster wins.”*



## SECTION II

## Strategy is not a slogan, a wish, or a calendar

Many movements confuse strategy with activity. They believe that if they organize events, issue statements, hold meetings, publish reports, call protests, or meet diplomats, they are being strategic. Activity is not strategy. A calendar full of actions can still be strategically empty.

A real strategy answers five questions. Movements that cannot answer all five are not yet strategizing. They are merely working hard.

### 1. Diagnosis

What system are we trying to change, and what kind of regime are we facing?

### 2. Objective

What specific change are we trying to produce, in what time frame, with what evidence of success?

### 3. Leverage

What sources of power can we build, and what sources of regime power can we weaken?

### 4. Sequence

What must happen first, what must happen second, and what must wait?

### 5. Learning

How will we know if the strategy is working, and how will we adjust if it is not?

The first law of adaptive strategy follows directly from these questions: poor diagnosis produces poor action. When democratic actors understand the regime more accurately, they choose better mixes of tactics, time their moves more effectively, and reduce strategic error. Most movement failures, on closer inspection, are diagnostic failures wearing tactical clothing.



## SECTION III

### The Adaptive Strategy Cycle

Continuous strategizing is taught in the Playbook for Liberty as a simple, repeatable seven-step cycle. Every WLC member, chapter, coalition, and partner movement should be able to use it. The cycle is small enough to fit in a single afternoon for a national leadership group, and serious enough to discipline the work of an entire campaign.

## Step 1. Diagnose

Start by understanding the regime and the moment. The regime type matters: competitive authoritarian, closed authoritarian, personalist, military or post-coup, hybrid. The institutions that still function matter. The pillars of support, the sources of legitimacy, money, coercion, and fear matter. The current vulnerabilities matter. What has changed in the last thirty, sixty, or ninety days matters most of all.

Not all authoritarian regimes are alike, and strategy must be calibrated accordingly. Competitive authoritarian regimes may require emphasis on elections, institutional footholds, judicial challenges, observation, and media freedom. Closed authoritarian contexts may require protection, exile coordination, international pressure, sanctions, and accountability mechanisms. The diagnosis decides the strategy. The strategy does not decide the diagnosis.

## Step 2. Define the objective

A movement should avoid vague goals such as “raise awareness” or “fight the dictatorship” unless they are translated into measurable objectives. Better objectives include:

- Secure coordinated international attention for five named political prisoners within ninety days.
- Build a verified documentation file ready for a Magnitsky-style sanctions submission.
- Unify three opposition sectors around a written minimum democratic agreement.
- Protect twenty at-risk activists through digital and physical security training within sixty days.
- Establish an election-integrity observation network in the six months before a manipulated vote.
- Convene a transition-readiness working group with legal and governance experts.

Good strategy begins when the movement defines what success would look like in a specific time frame, and what evidence would confirm it.

## Step 3. Map power

Ask who has the power to produce the desired change. Is the key actor domestic, international, institutional, financial, legal, religious, media-based, or diplomatic? Modern authoritarianism depends on formal institutions, informal networks, money, narrative control, fear, and international backing. To weaken it, a movement must map its pillars, incentives, vulnerabilities, and fractures.

A serious power map names actors in the following categories:

- Regime decision-makers and their inner circle.
- Security forces, including divisions and rivalries within them.
- Judges and prosecutors at the levels relevant to the objective.
- Economic enablers and major business interests.
- Propaganda operators and captured media outlets.
- Foreign allies, financial backers, and diplomatic protectors.
- Religious or moral authorities, on both sides of the conflict.
- Diaspora networks and international advocates.
- International pressure points: governments, multilateral bodies, courts.
- Potential defectors, neutral actors, and unconvinced insiders.

#### **Step 4. Choose strategic tracks**

Do not rely on one track. The WLC approach calls for multi-track strategy. Depending on the context, the relevant tracks may include civil resistance, political coordination, institutional engagement, international advocacy, legal accountability, digital security, narrative strategy, diaspora mobilization, prisoner support, negotiation or bridge-building, and transition planning.

Trust-based coordination produces multi-track action. Civil resistance becomes linked to political and institutional strategy, international advocacy supports domestic timing, and party and civic actors reduce duplication. The discipline is to pick the smallest set of tracks that, together, can reach the objective, and to define how each track supports the others.

#### **Step 5. Sequence actions**

A strategy is not just a list of tactics. It is an order of actions. Timing matters as much as content. Consider, for example, a political-prisoner campaign:

1. Document the case rigorously, with verified facts and protected sources.
2. Coordinate the family, lawyers, and trusted activists around a shared communications plan.
3. Prepare a public narrative that connects the case to broader human-rights claims.
4. Brief international partners privately, before any public escalation.
5. Launch public advocacy at a strategic moment chosen for maximum visibility.
6. Connect the case to sanctions, legal mechanisms, or diplomatic pressure in a coordinated sequence.

7. Review the regime's response and adjust the next phase accordingly.

The sequence has internal logic. Each step prepares the next. Acting out of order, no matter how well-intentioned, often weakens the campaign and exposes its participants. The same logic applies to coalition-building, election protection, transition planning, and accountability work.

## Step 6. Act

Action should be disciplined, not improvised. Every action should have a clear purpose, a defined target audience, a sober risk assessment, a communications plan, a security plan, a decision-maker responsible for follow-up, and a metric for evaluating whether it worked. Actions that meet these criteria produce learning. Actions that do not produce only fatigue.

## Step 7. Review and adapt

After every major action, conduct an after-action review. Because autocracies learn, democratic actors must institutionalize faster feedback loops through diagnosis, peer learning, after-action review, tactical revision, and cross-border lesson sharing. Five questions are usually enough to begin:

- › *What did we expect?*
- › *What happened?*
- › *What did the regime do?*
- › *What did we learn?*
- › *What changes now?*

These five questions are the minimum. Section VI of this essay sets out a more complete after-action review template that the World Liberty Academy uses in its workshops.



## SECTION IV

# The Adaptive Strategy Canvas

The Strategy Canvas is the working tool that turns the seven-step cycle into a one-page document. Movement leaders are encouraged to fill it out in writing, revisit it at the start of each campaign cycle, and circulate it among trusted members of the leadership group. The discipline of writing is the discipline of clear thinking.

An interactive version of the Canvas is available through the Playbook for Liberty website. The version below is the same instrument in static form, suitable for use offline, in a meeting, or in a setting where digital tools are not safe to use.

## **WLC ADAPTIVE STRATEGY CANVAS**

### **1. Context**

*Country or community. Regime type. Current phase of struggle. Level of repression. Main opportunity. Main risk.*

### **2. Problem**

*What is the specific problem we are trying to solve? Who is affected? Why now?*

### **3. Objective**

*What concrete result do we want in 30, 90, or 180 days? How will we know if we succeeded?*

### **4. Power map**

*Who sustains the regime on this issue? Who can influence them? Who are potential allies? Who are potential spoilers? Who is most at risk?*

### **5. Strategic tracks**

*Which tracks are relevant: civic, political, legal, international, digital, financial, narrative, protection, transition?*

### **6. Sequence**

*What must happen first? What comes next? What should wait?*

### **7. Protection**

*Who could be targeted? What digital, legal, physical, and psychosocial protections are needed? What is the emergency plan?*

### **8. Narrative**

*What is the message? Who needs to hear it? What regime narrative are we countering?*

### **9. Metrics**

*What will we measure? Participation, media reach, diplomatic engagement, prisoner visibility, sanctions progress, coalition alignment, security improvement?*

### **10. Learning**

*When will we review? Who will document lessons? How will lessons be shared safely with the WLC network?*

The Canvas is most useful when it is short. If a section requires more than a few sentences, the strategy is probably still unclear. The discipline is to keep refining until each field can be answered concisely. A campaign cannot be communicated to allies if it cannot first be communicated to its own leaders.



## SECTION V

### Signal versus noise

Adaptive strategy does not mean constant improvisation. It means disciplined adjustment. A movement should not change direction every time the regime creates noise. It should learn to distinguish two categories of incoming information.

#### Signals

Events that reveal real shifts in power, risk, opportunity, or public mood. Examples include:

- Elite fractures inside the regime.
- Sudden economic stress that erodes the regime's capacity to pay its enablers.
- New repression laws or legal architectures.
- International diplomatic shifts that change the regime's external position.
- Large-scale public anger over a specific event.
- Hesitation or quiet refusal within the security forces.
- Major prisoner cases that crystallize public attention.
- Unexpected regime concessions, which often signal weakness.

#### Noise

Distractions designed to exhaust, divide, or provoke the movement. Examples include:

- Online rumors and personality conflicts amplified by anonymous accounts.
- Fake-opposition provocations and manufactured factions.
- Disinformation campaigns timed to coincide with movement actions.
- Symbolic regime insults aimed at producing emotional reaction.
- Manufactured scandals that reward chasing rather than thinking.

The discipline is to ask, of every incoming event: does this change our strategy, or does it merely demand emotional reaction? A movement that cannot tell signal from noise will be moved by every gust of wind. A movement that can tell them apart conserves its energy for the moments when adjustment is genuinely required.



## SECTION VI

## The WLC After-Action Review method

Every WLC training, campaign, advocacy effort, or coalition initiative should end with a structured review. The format must be short enough to actually use, but serious enough to generate learning. Without structured documentation of outcomes, the feedback loop has no inputs, and the next campaign repeats the previous campaign's mistakes.

The following template is the version used by the World Liberty Academy. It is intentionally compact. It is meant to be filled out within seventy-two hours of an action, while memory is fresh and before the lessons fade.

### WLC AFTER-ACTION REVIEW TEMPLATE

#### **Action reviewed**

*One-line description of what was done.*

#### **Date and participants**

*When the action took place, and who was involved at the leadership level.*

#### **Original objective**

*What we set out to achieve, stated specifically.*

#### **Expected outcome**

*What we believed would happen if the strategy worked.*

#### **Actual outcome**

*What actually happened, including unintended outcomes.*

#### **Regime response**

*What the regime did, when, and how.*

#### **Public response**

*How citizens, allies, and bystanders reacted.*

#### **International response**

*How partners, governments, media, and donors reacted.*

#### **Security incidents**

*Any threats, arrests, infiltration attempts, or digital attacks.*

#### **What worked**

*Specific elements that produced the intended effect.*

#### **What failed**

*Specific elements that did not work.*

#### **What surprised us**

*Outcomes we did not predict in either direction.*

#### **What should be repeated**

*Concrete elements worth replicating in the next cycle.*

### **What should be stopped**

*Elements that should not be repeated.*

### **What should be changed**

*Elements that need to be adjusted.*

### **What should be shared with the WLC**

*The transferable lesson, written for peers in other countries.*

### **What must remain confidential**

*Information that, if disclosed, would endanger people or future operations.*

**A note on documentation safety.** After-action reviews contain operational information. They should be written in secure environments, anonymized from the start, stored in encrypted form, and shared with the WLC only through verified channels. The detailed methodology for safe documentation is set out in the Playbook training document for Principle 2: A Compass, Not Recipes.



## **SECTION VII**

# **Common strategic mistakes to avoid**

Movements tend to fail in similar ways. The list below is short and worth memorizing. Most strategic failures are variations on these five mistakes.

## **Mistake 1. Confusing bravery with strategy**

Courage is indispensable, but courage without structure can lead to unnecessary sacrifice. Democratic movements need both meaning and architecture: freedom, dignity, pluralism, and conscience, and also diagnosis, sequencing, coordination, protection, accountability, institutional learning, and risk analysis. Bravery is the engine. Strategy is the steering.

## **Mistake 2. Copying another country's playbook**

Comparative learning is essential. Mechanical imitation is dangerous. Comparative cases should be used as structured prompts, not as templates. Context diagnosis must precede recommendations, and tactics from another country should never be deployed without local adaptation. The full treatment of this discipline is set out in the Playbook training document for Principle 2: A Compass, Not Recipes.

### **Mistake 3. Acting without sequencing**

A protest, a statement, a report, or a diplomatic meeting can be useful or useless depending on timing. The right action at the wrong time is the wrong action. Before any major step, ask: what does this action set up next?

### **Mistake 4. Ignoring protection**

If strategy increases risk without protection, it may strengthen the regime more than it weakens it. Activists and movements must be protected from political, digital, physical, and transnational threats so they can organize, testify, and sustain their work. A campaign that exposes its own people without preparation is a campaign that will lose its people.

### **Mistake 5. Failing to document learning**

If lessons are not captured, movements repeat their own mistakes. If lessons are not shared, one country's pain does not become another country's preparation. Documentation is not bureaucracy. It is how a movement remembers what it learned, and how a network becomes wiser than any of its parts.



## **SECTION VIII**

### **Practical exercises for the World Liberty Academy**

The discipline of strategy is built through practice, not through reading. The following five exercises are used in WLC Academy workshops, and can be adapted for any leadership retreat, training session, or coalition meeting. They build on each other, and a full sequence (one exercise per session) produces a working strategic plan within a few weeks.

#### **Exercise 1. The 90-Day Strategy Drill**

Participants choose one concrete objective they want to advance in the next ninety days, and build a strategy for it using the Adaptive Strategy Canvas. The result should include diagnosis, objective, power map, strategic tracks, sequence, protection plan, narrative, metrics, and a learning plan. The exercise typically takes two to three hours, and ends with each team presenting its Canvas to the others for critique.

#### **Exercise 2. Regime Response Simulation**

The trainer presents a movement action drawn from a real or hypothetical case. Participants role-play the regime's likely countermeasures: arrests, smear campaigns, fake accounts, legal threats, internet shutdowns, family intimidation, controlled concessions. The group then revises the original strategy in light of what the regime would predictably do. The exercise teaches the most important habit of adaptive strategy: thinking like the opponent.

### **Exercise 3. Tactical Sequencing Lab**

Participants receive ten possible actions: a public protest, a documentation report, a private diplomatic briefing, a media campaign, a legal complaint, a sanctions dossier, a community-outreach effort, a digital-security training, a coalition meeting, and a prisoner campaign. The task is to arrange them in the safest and most effective sequence for a given objective and context. The exercise reveals how often movements have the right pieces but the wrong order.

### **Exercise 4. After-Action Review Practice**

Participants analyze a past campaign from their own country or another WLC context, using the After-Action Review template. They identify what was expected, what actually happened, what the regime did, what the movement learned, and what should change. The exercise builds the muscle that turns experience into knowledge.

### **Exercise 5. Red Team / Blue Team**

The group splits in two. One team designs a democratic strategy. The other team acts as the regime and tries to disrupt it. Both teams then identify the vulnerabilities the exercise revealed, and redesign the plan together. This is the most demanding of the five exercises and produces the largest improvements when done well.



## **SECTION IX**

### **Strategy reviewed before, during, and after action**

The continuous-strategy discipline is held together by a simple rhythm. Strategy is reviewed at three moments, every time. The questions are short. The habit is what matters.

#### **BEFORE ACTION**

- › *What are we trying to achieve?*
- › *What risks are we accepting, and on whose behalf?*
- › *What protection is in place?*
- › *What is the next step after this action, regardless of how it ends?*

## **DURING ACTION**

- › *Is the context changing in ways our plan did not anticipate?*
- › *Is the regime responding as expected, or differently?*
- › *Are people safe?*
- › *Do we need to adjust now, or can the adjustment wait?*

## **AFTER ACTION**

- › *What did we learn?*
- › *What changed in the balance of power?*
- › *What should be shared with other WLC members?*
- › *What should remain confidential, and for how long?*

This rhythm turns activism into learning, and learning into power. Movements that practice it become harder to defeat, because every cycle of action ends stronger than it began.



## **CONCLUSION**

### **Learning faster than the regime**

Principle 4 is the operational heart of the Playbook for Liberty. It teaches that strategy is not a fixed plan, a heroic impulse, or a one-time workshop. Strategy is a living discipline, practiced every week, refined every cycle, and shared across the network so that no movement carries the burden alone.

The decisive advantage in the contemporary struggle for liberty will belong to those who can learn faster, coordinate broader, protect their people better, hold tyrants accountable, and embody a more credible future. None of those capacities is an accident. They are produced by the disciplined practice this principle describes.

*Do not only act. Diagnose.*  
*Do not only denounce. Map power.*  
*Do not only mobilize. Sequence.*

*Do not only suffer repression. Learn from it and make it backfire.  
Do not only survive. Adapt.*

*Strategy is how courage becomes power. Continuous strategy is how movements stay alive, stay relevant, and stay one step ahead of oppression.*

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#### **CONTINUE TO PRINCIPLE 5**

*Principle 5 of the Playbook for Liberty is Nonviolence and the Defense of Democracy: Principle and Pragmatism. It explains why nonviolent discipline remains the most effective instrument democratic movements have, and how to defend that doctrine when faith in nonviolence is wavering.*

***Fuerza y fe.***

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