

A Full-Spectrum Response to Sharp Power

The Vulnerabilities and Strengths of Open Societies

by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world has changed in the past decade and a half. During this period of democratic downturn, dictatorships have intensified and modernized their repression. Regimes in virtually every region have become more authoritarian. Two major powers in particular, China and Russia, have led the way in tightening their grip domestically, adapting their techniques for a new era, and deploying them to emerge as active and purposeful transnational forces that are able to influence open societies and their institutions.

There are serious vulnerabilities in a cluster of institutions related to information and ideas, commerce, media, and technology that form the ‘central nervous system’ of modern open societies. Today, such institutions have deep relationships across the autocratic-democratic divide. Through these conduits and nodes of shared activity, autocratic powers are recalibrating incentives in ways that conflict with standards of democratic accountability. When this critical system is exposed to malign influence, the adverse reverberations can be profound.

Crucially, today more than at any time in recent memory, there are no bright lines between domestic affairs and international influence. As the reports in this Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience series indicate, autocracies and democracies have become tethered to one another in complicated ways that, more often than not, have harmful effects on practices and standards in the democracies.

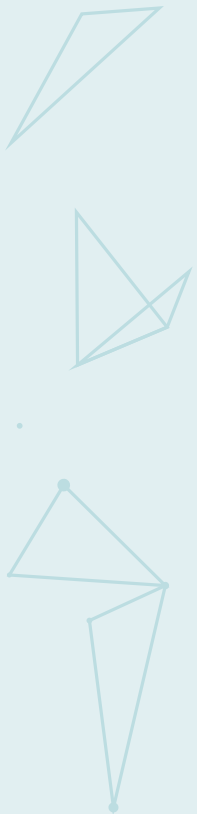
Much of the analysis on authoritarian regimes in recent years has assumed that they would attempt to accrue international influence by attracting and winning over their interlocutors. But the leaders in Beijing and Moscow are unambiguous in their efforts to rule through strength and fear at home, and people in free societies should open their minds to the possibility that these regimes are inclined to do similarly abroad.

Episodes that a few years ago could be brushed off as single or random examples of authoritarian overreach are now recognizable as part of a global pattern. Given the velocity and scope of the changes, and as an outgrowth of its original work on sharp power, the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy undertook **an initiative to assess the ways in which modern forms of authoritarian influence are affecting the democratic infrastructure in open societies.** As globalization has deepened integration between democracies and autocracies, the compromising effects of sharp power—which impairs free expression, neutralizes independent institutions, and distorts the political environment—have grown apparent across crucial sectors of open societies.

KEY CONTEXT

An underestimation of the threat. At the outset of this deeper and wide-ranging engagement between autocracies and democracies, policymakers in the latter grossly underestimated the determination of authoritarian powers and their capacity to alter and reforge international norms and institutions. During a period in which democracies have been preoccupied with their own internal problems, the authoritarian regimes in Russia, China, and other countries have pushed boundaries and successfully exploited the vulnerabilities of democratic systems.






Authoritarian regimes have strong preferences about the way the world should be ordered and governed. Autocrats are not agnostic about freedom of expression or association, for example. The organizing principles of these systems require the control of speech and ideas and the elimination of independent groupings or power centers in society.

Democracies must “get their own house in order” but cannot ignore the world around them while they do so. The authoritarian regimes that have taken advantage of their interactions with democratic countries and international rules-setting bodies are not likely to retreat or hit a pause button as democracies tend to domestic difficulties. Efforts by democracies to mend internal weaknesses and protect their institutions from external threats must be simultaneous and mutually reinforcing if either endeavor is to succeed.

Halting a debilitating cycle. Authoritarian powers’ compromising activities in the media, education, commercial, and technology sectors, among others, amount to a constant probing of a given democracy’s integrity. In the absence of necessary adaptations and reforms by the targeted country, authoritarian influence can stimulate a debilitating cycle of democratic deterioration and further exploitation.

- **Media:** Disruptions to the information ecosystem during the digital age have helped authoritarians’ preferred narratives gain traction in settings around the world. Financial pressures that media outlets face in many settings can render them vulnerable to different forms of economic manipulation and coercion. Budget constraints often make it difficult for media outlets—especially those in emerging or weakened democracies—to retain reporters with dedicated expertise. This dynamic can generate asymmetries in the knowledge and resource base that local outlets can dedicate to reporting on engagement with authoritarian regimes, creating a vacuum in local reporting that authoritarian state media outlets seek to fill through direct and indirect means.
 - **Knowledge Sector:** Authoritarian regimes’ sharp power initiatives in the knowledge sector aim to compromise the systems that facilitate the exchange of ideas, while appropriating knowledge-generating institutions, to the extent that they are permitted to do so, as their own platforms of influence. Shrinking space for independent intellectual inquiry within authoritarian settings such as China, Russia, Turkey, and Hungary has had significant international repercussions.
 - **Technology:** The globally connected digital environment gives authoritarians a means to extend their reach into open societies. Technological innovations and platforms that are developed within open, democratic settings feature considerable vulnerabilities of their own, but an additional threat arises from the rapid diffusion of new platforms that were incubated within authoritarian settings. The authoritarians have become purposeful in their development of technology and the ways in which it is structured and employed. Democracies must be similarly purposeful in crafting rules for emerging technologies that are informed by their own governing principles.
 - **Commerce:** Like all corruption, authoritarian corrosive capital is enabled by a lack of strong legal safeguards and robust accountability and transparency mechanisms. The sharp power effects of corrosive capital generally take the form of “elite capture,” enabling the “repurposing” of local institutions into “instruments of foreign influence.” The authoritarians’ recipe for exercising sharp power through corrosive capital relies not on huge amounts of money, but on strategically focused agreements with well-connected elites and in specific sectors.
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RECOMMENDATIONS

A response from the full spectrum of institutions within open societies is essential. Governments may be best suited to respond to certain aspects of the sharp power challenge. The methods of authoritarian interference that are covert or coercive may call for the employment of law enforcement or regulatory instruments. But government alone cannot craft an effective defense against the diverse forms of influence that have taken shape in recent years.

- Civil society—broadly understood—is a crucial part of democracies’ competitive advantage over authoritarian states.** In this new environment, a range of actors in the nongovernmental sector—including but not limited to media, universities, publishers, and technology and entertainment firms—must develop strategies for resilience that reinforce standards of openness, accountability, and institutional integrity. Any number of these institutions are increasingly suffering from the effects of sharp power, necessitating a more affirmative and purposeful response.
- Autocrats’ divide-and-conquer methods must be met with democratic unity.** A central feature of authoritarian governance is the divide-and-conquer approach to exercising power. The leaders of critical institutions in democracies should coordinate with one another rather than attempt to grapple with authoritarian pressure on their own. To avoid being exploited as a tool of sharp power, private-sector firms must consider adopting business strategies that do not permit authoritarian regimes to induce the revision of public statements, the sanctioning of employees, the alteration of maps, and the like. The failure to do so will result in a downward spiral of standards that will bolster the autocrats’ strategic advantage.
- In the technology sphere, democracies need to stimulate a race to the top.** Given the degree to which modern technology is shaping the political landscape, democracies must deepen efforts to encourage free expression, integrity of information, and essential privacy safeguards. Platforms that build in surveillance or censorship mechanisms contribute to manipulation of the information environment. We are at an inflection point when it comes to standard setting for powerful emerging technologies. It falls to democratic societies to shape norms concerning the design and use of technology that will protect the free exchange of ideas while also requiring accountability and adherence to human rights.
- Civil society can help address persistent political-literacy gaps regarding China and Russia.** Surge capacity for local civil society expertise is critical to addressing the surprising success of authoritarian sharp power in established and emerging democracies alike. A civil society sector that is knowledgeable on and alert to the risks of engagement with global authoritarian powers can contribute to greater transparency and informed policymaking, and ultimately serve as a vital line of defense that reinforces the institutional integrity of democracies.
- Today’s challenges cannot be viewed as either purely domestic or purely external.** Given the extent to which democracies and autocracies are tethered to each other in key domains such as commerce, education, media, and technology, the challenges to democratic governance that have emerged in recent years can no longer be seen as either entirely domestic or entirely foreign in character. Therefore, refreshing and strengthening critical democratic institutions internally, on the one hand, and safeguarding them from the compromising or corrosive influence of external authoritarian powers, on the other, are not mutually exclusive exercises. In fact, both are at risk of failure if they are not designed to be mutually reinforcing.

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- **Democracies of all stripes have a stake in this struggle.** But if better resourced, more established democracies cannot achieve essential reforms to resist authoritarian influence, it bodes poorly for their more vulnerable counterparts around the world. The reports in this series identify weaknesses in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Bolivia, Nigeria, Portugal, and Serbia. Open societies everywhere are more interconnected with, and vulnerable to, authoritarian systems and ideas than at any other point in the post–Cold War era. Democracies at different levels of development—and at different stages of awareness—will need to share information and expertise in new ways.
 - **Democracies must shift from an awareness-raising phase to more concerted action.** Media and civil society groups play a crucial role in raising public awareness and informing and educating broader constituencies about the nature and tactics of authoritarian influence. In recent years, first-rate research and monitoring efforts have been undertaken to measure the extent of the challenge, and to put important information into the public domain. These efforts are necessary, but insufficient. As the reports in this series observe, an active response is taking shape in certain sectors. For instance, media outlets, civil society groups, and technology enterprises are finding innovative ways to rebuff Beijing’s sharp power intrusions in the media sphere. The countries with the most advanced civil society efforts to investigate, report on, and build understanding about the nature and forms of sharp power, such as Australia, Taiwan, and the Czech Republic, have arguably made the most progress in this respect. Successful measures in individual countries must now be accelerated and scaled up in a concerted fashion by other democracies.

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The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. Each year, NED makes more than two-thousand grants to support the projects of nongovernmental groups abroad who are working for democratic goals in more than a hundred countries. Since its founding in 1983, the Endowment has remained on the leading edge of democratic struggles everywhere, while evolving into a multifaceted institution that is a hub of activity, resources, and intellectual exchange for activists, practitioners, and scholars of democracy the world over.



ABOUT THE FORUM

The International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a leading center for analysis and discussion of the theory and practice of democracy around the world. The Forum complements NED's core mission—assisting civil society groups abroad in their efforts to foster and strengthen democracy—by linking the academic community with activists from across the globe. Through its multifaceted activities, the Forum responds to challenges facing countries around the world by analyzing opportunities for democratic transition, reform, and consolidation. The Forum pursues its goals through several interrelated initiatives: publishing the *Journal of Democracy*, the world's leading publication on the theory and practice of democracy; hosting fellowship programs for international democracy activists, journalists, and scholars; coordinating a global network of think tanks; and undertaking a diverse range of analytical initiatives to explore critical themes relating to democratic development.

