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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.