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The Authoritarian Threat

THE HIJACKING OF “SOFT POWER”

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Since the end of the Cold War, the democratic West has accorded particular prominence to the idea of integrating nondemocratic regimes into the liberal international order. For political leaders and analysts in the United States and Europe, integration has been a dominant foreign-policy organizing concept, serving as the West’s strategic lodestar over the past quarter-century. The democracies’ central assumption has been that patient engagement with authoritarian states would yield clear mutual benefits. By embracing such regimes and encouraging their integration into the global economic system and key political institutions, Western powers hoped to coax the autocracies toward meaningful political reform, leading them eventually to become more like the democracies. Even the tougher cases for democratization, such as China and Russia, were expected slowly but inevitably to liberalize politically as their economies grew and their middle classes developed.

But in an unanticipated twist, the authoritarian regimes, both large and small, have turned the tables on the democracies. Rather than reforming, most of these repressive regimes have deepened their authoritarianism. And now they are turning it outward. Although the leading authoritarian regimes are today integrated in many ways into the global system, they have not become more like the democracies; rather, they have developed policies and practices aimed at blocking democracy’s advance. Exploiting globalization and the opportunities presented by integration with the West, these states have set out to undermine the very institutions and arenas that welcomed them.

Today, authoritarian regimes are projecting power beyond their borders. They are targeting crucial democratic institutions, including elections and

the media. They use deep economic and business ties to export corrupt practices and insinuate themselves into the politics of democracies, both new and established. They are influencing international public opinion and investing heavily in their own instruments of “soft power” in order to compete with democracy in the realm of ideas.

Through authoritarian learning and by exploiting the opportunities presented by globalization, authoritarian trendsetters have created a modern antidemocratic toolkit that in many ways serves as the mirror image of democratic soft power.

In 2014, the National Endowment for Democracy’s International Forum for Democratic Studies launched a two-year initiative on resurgent authoritarianism, from which this essay and others in this series come. The project found that regimes in countries as diverse as China, Russia, Venezuela, and even archrivals Iran and Saudi Arabia, despite disagree-

ing on many issues, broadly share the objective of containing the spread of democracy. Moreover, these regimes are capitalizing on the benefits of integration to pursue this goal both domestically and internationally.

One area in which the rise of authoritarian power has been highly visible is geopolitics. China has been exerting its influence more forcefully in the South China Sea, for example, flexing its muscles with an island-building spree in the Spratly Islands and generally adopting a more assertive military profile in the region. Russia, although seen by some as enfeebled, has pushed into high gear a policy of disruption: Within a span of eighteen months, it has annexed Crimea, invaded Ukraine, and plowed significant new military resources into the Middle East. Russian airstrikes in Syria, begun in September 2015 on behalf of Bashar al-Assad’s brutal regime, caught the West off guard, as did the Kremlin’s military forays into Crimea and other parts of Ukraine in 2014. Iran, meanwhile, has upped its activities in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon. Augmenting its existing presence in Syria, Iran sent ground troops into the country in October 2015, side by side with Russia in a show of solidarity. Saudi Arabia, for its part, has undertaken a months-long bombing campaign in Yemen in an effort to contest rival Iran in a region beset with power vacuums.

The willingness of these illiberal regimes to use military power is one sign of the changing international environment. But it is their development of so-called soft power that is the most conspicuous aspect of the new authoritarianism. The term *soft power* is a rather uncomfortable fit for these efforts, however, as none measures up to Joseph Nye’s conception of such power that emphasizes states’ capacity to attract others by the legitimacy of their “policies and the values that underlie them.”¹ Even the China model, which has attracted any number of authoritarian governments and even some Western analysts, is fraught with problems. Yet that has not stopped

the leading authoritarian governments from hijacking the concept of soft power as part of a broad assault on democracy and its values.

Through authoritarian learning (for example, by adapting or mimicking democratic forms) and by exploiting the opportunities presented by globalization, authoritarian trendsetters have created a modern antidemocratic toolkit that in many ways serves as the mirror image of democratic soft power. It includes government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs), “zombie” election monitoring, foreign aid and investment, and both traditional- and new-media enterprises.

The leading authoritarian governments have established a wide constellation of regime-friendly GONGOs, including think tanks and policy institutes that operate at home and abroad. Some of these groups are benign, but many operate with the aim of subverting authentic debate, either by spreading regime messages in a nontransparent way or by crowding out authentic voices. “Zombie” election monitoring, which allows authoritarian regimes to manipulate the integrity of the election process, is a related innovation. In terms of aid and investment, China and other authoritarian governments have sunk vast sums into the developing world, enabling recipient governments to sidestep the standards of transparency and accountability required by the established international financial institutions.

Finally, illiberal regimes are scaling up their traditional- and new-media capabilities and broadcasting content to global audiences. On the surface, these enterprises seem like soft-power instruments. But China’s CCTV and Russia’s RT are not the BBC or Deutsche Welle, which operate according to a fundamentally different value system. Because editorial accountability for authoritarian media outlets ultimately rests with the political leadership, the content that they produce is compromised, through either editorial omission or commission. Thus if CCTV reports at all about controversial topics such as the Tiananmen Square Massacre, Tibet, or Taiwan, it is not in a dispassionate or critical way. RT, meanwhile, unfailingly follows the Kremlin line, rationalizing the status quo that the regime seeks to maintain by cynically portraying all systems, whether authoritarian or democratic, as corrupt.

Similarly, the deepening commercial integration of the last two decades has enabled the Chinese and Russian governments to influence political affairs in both young and established democracies. These regimes have identified ways to compromise the values of transparency and accountability and to export corruption to the democracies. For example, under Vladimir Putin, a centerpiece of Russia’s engagement with the West has been the corrupt and exploitative export of hydrocarbons, which has had an impact on Western financial, legal, and political institutions.²

In short, the authoritarian toolkit enables illiberal regimes to project their influence into the democratic space in a variety of ways. At the same time, authoritarian regimes have become adept at muffling voices from the democracies. Over time, Western universities, think tanks, and me-

dia and technology companies operating in China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States have become more integrated commercially with these authoritarian systems. This has sometimes enabled these regimes to coopt their Western partners and induce self-censorship, thereby resetting norms of free expression through what is essentially economic coercion.

In addition, the authoritarians are trying to unmoor the institutions that have served as the glue of the post–Cold War order. Illiberal regimes work together within the regional and international rules-based organizations that have been crucial to the global political framework—the UN, the Organization of American States, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)—in order to neuter their human-rights and democracy components. Meanwhile, authoritarian governments are establishing their own organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union, which are promoting alternative, authoritarian-friendly norms.

In a relatively short period, the leading repressive regimes have forged a formidable infrastructure for challenging the democracies and their values, and a real competition over norms has emerged as the West’s normative power has begun to unravel. As Alexander Cooley observes, leading authoritarian regimes are challenging the notion of universal human rights and propagating instead norms based on “state sovereignty” and security, “civilizational diversity,” and the defense of “traditional values” against liberal democracy. These all enjoy significant backing today. The effects are most visible in the narrowing of the political space for civil society, the shifting missions that regional organizations are embracing, and the growing clout of non-Western powers as international patrons.³

The Worst Get Worse

In the face of this authoritarian mobilization, the democracies have been caught flatfooted. Due in part to complacency but also to the “crisis of confidence” that set in after the 2008–2009 global economic crisis (and has been exacerbated by the crisis of mass migration to Europe that began in 2015), the established democracies so far have had no coherent answer to the authoritarian surge. More troublingly, the West seems to have fallen into a political torpor that contributes to a larger “failure of imagination” in responding to the serious challenges that have emerged in the new, contested environment.⁴ In order to understand the growing challenges to democracy posed by the authoritarian surge, we must examine the evolution of the authoritarian toolkit since the “backlash” against democracy began in the mid-2000s.

At first, the backlash was apparent only in a limited number of countries and was confined largely to the domestic level. In this early phase, authoritarian regimes used legal, regulatory, and informal measures, often restricting freedom of expression and association, to obstruct the

emergence of democratic pluralism. Repression in authoritarian settings tends to exhibit an ebb and flow in which the government's grip is tightened and then, at some point, relaxed. The authoritarian backlash never eased, however. Instead, it has gained momentum and deepened in intensity over the past decade.

Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report bears this out: In each of the past nine years, declines in political rights and civil liberties have outstripped improvements. Notably, a large share of those declines have occurred in countries already deemed Not Free by Freedom House. In other words, countries in the worst category have become even more repressive, sinking further *within* that category. This deepening authoritarianism in already repressive environments has been a crucial driver of the decline in Freedom House ratings often cited as evidence of a "democratic recession."

A big part of this story is found in the two regions that represent centers of authoritarianism: the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In the FSU, rights and freedoms markedly declined in countries such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan between 2006 and 2015. Moreover, in Russia, whose intensifying authoritarianism has implications not just for its neighborhood but for the wider world, political rights and civil liberties worsened significantly during these years. In the MENA region, fifteen of eighteen countries have become less free over the past ten years, and in many cases considerably so. (Tunisia, which has established a nascent democracy, is of course an exception.) Countries such as Bahrain, Iran, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, which were already highly autocratic, have become even more so, especially since the Arab uprisings. Egypt under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is by most accounts even more repressive than it was during the Hosni Mubarak era.

China, with the world's largest population and second-largest economy, ranks among the world's most politically repressive states. On Freedom House's combined 100-point scale⁵ for political rights and civil liberties, China scores a paltry 17, the same as in 2006. Out of 40 possible points for political rights, China scores just 2, an astonishingly low number that reflects the systematic repression and denial of political rights in that country. As in Russia, deepening authoritarianism in an increasingly internationalist China reverberates beyond its borders.

Above all, authoritarian rulers are preoccupied with regime survival, and they study and learn from other authoritarian regimes, both past and present, in order to maintain power. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has scrutinized the collapse of the Soviet system in order to avoid the same fate,⁶ while Vladimir Putin's Kremlin has carefully studied the durability of the Chinese system in the post-Tiananmen period. In the first case, the CCP seeks to draw lessons from Soviet failure; in the second, the post-Soviet Kremlin, like any number of other contemporary authoritarian governments, attempts to glean what it can from China's seeming success at repressing political opposition while growing its economy.

One sign of the priority given to regime security by authoritarian governments is their massive investment in internal security, which, tellingly, can outstrip even military and external-defense budgets. The Chinese and Iranian governments, for example, use public funds to build vast security apparatuses that are devoted to suppressing internal dissent.⁷ Following the Arab uprisings in 2011, Saudi Arabia increased the staff of its already amply manned interior ministry by sixty thousand.⁸ These regimes have made the prevention of domestic dissent a cornerstone of their national (read “regime”) security strategy.

Thwarting “Color Revolutions”

In countries where basic democratic rights are routinely denied, the menace of a “color revolution” has become the central organizing concept around which authoritarian regimes formulate their security and propaganda strategies. For example, the May 2014 Moscow Conference on International Security, sponsored by Russia’s defense ministry, focused on the impact of popular protest—specifically color revolutions—on international security. Speakers included Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu and foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. Senior officials from nondemocracies such as China, Egypt, Iran, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates attended the conference, along with officials from Burma, a country in the midst of a troubled transition. The Russian speakers warned attendees that “color revolutions are a new form of warfare invented by Western governments seeking to remove independently-minded national governments in favor of ones controlled by the West.”⁹

In September 2015, Russia, Belarus, and EU-aspirant Serbia took part in a military-training exercise dubbed Slavic Brotherhood 2015, held in Novorossiysk, Russia. General Valeriy Gerasimov, head of Russia’s General Staff, explained that such exercises were needed because color revolutions are “a form of armed struggle that must be met by military force.” According to Gerasimov, interpreting color revolutions as a type of warfare allows for military-training adjustments and calls for the armed forces to devise ways to thwart such popular movements.¹⁰ Through training exercises such as Slavic Brotherhood 2015, Russia and other authoritarian states are developing the hard-power capacity to contain democratic development and any form of organized dissent.

China has likewise devoted considerable attention to the concept of color revolutions. On 13 June 2015, for example, the *People’s Daily*, a CCP mouthpiece, published five scholarly articles exploring the roots of color revolutions and what China might learn from the experience of the affected nations. The CCP regime believes that the United States had a hand in these protest movements and that NGOs helped to foment them. China’s official military strategy now states that “anti-China forces have never given up their attempt to instigate a ‘color revolution’ in this

country.”¹¹ By assigning responsibility for domestic dissent to external forces, these governments create a rationale for internationalizing their strategy of “democracy containment.”

These kinds of cross-national military and security exercises show the extraordinary lengths to which these regimes and others are going to stifle political pluralism. This is part of a larger effort at authoritarian learning that has also helped authoritarians to craft more sophisticated methods for controlling civil society, the business community, and political opposition.

Authoritarian learning also has played a visible role in shaping how repressive regimes manage and censor the Internet, which they see as a growing threat. China is a leader in this regard, demonstrating that it is possible to expand Internet access—some 640 million people are now online in China—while maintaining effective control over political content. The authorities in Beijing, like illiberal governments in many other capitals, exploit the globalization of commerce to use the most modern technology available on the world market, often provided by Western firms, to censor the Internet. Facing this degree of online use and the challenge that it poses to the regime’s ability to dominate key political narratives, the CCP has undertaken a vast, multilayered set of measures to maintain control.¹²

The CCP’s censorship measures have also had a demonstration effect abroad. Other countries—both authoritarian and semi-authoritarian—see the “success” of Beijing’s approach to controlling the Internet and other information and communications technologies and realize that systematic online censorship can be achieved. Over time, other countries have learned by observation or direct assistance from China, and have adapted methods of Internet repression to their own contexts.

In September 2013, Chinese authorities, citing the need to crack down on what they termed “online rumors,” issued new guidelines for social media, which serve as vital popular forums for discussing politics. Under the new rules, Internet users who post defamatory comments that are seen by 5,000 users or reposted more than 500 times could face up to three years in jail. Since its adoption, this measure has effectively suppressed the most-followed civic voices in China on social media. The Kremlin clearly took notice, because less than a year later, in August 2014, it put into effect a new set of regulations similar to the Chinese guidelines. Russia’s “blogger law” requires any person whose online presence draws more than 3,000 daily readers to register, disclose personal information, and submit to the same regulations as mass media.

Authoritarian regimes also are learning from each other how to choke off independent civil society. In recent years, trendsetting authoritarian regimes have adopted a cascade of laws restricting the civil society sector, and other countries, including some democracies, have followed suit.¹³ Troublingly, the intensive learning that has taken place at the domestic level also has been crucial to the development of the authoritarians’ methods for obstructing democracy beyond their borders. In other

words, the most influential authoritarian regimes, Russia and China foremost among them, have served as incubators for the innovation of antidemocratic techniques that are now applied internationally. By and large, observers in the democracies have failed to appreciate this.

The Challenge from “Zombie” Democracy

Through experimentation and learning, authoritarian regimes have refined their techniques of manipulation at the domestic level. By constructing fake political parties, phony social movements, and state-controlled media enterprises that appear in many ways to be like those of their democratic counterparts, autocrats simulate democratic institutions as a way of preventing authentic democracy from taking root.

Authoritarian regimes have coupled their harsh crackdown on independent NGOs, for example, with a scaling up of government-backed GONGOs, entities that Moisés Naím describes as employing the “practices of democracy to subtly undermine democracy.”¹⁴ Beijing has moved aggressively to fill the public space with GONGOs and, as part of its larger ambitions, seeks to develop an array of state-backed think tanks. On 27 October 2014, at the sixth meeting of the Leading Group for Overall Reform, Chinese president Xi Jinping, who heads the group, called for the creation of a new set of CCP-directed think tanks:

Building a new type of think tank with Chinese characteristics is an important and pressing mission. It should be targeted [at] promoting scientific and democratic decision making, promoting modernization of the country’s governing system and ability, as well as strengthening China’s soft power.¹⁵

The CCP already has taken the GONGO concept one step further, requiring all domestic cultural, economic, and social organizations to establish Party-organized groups (sometimes called “PONGOs”), which will allow the authorities to assert even greater control in this sphere.¹⁶

As authoritarian “zombie” democracy has migrated from the domestic to the international level, China’s state-backed GONGOs increasingly insinuate themselves into regional and supranational rules-based organizations. At sessions of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a component of the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that reviews human rights in all UN member states, Beijing-aligned “nongovernmental” organizations take part in UN meetings to push the line of Chinese authorities and harass human-rights activists who criticize the Chinese government in this forum.

In October 2013, several Chinese GONGOs descended on Geneva as China’s rights record was under review by the UNHRC. At such UPR sessions, representatives of GONGOs, sometimes in coordination with Chinese diplomats, use a variety of tactics to intimidate activists, taking unauthorized photos of them, and filling up meeting halls with regime representatives to

drown out accusations of rights abuses. According to a 2015 Reuters investigation, 47 NGOs from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau are authorized to participate in UNHRC meetings. Of these, at least 34 are GONGOs, either under the authority of Chinese government ministries or CCP bodies, or headed by a current or retired government or Party official.¹⁷

In what has become an annual ritual at the OSCE's Human Dimension Implementation Meetings (HDIMs) in Warsaw, Poland, GONGOs from countries such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia take part in proceedings that were intended to allow authentic civil society groups to voice their views about human rights and democracy in their countries.¹⁸ In 2014, Kremlin-backed GONGOs stayed true to form and sought to confuse the discussion about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In September 2015, Azerbaijani GONGOs actively confronted independent Azerbaijani civil society participants and tried to muddy the waters regarding the country's rights record.

Similarly, the Cuban and Venezuelan governments brought GONGOs to the April 2015 Summit of the Americas in Panama, with the aim of presenting regime-backed groups as authentic civil society members. Many of these groups claim to be autonomous, yet they dutifully advocated the positions of their countries' governments.

Meanwhile, apart from influencing the proceedings of regional organizations, Russia sinks extensive resources into GONGOs in countries on its periphery and beyond. Through organizations such as Russky Mir and the Foundation for Defense of Rights of Compatriots Abroad, the Kremlin funds many initiatives of this kind. The Baltic states endure an especially heavy dose of Russian "soft power," as Kremlin-supported GONGOs try to influence the public debate and shape the views of these societies, which are home to large ethnic-Russian communities.

According to a 2015 report, the investigative-journalism initiative Re:Baltica found in 2013 that Russky Mir was making grants to support the promotion of "Russian language and culture" in the Baltic states, while the smaller Foundation for Defense of Rights of Compatriots Abroad funded "filmmakers that support and promote" the Russian version of twentieth-century history; "researchers who accuse the Baltic states and Ukraine of human rights violations"; ethnic Russians "who were tried [for] participating in the 2007 riots in Tallinn," Estonia's capital; and "active participants of the deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia" during and after World War II.¹⁹ While the Kremlin ruthlessly represses the activities of independent NGOs in Russia, beyond its borders the Russian authorities eagerly exploit the open space of the democracies, providing financial and political support to Kremlin-friendly GONGOs that operate unhindered in these democratic settings.

Authoritarian regimes also have begun using methods of election manipulation at the international level, supporting faux monitoring groups that endorse fraudulent elections with the aim of clouding the assessments

made by established monitoring organizations. These “zombie” monitors have proliferated widely. Two authoritarian-led initiatives, the Commonwealth of Independent States Election Monitoring Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, have sent purported monitors to recent polls across Eurasia. In October 2013, Azerbaijan’s government brought in zombie monitors from abroad to sanctify its patently manipulated presidential election. A host of ersatz monitoring organizations, with names such as the Observer Mission of the Standing Conference of Political Parties of Latin America and the Caribbean and the Observer Mission of the NGO Forum of the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation, along with a motley group of fringe politicians from Europe, praised this Alice in Wonderland–like pseudo-election event.

A similar spectacle occurred in Crimea during a “referendum” held in March 2014 after Russia’s “little green men” (as some Crimean locals called the Russian troops whose presence the Kremlin denied) had invaded the peninsula. During this pseudo-referendum, a mix of radical political figures who were brought to Crimea despite lacking credentials for authentic election monitoring appeared in Russian-government media outlets to present findings that went in lockstep with those of the Kremlin. Even China, a country that itself does not hold real elections, has sent observers to recent elections in Burma and Zimbabwe.

The Battle over Information

The ideas and messages of zombie NGOs and election monitors are disseminated through state-backed media, which serve as instruments for manipulating audiences and suppressing democratic content. At home, the authoritarians can deploy a potent combination of censorship and propaganda, allowing them to dominate the media space and create an unchallenged alternate reality for their audiences. Beijing, Moscow, and Riyadh spare little expense to keep alternative ideas and information from entering mainstream political discussion. In a perfect example of the studious authoritarian avoidance of sensitive domestic issues, China’s state-run media did not report at all on the country’s massive stock-market collapse in August 2015.²⁰

Abroad, however, Beijing and Moscow cannot impose censorship in the same way they do at home; instead, they use other techniques adapted from domestic experience and apply them to the international arena. In the online realm, for example, these regimes rely on trolls, cyberattacks, and disinformation to achieve their objectives. While these illiberal governments are committed to preventing the competition of ideas within their borders, they have taken big steps to make certain that their own point of view is heard abroad. The best-resourced among them have built formidable media outlets that enable them to project their messages into the global marketplace of ideas.

At home, these regimes repress domestic media and increasingly obstruct the work of Western news organizations, thereby cutting off one of the few remaining arteries for transmitting information on these politically closed countries. By manipulating the granting of visas and harassing and even jailing journalists (as in the case of *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian in Iran), these regimes set the terms of engagement. At the same time, authoritarian media outlets have exploited the openness of democracies by increasing their presence and activities in a number of democratic countries. Telesur, supported by Venezuela and several other countries, operates in Spanish-speaking Latin America. China's CCTV and Russia's RT have a large and growing presence in the United States; both have open access to dozens of cable and satellite systems in the United States and around the world for broadcasting their state-backed content.

CCTV offers programs in Arabic, French, Russian, and Spanish, while China's state news agency, Xinhua, is expanding worldwide. CCTV America's Washington headquarters employs about thirty journalists producing Mandarin-language content and more than a hundred producing English-language content. CCTV also has broadcasting facilities in New York and Los Angeles. China's media presence in the developing world is growing: It has twelve bureaus in Latin America and has built an enormous media foothold in sub-Saharan Africa.

In November 2015, it came to light that China Radio International (CRI), Beijing's state-run radio network, is operating as a hidden hand behind a global web of stations on which the Chinese government controls much of the content. According to a Reuters investigation, 33 stations in 14 countries "primarily broadcast content created or supplied by CRI or by media companies it controls in the United States, Australia, and Europe." As part of this elaborate Chinese-government effort to exploit the open media space, more than a dozen stations across the United States operate as part of the CCP's "borrowed boat" approach, in which existing media outlets in foreign countries are used to project China's messages.²¹

Beijing devotes elaborate efforts to limiting foreign reporting that it deems unfavorable. Over the past two decades, the Chinese government has developed tools to extend information controls to media outlets based outside China. In many cases, Chinese officials directly impede independent reporting by media based abroad. More prevalent, however, and often more effective are methods of control that subtly induce self-censorship or inspire media owners, advertisers, and other international actors to take action on the CCP's behalf.²²

Like CCTV, Russia's RT has a Washington, D.C., headquarters and broadcast facilities in New York, Miami, and Los Angeles. State or state-friendly media in Russia—Life News, NTV, Channel One Russia, and Russia 24—disseminate not just the Kremlin's narratives but also outright fakery to domestic audiences and those in the Russian-speaking space.

These outlets spread the same stories via social media as well. RT, meanwhile, pushes this manipulated content out to international audiences.

In addition to its English-language broadcasts, Russia's state media devote substantial attention to reaching the Balkans, Latin America, and the Middle East. Russia, like China and Iran, sees an opportunity to exploit the information space in the Balkans, where the democracies' already limited media presence is shrinking. A large part of Russia's editorial efforts, along with those of other authoritarian regimes, are aimed at assailing the West, distorting perceptions of democracy, and tarnishing the image of the United States and the EU. To the extent that these regimes have agreed on any ideology, it is anti-Americanism. This focus is best understood as a reflection of the absence of a positive ideology or vision of their own.

For a long time, the West did not worry about authoritarian international media enterprises. Over time, however, it has become clear that outlets such as CCTV and RT are able to exert real influence. Although it may be comforting to think that people in the democracies have a natural resistance to foreign propaganda, this is not always the case. One need only look at how warped and false arguments about Russia's invasion of Ukraine snaked their way into the debate in the United States and Europe.²³

Authoritarian-backed media have become intertwined with the world of normal news, especially online. Western news outlets today are picking up key narratives pushed by Russian state media. Slick websites with phony news and Kremlin spins appear in the new democracies of Central Europe. In today's helter-skelter, fragmented media world, it is much easier for authoritarian governments to manipulate the global understanding of important issues, making it harder to distinguish between authentic and phony information.

Responding to Authoritarian Internationalism

A renewed struggle between democracy and authoritarianism has emerged. The decade-long democratic decline reported by Freedom House has been most dramatic within the ranks of already authoritarian regimes, which have become even more repressive. At the same time, the most influential among them—China, Russia, and Iran—have become more internationalist. In doing so, they have found ways to exploit integration and to broaden their influence in the democratic world. Through the development of the antidemocratic toolkit of simulated NGOs, think tanks, election monitors, and news media, the autocrats are actively seeking to undermine democracy from within.

Increasingly, these regimes show solidarity and coordination with one another, at least when it comes to contesting and containing democracy and the ideas central to it. Through this more internationalist approach and authoritarian learning, China, Russia, Iran, and other illiberal regimes have developed instruments to counter the democratic West's soft power. But

the power that the authoritarians are exerting is not soft power as customarily understood. Indeed, the application of the term *soft power*—a benign concept generally applied to efforts made to bolster a country's image, contribute to open debate, and win friends and allies—to the ideas-related efforts of the authoritarians is problematic. What the authoritarian regimes are practicing is instead a more malign mirror image of soft power.

This misunderstanding has led observers in the West to assume that the authoritarians have established their international media outlets (CCTV, RT, and Iran's Press TV, for example) in order to build prestige and gain respect from the outside world—that is, to win hearts and minds. But this is a fundamental misapprehension. As China, Russia, and Iran have spent vast and increasing sums on media and other tools to exert international influence, the image of all three countries has remained very low in the West, and in some cases is sinking even lower.²⁴ Their principal aim is not to promote authoritarianism, but rather to contain the spread of democracy and reshape the norms of the international order. It will be increasingly important for observers in the West to understand the alternative (and more malevolent) explanation for these massive influence initiatives, because as Peter Pomerantsev observes, “illiberal regimes across the world are adopting similar strategies and uniting to create global networks of pseudorealities.”²⁵

Yet so far the democracies, whether out of complacency or willful ignorance, have not taken seriously the prospect that these emboldened illiberal powers could reshape the undefended post-Cold War liberal order. The challenge is particularly vexing because the authoritarians have turned integration, jiu jitsu-like, against the democracies. This unexpected twist requires some fresh and serious thinking about how the democratic world should respond to the growing authoritarian challenge.

Any such renewed thinking will first require dispensing with the false framing of this issue as a choice between shunning or engaging authoritarian regimes. Most of them are already thoroughly integrated into the international system, making some kind of engagement unavoidable. It is the *nature* of the democracies' engagement that must be rethought. The established democracies must pursue a more nimble and principled approach that takes into account the new environment in which authoritarian regimes are seeking to undermine democratic institutions and values.

The democracies need to renew and refresh their commitment to democratic institutions, and to take steps to stop the authoritarians from hollowing out the most important regional and global rules-based organizations. As China, Russia, and Iran scale up their media presence in places such as the Balkans, Central Europe, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa, so too should the United States and European democracies instead of scaling back as they have been doing. Moreover, the democratic states need to upgrade and modernize their international media capacity so that they can compete and flourish in this new and contested environment.

The democracies must pursue democratic learning—innovation by civil society but also renewal of commitment from democratic governments—with the same vigor that the authoritarians devote to their pursuit of authoritarian learning. If the democracies instead opt to pursue a reactive, status-quo policy that allows the authoritarians to keep the initiative, we can expect the grim prospect of an even greater erosion of democratic space in the years to come.

NOTES

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1. Joseph S. Nye Jr., “The Decline of America’s Soft Power: Why Washington Should Worry,” *Foreign Affairs* 83 (May–June 2004): 16–20.

2. Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, “The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money,” special report presented by *The Interpreter* (a project of the Institute of Modern Russia, New York), 2014.

3. Alexander Cooley, “Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms,” *Journal of Democracy* 26 (July 2015): 49–63.

4. Christopher Walker, “The West’s Failure of Imagination,” *Wall Street Journal*, 3 August 2015.

5. Freedom House rates countries as Free (1–2.5), Partly Free (3–5), or Not Free (5.5–7) based on their averaged combined scores for political rights and civil liberties, which in turn are based on a 40-point scale and a 60-point scale, respectively, that combine to make a 100-point scale. The declines of the past nine years are based on these more granular subdata rather than the overarching categories of Free, Partly Free, and Not Free, whose composition has not changed substantially. See *Freedom in the World* reports beginning in 2008 and “Freedom in the World: Aggregate and Subcategory Scores,” <https://freedom-house.org/report/freedom-world-aggregate-and-subcategory-scores>.

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