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“The Threat Posed by ‘Sharp Power’ to the Integrity of Democratic Societies”

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I would like first to thank the Committee for the opportunity and privilege of presenting testimony on this important subject.

I would begin my remarks by noting that public and cultural diplomacy efforts that aim to inform and influence foreign audiences are an important aspect of states’ exertion of what has come to be understood as soft power. This includes spheres such as the arts, publishing, people-to-people exchanges, international broadcasting, and the like. Such soft power is based on attraction and persuasion.

In recent years, authoritarian governments including China and Russia have spent billions of dollars to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world, employing a diverse range of resources that includes cultural activities, educational programs, people-to-people exchanges, and the development of media enterprises and information initiatives with global reach.

As such authoritarian initiatives have scaled up, observers in the democracies have tended to view authoritarian influence efforts through the familiar lens of “soft power.” But this lens in some ways has become outdated. According to Joseph Nye’s original definition, 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, policies, and independent civil society.

Contrary to some of the prevailing analysis, the influence wielded by Beijing and Moscow through initiatives in the spheres of media, culture, and education is not simply an effort to “share alternative ideas” or “broaden the debate” in an open and pluralistic manner.

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, for example, 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.

From "Soft Power" to "Sharp Power"

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, then it stands to reason that their elaborate initiatives must not be working. Unfortunately, authoritarian regimes view the use of such power overseas in a different way, one that cannot be divorced from the political values by which they govern at home. My colleagues and I at the International Forum for Democratic Studies observed in a report published last year titled "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence" that in key respects the autocracies are not engaged in "public diplomacy" as democracies would understand it.

Instead, they often appear to be pursuing more malign objectives, associated with new forms of outwardly directed censorship and manipulation, 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.

Leadership in Beijing, Moscow, Riyadh and in other such settings 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.

Even more striking is the resilience and dynamism that the most influential authoritarian states are displaying. Led by China and Russia, these nondemocratic regimes are showing themselves to be firmly entrenched at home, even as they project influence beyond their borders in ways that corrode and undermine democracy and its institutions. The regimes in Beijing and Moscow have refined and scaled up their instruments of influence and, with them, the ability to manipulate, distort, and shape the political landscape within democratic societies. As they have become more repressive domestically, these authoritarian governments have grown emboldened and more ambitious internationally, with worrisome implications for democratic institutions around the world.

Today's media environment reflects this challenge. As I wrote in the *Journal of Democracy* in 2016, "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 (now CGTN) and Russia's RT are not the BBC, or Deutsche Welle, - or the CBC - which operate according to a fundamentally different value system. Because editorial accountability for authoritarian media outlets ultimately rests with unchecked 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 way. RT, meanwhile, unflinchingly 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." ¹

As we note in the *Sharp Power* report, while there are differences between the approaches of China and Russia, they "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." ²

In their development of international influence efforts, the Russian authorities determined that they did not need to convince the world that Russia's 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 media manipulation efforts have since reflected a relentless, multidimensional attack on the prestige of democracies—the countries within the transatlantic community especially—and on the ideas underlying democratic systems.

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)". Its methods include both co-optation and manipulation, and they are applied to targets in the media, academia, and elsewhere. They seek to permeate institutions in democratic states that might draw attention or raise obstacles to CCP interests, creating disincentives for any such resistance.

¹ Christopher Walker, "The Hijacking of 'Soft Power,'" *Journal of Democracy* 27, no.1 (2016): 50.

² International Forum for Democratic Studies, "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence" (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), 13, www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Introduction-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence.pdf.

I would note that in the present environment, in democratic countries, the cultural sphere, as well as those academia, media, and publishing are open and accessible, and they must remain so. Yet at a time when the leading authoritarian regimes are contesting democracy at the level of ideas, principles, and standards, this openness unfortunately makes them ripe targets for sharp power.

A prominent example of this challenge is China's global network of more than five hundred Confucius Institutes. First launched in 2004 and now found in more than eighty countries, these institutes are initiatives of the Chinese state that straddle the worlds of culture and academia, providing Chinese-language instruction and various cultural offerings through a presence on university campuses. In Canada, as of this year there are 12 Confucius Institutes, and 36 Confucius classrooms.

Chinese authorities portray the Confucius Institutes as being similar to France's Alliance Française or Germany's Goethe-Institut, both of which receive government funding to give language and culture classes. Yet unlike those freestanding organizations, the Confucius Institutes are embedded within educational institutions, most of which are committed to the type of free intellectual inquiry that is impossible at Confucius Institutes themselves. Many casual observers of the Confucius Institutes might not realize that the Confucius Institutes' constitution, found on the website of Hanban (the Chinese arm of the government that directs them), implies that Chinese law applies within the premises of the Institutes.³

Little about these institutes is transparent. It is hard to say, for instance, what amount of Chinese government money goes to individual host universities. It is also unclear what level of control universities have over curricula within the Institutes. The agreements between these parties generally remain confidential.⁴

Recent reports have found that there are CCP cells on college campuses in a number of democracies, including Canada.⁵ According to estimates from China's embassy in Canada, there are some 186,000 Chinese students in Canada.⁶ Chinese embassies and consular officials have been detected channeling resources and programmatic guidance to associations of Chinese students in ways that suggest inappropriate

³ Rachele Peterson, "Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education," National Association of Scholars, June 2017, www.nas.org/images/documents/confucius_institutes/NAS_confuciusInstitutes.pdf.

⁴ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "House Proposal Targets Confucius Institutes as Foreign Agents," *Foreign Policy*, March 14, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/14/house-proposal-targets-confucius-institutes-as-foreign-agents-china-communist-party-censorship-academic-freedom/>.

⁵ "China's Ruling Party Has Branches on University Campuses Around the World," *Radio Free Asia*, April 19, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/united-front-04192018150038.html>.

⁶ "As Canadian Public Schools Look to Asia for Cash, Chinese Authority Plans School in B.C.," *The Globe and Mail*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/as-canadian-public-schools-look-to-asia-for-cash-chinese-authority-plans-school-inbc/article37401027/>.

behavior and plans to manipulate the academic environment. Beijing's ambitions in the educational sphere should come as no surprise.

In 2017, China's education ministry instructed Chinese diplomats around the world to "build a multidimensional contact network linking home and abroad—the motherland, embassies and consulates, overseas student groups, and the broad number of students abroad."⁷ Such activities are part of a broader effort to influence the public sphere in the United States and other democracies that is being brought into sharper relief through important reporting by independent journalists.⁸

Framing the Understanding of Authoritarian Engagement: Interests Informed by Values

Why should we care about this dramatic buildup of influence by the authoritarians, and how should we think about it?

After all, aren't China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and other such states simply pursuing their own interests? They are, to be sure.

But it is critical to remember that these interests are informed by autocratic political values and preferences that privilege state control above all else, something that is evident in the way the authorities in such countries treat their own media and civil society.

The information I have referenced here only touches in a limited way upon the corrosive effects of sharp power that are increasingly apparent in the spheres of culture, academia, and media—sectors that are crucial in determining how citizens of democracies understand the world around them.

In conclusion, I would emphasize that democratic societies must reckon with the challenges presented by sharp power. The challenge is multifaceted, and so must be any response. Society-wide responses are needed that take into account the reality that the democracies cannot rely solely on governmental measures for meeting what is a complex, multidimensional challenge. At the same time, democracies must take care that they do not make things worse. Democratic systems cannot sacrifice their own standards and values as a way of safeguarding against the authoritarian sharp power.

⁷ Chris Buckley, "China Says Its Students, Even Those Abroad, Need More 'Patriotic Education,'" *New York Times*, February 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/11/world/asia/china-patriotic-education.html>.

⁸ For example, Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "China Built an Army of Influence Agents in the U.S.," *Daily Beast*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-china-built-an-army-of-influence-agents-in-the-us>.

University administrators, publishers, media executives, and others who find themselves facing the gambits of sharp power must redouble their commitment to democratic standards—rejecting efforts to restrain free political expression would be a good start. Common standards must be established and adhered to by such institutions in order to reduce their exposure to sharp power and safeguard their integrity.

As long as China, Russia and other such internationalist authoritarian powers remain unfree societies in which independent institutions are unable to hold the top leadership accountable, their authoritarian regimes will continue to exert sharp power. The democracies must draw upon their reserves of innovation and determination as free societies to meet this challenge.