

THE PERSISTENT THREAT OF SHARP POWER TO DEMOCRACY

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We are well into the second decade of an authoritarian resurgence that has reshaped the global landscape. Autocratic powers, led by China and Russia, have become more assertive and ambitious. The authorities in these repressive settings work relentlessly to deny their own people the right to participate in the governments of their countries. They seek to dominate media, education, and the courts to marginalize alternative points of view. Pervasive technologies that were widely thought to offer advantages for greater freedom instead are affording ambitious leaders in Beijing, Moscow, and elsewhere potent new tools of manipulation and control. A global financial system vulnerable to kleptocracy and its networks also favors the autocrats. In crucial and unanticipated ways, the world has become flatter for the authoritarians.

Over a protracted period, the autocrats have tightened the screws at home. Along with other unremittingly repressive regimes—such as Cuba, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—China and Russia also are actively exerting influence beyond their borders and view democratic publics abroad in a manner similar to their own populations: as hostile forces needing to be neutralized or controlled. In today’s interconnected world they have the tools to do so. In an era of globalization, the autocrats’ domestic standards and behaviors do not remain neatly contained within their borders.

As nonmilitary activities falling outside the scope of “hard power,” these influence efforts have been commonly understood as “soft power.” However, this framing is inadequate and has led to a dangerous complacency among democracies. Unlike soft power, which relies on attraction, these corrosive and compromising influence efforts often rely on manipulation and

outward-facing forms of censorship. In 2017, Jessica Ludwig and I first described these influence activities as “sharp power” because they pierce and penetrate the information and political environments of targeted countries in order to “monopolize ideas, suppress alternative narratives, and exploit partner institutions.”¹

Given the new circumstances, a crucial question arises: What happens when repressive powers systematically exert influence in systems and institutions that are central to the functioning of democracy? With a growing body of research available the answer to this question has become clearer. It should be a cause for concern for anyone who would like to see democracy and the ideas that underlie it flourish.

As authoritarian influence has spread, so too have the risks for democracy. Russia’s full-blown attack on Ukraine brought these dangers into sharper relief. Yet democracies have not developed adequate strategies to hold repressive regimes accountable or to address the autocrats’ sophisticated and compromising forms of international influence. The authoritarian mobilization that has taken shape over a protracted period of time is a powerful reminder of the global stakes for democracy that ineluctably have come into view.

Over the past five years, awareness of the sharp-power threat has grown considerably, but the autocrats are adapting. While journalists and civil society are shining light on the problem, transparency alone is insufficient. Most democracies are at best in the early stages of tackling the threats posed by the elite capture, divide-and-conquer tactics, and technological encroachment that are integral to authoritarians’ outward-facing engagement. Free societies must therefore come to grips with the new reality and develop more purposeful means of reversing the authoritarian momentum.

Democratic Complacency

Authoritarian regimes have been waging an active assault on democracy for quite some time. The effects of this battering are now clearly visible. Authorities in countries from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe have launched massive crackdowns, often with impunity. Cooperation and learning among these repressive regimes has been normalized. Anne Applebaum observes that rather than simply dealing with the government in their home capital, in this new environment democratic activists and reformers today in fact must fight multiple autocrats, in multiple countries, part of a phenomenon that she calls “Autocracy, Inc.”²

Free societies’ misguided assumptions about the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy have only worsened the authoritarian challenge. In the wake of the Cold War, Western democracies were convinced that deep engagement with Russia and China—particularly economic integration—would yield clear mutual benefits and encourage meaningful political reform. During this period, the West welcomed the PRC into the international system, believing that doing so would lead it to develop into a “responsible stakeholder.”

But in retrospect, democracies made a crucial error in their interactions with autocracies. Free societies largely put aside their own inherent competitive advantage—the principles of democratic accountability and transparency. By turning a blind eye to the authoritarians’ corrupt practices, succumbing to self-censorship, or otherwise letting the authoritarians set the terms of engagement, democracies and their key institutions ceded much ground. Universities in open societies, for instance, were far too permissive in allowing PRC-affiliated cultural and language centers (known as Confucius Institutes), along with a wide range of other authoritarian-sourced initiatives that might compromise academic integrity on their campuses. Over time, authoritarian regimes buckled down and asserted their own preferences.

The global authoritarian offensive is hardly limited to the repression of individual activists or advocacy groups, however. It is far more ambitious. Leading authoritarian powers are targeting the minds of foreign publics by manipulating key institutions in democracies, including universities, publishers, think tanks, policy institutes, media outlets, and entertainment companies.

Knowledge-sector institutions now confront vexing asymmetries in their relationships with authoritarian powers that leave them open to sharp-power efforts to compromise their integrity. For example, foreign scholars of the PRC, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates have encountered a range of repressive tactics; although they are often subtle, they can also be quite crude. As an early indicator of the determination of Chinese party state to manipulate discourse, at the annual meeting of the European Association of Chinese Studies in 2014 in Braga, Portugal, personnel from Confucius Institute Headquarters seized printed conference programs and returned them with several pages missing, including ones touting a sponsorship from a Taiwanese foundation.³

China and Russia in particular have built out formidable global-media infrastructures, which increasingly collaborate with media enterprises in democracies and autocracies alike in order to disseminate friendly messages about their regimes and block critical coverage. For instance, the Russian authorities have made content from the Russian state-owned news agency Sputnik free to use, whereas Reuters and other international news agencies charge client outlets for their services. Another part of the Kremlin's media strategy includes hidden or indirect pressure through, for example, opaque foreign-media financing or disguised mergers and acquisitions. The Kremlin may even involve foreign news outlets that have no overt connection to Russia.⁴ These methods have enabled Russian authorities to pollute foreign media ecosystems

and manipulate their audiences: While the Kremlin’s messaging around its invasion of Ukraine has largely fallen on deaf ears in the West, it has gained traction in much of the global South.

The CCP’s global information strategy relies on a combination of censorship and propaganda. It now includes, in addition to positive messaging about China and its regime, more bellicose and corrosive narratives targeting perceived enemies.

The application of sharp-power tactics globally has accelerated a worldwide shift toward authoritarianism and away from democracy. But as Edward Lucas observes, free societies are “losing the battle of ideas with authoritarian regimes, not because [democratic] ideas are weak, but because the battlefield is skewed against them.”⁵ To gain the upper hand, democracies need new ways to level the field and respond to the challenge.

A Democratic Counter-Mobilization

Most free societies are still not adequately prepared to meet the multidimensional sharp-power strategies employed by China, Russia, and like-minded states. Authoritarians’ international engagement tends to mimic their domestic governance, often including outward-facing censorship, elite capture, and corrupting practices.

Authoritarian powers’ full-spectrum set of influence tactics can be overwhelming for many countries. Countries lacking a robust civil society, capable news media, and independent China (and Russia) expertise are much more vulnerable. To address the growing sharp-power challenge, democratic societies should:

Roll back secrecy and opacity. Open societies need to more directly and creatively confront the authoritarians’ opacity and secrecy. When engaging with foreign partners, autocrats prefer to work directly (and often exclusively) with executive-branch elites. This state-oriented approach enables a culture of secrecy and corruption. Operating abroad as they do at home, the leaderships

of China, Russia, and other authoritarian powers do not welcome nongovernmental voices in decisionmaking processes, whether in bilateral relations or international organizations.

Democracies should not cede this ground. Open societies need to recommit and intensify their efforts to incorporate nongovernmental voices into key forums, discussions, and decision making processes.

Rebuff elite capture. The more elite capture in a country, the more treacherous the path to safeguarding institutional integrity becomes. But authoritarian cooptation of local elites does not lend itself to garden-variety transparency and accountability initiatives. Going forward, new initiatives must address elite capture where it has already metastasized and prevent its spread to new places.

Defend the freedom of expression. Rewriting the rules of free expression is a central aim of authoritarian powers. Institutions in open societies—including universities, publishers, think tanks, technology firms, media, and entertainment companies—must develop new ways to resist the efforts of authoritarian powers and their surrogates to limit freedoms of expression or association. Given the extent to which authoritarian powers have already cowed even powerful institutions into self-censorship, the need to rebuild eroded free-expression norms is even greater.

Address knowledge asymmetries. The targets of sharp power often lack the necessary knowledge to resist. Scholars, journalists, and publics alike need deeper understandings of how sharp-power tactics and Chinese and Russian influence manifest in local contexts as well as how to bolster transparency and accountable governance. New, interdisciplinary networks should be developed in individual countries to act as “knowledge hubs” for accelerating learning and adaptation.⁶ By cooperating with civil society, media, and watchdog organizations, these hubs

should bridge cognitive gaps among the general public, sharing knowledge beyond narrow communities of analysts.

Compete in the Global Media Sphere. Related to persistent knowledge asymmetries is the lopsided competition that has taken shape in the global media context. China and Russia in particular have developed massive outward-facing media capabilities that are able to curate content to suit the preferences of political leadership in Beijing and Moscow. Narratives projected by these media initiatives increasingly are aligned with each other. Through their lucratively resourced media outlets, the autocrats never shy away from criticizing democracies. In the narrative competition terms, the relentless assailing of democracy and ideas that underlie it by the autocracies has undoubtedly had an impact.

Incentivize transparent and accountable technology. Authoritarian powers are working to reshape the global technological environment to fit their chief priorities: control and surveillance, both inside and outside their borders. For this reason, democracies must accelerate and deepen their efforts to adopt common technological standards that embrace transparency and accountability.

Finally, we should not lose sight of the fact that these ruthless and unaccountable regimes do not hold the moral high ground. In addition to systematically repressing their own people, the regimes in Beijing and Moscow are prosecuting their own forms of modern genocide in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region and Ukraine, respectively. The leaderships in Tehran and Riyadh exercise unspeakably brutal treatment of women, who are courageous and fearless in striving for greater freedoms in the face of their governments' unrelenting repression. Venezuela has become an impoverished cruel, hollowed out state under the leadership of Hugo Chavez and Nicholas Maduro. In unfree systems, the regimes instrumentalize and degrade their own people, whom the

countries' leaderships invariably fear. Democratic societies can become inured to the autocrats' extraordinary depredations, in part due to the neutralizing and conditioning effects of present-day disinformation and propaganda. But deep into the second decade of the global authoritarian resurgence in which unfree regimes are projecting their standards and values into the wider world, policy makers and citizens in free societies must be clear-eyed about what is at stake. Unless democratic societies rise to the challenge by leveraging their inherent competitive advantages—innovation, free expression, openness, and accountability—the sharp-power challenge will continue to mount.

NOTES

¹ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), 13.

² Anne Applebaum, *Autocracy, Inc: How the World's Authoritarians Work Together*, Nineteenth Annual Seymour Martin Lipset Lecture on Democracy in the World, 1 December 2022. <https://www.ned.org/events/nineteenth-lipset-lecture-anne-applebaum-autocracy-inc/>

³ Glenn Tiffert, "The Authoritarian Assault on Knowledge," *Journal of Democracy* 31 (October 2020): 29.

⁴ Edward Lucas, "How Autocrats Undermine Media Freedom," *Journal of Democracy* 33 (January 2022): 131–46.

⁵ Lucas, "How Autocrats Undermine Media Freedom," 144.

⁶ Martin Hála, *A New Invisible Hand: Authoritarian Corrosive Capital and the Repurposing of Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for Democracy, 2020), 10.