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SHARP

POWER

Rising

Authoritarian Influence

From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power'

Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World

Over the past decade, China and Russia have spent billions of dollars to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world, employing a diverse toolkit that includes thousands of people-to-people exchanges, wide-ranging cultural activities, educational programs, and the development of media enterprises and information initiatives with global reach. As memory of the Cold War era receded, analysts, journalists, and policymakers in the democracies came to see authoritarian influence efforts through the familiar lens of “soft power.” But some of the most visible authoritarian influence techniques used by countries such as **China and Russia, while not “hard” in the openly coercive sense, are not really “soft” either.**

Contrary to some prevailing analysis, the attempt by Beijing and Moscow to wield influence through initiatives in the spheres of media, culture, think tanks, and academia is neither a “charm offensive” nor an effort to “win hearts and minds,” the common frame of reference for “soft power” efforts. **This authoritarian influence is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on distraction and manipulation.** These ambitious authoritarian regimes, which systematically suppress political pluralism and free expression at home, are increasingly seeking to apply similar principles internationally to secure their interests.

We are in need of a new vocabulary for this phenomenon. **What we have to date understood as authoritarian “soft power” is better categorized as “sharp power” that pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries.** In the new competition that is under way between autocratic and democratic states, the repressive regimes’ “sharp power” techniques should be seen as the tip of their dagger—or indeed as their syringe.

Key Context

Exploiting a Glaring Asymmetry: Critical to the headway made by authoritarian regimes has been their exploitation of a glaring asymmetry: In an era of hyperglobalization, Russia and China have raised barriers to external political and cultural influence at home while simultaneously taking advantage of the openness of democratic systems abroad.

A Widening Scope of Authoritarian Influence: This study examined four countries (Argentina, Peru, Poland, and Slovakia) in two regions (Latin America and Central Europe), but similar forms of Russian and Chinese “sharp power” are visible in a growing number of democracies around the world.

A Particular Threat to Vulnerable Democracies: While the leading authoritarian regimes’ ambitions have gone global, a subset of countries where democratic roots remain shallow are especially vulnerable to their influence efforts. Those in Latin America and Central Europe make attractive targets due to their proximity and strategic value to the established democracies of North America and Western Europe.

The Implications of Authoritarian “Sharp Power”

Taken separately, authoritarian influence efforts in particular countries may seem fairly harmless or ineffectual. However, when the seemingly disparate activities of Russia and China around the world are added together, a far more disturbing picture emerges.

This report suggests that even exchange-related activities backed by authoritarian governments should be approached with greater skepticism. Although some of these initiatives may appear to advance admirable goals, many are designed to promote a particular political narrative, which in turn creates favorable conditions for authoritarian regimes.

While there are differences in the shape and tone of the Chinese and Russian approaches, both stem from an ideological model that privileges state power over individual liberty and is fundamentally hostile to free expression, open debate, and independent thought. At the same time, both Beijing and Moscow clearly take advantage of the openness of democratic systems.

The following are key steps that can be taken to address the malign efforts by Russia and China to influence and manipulate democracies:

Address the shortage of information on China and Russia. In the four democracies examined, information concerning the Chinese political system and its foreign policy strategies tends to be extremely limited. There are few journalists, editors, and policy professionals who possess a deep understanding of China and can share their knowledge with the rest of their societies. The same holds true for Russia in places such as Latin America, though knowledge of today’s Russia is stronger in Central Europe.

Unmask authoritarian influence. Chinese and Russian sharp power efforts rely in large part on camouflage—disguising state-directed projects as the work of commercial media or grassroots associations, for example, or using local actors as conduits for foreign propaganda and tools of foreign manipulation. To counteract these efforts at misdirection, observers in democracies should put them under the spotlight and analyze them in a comprehensive manner.

Inoculate democratic societies against malign authoritarian influence. Once the nature and techniques of authoritarian influence efforts are exposed, democracies should build up their internal defenses. Authoritarian initiatives are directed at cultivating relationships with the political elites, thought leaders, and other information gatekeepers of democratic societies. Moscow and Beijing aim to get inside democratic systems in order to win supporters and to neutralize criticism of their authoritarian regimes.

Reaffirm support for democratic values and ideals. If one goal of authoritarian sharp power is to legitimize illiberal forms of government, then it is effective only to the extent that democracies and their citizens lose sight of their own principles. Top leaders in the democracies must speak out clearly and consistently on behalf of democratic ideals and put down clear markers regarding acceptable standards of democratic behavior.

Reconceptualize ‘soft power.’ Finally, journalists, think tank analysts, and other policy elites need to recognize authoritarian influence efforts in the realm of ideas for what they are: corrosive and subversive “sharp power” instruments that do real damage to the targeted democratic societies. The conceptual vocabulary that has been used since the Cold War’s end no longer seems adequate to the contemporary situation.



From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power'

By Christopher Walker
and Jessica Ludwig

Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World

'Soft Power' in Contemporary Perspective

In his report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2007, then president Hu Jintao laid down a marker that would propel to new heights his country's investment in what is commonly referred to as "soft power." Hu said at the time:

We must keep to the orientation of [an] advanced socialist culture, bring about a new upsurge in socialist cultural development, stimulate the cultural creativity of the whole nation, and enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests, enrich the cultural life in Chinese society and inspire the enthusiasm of the people for progress.¹

In the decade since Hu's exhortation, China has spent tens of billions of dollars to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world, employing a diverse toolkit that includes, but is not limited to, thousands of people-to-people exchanges, wide-ranging cultural activities, educational programs (most notably the ever-expanding network of controversial Confucius Institutes), and the development of media enterprises with global reach.

During roughly the same period, the Russian government accelerated its own efforts in this sphere. In the mid-2000s, the Kremlin launched the global television network Russia Today (since rebranded as the more unassuming "RT"), built up its capacity to manipulate content online, increased its support for state-affiliated policy institutes, and more generally cultivated a web of influence activities—both on and offline—designed to alter international views to its advantage.

At the outset, many observers in major democracies breezily dismissed Russian and Chinese government efforts to build more modern and sophisticated tools of international influence. The authoritarians' television and online initiatives, whose programming and editorial lines were at first stilted or disjointed, were seen as autocratic vanity projects or otherwise not worthy of serious consideration. To one degree or another, these governments struggled to “tell their story” in ways that would appeal to the world. It would require extraordinary editorial gymnastics and creativity to overcome the evident features of their systems: entrenched kleptocracy, massive environmental problems, institutionalized censorship, deepening economic inequality, and harsh political repression that remains fundamental to governance in both settings.

Exploiting a Glaring Asymmetry

But the dismissiveness of skeptics in the democracies led to a dangerous complacency, allowing the authoritarians, through trial and error, to refine their existing efforts and develop a much more powerful array of influence techniques suitable for a modern environment. Critical to their success has been their exploitation of a glaring asymmetry: In an era of hyperglobalization, the regimes in Russia and China have raised barriers to external political and cultural influence at home while simultaneously preying upon the openness of democratic systems abroad.

The adjustments made by the authorities in Moscow and Beijing have been gradual but systematic in nature. Russian officials, for their part, determined that they did not need to convince the world that their autocratic system was appealing in its own right. Instead, they realized that they could achieve their objectives by making democracy appear to be relatively less attractive. Russian disinformation efforts have since constituted a relentless, multidimensional attack on the prestige of democracies—the United States and leading European Union countries especially—and on the ideas underlying democratic systems.²

Meanwhile, as China has dramatically expanded its economic interests and business footprint around the globe, its government has focused its influence initiatives on masking its policies and suppressing, to the extent possible, any voices beyond China's borders that are critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).³ Its techniques include both co-optation and manipulation, and they are applied to targets in the media, academia, and the policy community. They seek to permeate institutions in democratic states that might draw attention or raise obstacles to CCP interests, creating disincentives for any such resistance.

While there are differences in the shape and tone of the Chinese and Russian approaches, both stem from an ideological model that privileges state power over individual liberty and is fundamentally hostile to free expression, open debate, and independent thought.

The decision makers in Beijing and Moscow clearly have the political will and the resources to build up and implement their influence efforts. By comparison, the United States and other leading democracies seem to have withdrawn from competition in the ideas sphere. They have been slow to shake off the long-standing assumption—in vogue from the end of the Cold War until the mid-2000s—that unbridled integration with repressive regimes would inevitably change them for the better, without any harmful effects on the democracies themselves. But as globalization accelerated and integration deepened over the past decade, the authoritarians survived, and their ability to penetrate the political and media space of democracies has become progressively stronger.⁴ The authoritarian initiatives themselves are truly global in scope, turning up in democratic countries on every continent.

The Particular Threat to Vulnerable Democracies

While the leading authoritarian regimes' ambitions have gone global, a subset of countries where democratic roots remain shallow are especially vulnerable to their influence efforts. Those in Latin America and Central Europe also make attractive targets due to their proximity and strategic value to the established democracies of North America and Western Europe.

Given the troubling implications of the Chinese and Russian projects, the International Forum for Democratic Studies, in cooperation with several leading think tanks, undertook an initiative to closely examine and inventory the instruments of authoritarian influence in vulnerable democracies. The think tanks carried out on-the-ground research and analysis in Slovakia (Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava), Poland (Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw), and Argentina and Peru (The Center for the Opening and Development of Latin America, Buenos Aires).

These powerful and determined authoritarian regimes, which systematically suppress political pluralism and free expression in order to maintain power at home, are increasingly applying the same principles internationally to secure their interests.

This initiative focused on the dimensions of Chinese and Russian authoritarian influence that in recent years have become especially visible, but have been understudied in the context of democratic societies: cultural and education-related activities; think tank and policy-relevant engagement; and the development of media platforms that can disseminate information globally. Such efforts are typically understood in the familiar context of “soft power.” They represent, however, only a portion of a far larger iceberg of influence activity undertaken by the Russian and Chinese governments.

The findings of the think tanks are the focus of this report, which describes how Russia and China alike are investing resources in the media, think tank, cultural, and university sectors, through either overt programmatic support or less transparent means. The authoritarians' efforts in these areas are of a piece with their broader influence initiatives, and more established democracies would be wise to draw lessons from the four countries assessed here, as the same antidemocratic techniques are now being applied around the world.

The think tanks' research raises serious questions concerning the democratic community's understanding of the threat to date. Contrary to some prevailing analysis, the influence wielded by Russia and China through initiatives in the spheres of media, academia, culture, and think tanks is not a “charm offensive,” nor is it an effort to “share alternative ideas” or “broaden the debate.” It is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on manipulation and distraction. These powerful and determined authoritarian regimes, which systematically suppress political pluralism and free expression in order to maintain power at home, are increasingly applying the same principles internationally to secure their interests.

Nevertheless, the underlying logic of the authoritarians' wide-ranging engagement in the democracies' public spheres remains murky to many. Why do the world's leading antidemocratic regimes devote vast material resources and political energy to participating in the ideas space of the democratic world? This report seeks to shed light on that question.

Methodology

This report represents a collaborative effort undertaken by the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies and three think tank partners based in Poland, Slovakia, and Argentina to document and analyze the influence activities of two trendsetting authoritarian states—Russia and China—in young democracies. The Center for the Opening and Development of Latin America (Argentina), the Institute of Public Affairs (Poland), and the Institute for Public Affairs (Slovakia) are members of the Forum's global think tank network, the Network of Democracy Research Institutes.

In order to understand how authoritarian regimes are leveraging and repurposing traditional tools of “soft power” for what we believe is more appropriately understood as corrosive “sharp power,” the three think tanks and their lead researchers conducted a comprehensive on-the-ground inventory of activities carried out by the Chinese and Russian governments or their surrogates in four specific spheres: (1) media, (2) academia, (3) culture, and (4) the think tank and policy communities. These sectors were selected for analysis due to their critical role in shaping perceptions and public opinion in democratic societies. The researchers employed four principal methods to conduct their inventories:

- Aggregating and analyzing prior research done by local scholars, journalists, and think tanks
- Qualitative interviews with country-based analysts, journalists, academics, students, university administrators, and counterparts in the policy community
- Surveying themes covered in print and online media, as well as in social media
- Examining the topics of events and projects organized by cultural institutions, universities, and research institutions based in each country

By undertaking a cross-regional comparative approach, this report seeks to explain how the Chinese and Russian regimes project and exert influence across varied democratic settings. Latin America and Central Europe were identified as regions in which both China and Russia have sought to develop a presence and invested significant resources. The four case countries—Peru, Argentina, Poland, and Slovakia—were selected in light of their status as young democracies that are classified as “Free” according to Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* rating system (receiving a rating of 1 to 2.5 on a scale of 1 to 7).

The International Forum convened two meetings with the lead researchers in Washington, DC, in May 2016 and January 2017 to discuss the scope of the think tanks' inventory efforts, share interim findings and analysis, and solicit input from Latin American and Central European regional experts, as well as analysts familiar with Chinese and Russian foreign policy interests in those two regions. In addition, several think tank researchers who study Chinese and Russian influence strategies in other democratic states participated in the January 2017 gathering to provide further comparative perspectives on how these efforts may impact democratic societies.

The Unanticipated Threat from Authoritarian Regimes

Analysts, journalists, and policymakers in the democracies have tended to view authoritarian influence efforts through the familiar lens of “soft power.” According to Joseph Nye's original definition,⁵ a country's “hard power” is based on coercion, largely a function of its military or

economic might, whereas “soft power” is based on attraction, arising from the positive appeal of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies. The regimes in Moscow and Beijing surely are seeking to shape public perceptions, sentiments, and opinions overseas to an extent that simply would not have been possible a decade or more ago. With the explosive growth of the internet and social media, and the integration of authoritarian information outlets into the media spaces of democracies, the opportunities for exerting influence are far greater today than at any time in the recent past.

But those who interpret these efforts as a way for Moscow and Beijing to boost their countries’ “soft power” appeal may be missing the mark, and risk perpetuating a false sense of security. After all, if the aim of the authoritarians’ efforts is to improve their international image, and Russia and China do not in fact enjoy an improved image in the democracies,⁶ then it stands to reason that their elaborate initiatives must not be working.⁷ And even if they were, there would be no obvious or direct harm to democratic states.

Unfortunately, authoritarian regimes view the use of such power overseas and the notion of success in world politics in an entirely different way, one that cannot be divorced from the political values by which they govern at home. As the essays in this report point out, they are not engaged in “public diplomacy” as democracies would understand it. Instead, they appear to be pursuing more malign objectives, often associated with new forms of outwardly directed censorship and information control, which are directly at odds with the benign conception of “soft power.”

A clearer picture of these regimes’ intent can be gleaned from their domestic political and media landscapes. Beijing and Moscow have methodically suppressed genuine dissent, smeared or silenced political opponents, inundated their citizens with propagandistic content, and deftly co-opted independent voices and institutions—all while seeking to maintain a deceptive appearance of pluralism, openness, and modernity. In fact, in recent years the realm of ideas in the two authoritarian behemoths has been steadily monopolized by the state and its surrogates.

Both regimes have redefined censorship for a twenty-first century context. Their systems allow a considerable volume and diversity of information, but precious little objectivity or pluralism when it comes to news coverage and political ideas. The dazzling variety of content available to consumers helps disguise the reality that the paramount authorities in these countries brook no dissent. In China’s case, a sophisticated system of online manipulation—which includes a vast, multilayered censorship system and “online content monitors” in government departments and private companies who number in the millions⁸—is designed to suppress and neutralize political speech and collective action, even while encouraging many ordinary people to feel as though they can express themselves on a range of issues they care about.

It is with a similar approach that the authoritarian trendsetters have plunged into the open societies of the democratic world. For example, just as Beijing has compelled its domestic internet companies and news outlets to police their own content for violations of the regime’s redlines, it hopes to school its international interlocutors on the boundaries of permissible expression and encourage them to self-censor in a manner that limits candid scrutiny of what China views as sensitive topics.

The nature of the regimes in Russia and China must be taken squarely into account when considering the implications of their vigorous international influence efforts. They have not come simply to attract or win over. They have come to manipulate, confuse, divide, and repress.

'Sharp Power': A New Conceptual Vocabulary

In common parlance, “soft power” has become a catch-all term for forms of influence that are not “hard” in the sense of military force. But the authoritarian influence techniques that have gained pace and traction in recent years, while not hard in the openly coercive sense, are not really soft, either.

Although Russia and China undertake some activities that can credibly fall into the category of normal public diplomacy, the nature of these countries’ political systems invariably and fundamentally color their efforts. In the case of China, for example, educational and cultural initiatives are accompanied by an authoritarian determination to monopolize ideas, suppress alternative narratives, and exploit partner institutions. The rulers of Russia, a less wealthy and powerful state, sometimes seem content to propagate the idea that their kleptocratic regime—whose paramount leader is rapidly approaching two decades in office—is a “normal” member of the international community, and that its actions and statements are no less valid than those of democracies. But they can only generate this false sense of equality by sowing doubt and disorder among their rivals.

We are in need of a new vocabulary to describe this phenomenon. What we have to date understood as “soft power” when speaking of authoritarian regimes might be more properly labeled as “sharp power.”

Authoritarian influence efforts are “sharp” in the sense that they pierce, penetrate, or perforate the information environments in the targeted countries. In the ruthless new competition that is under way between autocratic and democratic states, the repressive regimes’ “sharp power” techniques should be seen as the tip of their dagger—or indeed their syringe. These regimes are not necessarily seeking to “win hearts and minds,” the common frame of reference for “soft power” efforts, but they are surely seeking to manage their target audiences by manipulating or poisoning the information that reaches them.⁹

“Sharp power” likewise enables the authoritarians to cut, razor-like, into the fabric of a society, stoking and amplifying existing divisions. Russia has been especially adept at exploiting rifts within democratic nations.¹⁰ And unlike the blunt impact of hard power, “sharp power” entails a degree of stealth. Taking advantage of the open information environment of democracies, the authoritarians’ “sharp power” efforts are typically difficult to detect, meaning they benefit from a lag time before the targeted democracies realize there is a problem.

Above all, the term “sharp power” captures the malign and aggressive nature of the authoritarian projects, which bear little resemblance to the benign attraction of soft power. Through sharp power, the generally unattractive values of authoritarian systems—which encourage a monopoly on power, top-down control, censorship, and coerced or purchased loyalty—are projected outward, and those affected are not so much audiences as victims.

The authoritarian ideal for the media is plain to see in China. On the ninetieth anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Liberation Army, four separate state-owned newspapers had identical covers. In February 2016, President Xi Jinping visited the headquarters of the three

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main state media organizations, which pledged their loyalty to the Communist Party.¹¹ When such total control is not possible or desirable, authoritarian regimes often resort to strategic distraction. Among other examples, this can be observed in the Russian national broadcast media, which are by turns disorienting and entertaining, or in Beijing's large-scale fabrication of social media posts designed to disrupt discussion of controversial topics.¹²

Chinese universities, meanwhile, have come under increasing ideological control. Party committees oversee the running of the schools and monitor the ideological and political thinking of undergraduate and graduate students.¹³ In the run-up to the CCP's 19th Party Congress in October 2017, China's leading anticorruption agency, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), stepped up efforts to assess the effectiveness of these party committees at a number of China's top universities—including several that host joint academic initiatives with foreign universities.¹⁴

There is clearly nothing “soft” about these regimes' treatment of the media, education, and the realm of ideas more generally in their domestic environments. Why should we view their outward-facing activities so differently?

In order to fully appreciate the qualitative distinctions between authoritarian sharp power and soft power as it is customarily understood, it is essential to review the array of influence techniques developed by leading authoritarian regimes, and how they are deployed.

The Authoritarian Inventory of Influence

China's emergence on the world stage is a relatively recent phenomenon that the regime is able to play to its own advantage. Its first major contact with many countries occurred under the auspices of Beijing's “going out” strategy, which positioned China as an alternative source of investment for developing nations. The global financial crisis in 2008 provided China with an opportunity to expand this role. That year, the government released its first foreign policy “white paper” on Latin America and the Caribbean, articulating principles for a new framework to guide China's relations with the region.

Beijing published a second policy paper in 2016, during President Xi's visit to Lima, Peru, for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. Among updates to the first paper were new sections that heavily emphasized people-to-people exchanges, culture, and media cooperation.¹⁵ Many of these concepts are echoed in China's first policy paper for Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁶

In the media sphere, Juan Pablo Cardenal's survey of Chinese government-sponsored activities identifies "a triple approach" for formal engagement with the local media and individual news consumers: (1) developing the local presence of Chinese state media in Latin American countries; (2) establishing partnerships, content exchanges, and cooperation agreements between Chinese state media and local public media, as well as with some independent media outlets; and (3) offering exchange opportunities and trainings for individual journalists.

On paper, such exchange-based activities between media outlets appear to be conducted in the spirit of openly sharing information and perspectives. However, the projects that Cardenal documents—such as the insertion of elaborate media supplements like *China Daily's China Watch* into several local private newspapers in Argentina, and the prime-time airing of China Global Television Network (CGTN) documentaries on the public station TV Peru Channel 7 during the 2016 APEC Summit—reveal a more ambitious plan to use local media as a "borrowed boat" for the dissemination of Chinese state propaganda. Likewise, interviews with journalists who participate in trainings paid for by Chinese state media outlets reveal how such trips are shaping the way that Latin American journalists, who often possess little prior knowledge of China, ultimately view and report on the country and its policies toward their own countries and region.

In all four of the countries examined, the think tank researchers noted that there are few experts in the media, academic, and analytical communities who follow China closely, and the tendency among the few who do is to focus on the economic aspects of China's relationship with their own country. Given China's size, complexity, and growing presence in the international arena, the researchers were surprised to find that commentators rarely discuss other aspects of the country that might be of interest to citizens living in a democracy, such as China's political system and human rights record. The researchers suggest that this is likely due to a combination of factors, such as the public's general lack of interest (as in Slovakia), or a fascination with China's rapid economic development as an "alternative model" (as in Poland). But the result is a vacuum in the information environment of the democracies that China is able to exploit.

In this context, Cardenal's review of the academic sectors in Argentina and Peru shows how China, through partnerships between Latin American universities and its own tightly controlled state universities, can have an outsized impact on the frame and tone of China-focused scholarship in the region. One example is the establishment of the Joint International Research Center (CIMI in Spanish) in April 2017 as a partnership between the prominent Buenos Aires-based National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET in Spanish) and Shanghai University. Cardenal notes that the new center's research aims "to clarify the way in which China is perceived in Argentina's public opinion" using new methodologies for studying the social sciences and globalization.

China has also sponsored the establishment of Confucius Institutes at local universities in all four case countries examined in this report: four in Peru, two in Argentina, five in Poland, and two in Slovakia. In Poland, Jacek Kucharczyk notes that plans are currently in the works to open a sixth Confucius Institute at Warsaw University, despite protests by the university's students, who have voiced concerns about the potential impact the institute might have on academic freedom.

Although the researchers note that many Confucius Institute activities seem innocuous, emphasizing Chinese language instruction and cultural events such as film exhibitions, other elements of their activities are out of place in a university context. Chinese government control over staffing and curriculum ensures that both will subtly promote CCP positions on issues like territorial disputes or religious minorities in China. In Slovakia, Grigorij Mesežnikov and Gabriela Pleschová describe how shortly after Slovak president Andrej Kiska's 2016 meeting with the Dalai Lama—which was highly criticized by the Chinese government—the Confucius Institute based at the Slovak University of Technology joined the Chinese embassy in cosponsoring an exhibition that emphasized China's territorial claims over the Tibetan region, titled “A Chinese Story: Chinese Tibet.”

In Latin America, a unique Confucius Institute Regional Center for Latin America—located in Santiago, Chile, and operated by Hanban, an Education Ministry office responsible for teaching the Chinese language abroad—provides methodology trainings for Confucius Institute instructors based throughout the region. At the individual institutes, Hanban supplies teachers and staff from China—some of whom lack sufficient Spanish skills to communicate effectively with local students. Yet local universities are typically expected to cover some of the costs for hosting the institutes. In Argentina, the two universities that host Confucius Institutes each provide funding for 50 percent of the operating expenses; the same is also true for at least one of the universities hosting a Confucius Institute in Peru. Since in all three instances the universities are public, this essentially means Argentine and Peruvian taxpayers are footing the bill for Chinese state-run institutes that can be employed as vehicles for promoting Beijing's views and narratives. Similar local subsidization of Confucius Institutes occurs in other democracies.¹⁷

For Beijing, culture has become an important avenue for advancing sharp power, precisely because its potential in this regard is often underestimated. Kucharczyk describes how China presents itself as an “ancient, anodyne culture” that poses no threat and can provide opportunities for “win-win cooperation.” Yet cultural events like Chinese New Year celebrations—which have proliferated around the world and become increasingly prominent in recent years¹⁸—can afford the Chinese authorities a prime opportunity to exert influence over how the country is represented abroad. In Argentina, Cardenal tells the story of how the Chinese embassy has used behind-the-scenes influence to transform what was once a grassroots cultural occasion organized by Buenos Aires' predominantly Taiwanese Chinatown community into a high-profile public event centered on the People's Republic of China.

Because Russia has far fewer financial and human resources at its disposal, as well as more complicated historical relationships with many countries, it has adopted a different approach to exerting influence in young democracies.

Perhaps the most highly visible Russian tool of influence—and one that has received the most attention from analysts—is the international expansion of its state media. In their inventory efforts, the researchers found that direct audience consumption of Russian television and print content is in all likelihood quite low in Central Europe. However, Jacek Kucharczyk points out that Russian state media still serve as an important channel for introducing disinformation into Poland. Their stories are often picked up by third-party websites—some run by Polish individuals or entities with their own reasons for supporting such narratives. The information, once filtered through a local source, becomes more palatable to a local population that would likely be skeptical of a Russian source.

All of Russia's influence efforts in the media, academia, culture, and the policy community tend to promote specific political narratives that advance the Kremlin's interests. In Poland and Slovakia, a general goal is to stoke and amplify any domestic opposition to the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). To achieve this in each country, however, the Russian regime adopts a tailored approach. In Slovakia, it draws on the population's Slavic identity in an attempt to argue that Russia and Slovakia share the same values, and that those associated with Western Europe and the United States are alien to Slavic history and culture.

In Poland, where the notion of fraternal ties with Russia carry far less weight, the Kremlin supports initiatives that emphasize the need to defend the Poles' own "traditional values" from the liberal ideas embraced by the rest of Europe. Perhaps most troubling, however, have been Russian-sponsored initiatives intended to undermine Poland's support for the new democratic government in Ukraine by reviving narratives about historical tensions between the two countries. In both Poland and Slovakia, the Russian government seeks to weaken a sense of belonging to the European and transatlantic communities, in which democratic governance and a commitment to shared liberal values have been defining and unifying features.

In both Poland and Slovakia, the Russian government seeks to weaken a sense of belonging to the European and transatlantic communities, in which democratic governance and a commitment to shared liberal values have been defining and unifying features.

For Russia, collaboration with academic and educational institutions in young democracies is important because their local reputations lend an air of credibility to the narratives that the regime wants to promote. In Slovakia, Mesežnikov and Pleschová detail a number of efforts, such as lecture tours by political scientists and historians aligned with Russia's government. They are funded by the Russian embassy, but Slovakian universities and high schools are sought out as event hosts and cosponsors. In both the Russian and Chinese cases, partnerships with local institutions are integral to accomplishing the authoritarian regimes' sharp power aims.

One additional realm in which the researchers noted increasing activity by the Russian and Chinese regimes is their own overseas communities. They appear to be expanding the definition of who is "Russian" or "Chinese" and are attempting to bring the relevant populations into their sphere of influence. In Slovakia, these efforts include initiatives to co-opt all Russian speakers through Russian expatriate associations. In Peru, Cardenal describes how China's efforts to engage the country's Tusan community—Peruvian citizens with ethnic Chinese heritage whose ancestors emigrated from China in a number of waves since the 19th century—have succeeded to such an extent that some Tusan are beginning to self-identify as "overseas Chinese" in tandem with their identity as Peruvian citizens.

The Goals and Impact of Authoritarian Influence Campaigns

By underwriting initiatives that borrow many of the traditional vehicles for transmitting soft power, China's one-party regime attempts to make itself more relatable to democratic societies. State-funded research centers, media outlets, Confucius Institutes, and people-to-people exchange programs essentially mimic the various outgrowths of independent civil society that exist in a democracy. Local actors in young democracies are often unaware of the extent to which civil society is tightly controlled inside China. The Russian authorities have also imposed growing restrictions on their own civil society sector,¹⁹ a point that is similarly not well understood by observers in Latin America.

An analysis of Beijing's various sharp power initiatives suggest that they seek to reduce, neutralize, or preempt any challenges to the regime's presentation of itself. In this sense, they are instruments of manipulation and censorship, not simple attraction.

According to the researchers' inventory, the Chinese government often aims to portray the country as either a benign foreign influence or a successful example of economic development without democratic political institutions. Beijing does not necessarily expect other countries to follow its supposed alternative model (although in certain circumstances it does promote this notion), and it is willing to find ways to engage with governing elites regardless of their political ideology or regime type. However, embedded within China's campaign to defend and promote its own one-party system is a tacit criticism of democracy as inefficient, chaotic, and a poor catalyst for economic development. And Beijing does not hesitate to use its local allies and influence to silence opposition to its projects.

Russia, meanwhile, tends to focus its sharp power more directly on undermining the health and credibility of democratic regimes. The promotion of narratives that tap into the existing frustrations and cynicism of local populations is effective even in environments where popular opinion of Russia is not favorable. Whereas Beijing attempts to raise its profile and expand its power mainly through aggressive investment, co-optation, and dishonest salesmanship, Moscow hopes to level the playing field largely by dragging down its democratic adversaries, either in appearance or in reality.

One key challenge of measuring the impact or culpability of Russian and Chinese influence efforts is that they cannot be assessed in isolation from the genuinely domestic dynamics of democratic societies. In his report, Jacek Kucharczyk recognizes Poland's recent democratic backsliding first and foremost as a product of local factors and political trends. But as he also points out, "the research detailed in this essay reveals many dangerous liaisons between specific political narratives employed by homegrown populists and Russian propaganda, as well as calculated efforts by China to portray itself as an ultramodern, benevolent power featuring an authoritarian political system that offers a better incubator for economic growth than liberal democracy."

Democracy is more often than not an untidy process in which ideological and policy debates take place out in the open. Moscow in particular exploits such conflicts to increase polarization and break down democratic comity and consensus. Illiberal narratives generated abroad and local populist themes can feed off each other in a vicious circle, further complicating the task of separating one from the other. As Kucharczyk puts it, "This narrative overlap makes it difficult to distinguish propaganda contents originating in and propagated by Russia from material produced by domestic actors. At the same time, the proliferation of populist narratives creates an opportunity for Russian propaganda, as these narratives can be amplified with different propaganda tools, such as online trolling."

Another finding that emerges from the researchers' inventories is that authoritarian states such as China and Russia employ economic activity as leverage to advance political goals in the realm of ideas. China is especially adroit in this regard, applying pressure with varying intensity and through indirect channels that are not always apparent unless one examines Chinese business activities in conjunction with Beijing's other influence efforts.²⁰

The cultivation of personal relationships is also a key facet of the authoritarians' sharp power influence. Many of the initiatives documented in this report, such as the authoritarians' people-to-people exchanges, are directed at the political elites, thought leaders, and other information gatekeepers of democratic societies. For politicians, journalists, academics, and think tank researchers in young democracies, such new connections offer the prospect of greater prestige and access to resources. For the authoritarians, currying goodwill and shaping the perspectives of key individuals can be a particularly cost-effective way to alter policy, while also gaining indirect access to wider audiences. These efforts are part of the larger aim of Moscow and Beijing to get inside democratic systems in order to incentivize cooperation and neutralize criticism of their authoritarian regimes.

A Widening Scope of Influence

This study examined four countries in two regions, but similar forms of Russian and Chinese sharp power influence are visible in a growing number of democracies around the world.

In Central Europe, the Czech Republic and Hungary have both been courted and manipulated by the two leading authoritarian states. In the Balkans, Russia still has a higher profile: A 2016 report estimated that 109 registered nongovernmental organizations, associations, and media outlets could be linked to pro-Russian lobbying efforts.²¹ Russian media have been especially active. According to one analyst, Russia's strategy for Serbia has been to use the pro-Kremlin outlets to "destabilize the region and discredit the EU and Serbia's membership ambitions."²² However, China also seems to be focusing more and more attention on Southeastern Europe. Under the auspices of its Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has made significant infrastructure investments in Serbia and elsewhere in the Balkans, which could provide the Chinese authorities with new allies and leverage within the EU as such countries enter the bloc.²³

The potential results can already be seen in Greece, a longtime EU member that has recently become a hub of Chinese investment in Europe. As the two countries' economic and other ties have deepened, observers have raised concerns that Beijing is buying Greece's silence or even cooperation on human rights issues. In June 2017, for example, Greece prevented the EU from condemning China's human rights record.²⁴



The nature of China's growing influence in sub-Saharan Africa, a region rife with young democracies, is also an urgent concern. An analysis of Afrobarometer's 2014–15 opinion polling data found that nearly one out of every four Africans surveyed indicated a preference for China as a model for their own country's development.²⁵ China has stepped up its engagement especially in Africa's media sphere, expanding the presence of its state media outlets, hosting exchange programs and trainings for journalists, and acting as a supplier for Africa's telecommunication infrastructure.²⁶ Far more study is required to understand the impact of Chinese sharp power on the prospects of democracy on the continent.

In New Zealand, China's web of influence has reached deep into democratic institutions, partly by attempting to assert political control over the country's diverse ethnic Chinese population, and by offering attractive incentives to former New Zealand politicians who maintain close ties to the current government and can promote Beijing's interests.²⁷

Democracies have assumed that engagement with authoritarian countries would lead to changes in their repressive systems, but there is little parity in an exchange between an open society and a deliberately closed one.

In Australia, another established democracy that has strong economic ties with China, Beijing has applied sharp power in an intensive way across a number of important sectors, including the media, business, politics, and culture. For example, Chinese entities are suspected of funneling donations to political parties and individual politicians, Chinese state-run media outlets buy space in Australian newspapers to promote official views, and government representatives exert influence over Chinese students at Australian universities—detering open debate and promoting the official line on sensitive issues.²⁸

A key aim of Chinese influence efforts in Australia is to weaken the country's alliance with the United States.²⁹ But regardless of its intended goals in terms of Australian government policy, Beijing's activities are damaging the underpinnings of Australian democracy. This threat to a long-standing bastion of freedom in the world should serve as a wake-up call for democracies everywhere.

Understanding Authoritarian Influence in an Era of Globalization

Taken individually, authoritarian influence efforts in particular countries may seem fairly harmless or ineffectual. However, when the seemingly disparate activities of Russia and China around the world are added together, a far more disturbing picture emerges.

The evidence presented by the report authors suggests that even exchange-related activities backed by authoritarian governments should be approached with greater skepticism. Although some of these initiatives may be genuine and advance admirable goals, many are designed to promote a particular political narrative, which in turn creates favorable conditions for authoritarian regimes.

While Russia and China may take somewhat different approaches to the application of sharp power, they both clearly take advantage of the openness of democratic systems. Democracies have assumed that engagement with authoritarian countries would lead to changes in their repressive systems, but there is little parity in an exchange between an open society and a deliberately closed one. In the marketplace of ideas, authoritarian regimes simply do not respect the rules: They protect their own controlled environments while attempting to tip the

scales abroad. This lack of reciprocity is evident with respect to media, nongovernmental organizations, and academia as well.

In many local contexts, there is a general lack of knowledge and expertise regarding the foreign policy objectives of China and Russia and the full extent of repression within their borders. The initiatives documented in this report demonstrate a serious effort by the Chinese and Russian regimes to exploit the situation and ensure that thought leaders and sociopolitical elites in democratic societies are willing to help advance their strategic interests.

China especially is making long-term investments in this sphere. Many of its exchange and educational initiatives focus specifically on youth, such as the exchange program for young think tank leaders from Central and Eastern Europe cited by Kucharczyk, and the Bridges to the Future exchange program for young Latin American leaders described by Cardenal.

To some extent, the increased but fundamentally unbalanced interconnectedness associated with globalization has already borne fruit for authoritarian regimes. Many experts, policymakers, and journalists consulted for this report were reluctant to be cited by name. Offering an educated opinion that may be critical of the Chinese government can jeopardize an expert's access to China.

It is worth noting the similarities between the skewed exchanges of information and ideas described here and the prevailing pattern of economic engagement between democracies and the authoritarian powers. With the passage of time, it has become increasingly clear that the autocrats have managed to maintain tight control over their national economies while expanding the reach of their standard-bearing companies abroad. In China's case, the authorities have deftly put up barrier after barrier to foreign companies seeking access to the domestic market, requiring them to give up intellectual property, partner with approved Chinese firms, and comply with censorship and other demands. Meanwhile, Chinese firms have profited from their access to democratic markets; among countless other investments, China is pumping billions of dollars into U.S. companies that are working on cutting-edge technologies with potential military applications. While policymakers have recently become more attuned to the national security dimension of China's economic activities in democracies, they have been terribly slow to react to the dangers posed by China's influence activities in the media, academic, or cultural spheres. The same can be said with respect to Russia.

The regimes in Moscow and Beijing are essentially exploiting the opportunities of globalization while rejecting its underlying principle of free and open exchange. This basic hostility to universal liberal norms is most clear in their propaganda narratives, which typically frame democratic values as "Western values" that have no place in other parts of the world. As an alternative, the two governments promote nationalist, "traditional" cultural constructs and revisionist histories that seem to justify authoritarian rule and the violation of basic human rights.

As Joseph Nye and Wang Jisi have argued, "soft power is not a zero sum game in which one country's gain is necessarily another country's loss."³⁰ Yet the leaders of China and Russia apparently see themselves as engaged in a zero-sum competition with democratic nations, which runs counter to the conventional understanding of soft power. Until policymakers in the democracies recognize and properly define what they are facing, they will continue to fall prey to authoritarian influence efforts.



Implications for the Democracies

Even the strongest and most well-established democracies are far from immune to authoritarian influence. The United States and Western European powers have been targeted with an onslaught of Russian and Chinese initiatives in the arenas of media, culture, and politics. Among other problems they are grappling with is the pollution of the information space by a widening array of state-sponsored media campaigns, as well as the challenges to free expression and academic integrity presented by Confucius Institutes and university partnerships.

But it is the authoritarians' emphasis on young or institutionally fragile democracies that poses a particularly serious problem. In countries like Argentina, Peru, Poland, and Slovakia, democratic standards and values are not as well entrenched, and the system is not as well equipped to resist outside manipulation. Resources to support and sustain independent knowledge building about China and Russia are also scarce. The leading authoritarian states have sought to exploit this vulnerability, dedicating formidable and growing resources to the countries in question.

The following are key steps that can be taken to address China and Russia's malign efforts to influence and manipulate democracies:

- **Address the shortage of information on China and Russia.** In the four democracies examined, information concerning the Chinese political system and its foreign policy strategies tends to be extremely limited. There are few journalists, editors, and policy professionals who possess a deep understanding of China and can share their knowledge with the rest of their societies. Given China's growing economic, media, and political footprint in these settings, there is an acute need to build capacity to disseminate independent information about the country and its regime. The same holds true for Russia in places such as Latin America, though knowledge of today's Russia in Central Europe is more robust.

Civil society organizations should develop strategies for communicating expert knowledge about China and Russia to broader audiences. This should include a conscious effort to break down ordinary academic and policy barriers to enable collaboration between experts

on China and Russia and regional specialists focused on Latin America or Central Europe. The challenge is global in scope, turning up in democratic countries on every continent, and the response must take this into account.

- **Unmask authoritarian influence.** Chinese and Russian sharp power efforts rely in large part on camouflage—disguising state-directed projects as commercial media or grassroots associations, for example, or using local actors as conduits for foreign propaganda and tools of foreign manipulation. To counteract these efforts at misdirection, observers in democracies should put them under the spotlight and analyze them in a comprehensive manner.

Given the dispersed, globalized nature of authoritarian influence activities, which are increasingly embedded within democratic societies, the formation of working alliances across professional fields and borders is critical. Researchers, journalists, and civil society leaders who are concerned about the ever more complex challenges posed by authoritarian sharp power should also analyze the discourse of illiberal elites in democratic societies, and highlight the ideological concepts that authoritarian regimes seek to propagate in order to advance their own interests.

- **Inoculate democratic societies against malign authoritarian influence.** Once the nature and techniques of authoritarian influence efforts are exposed, democracies should build up internal defenses. Authoritarian initiatives are directed at cultivating relationships with the political elites, thought leaders, and other information gatekeepers of democratic societies. Such efforts are part of the larger aim of Moscow and Beijing to get inside democratic systems in order to incentivize cooperation and neutralize criticism of their authoritarian regimes.

Support for a robust, independent civil society—including independent media—is essential to ensuring that the citizens of democracies are informed enough to critically evaluate the benefits and risks of closer engagement with authoritarian regimes. Where collaboration with Chinese and Russian state-backed entities has become widely accepted, civil society can develop and adopt their own voluntary standards of conduct for appropriate engagement with their “counterparts” in authoritarian regimes, mitigating the risk of co-optation and the export of censorship practices from autocratic to democratic settings.

- **Reaffirm support for democratic values and ideals.** If one goal of authoritarian sharp power is to legitimize illiberal forms of government, then it is only effective to the extent that democracies and their citizens lose sight of their own principles. Russia’s efforts to exploit pre-existing cleavages in democratic societies and China’s attempts to neutralize criticism of its own regime place an emphasis on fueling citizens’ doubts about democracy as a successful form of government. Top leaders in the democracies must speak out clearly and consistently on behalf of democratic ideals and put down clear markers regarding acceptable standards of democratic behavior. Otherwise, the authoritarians will fill the void.
- **Reconceptualize “soft power.”** Finally, journalists, think tank analysts, and other policy elites need to recognize authoritarian influence efforts in the realm of ideas for what they are: corrosive and subversive “sharp power” instruments that do real damage to the targeted democratic societies. The conceptual vocabulary that has been used since the Cold War’s end no longer seems adequate to describe what is afoot. The growing inventory of tools used by repressive regimes are not “soft” in the sense that they seek merely to attract support.

They are not principally aimed at “charming” or “winning hearts and minds.” Such tactics should be seen instead as instruments of manipulation, distortion, and distraction that reflect the antidemocratic political systems of the authoritarian states that wield them.

The regimes in China and Russia are deeply engaged in an international struggle over information, influence, and ideas. If the United States and other powerful democracies do not rise to the challenge, they will be abdicating their leadership roles, abandoning their allies, and neglecting their own long-term security. Should these and other well-resourced autocratic regimes maintain their current momentum for the foreseeable future, their efforts could do grievous damage to the integrity of young democracies. This in turn would deliver a devastating blow to the rules-based international order that has underpinned global security and prosperity.

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NOTES

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