



Emerging Global Challenges to Democracy: Countering Authoritarian Influence

New and emerging challenges to democracy have arisen in recent years that are driving political developments in countries around the world. Amid global shifts in the information, financial, and technological landscapes, autocrats have found ways to weaponize new digital capabilities and cross-border ties. Democracy's supporters must develop new local responses to these globally driven challenges associated with rising authoritarian powers that are moving with extraordinary speed. To begin addressing the systemic drivers of change, democrats need to cultivate new forms of collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and innovation.

The Challenge:

Authoritarian powers have mobilized and emerged as active and purposeful transnational forces that are influencing societies of all types. They are using massive resources and coordinated political efforts to chip away at the rules-based international institutions that have served as the glue for the post-Cold War liberal order. The focus of such corrosive efforts is not simply to defend authoritarianism at home but to denude the international norms that stigmatize such governance. Around the world, a growing number of societies are paying a price for the excesses of unchecked authoritarian power. Today's authoritarianism finds its most ghastly expression in Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine.

Over the past decade and a half, authoritarian powers have intensified their repression at home and sought to project greater influence globally. Two major powers in particular, China and Russia, have led the way in adapting their methods for a new era. Other such powers, for instance Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela, are flexing their muscles internationally. To some extent, they all interact with states around the world in ways that bolster kleptocratic cliques, undermine rule of law, corrode the media environment, and leverage technology in service of autocracy. Their networked, cross-border influence operations aim to prevent the emergence of democracy where it does not yet exist and subvert it where it does.

State of Play:

Until recently, democracies underestimated the scope of authoritarians' ambitions and their ability to exploit asymmetries in the global environment. The autocrats have proven adept at exploiting transnational flows of money, technological know-how, and information to their advantage.

China has claimed a larger role on the global stage and has sought to promote its own preferred ideas, norms, and approaches to governance. The regime in Beijing and others like it understand the importance of ideas, which explains why they work so hard to try to prevent the emergence of alternatives within their own systems and contest the meaning of democratic values at multilateral institutions.

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From the Wagner Group in sub-Saharan Africa, to corrosive Russian state media in multiple languages and regions of the world, to the menacing of neighboring countries, Moscow makes its presence felt in deeply damaging ways. China, meanwhile, sets the gold standard for repression at home and its leadership is pursuing vision for global order that is at odds with principles of human rights and democracy. China and Russia alike have built out formidable global-media infrastructures, which increasingly collaborate with media enterprises in democracies and autocracies alike in order to disseminate friendly messages about their regimes and block critical coverage. Authoritarian powers' compromising activities in the media, but also in such sectors as education, commerce, and technology, amount to a constant probing of a given democracy's integrity. The emerging threat involves not simply curbing of speech and manipulating information, but the proliferation of technological norms and systems that reinforce authoritarian actors and practices across a whole range of areas, including the application of digital methods of control to physical spaces.

Principles for Response:

Strengthen Resilience by Leveraging Civil Society. A vibrant civil society is both a critical aspect of democracies' competitive advantage and necessary to address the multifaceted nature of the authoritarian challenge. When engaging with foreign partners, the Chinese party-state and its proxies prefer to work with executive-branch elites. This state-oriented approach enables a culture of secrecy and corruption. The leaderships of China and other authoritarian powers seek to sideline nongovernmental voices in decision making processes, whether in bilateral relations or international organizations. For these reasons, it is essential to strengthen civil society capacity to respond to the evolving authoritarian challenge. In open societies especially, coordinated response from leaders of critical nongovernmental institutions such as media, universities, anti-corruption initiatives, and technology enterprises is integral for strengthening resilience against the authoritarian influence across domains.

Address Knowledge and Capacity Gaps. Persistent gaps in political literacy regarding China and Russia's efforts frequently limit democratic response. 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 it can ultimately serve as a vital line of defense that reinforces the institutional integrity of democracies. New, interdisciplinary networks should be

developed in individual countries to act as knowledge hubs for accelerating learning and adaptation. By cooperating with civil society, media, and watchdog organizations, these hubs should bridge cognitive gaps among the general public, sharing knowledge beyond narrow communities of analysts.

Promote Democratic Collaboration and Learning. Collaboration among democracies at different levels of development and awareness is critical for safeguarding institutions in both well-resourced established democracies and their more vulnerable counterparts. Authoritarian powers are collaborating and learning; the democracies must do so as well.

Reaffirm Support for Democratic Principles. Democracies and their citizens must not lose sight of their own democratic principles when Russia and China actively seek to fuel doubts about democracy as a successful form of government, often by exploiting preexisting fault-lines in democratic societies. Leaders in the democracies must speak out clearly and consistently on behalf of democratic ideals and put down clear markers, including in organizations such as the UN, regarding acceptable standards of democratic behavior. Otherwise, the autocrats will fill the void.

Additional Resources:

Combatting Beijing's Sharp Power: In [a set of Journal of Democracy essays](#), John Fitzgerald details how [civil society in Australia and Chinese Australians](#) were among the first to push back against Chinese interference in Australian politics and public life; Ketty Chen writes that Taiwan has long been the biggest target of Beijing's political and information manipulation, and [Taiwanese civil society has pioneered methods](#) for defending against it; and Martin Hála explains how, despite Beijing's efforts at intimidation and manipulation, [democracies in East Central Europe have blunted the impact](#) of such influence efforts by systematically investigating and exposing them.

Identifying Democratic Weak Points: Reports from the [Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience Series](#) highlight vulnerabilities in institutions of open societies related to media and information, knowledge generation, technology, and commerce. An overview report with key findings can be found [here](#).

Understanding the Breadth of Authoritarian Influence: A [Forum report](#) examines Chinese and Russian influence in four young democracies in Latin America and Central Europe—Argentina, Peru, Poland, and Slovakia. In addition to offering evidence of malign influence operations, it highlights key steps to address efforts by authoritarians to manipulate and undermine democracies.