



# Council for a Community of Democracies

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Press Release

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## Palmer Prize Honors Diplomats for Advancing Democracy

The Community of Democracies Ministerial, Vilnius, Lithuania July 1

Seven diplomats were recognized at the Vilnius Ministerial of the Community of Democracies for their work in advancing democracy. It marks the first time an international body has honored diplomats for their contributions to the cause of democracy and human rights. The awards, bearing the name The Mark Palmer Prize, named for a former U.S. Ambassador to Hungary, were presented at a ceremony at the Vilnius Ministerial. They have gone to diplomats from Peru, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Canada, the Netherlands and the United States. In addition, an award has been made posthumously to a Polish diplomat and special recognition was given to a diplomat from India.

Mark Palmer, for whom the prize is named, is noted for strongly supporting Hungarian democratic activists prior to the fall of Communism. He also played a key role in conceiving the Community of Democracies and the National Endowment for Democracy. When asked to reflect on the significance of the award in his name, Ambassador Mark Palmer commented 'I hope this Prize will help make a dictator-free world a central objective of the democracies' diplomacy'.

Ambassador Palmer observed that during the transition to democracy in East/Central Europe neither he nor his counterparts had clear guidance from their capitals on how to relate to the emerging democrats at the Cold War's end. As a result, three years ago, Palmer launched *A Diplomat's Handbook for Democracy Development Support* ([www.diplomatshandbook.org](http://www.diplomatshandbook.org)); a project directed by retired Canadian Ambassador Jeremy Kinsman which has been adopted by the Community of Democracies.

The Handbook, widely consulted in recent years by diplomats of many democracies, seeks to fill a vacuum by providing a tool kit of ideas of how diplomats can relate to democracy activists and civil society to assist with democratic transitions. It also presents case studies of how diplomats from many nations have worked to encourage, support and advance democracy.

The Palmer Prize is awarded by the Council for a Community of Democracies (CCD) on behalf of the nongovernmental International Steering Committee of the Community of Democracies. It is intended to identify diplomats who exemplify the new dimension in diplomacy reflected in the Handbook. The Palmer Prize is made possible by the Sándor Demjén Foundation.

The recipients of the award are:

Žygimantas Pavilionis, currently Lithuanian Ambassador to the United States and formerly coordinator of the Lithuanian chairmanship of the Community of Democracies, for his outstanding contributions to the reinvigoration of the Community of Democracies.

Jaroslav Olša, Jr., the current Czech Ambassador to the Republic of Korea. Olša served as Czech Ambassador to Zimbabwe from 2000-2006. He advocated for free and fair elections during the 2002 Presidential and 2005 Parliamentary elections and did his best to ensure that a true record of what he observed reached local and other observer missions and the international community. Olša is also the author of articles and books on history and art of contemporary Zimbabwe (e.g. *History of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi*, 2008). Olša worked with civil society and the country's main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, and explored various ways in which he could support the Zimbabwean people's struggle for democracy. Olša was instrumental in the establishment of Zimbabwean cultural presentations that showcase political and social commentary in Zimbabwe. In addition to establishing ties with the opposition, Olša worked to remain on reasonable terms with the then ruling party ZANU-PF, headed by Robert Mugabe, to advocate for democracy and respect for human rights.

Ernesto Pinto-Bazurco Rittler is the current Peruvian Ambassador to Romania. In 1980, Pinto-Bazurco Rittler challenged the Castro regime, at risk to his own life, by advocating for democracy, non-violence and human rights in Cuba. As the diplomat in charge of the Peruvian embassy in Havana, Pinto-Bazurco Rittler was instrumental in securing asylum for thousands of Cubans. In meetings with Castro, Pinto-Bazurco Rittler adamantly refused to hand over the thousands of asylum seekers that sought refuge at the Peruvian embassy. The standoff eventually gained international attention and resulted in the Mariel boatlift, a chaotic five-month period in which more than 125,000 Cubans defected to the US. He is also lauded for his efforts in promoting human rights in Eastern Europe by the Journalists League Sibiu, Romania. He is a respected legal academic and has been a major contributor to international law in Latin America on the issue of the right to asylum. He is also a weekly contributor to the *Diary El Comercio* of Peru.

James McGee is the former United States Ambassador to Zimbabwe. McGee played a leading role in calling for free and fair elections and speaking out against human rights abuses committed by the Zimbabwean government. McGee worked to draw attention to political violence in Zimbabwe and has led various delegations of diplomats through the country "to assess the electoral and post-election environment." Additionally, McGee "provided unwavering support for various programs, to foster civic participation, defend human rights, and strengthen the electoral process in the highly volatile and challenging environment of Zimbabwe in 2008."

Ben Rowswell, a Canadian diplomat who founded the Democracy Unit of the Canadian foreign ministry, is described as having "devoted himself to enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of democracy support as an essential tool for diplomacy." Rowswell worked in Iraq, both with the Canadian government and with the National Democratic Institute, and advocated for democracy support during the country's transition. In 2008, Rowswell helped lead Canada's mission in Afghanistan, and successfully lobbied for the creation of Kabul's Electoral Complaints Commission (the body that adjudicated allegations of fraud during the Afghanistan's 2009 presidential election). Rowswell uses his experience in the field to assist the Canadian government in making informed democracy promotion-related policy decisions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Caecilia Wijgers is a Dutch diplomat who has been instrumental in multiple initiatives that have aided emerging civil society opposition groups in Cuba. Most notably, she helped distribute its publications – many of which are considered “subversive material and enemy propaganda” by the Cuban government – to opposition groups. Wijgers has been repeatedly lauded by numerous Cuban dissidents for her strong commitment to human rights, internet/media freedom, and democratic reform.

A special posthumous award was made to Mariusz Handzlik, a Polish diplomat who died in the April 2010 plane crash that killed Polish President Lech Kaczynski. During his years of diplomatic service, Handzlik was a tireless advocate of democratic reform in Central Europe and the Baltic States and heavily contributed to the development of several Euro-Atlantic institutions in those regions. His efforts in supporting democracy in other countries resulted in reestablished diplomatic ties with Ukraine and Lithuania, as well as partnerships with Georgia, Romania and Azerbaijan. Handzlik regarded civil society and activists as principal actors in international relations and championed human rights and democratic values, even in non-democratic states.

Also cited by the awards committee for his work in supporting democratic development was Indian Ambassador Ajai Malhotra the former Deputy Permanent Representative of India to the UN. Malhotra was pivotal in the development of the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) and was a forceful advocate of channeling UNDEF funds to civil society. Malhotra was a strong proponent of funding local civil society groups wherever possible. Prior to Malhotra’s involvement, UN funds were heavily focused on supporting government structures, rather than civil society.

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