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LAURA PAVLOVIC

*Interviewed by: Larry Garber
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INTERVIEW

Q: It's Wednesday, November 12, 2025. I'm here with Laura Pavlovic, and we're going to be reviewing Laura's experience in the DRG [Democracy, Rights, and Governance] sector, but also, more broadly, her efforts in international development.

We'll start, as we often do, with your origin story. How did you first decide you wanted to get involved with international development, democracy, work, teacher, parent, mentor, etc.? Give us a little background on that.

PAVLOVIC: I probably draw my origin story back to high school. I grew up in a very small town in Connecticut, but I had an amazing civics teacher my freshman year of high school who spent a lot of time talking about democracy and also about communism. I was a child of the 1980s and was very interested in socialism and what it would look like to live in a socialist country.

As a result of that, when I was sixteen years old, I became an exchange student and went to Bosnia for a year to actually see a socialist country myself. That was before the fall of the Berlin Wall-the only communist country you could go to (as an exchange student) was Yugoslavia. As a result of that, and obviously the war that came afterwards, I became very interested in the question of politics and the ways in which political elites can deploy the tools of media and elections to further their own interests. This ended very badly in the Balkans. But obviously, working on Bosnia issues since the 1990s, you've seen examples of external actors assisting and engaging local actors to shift the pendulum back in a different direction. I didn't know about USAID [United States Agency for International Development] then. I also did not know about USAID when I went to law school.

Q: Before you get to law school, what did you study in college?

PAVLOVIC: I studied Slavic languages and literatures with a focus on Russian politics and history. So I continued to stay engaged in that part of the world.

Q: And you studied at?

PAVLOVIC: University of Pennsylvania.

Then I went off to Prague. I arrived in Prague the day after the Velvet Divorce [peaceful split of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, 1993]. I studied there. That was where I started to get very interested in East Central European history. I started with a focus on the Habsburgs. I had grand intentions to look at the Ottoman Empire as well, and the ways in which that history shaped a lot of the socioeconomic factors that underlay what ended up happening in Bosnia.

I was so taken with this that I actually decided that I was going to immediately finish college and go off and get a PhD in East Central European history at Columbia. Which I started, and then realized that you need money to do things like that, and recognized that it probably wasn't going to work.

In the meantime, I was very much involved with what was going on in Bosnia. My host sisters, who are half Serbian and half Croat, became refugees on the first day of the siege of Tuzla [1992 attack on the city during the Bosnian War], which is where I lived. I had been very involved in their political asylum case and getting them asylum in the United States. I became very interested in issues of refugee law and transitional justice.

I eventually found my way into thinking about law school, and applied and was accepted to Harvard. The first summer after law school, I interned at the Office of the Prosecutor at the War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, working on command responsibility cases, which was really interesting. Back to this question of the ways in which political elites shape the rules to advance their own ends, I had a front row seat to that, working on a lot of those cases. By then, the first work that I published looked at the Dayton Accords and what came after, and comparing the work that the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague was doing [on transitional justice] versus the Human Rights Chamber, which is the local version of that, that was set up in Sarajevo after the war.

I started to branch out from there. I had started from a focus on, in the DRG [Democracy, Rights, and Governance] parlance the rule of law and transitional justice world, and then started thinking about the ways in which other democratic institutions impact on these issues. So in my third year of law school, I had started wandering across campus to the Kennedy School, got to know Pippa Norris, who was a mentor to me my third year of law school, and started to think about the ways in which media institutions play into this narrative. Unwittingly, I ended up designing what probably would have been a really nice USAID transitional media program for post-war Kosovo, but I didn't know that USAID existed at the time.

I ended up doing another article that I published on comparative constitutional law and the ways in which the U.S. free speech regime doesn't necessarily work [the same way] in instances like Kosovo and Serbia. I was very interested in these sorts of issues. I had loans to pay back, so I went off to big law [a large corporate law firm] for a few years, but stayed very engaged in human rights issues.

I had a pre-existing relationship with Human Rights Watch, and so was doing some writing for them, and was very involved in the aftermath of 9/11 and setting up this

cohort of what they called “Young Associates,” which was focused on raising attention to violations of international humanitarian law and some of the civil rights challenges in the United States after 9/11. Then I eventually met my husband, who knew exactly what USAID was, and had applied to a job for USAID, and we found ourselves in Kenya.

Q: What year is this we're talking about?

PAVLOVIC: 2005. We moved to Kenya in 2004. I was working for the Kenya Human Rights Commission. There had been a massive wave of forced evictions in Kibera, which is one of the two big slums in the center of Nairobi. I was doing some work for them as a program associate, and went in and started documenting what was happening, how all of this went down, and started doing some reporting and documentation for them to push back against some of this.

Q: Milan [Milan Pavlovic], meanwhile, is at USAID?

PAVLOVIC: Yes. He was a regional legal officer. At that point, I'm running around Kibera, and this job becomes available, managing the Burundi program. Burundi, in those days, was limited-presence [a small, minimally staffed USAID mission]. We did have one U.S. direct hire personal services contractor on the ground and five or six FSNs [Foreign Service Nationals] at the time. But they were looking for somebody to sit in the limited-presence countries office in Nairobi to help manage that program.

At that point, the war [Burundi civil war, 1993–2005] was coming to an end. I think on my first trip to Bujumbura there was still mortar fire going on. But at that point we had colleagues from what was then OFDA [Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance] on the ground that were handling a lot of the immediate humanitarian assistance needs. We had an OTI [Office of Transition Initiatives] program that was starting to wind down, and they were looking to hand off to future development programming.

That was my first job at USAID, managing that process, and working to institutionalize a lot of the work that OTI had been doing, to try to rebuild inter-ethnic ties and support a new generation of political leaders, and bolster electoral and governance institutions in the wake of the war.

When I came in and started this program, it was an amazing entry point to get to know USAID, because I was involved in managing everything. We had emergency food aid, we had health programming, we had agriculture and livelihoods assistance. We were moving from a focus on conflict management and mitigation into starting to think about long-term development and how you start to rebuild governance institutions with a focus on these issues.

Q: And you're a personal services contractor?

PAVLOVIC: Local hire personal services contractor, exactly. I spent about one week of the month in Bujumbura and the rest of the time I was in Nairobi managing a lot of this programming remotely. Right around that time, Tjip Walker was starting the Fragile State Strategies. I can't remember what the first fragile state strategy was, but I remember very clearly that Burundi was the second. So I had an opportunity to work on that with Tjip.

That's how I know Tjip, getting involved in drafting that. I remember very clearly that they gave us exactly ten pages to write the strategy. I was horrified by this, so I put a lot of the detail that normally would have been in the paper and these voluminous footnotes in the back of the document. It didn't take me very long to kind of figure out the bureaucracy of USAID.

The big thing for me, and again, it was kind of a weird position. It was a program manager position, so it's kind of a program officer position. I remember, I was also involved in the very first operational plans that USAID started back in those days. But it was also a technical job. You were doing a lot of the design work. We were making some good progress in a lot of the reconciliation work that had been going on. OTI had done really tremendous work, and I think it'd be really interesting to go back and see a lot of the young political leaders that they had been supporting, where a lot of them wound up. We knew that they were becoming members of parliament, even when I was working that program.

I remember, very clearly, I spent a lot of time with my OFDA colleague, who was also on the ground, talking about the fact that we were, in a lot of ways, addressing the immediate response to a lot of these issues. I remember very clearly walking around therapeutic feeding centers with him, and just thinking to myself, "This is great, we're addressing these immediate issues, but we are also really risking a lot of this assistance becoming instrumentalized." I look back at the trajectory of Burundi since then, and all of the assistance that we provided, and it was just something that really stuck in my head. We're helping to meet the moment, with respect to post-conflict transition assistance. We're dealing with the immediate humanitarian assistance needs, but we're not quite sure how this is going to end.

Very shortly after I wrapped up drafting the Fragile State Strategy, there was a call for backstop seventy-six Foreign Service Officers [USAID technical specialties]. I applied to that. Jay Singh was a USFSC sitting in the Regional Conflict Management Office, and I remember he was talking to me about what was likely to happen when I went back and did my interview for backstop 76. It turned out, they were known until the end of USAID as Crisis Stabilization and Governance Officers.

But when I went back to DC to do my exam and my interview for the backstop 76, the fact pattern they gave me was another fragile state. I kind of thought to myself, "Well, I have a leg up on this a little bit since I just wrote this thing for Burundi." But I remember very clearly being in the room [during the interview], and it was managed very well. You had to write your strategy, you had a certain amount of time to write your strategy, and then you came back into the room and had to defend it through a mock interagency process. And that was how I found myself moving from PSC [personal services contractor] into the U.S. direct hire world.

Q: So what year is that?

PAVLOVIC: So 2005 I applied to become a U.S. direct hire. Literally [it took] a year and a half for security [clearances]. I think I found out that I had gotten the position at the end of 2005, beginning of 2006, and then I left Kenya and moved back to the U.S. to start the

new entry professional program in February of 2007. So I became a direct hire in 2007.

Q: Were you based in Washington?

PAVLOVIC: Yes. I came back to DC. We had a month of what they called NEP [New Entry Professional] training, which was just an introduction to USAID. Then we actually had a month of backstop 76 training. So you literally had a week on rule of law, a week on elections, a week on civil society, a week on governance.

The governance was, I remember this very clearly, and I've told Derick Brinkerhoff this many times, that we basically got a week of [learning from Brinkerhoff's book] Implementing Policy Change, which was amazing and a gift. One of the things that I got to do as a NEP while I was still in DC was actually help teach that course for the next round of NEPs that came behind me. It was an incredible luxury to have a full month of in-person DRG training at the beginning of all of that.

That was February of 2007. We were through training by April, and then you were required to do a whole series of rotations over the course of your time in Washington. I spent some time working on the Governance and Rule of Law team [in the DRG Center]. I spent some time in CMM [Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation] filling in for Lisa Chandonnet, so I got to be the acting USAID rep for counterterrorism. I went out on a TDY [temporary duty assignment] to South Sudan to fill in behind John Granville, who had just been killed, which was an experience of my life that I will never ever forget [John Granville, USAID officer assassinated in Khartoum in 2008].

Then I worked for Claire Ehmann, who was in E and E [Europe and Eurasia] at the time, on a retrospective of all of the work that had been done on democracy and governance in Eastern Europe, and got to run a bunch of meta evaluations, which was really cool.

It was a pretty amazing experience. And then on the rule of law side, I worked on drafting a guidance document on working with non-state justice institutions. So I had various assignments while I was in DC, working through these rotations.

Q: From your perspective, or from the Center's [the DRG Center at USAID] perspective, was the fact that you were a trained lawyer pushing you in one direction or another? Or had you left that behind and you were a democracy officer and, either from your or their perspective, available to do whatever?

PAVLOVIC: I was very interested in the rule of law. When you came in as a NEP you were asked to put together this individual learning and training plan. My individual learning and training plan was very much focused on shoring up some of the gaps. I felt like I had a pretty good grounding in a lot of the conflict mitigation work because of what I had done in Burundi. I had a big gap on counterterrorism, which is why I was interested in getting with Lisa and learning a little bit more about that. It was 2007, it was the heyday of that sort of work.

But when I looked at the experience that I had in the DRG space, we had a CEPPS [Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening] program in Burundi, so I felt like I had a little bit more of a grounding in that. But I was very much interested [in

rule of law] because of some of the transitional justice stuff that I had been doing before. And then in Burundi, I was very much interested in looking at some of the more institutional work that USAID was doing in the rule of law space. Cathy Niarchos was the head of that program at the time.

So I did some work on that. And then on the governance side as well, I was very interested in understanding a lot of legislative strengthening work that was going on.

Q: Before we go into some of the specific questions, why don't you just run through your USAID history? I'm not going to take you through each of your assignments but try to ask you some general questions. Why don't you just describe from being a NEP through ending up as the Deputy Director at the Center? The 18 years it amounted to in terms of different assignments.

PAVLOVIC: When I finished up as a NEP, we had a first assignment in Ukraine for four years. The first two years I was there, I was managing the Millennium Threshold Program, which was focused on anti-corruption. I eventually moved to become deputy director of that office, and then director of that office.

Q: There was a separate office outside of the DRG office?

PAVLOVIC: No. It was in the DRG office, but I was tapped by the mission director when I got to Ukraine to manage the MCC [Millennium Challenge Corporation] program, which, previous to that, had been managed out of the program office. So it kind of moved from the program office into DG because I was managing it. Then we came back to DC as a tandem [assignment]. We rotated back to DC probably more than the average Foreign Service officers, but I always thought that was a feature rather than a bug.

I got to be the inaugural division chief for cross-sectoral programs, which is where you and I got to know each other, which was amazing. I had the opportunity to work on the 2013 DRG strategy. We'll come back to some of what happened there, talking about things that we're proud of.

I left from there to become the head of what became the Office of Democratic and Economic Growth at USAID Serbia. I was in charge of the merger of the two technical offices in the mission. Moved from there to Thailand, where I managed another cross-sector office that included democracy, counter-trafficking, economic growth, and engineering. That was a regional general development office.

Then came back to DC to become the deputy director of the DRG Center at the time. And then had the great good fortune to be there when we became a bureau, and I became the first senior deputy assistant administrator for the DRG Bureau. And then after that, I became the SDAA [Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator] in the Conflict Prevention and Stabilization Bureau. I moved over there in June of 2024, and I stayed there until everything happened this year.

Q: Obviously an incredibly diverse career. From what I know, you were at the center of a number of important initiatives for the agency, both in Washington and overseas. Why don't you start with just the question of how your field experiences influenced your

approach to working in Washington? Particularly in the Democracy Center, during the different times that you were there, both the first time after Ukraine and then the second time after Thailand.

PAVLOVIC: I think that the folks that came back to the Center benefited massively from that. But I also thought, and I will always think, that the Center benefited massively from having Foreign Service Officers come back.

Q: Can you give a specific example of that influence of being in the field, coming back to Washington, and working, whether it was the cross-sectoral program efforts or the local partnership, how your field experience really informed what you were doing? Was there value added in terms of other people who hadn't necessarily been out in the field?

PAVLOVIC: I think that the challenge for folks that spend their careers in Washington and don't really have an opportunity to kind of understand how the sausage is made in missions, don't get a purview on having the opportunity to be at post over enough of a period of time to really start to build an understanding of the political dynamics that are really driving why things work the way that they do at post.

Because of the fact that I spent more time in Eastern Europe than any place else, I have somewhat of a unique perspective on that, because of the fact that I had a very large DRG budget that was relatively un-earmarked. It gave me considerable latitude to be able to look at the country as it existed, and to think about the ways in which development assistance could assist in identifying and leveraging those windows of opportunity to pursue democratic change.

I think a lot of my colleagues that worked in Africa, for example, with very small DRG budgets or heavily earmarked DRG budgets, didn't have that experience. But because of the fact that I did have that experience, I was able to look at the full panoply of democracy and governance work almost as a palette that you could apply to addressing these challenges.

A lot of my perspective came from having had this experience, to some extent. Also in Burundi, where we had the good fortune of being in missions with increasing budgets over the course of my career. I think any good Foreign Service officer is really good at shilling for cash. Half of your job is raising funds for the opportunities that you find, because we never have enough resources.

Having that experience of going through serious country-level assessments, or serious sectoral assessments, you take a much broader view of what change is possible. I had somewhat unconstrained resources to be able to do that.

I'll give a very concrete example. When we started working on the DRG strategy back in 2013, there was a focus that was there. We look back on that now, and we think that was the beginning of PEA and cross-sector [work] and human rights as a sub-sector in its own right. But I think the thing that was really important for me about that strategy was it started to push in the direction of understanding that the challenges we had in the DRG space were not a lack of good models or a lack of understanding of the kind of constituent institutions that had become part of DRG [civil society, elections, rule of law,

governance]. It's really understanding the forces at play that have an interest in maintaining the status quo, and thinking about the various ways you can look across the country and look at windows of opportunity to identify change agents that push in a more pro-democratic way.

If you look, for example, at the strategic objective that was focused on accountability, there was very much a focus back in those days of not necessarily just having a parliamentary strengthening program; there was an interest in those days at looking at the ways in which you can bring what we always roughly refer to as the supply and demand sides of those equations together, and to be thinking about how you could be working across your portfolio to engage all of those various change agents, wherever they happen to sit, into much more well-integrated program designs.

And then ultimately, from where I sat in DC, working on cross-sectoral programs at the time; how can we, from Washington, provide missions with the analytical resources that they need to be able to do that work? And so the political economy analysis framework that we developed when I was in cross-sectoral programs was a way of helping our colleagues in other sectors who were also doing governance work.

I think a lot of DRG people who hadn't spent time in missions had no idea of the extent and depth and breadth of the work that our colleagues working on agriculture had, in terms of all the agricultural policy reform work that they were doing. There was always this feeling sitting in the DRG Center that we need to go talk to our colleagues in health and in agriculture and teach them about how to do governance.

Q: Or do policy reform more generally.

PAVLOVIC: Exactly. Frankly, our colleagues in Feed the Future [U.S. government global food-security initiative] were doing scope and scale related to policy reform that was something that I feel like in the DRG sector we couldn't even wrap our heads around, because there was so much work and there was so much money going in there. I think being in a mission where you are interacting with those colleagues on a daily basis and understanding what's going on in other sectors and the extent to which they're taking on democracy gives you a much wider sense of the ways in which you can take these issues on that is not so driven by the sectoral silos that existed in DRG when I first came back in 2007.

You remember the pillars. There was a laser focus on elections and on civil society and on rule of law and governance as pillars in their own right, rather than looking with a political economy lens: Where are the windows of opportunity? How can we engage these various democratic institutions? And also our colleagues working in other sectors to open up that space and find opportunities and pursue positive change.

Q: You sort of answered it, but you alluded earlier on, and I just want to give you a chance to describe this a bit more specifically: being involved with the DRG strategy in 2013 was a highlight of your time in DC. Maybe just reinforce what was so special about this DRG strategy, and how much, looking back ten years now, how much impact do you feel it had on the way the agency thinks about DRG and thinks about international

development more generally?

PAVLOVIC: I think that that strategy laid the foundation for a lot of really important things that we saw. I am extremely biased, I will recognize that at the outset. But I think that there are three ways that it laid a really important foundation for what was to come.

I talked a little bit about this idea of developing more holistic programming that was focused on bringing together the supply and the demand sides. Because remember that that strategy got to principles: participation, inclusion, transparency, accountability. How can you be working across these, what we had traditionally seen as pillars, to actually advance those outcomes? It moved from a focus on institutions to a focus on outcomes. I think that's really important. And you started to see programs that were doing that.

I remember very clearly talking to Danielle Reiff, who was in Georgia at the time, about some of the work that she was doing in bringing together civil society activists and parliamentarians in Georgia. So that's one foundation.

The second foundation was what Sarah Mendelson used to say, "We put the R in DRG." This focus on human rights. We had a human rights team for the first time after that. I think the reason why I saw that as being incredibly important was because it started to lay the foundation for the elevation that happened under the Biden administration.

I remember having a lot of these discussions two tours later, when I came back to DC in 2021. We talked about what elevation actually meant and what it meant to elevate democracy, rights, and governance. It meant that DRG had a seat at the table to raise issues of democracy and human rights in a way that actually influenced foreign policy making and influenced resources. The work that was done with that strategy to elevate human rights was the beginning of that thinking, and it laid a foundation for a lot of what came after that.

And then foundation number three, that I am most interested in and was most engaged in, was the integration agenda. That elevation of the idea of focusing on the ways in which democratic principles and practices are important to sustainable development in other sectors; I don't know that we had really articulated that before. That became a massive focus.

Q: Describe how that worked in practice. The skeptics would say, "Yes, DRG was promoting this idea of integrated programming, and the importance of policy reform and political economy, but that was basically so that they could resource these programs and intervene in these other sectors." As you said, a lot of the reaction initially was, "Hey, we're already doing policy reform in the health sector and in the agriculture sector." How did it manifest itself in concrete ways, introducing this as a core component of the DRG strategy?

PAVLOVIC: I would say a couple of things. To come back to political economy analysis, if you look at the action plan that was put in place in 2014 as part of the implementation of the strategy, there was a very specific integration action plan where we went to all of the other sectors and said, "Okay, where do you see opportunities to take this forward?" They identified areas, and our colleagues at Feed the Future said, "Agricultural policy

reform.” That’s all true. But I think what we brought to that, and this was one of the big ideas behind the use of political economy analysis, yes, you were doing policy reform, but you weren’t always doing this in a way that actually understood [and engaged with] the politics.

I remember the first time going to teach PEA at one of these Feed the Future conferences, one of the FSNs walked up to me and said, “You are actually articulating something that we never thought we could talk about before. Actually thinking about how you’re engaging with the governments as they are.” Having been involved in one of the pilots of the framework, which was focused on tuberculosis care and treatment in Ukraine, I think it’s fair to say that there were sectors where this really took off, but the idea of integrated programming was seized upon by certain sectors that were hardwired to think about politics in a way that felt familiar to us.

So if you think about our colleagues in biodiversity, their foundational documents around nation, wealth, and power are, to my mind, a variant of political economy analysis. There was really interesting work. I think when you look at the legacy of that, and at some of the political economy analyses, and the integrated programming that was done, we were able to find them because they understood what we were talking about.

Similarly, the tuberculosis stuff that I was doing in Ukraine, that was health system strengthening work. It was politically informed health system strengthening work. We had these fellow travelers sitting in other sectors that were working with us. I think that there was really good programming that came out of it that was truly integrated programming. We did case studies of a lot of this stuff. I think that we saw, certainly from the perspective of our colleagues sitting in other sectors, making those investments in local governments and getting involved in things like participatory budgeting set up those programs for sustainability. I think that it is a very fair thing to say.

I also think, conversely—and this is where my mind started to shift, especially when you start thinking about doing democracy programming in closing or closed spaces—the opportunity to work with your colleagues. For example, I’ll speak to Serbia in the economic growth space --to start to take on some of these issues as they are manifesting in the economic growth sector, that enabled you to actually get results that you would never be able to get in the DRG sector. I was never going to get anywhere in engaging the Serbian government on fixing anti-corruption policy, that was never going to happen.

The Serbian government was very interested in attracting foreign direct investment. So we could absolutely reform business permitting, we could reform construction permitting, we could reform the inspection system, all in ways that had anti-corruption effects. But those, that’s not a DRG program, that’s an economic growth program that is having massive democracy, rights, and governance impacts.

So when you look at the legacy of that and what was accomplished, did it happen everywhere? No, it didn’t happen everywhere. But I think it gave our sectoral colleagues connections and entry points into processes that enabled them to build the sustainability of their programs. And I think it enabled us to do work that we never would have been able to do had we continued to color within the lines of democracy, rights, and

governance programming.

Q: Obviously there was a lot that was accomplished in terms of moving that agenda. Can you maybe talk about a couple of cases where you tried and the pushback was too significant to overcome, and you left thinking, "This just isn't going to work in this context"? Or maybe cases where the agency is sympathetic to these issues but there are still going to be those who are going to put up resistance?

PAVLOVIC: There are a few areas where it was going to be very difficult to break in. There were ways in which some of the big initiatives, whether that's PEPFAR, whether that's Feed the Future, the extent to which those were managed for results were going to make it very difficult for these ways of working to effectively get integrated.

Even in the TB care and treatment, it was very clear that what was going on and the reason why Ukraine was continuing to have this problem with multi-drug resistant tuberculosis was because of the ways in which the hospital system was financed. They [hospitals] were financed by the bed. As a result of that, nobody was ever going to release a tuberculosis patient out of the hospital. So they were reinfecting each other.

When we told the health office that this is what was driving things, they needed to get earmark relief. None of their tuberculosis earmarks could be used, for example, to do public financial management reform or the sorts of reforms that would have to happen to actually address this issue. I think that there were real limitations to what we were going to be able to do that were driven a lot by earmarks, directives, and presidential initiatives. I think that's one challenge.

I think the other challenge that we came up against, that I'll just highlight, is the challenge of continuing to push for results in closed and closing spaces. One of the things that I was very involved in during that tour between 2012 and 2015 was the focus on increased government-to-government work. I was asked to go out to Ethiopia to do the public financial management and risk assessment framework for Ethiopia.

There had already been a decision made at the highest level of the agency that we were going to pursue government-to-government in Ethiopia. Never mind the fact that there were real concerns about moving forward and running money through government systems where we knew that this was a government that was very capable, and had been involved in instances of displacement in the past, instances of human rights violations. This was a fight the DRG took up at the time. This was a very hard-won battle to introduce a democracy review into ADS [Automated Directives System] 220, which is government-to-government assistance.

We could name and shame all of these countries and express concerns over them, but the reality of it was that within PEPFAR, there was a push to move as much money as possible through government systems. When you have that set of incentives, you are going to have a very limited purview to raise these issues. So what we were able to get done was to raise concerns and talk about risk assessment, but it was never the issues of what was actually going on in these countries and the real human rights concerns. I don't think that we ever had the opportunity to have the discussions or effectively take these

issues forward in terms of policy making and resource mobilization in the ways in which we had hoped to have at the beginning of it.

Q: What should a development agency be doing in the case of closed societies with problematic governments on the human rights side and on the governance side? How should USAID approach those efforts, both as a policy representative in the interagency and as experts on programming?

What have we learned about working in these closing and closed spaces on how to approach that tension? There are political reasons why we might be there, there are humanitarian reasons why we might be there. And yet, the politics are real and the abuses are real and the challenges are real.

PAVLOVIC: I think that we have a very mixed record on this. I think that the approach that we took in trying to open this up and talk about this in a risk assessment framing was the right approach. The reality of it was, having been involved, there were instances where you were dealing with a less geo-strategically important country, you could actually have the conversation. In some cases, we were able to say, given the scale of the concerns here, we are not going to pursue a direct government-to-government relationship with this country.

The reality of it is that in many of these countries with very large portfolios, Ethiopia is a strong example of it; although I will say, I think that that mission really took this issue seriously, and they did put together a risk mitigation plan that I thought did as much as it could to try to at least understand and do what it could to mitigate those risks. But I think that there are a lot of examples where we got thrown out of the conversation at the very beginning, and we were never not going to engage these countries, regardless of what the human rights concerns were.

What does it teach us? This is not a USAID-only problem. This is a problem that was very much shared by our colleagues in DRL as well, who showed up on their side of the ledger and raised very similar concerns.

Q: The question for USAID is whether it incorporates the holistic approach or is basically the development agency and the DRLs are the ones who are going to raise the human rights concerns. The default for USAID is to be promoting development opportunities in societies. Maybe a final point on this topic: the example in the U.S. government that theoretically uses a more democracy, human rights approach is MCC.

Did you ever feel that it would be appropriate for USAID to adopt the MCC-style cut-off? Either you meet the standards or we're not going to provide assistance to you.

PAVLOVIC: It's an interesting question. To be honest with you, I have so much cynicism about the way that MCC managed the threshold program. The question of to provide assistance or not to provide assistance, I saw that question differently. I saw that question as a question of conditionality, and so I wouldn't necessarily say that we were not going to provide assistance because, frankly, I served in countries where I cannot imagine not providing humanitarian assistance.

What I wished we would have had an opportunity to have been able to do, as an organization—and I think at the very end, our colleagues working on anti-corruption were starting to have those sorts of conversations—was about how you can do humanitarian assistance in ways in which you have eyes wide open on the corruption risks. For a whole variety of reasons, I feel as though having the integration discussion and risk mitigation discussion focused on corruption was an easier conversation to have. They were having those conversations around humanitarian assistance and how you mitigate the risk of providing that assistance in kleptocratic contexts. That was as far as we got.

I understand democracy as a sector of USAID assistance that came later and had a tremendous amount to do to catch up to what the other sectors were doing and be treated as a co-equal. But I do think that we never got as far as we needed to in terms of treating the risk of kleptocratic regimes as something that needed to be factored into the ways in which we were delivering humanitarian assistance and development aid. We never got there. The hope was that with the elevation of DRG to bureau status, we at least were in the room to be raising those sorts of issues. We had less than a year to do that.

Q: So you really feel that the bureaucratic elevation mattered? What you describe, even throughout the different 10 years that you had in DC, but also in the field, is that you were able to influence other bureaus from the DRG Office perch, but that it would have been much more impactful as a bureau rather than as a center.

PAVLOVIC: Yes. First of all, we were in policymaking rooms that we were not in previously. I think we had the opportunity to clear on things that we didn't have previously, and we were using that. I also think that the circumstances under which we were elevated really mattered. We were elevated during the Biden administration.

As a result—and I can tell you, being outside the United States for a significant period of that time and then coming back during the Biden administration—we were being invited in to be raising things. I think the ways in which our colleagues in other sectors were getting clear policy signals from the Biden administration that these were issues that needed to be taken seriously enabled us to have a greater effect.

PAVLOVIC: I think we're on Democracy Delivers, right?

Q: Yeah, you were talking about—

PAVLOVIC: —this idea that we would actually ask other sectors to talk about how they were contributing to democracy, rights and governance [DRG]. And so that was what was

happening, right? That was one of the major directions of the final democracy, rights and governance policy that David Black and folks were advancing over the course of the Biden administration.

Q: Whatever happened to that, did it go anywhere?

PAVLOVIC: We launched it, right? But, I feel like with this and everything else, it's a matter of—I mean, Matt Baker has been doing a tremendous amount to save as much as we possibly could, but all of that stuff has been taken down from the website. And we're very grateful to, obviously, to Tony [Pryor] and Stacey [Young], but to Matt and the DRG sector colleagues as well, who've done a lot to try to save all of that stuff.

Q: How would you compare—I mean, so one of the things that happened over time, perhaps inevitably, the way USAID works, or the way U.S. government works, is that others also became involved in implementing programs. So, you had DRL [Democracy, Human Rights and Labor] and other state bureaus implementing programs, and you probably saw that both in Washington and in the field. You obviously had the whole issue with—not issue, but the reality that you had programs emanating from the NED [National Endowment for Democracy]. You had Department of Justice responsible for certain types of programs. How would you compare, both in terms of program implementation, but also in ensuring policy coherence and quality control, the proliferation of these different entities involved in Democracy programming?

PAVLOVIC: I think it was a massive challenge. I think you could say that everyone was approaching this slightly differently, but you know, the reality of it was that we were in space—in most areas in which we were working—we were in space that was shared with others. I worked with OPDAT [Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training] RLAs [Resident Legal Advisors], my entire career at DOJ [Department of Justice], my entire career at USAID with the exception of Thailand, I think. But they were doing very, very different things. In an ideal situation, and I was just talking to somebody about this a couple of weeks ago—for any of these sectors and, certainly in the countries in which I've served, anti-corruption, rule of law, civil society were usually large enough that they were the subject of a working group at the embassy level that was bringing everybody together, ideally to coordinate approaches. And there were things, honestly, that my colleagues in DOJ were doing that we were not capable of doing.

Q: For example?

PAVLOVIC: Well, I'm not a prosecutor, right? I'm not going to be delivering training to prosecutors, or training judges on specific things.

Q: Right, but the USAID model, with a couple of exceptions like yourself, is you're not delivering the assistance anyway. You're hiring a contractor to do it. So the question is not, are you going to be doing it? It's a question of OPDAT versus, you know, some contractor that is delivering prosecutor training, judicial training, parliamentary training, whatever.

PAVLOVIC: Right, and so what I would say is that, in an ideal situation, you are leveraging the resources and tools that they have at their disposal to be able to complement the work that you were doing. So, for example, in the anti-corruption work that I was engaged in when I was in Serbia, right? We were doing a lot of the longer term work, engaging local civil society organizations, building movements, building pressure for reforms from the outside, whereas our colleagues at OPDAT were working, and we were working with them to ensure that they were engaging reform-minded prosecutors, for example.

So our comparative advantage, always in the space, country team, or any place else, was that we had contacts and contacts that nobody else had. We had the long view. We knew who the partners were. We knew who the change agents were. We were involved in helping to shape the DOJ program or the DRL program or the NED programs, and we're coordinating with all of them, so that the work that they were doing was additive to the multi-year investments that we were making in these sectors. And, in most instances, I feel like a huge amount of my time was spent maintaining those relationships and trying to troubleshoot when things were going awry to ensure that we were all rowing in the same direction.

But from everyone else, the reality of DRL's programs were, they were managed from Washington. They did not have the connections on the ground. And so, in an ideal situation, I was spending a lot of my time making those relationships with my colleagues back in Washington, or spending a lot of time when I was on home leave cultivating those relationships so that they knew to call me or folks on my team when money became available so that we could have a discussion around, are there things that you could be using your resources to tap into that would contribute to addressing some of these longer-term issues. And so, the longer I got into my career, the more time I was spending working hand in hand with my colleagues in the political section or mentoring [younger officers] because the other reality of it was, when you look at the ways that embassies were set up, the human rights officer was usually the most junior officer at post.

Q: And didn't have much experience.

PAVLOVIC: They didn't have much experience, but you know what, honestly, it was always an investment worth making to get to know that person and to be bringing them along [on TDYs] and ensuring that the reporting they were doing, which had a really important role to play, or the grants that they were providing, that they were connected up with our team, especially with our FSN [Foreign Service National], to ensure that that work was more sustainable. But, I always saw a lot of those programs as being additive to the work that we were doing, ideally.

Q: Particularly now in the current climate with the dismantling of USAID, it's come up before, this idea—and you probably know some of the people who've advocated that democracy programs should be run by an independent organization like NED, and USAID should basically give all its resources to that independent agency to run

democracy programs without the bureaucratic and political overhang of a government agency. So, I'm just curious how you reacted to it while you were at USAID, and in the current climate, whether you think the argument has any more salience than it may have had before.

PAVLOVIC: I mean, the reality of it is that it's NED that's left right now, right? They're the only ones that are actually programming right now, we hope. Unfortunately, I feel like we're always one bad appeals court decision away from oblivion. But, I think—

Q: —but make the argument based on when USAID was at full strength and had elevated democracy, you know, you still had those who would say yes, but it's going to be always compromised by being a government agency subject to policy control from the ambassador, subject to bureaucratic requirements, and that having a more flexible operation that a quasi governmental or non-governmental organization like NED can provide is beneficial in the sector.

PAVLOVIC: Yeah, I see it. I see it both ways. I think it's both—there are two ways of looking at this. I think especially in closed and closing spaces, having an independent organization that exists outside of the embassy and of U.S. policymaking is important, right? I have been in posts where ambassadors have been very active in seeking the veto right over [grants to] the civil society organizations that my office was supporting, for example. In instances like that, I think that NED plays a really, really critical role. There is a very strong argument to be made for continuing to do that, I will be very honest.

At the same time, I think that there are real difficulties with NED's model, right? Again, it's managed from Washington. They're not on the ground, and so I think while there is certainly a very strong argument to be made about the importance of having that independence so that you can make those investments where you might be dealing with an embassy that is much less inclined to support civil society organizations, that could come under fire from a government counterpart. I think that that's a challenge.

At the same time, those grants exist in a way that is disconnected from the rest of the system, right? Our NED colleagues don't have access to country team, right? And so this much larger conversation of civil society grants are one really, really important piece of the puzzle of how are you supporting local actors to pursue long-term positive change in the societies in which they're working, but it's only one tool. Our colleagues were never really engaged with the reform-minded change agents within government or elsewhere that I had access to, both directly because of the fact that I was doing that work, but also indirectly because of the fact that I was talking to my colleagues in the political and economic sections who were talking to people that I didn't even know.

Q: Or even talking to—it gets back to the whole issue of the integrated programming within USAID. I mean, you could have independent programming, and there may be advantages to it, but you're losing what you were arguing for in terms of the integrated programming that came out of several iterations of USAID strategies over 30 years.

PAVLOVIC: Yeah, that's exactly right. That's exactly right. I think maintaining that space to be able to support those change agents, wherever they are, I think is really important. I think the challenge of it, though, above and beyond missing the broader picture of where does that coalition for reform or those networks actually sit, is that you're only touching one piece of the puzzle. I think it's also the case that you are losing the ability to influence the larger discussion around these issues. Again, I think one of the things that I found myself fighting for all the time in the countries in which I was operating was to ensure that my Foreign Service National colleagues, who were the ones that had the connections that understood the dynamics and what change was possible, and who was capable of making that change—I spent a lot of my time relaying what they were telling me because they were not always allowed in the rooms that I was in.

Q: No, that's for sure.

PAVLOVIC: We lose that. We have lost those FSNs, some of them have gotten LNAs [Limited Non-Career Appointments], and they're now sitting at embassies, but I will guarantee you that they are not in the rooms that they were in when USAID existed, and that is to the huge detriment of the U.S. government.

Q: That was certainly my experience, and certainly when I visited you in Serbia and saw the talent that you had there with the FSNs. It was like, how would you understand what's going on in Serbia without the expertise that those folks were bringing to the table. Let me run through a series of what I describe as the critiques that we've heard over the 30 years that DRG has been institutionalized within USAID. One is this old issue of contractors versus grant fees. You can say that's done and covered, but I'm just curious if you had any thoughts about it, how you responded to the conversations about that topic?

PAVLOVIC: It's funny, it brings me back because I feel like we haven't—it's a weird year in which I feel like I haven't had this argument this year. Every single year—

Q: —I used to have it every single lunch I had to go with friends of mine.

PAVLOVIC: The reality of it is that there are—again, this entire idea that we were capable of litigating, or finalizing this argument from Washington was always a fool's errand, right? The reality of it is that there are instances in which—and again, the entire idea that this is something that could be litigated only among DRG folks is also a fool's errand. We were never the ones that were making this decision, our colleagues who were the contracting officers were making these decisions. Frankly, in many instances, you had pressure coming from mission directors and ambassadors in terms of what you were going to do and the degree of control that you needed to have that was making the decision for you.

I think the other thing I would say, and I don't have a lot of time to get into it, is that for me, as somebody that has had the great good fortune of having wonderful working relationships with grantees and with contractors over the course of my career. I still talk to them all the time. I think the thing that got me most excited about all of this work over

the last 10 years that I was with USAID was this reform that we were seeing coming from the side of our contracting officer colleagues to give us more space for adaptive management. And so as a result of that, the decision of having a grant versus having a contract was actually less and less relevant to me because of the fact that I had amazing contracting officers who were able to work with me to give me the space to be able to set an objective and maintain a considerable amount of flexibility to be able to respond to events on the ground. I was able to do that through cooperative agreements, and I was able to do it through contracts because I feel like so much of the argument—again, leaving aside the very parochial concerns, I will be very honest with you, some of our implementing partners on both sides who are making these arguments—the reality of it was that I always, certainly in the last 10 years of working at USAID, I always saw my job as identifying entry points and local change agents and getting resources to them to pursue that change. If that's your objective, in any instance, having the maximum space to be able to do that, and frankly, to identify the partners that really saw their jobs increasingly less as implementing programs and more as facilitating local change, that was what I was looking for, regardless of whether they were a contractor or grantee.

Q: The next question, which obviously you also were heavily involved with, is the local implementers versus the—I'll call them offshore implementers—and again, accepting the proposition that the goal is local change and building up local capacity and accepting that everyone agrees on that, how much do you feel, particularly in the democracy sector itself, the question of direct USAID funding of local organizations should be on the agenda or not? How much does it matter whether we have 7% going to local organizations, or 30% or 40% going to local organizations directly, versus pass-throughs? Was that something that—I mean, obviously it was an issue both the during the Obama administration and during the Biden administration, but I'm just curious, as you reflect on it and as you saw it up close, was that an issue that struck home, or did you think it was a bit beside the point? That we should be focusing on outcomes, results, and the like.

PAVLOVIC: I think that the ultimate goal of local ownership is the end goal and the desired state, and I think that my experience—again, 15 years being locked in rooms with mission directors yelling at me about whether or not we hit the 30% target, right? I'm sorry, the numerical targets were never the way to go about it, ever. They enabled all sorts of ridiculous, bad stuff—that said, I could never come up with a really effective counterargument to how do we hold ourselves accountable for moving in that direction. I did see change over time, and I think that we came a long way—the first targets were set when I was in Ukraine, so that's like 15 years ago now—to now, where I feel like we were getting to a point that we were starting to develop models that were going to enable a larger percentage of our assistance to go to local partners.

I think about a lot of the local works [programming] that I was doing in Serbia, where you had these umbrella grant schemes or network schemes that were enabling us to push more funding in that direction, and we were starting to see a lot of these local partners as actors that we were going to be supporting for the long-term. We were able to enable some of our local partners, for example, to hire MEL [monitoring, evaluation and

learning] expertise, or communications, or all of these things that we knew were going to be important to the long-term viability of these organizations. I think that there was an increasing consensus, certainly among the partners that I was working with, that that was the end state that we were pushing towards, but the reality of it was that forcing everything up front when you had organizations that weren't ready yet for managing that level of financing made it a huge challenge. But, I do think that I was seeing progress over the course of time, but the problem was it was never at the percentage level that leadership back in Washington wanted to have.

Q: I think you and I shared that view back when, and certainly now. Let me ask you—

PAVLOVIC: —but still, I continue to get yelled at about targets to the very, very end.

Q: One of the issues you raised in the context of the strategy and elevating human rights and justice issues—do we create too many subsectors with too many folks, let's say within DRG, basically competing with each other for resources, for staff. Does that create a problem in itself, including for people in the field who are then inundated with, "I'm the transition justice person." "I'm the local governance person." And, it just makes it hard to manage with so many recognized subsectors, with resources and personnel associated with them.

PAVLOVIC: Yeah, I think that's a huge challenge, and I meant to touch on it when we were talking about DRG. I think I was always able to deal well with the Center because I knew most people back there, so if I needed something, I knew who to call. But, the challenge was over time. We kept hiring on subsector and subsector folks, and it would make you crazy. Every single time you'd send a strategy back to Washington, you'd have 22 different comments to resolve, [along the lines of “you didn't mention this thing [issue area].” So, we had a lot of discussions about it, certainly over the tour in which I was in Washington, of how do you effectively enable your foreign service colleagues in the field to be able to take account of this issue, and, frankly, get comfortable with the fact that they're not going to take this forward in all instances. There will be countries in which this is a real issue, where you're going to want to focus your efforts, but you're not going to be able to get every single mission in the world to take on issue X. So, I think that's a challenge.

The other issue that was a massive challenge is the fact that, over time—this certainly happened with respect to the Summit for Democracy—where you had a tremendous amount of resources that were being held back in Washington to take on specific subsectors. I cannot tell you the extent to which I found that problematic, and this was always the fight. The foreign service officers in Washington will always yell at the civil service people for holding resources back in Washington, so you would have to go back to Washington to beg for resources to do something. I never thought that was the right approach.

Q: And the more subsectors you created, the more potential for doing—

PAVLOVIC: —the worse it got. And it was really, really out of control by the end. I think that was the boomerang, the downside to a lot of what happened during the Biden administration was we just had more issue owners with their resources back in Washington, and it just made it miserable for folks in the field to actually try to do their work.

Q: May I ask you to react to a critique that has become more publicized in the last couple of years by certain, let's say, MAGA [Make America Great Again] or right-of-center critics of USAID, which is that we were too often picking winners in our democracy programs. We were supporting particular actors and undermining, in some cases, elected officials who we didn't like because we thought they were corrupt, because we thought they were human rights abusers. But, we were sort of trying to make policy reforms and use our political economy analysis in ways that were unduly interfering in domestic political affairs.

PAVLOVIC: I think that it's always going to be hard to have the conversation with folks that think that we're involved in regime change operations. The reality of it is that any democratic election has a winner and a loser. I think the challenge is that all of that discussion, that this is what we're doing, takes away any agency from the folks on the grounds that are having this fight themselves. I think the reality of it is that all democracy work is political, and what we are doing, trying to do this work on the ground, is driven by an understanding that—again, this is going to frustrate democracy purists because it is an instrumentalist argument that democracies are more peaceful, democracies have stronger economic growth—but the reality of it is that if that is the desired outcome, then you are going to be engaging with civil society actors or reformers within government that have democratic objectives, and if you have undemocratic governments, that's in many cases going to look like regime change. But, this isn't something that I came up with, I'm not coming in with a set of presupposed solutions.

Q: And we should be honest about it.

PAVLOVIC: We should be honest about it.

Q: We do have democracy as a goal. I thought about it a lot when it first came out, and then in the last couple of weeks when I saw how willing this administration was to influence the election in Argentina by just putting \$20 billion on the table, I said, "Okay"—and with no inhibitions other than, "You don't elect him, we're cutting off our assistance." So I now think, okay, maybe I overstated that one. We're coming near the end of the 90 minutes, and I don't want to go too far over, but I do want to give you a chance to comment on anything that you don't think we covered, that you would like to see us have covered, or any other issues that are on your mind.

PAVLOVIC: I'm looking at your questions just to make sure that we hit on everything.

Q: I left off the Reimagining DRG program, again—

PAVLOVIC: I know, I just briefly touched on that.

Q: You're thinking about that, and I'm thinking about that, but that's probably another—

PAVLOVIC: That's another 90 minute conversation.

Q: —lunch conversation before we put something down, maybe together.

PAVLOVIC: We definitely do need to talk about it more. I think about it every single day, and I think that many of the ways in which USAID had started working over the course of the past 10 years in the democracy space, but I think also more generally with the focus on localization—it makes it easier, in a lot of ways, to reimagine what it looks like in the future, and I hope this doesn't come off as me sounding like an apologist for just going back to the way that things used to work because this is not at all what I intend by it. But, I think this focus on deep analysis and understanding what's driving the way that things work on the ground and using that as a basis to identify who those change agents and reformers are, what they look like, and how we support them sets us up for—and the reality of it is that, in many cases, a lot of the folks that we supported over the years are continuing to do this work. And so, I think that we have those local networks that should be the basis of whatever comes next. And I think that a lot of work that you and I were involved in over the course of the past 10 years, of loosening up restrictions and making those partnerships and that support easier, is going to, hopefully in the future, make it easier for us to restart this work in a way that is much more locally driven. I can only hope for that.

Q: Like I said, I think that's a longer conversation.

PAVLOVIC: That's a much longer conversation, but I feel like it's a good note to end on, though, right?

Q: We need to keep thinking about this in the future. Well, this has been, as always since I think I met you back in 2011-12, always educational for me to engage in these conversations with you, and you didn't disappoint me this time. I'm glad we scheduled this, and I really appreciate your taking the time and our having the ability to include what I think is a very unique and well-informed perspective into this democracy page that we're trying to create for reflecting on what USAID has been, so thank you so much, and like I said, we do need to follow up. Okay, anyway, why don't we cut it here?

End of interview