United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 12, 2023

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

Damon Wilson
President and CEO
National Endowment for Democracy
1201 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Suite 1100
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mr. Wilson:

As I recently wrote to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the use of taxpayer dollars to silence conservative and religious speech, or to suppress mere differences of opinion, is unacceptable.[1] The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) essentially acts as a private dispenser of public funding to a variety of global organizations. Although you accept private donations, according to your website, NED's funding for grants comes from Congress.[2] Recently NED dispensed hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants to the Global Disinformation Index (GDI), an organization whose biases and selective use of the "disinformation" label are easily discovered from its public posts and presentations.[3] This raises serious questions about NED's stewardship of taxpayer money and why it would fund a foreign organization that seeks to enforce its anti-conservative and anti-religious biases by financially punishing American news organizations that violate its self-appointed speech codes.

GDI accomplishes its censorship by creating a black list of web sites that run afoul of its speech guidelines, which it sends to advertising agencies. Those big tech companies and ad firms then collude with GDI to withdraw ad dollars from sites that GDI deems to contain "disinformation."[4] This is problematic because GDI broadly defines "disinformation" in a way that could, and apparently often does, sweep in legitimate differences of opinion and the deeply-held beliefs of the some of the world's major religions that uphold traditional teachings on marriage, sexuality, and the family, as well as other legitimate speech.[5]

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[1] Letter from Senator Charles E. Grassley, Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on the Budget, to Antony Blinken, Secretary, U.S. Dep't of State (April 12, 2023), on file with Committee staff.
[2] *Id.*
[3] Brian Flood, State Department funds 'disinformation' index targeting non-liberal and conservative news outlets: report, Fox News (February 16, 2023), https://www.foxnews.com/media/state-department-funds-disinformation-index-targeting-non-liberal-and-conservative-news-outlets-report.
[4] *Id.*
[5] Letter from Senator Charles E. Grassley, supra (citing Global Disinformation Index, Brief: Disinformation Risk in the United States Online Media Market, October, 2022 (October 21, 2022), https://www.disinformationindex.org/research/2022-10-21-brief-disinformation-risk-in-the-united-states-online-media-market-october-2022/).

GDI's bias is also evident in its list of top ten "riskiest" and "least risky" sites for disinformation. The ten riskiest sites are all conservative-leaning.[6] This is despite the fact that, as I noted in my letter to Secretary Blinken, a number of sites in the "least risky" category have peddled disinformation of their own.[7] This includes NPR, which ridiculed coverage of the Hunter Biden laptop story in advance of the 2020 election, falsely claiming that reports about the laptop were, "discredited by U.S. intelligence and independent investigations by news organizations."[8] Other sites on the "least risky" list also provided false information to voters in advance of the election. The New York Times and Washington Post, among others, now admit that the Hunter Biden laptop story they attempted to censor was legitimate.[9] This is not to mention the other well-known instances where such sites provided false information, whether it was claiming for two years that President Trump had ties to Russian interference in the 2016 election, repeating wild and unsubstantiated allegations in the Steele Dossier, or criticism of the Covid-19 "lab leak theory," which is now accepted as a real possibility by the FBI and Department of Energy.[10] GDI's bias in its actual and attempted censorship is clear based on its public representations.

Congress does not provide funding to NED so that it may put its thumb on the scale against the First Amendment. There needs to be a strict accounting for why these funds were dispensed and what measures NED has put in place to prevent this from happening again. While NED clearly made the right call in ceasing funding for GDI, the allotment of taxpayer dollars to this organization in the first place demands explanation.

So that Congress may conduct thorough and independent oversight of NED's grant funding,[11] please provide the following information no later than April 26, 2023:

1) All records[12] related to grant funding from NED to GDI, including any correspondence between NED and GDI, and between NED and the State Department, discussing this funding;

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[6] Gabe Kaminsky, Disinformation Inc: Meet the groups hauling in cash to secretly blacklist conservative news, Washington Examiner (February 9, 2023), https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/technology/disinformation-conservative-media-censored-blacklists.
[7] Letter from Senator Charles E. Grassley, Supra.
[8] Brian Flood, NPR under fire for claiming Hunter Biden laptop story was 'discredited' by US intelligence, media, Fox News (April 1, 2021), https://www.foxnews.com/media/npr-hunter-biden-laptop-story-discredited-intelligence.
[9] *See, e.g.*, New York Times (March 16, 2022), https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/16/us/politics/hunter-biden-tax-bill-investigation.html; Cristiano Lima, Hunter Biden laptop findings renew scrutiny of Twitter, Facebook crackdowns, The Washington Post (March 31, 2022), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/31/hunter-biden-laptop-findings-renew-scrutiny-twitter-facebook-crackdowns/.
[10] Michael R. Gordon, Lab Leak Most Likely Origin of Covid-19 Pandemic, Energy Department Now Says, Wall Street Journal (February 26, 2023), https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-origin-china-lab-leak-807b7b0a.
[11] *See* 22 U.S.C. § 4412(d) (The Endowment and its grantees are subject to congressional oversight).
[12] "Records" include any written, recorded, or graphic material of any kind, including letters, memoranda, reports, notes, electronic data (e-mails, email attachments, and any other electronically-created or stored information), calendar entries, inter-office communications, meeting minutes, phone/voice mail or recordings/records of verbal communications, and drafts (whether or not they resulted in final documents).

2) A detailed description of all activities NED is engaged in and funding it has provided at any time, or is currently providing, to counter what it deems as disinformation, misinformation, or mal-information anywhere in the world;

3) Please describe in detail what due diligence NED performed before granting funding to GDI, and why GDI's public demonstrations of bias did not dissuade NED from providing funding; and

4) Will NED assure the Congress that it will not provide grant funding to organizations, domestic or foreign, that target speech for suppression that would be constitutionally protected in the U.S.? If not, why not?

If you have any questions, please contact my staff at (202) 224-0642.

Sincerely,

Charles E. Grassley
Ranking Member
Committee on the Budget