

WINNING THE BATTLE OF IDEAS

EXPOSING GLOBAL AUTHORITARIAN NARRATIVES
AND REVITALIZING DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Democracies are engaged in an ideological competition with autocracies that could reshape the global order. Narratives are a potent, asymmetric instrument of power, as they reframe events in a way that conforms to and propagates a particular worldview. They have the potential to shift relations between society and the state as well as between individual states and broader coalitions.

Over the past decade and a half, autocracies like Russia and China have led the effort to disseminate authoritarian narratives globally, becoming more explicit in their efforts to normalize authoritarianism as an equally viable and legitimate form of government. While employing different tactics, the regimes in both Beijing and Moscow promote authoritarian narratives as a vital tool to amplify their influence, project the inevitability of their desired outcomes, and reshape the international landscape in ways that disadvantage democracy.

Rather than selling authoritarianism as such, authoritarian narratives focus on themes that have popular appeal—while attributing a wide range of visceral grievances to the shortcomings of democracy. Authoritarian narratives fall into four broad categories:

1. **Noninterference, Choice, and Threats to Sovereignty:** Narrative attempts to invoke universal themes such as sovereignty, noninterference, and choice which are presented as under threat from the spread of democracy.
2. **Exploiting Grievances in the Global South:** Tactics designed to attribute the numerous grievances in the Global South to exploitation by the West.
3. **Democracies Failing to Deliver:** A narrative that takes aim at the efficacy of democracy and, by implication, amplifies the ill-informed narratives about effectiveness of authoritarian governance.
4. **Need for a New World Order:** Collectively, the claims of Western interference, exploitation, and governance failures are intended to generate disillusionment with democracy and receptiveness to nondemocratic rule.

Autocrats use a variety of channels to disseminate these preferred narratives at scale. The four following methods are particularly noteworthy:

1. **Social Media:** Authoritarians have taken advantage of the enormous—and still growing—social media sphere to promote narratives legitimizing autocracy. They exploit many users' limited digital literacy skills through information influence campaigns and the employment of bots and online “troll farms” to peddle their preferred worldview.
2. **State Broadcasters:** Authoritarian actors also disseminate narratives through state media like RT, Sputnik, Xinhua, and China Global Television Network (CGTN). These outlets have the tone and imprimatur of an official news service, giving them a veneer of credibility that expands their reach.
3. **Partnerships with Local Media:** Authoritarian state-backed outlets aim to embed their content within national information environments. By disseminating preferred narratives through local media outlets and training foreign journalists, authoritarian actors are able to propagate norms of state control over the public information sphere.
4. **Foreign Media Cooptation:** Finally, authoritarian states are forging partnerships with other state broadcasters. These relationships have the indirect effect of incentivizing self-censorship and enable the intimidation of journalists and activists who criticize authoritarian leadership.

Democracies have often been reticent to assert the value of their own governance system, leaving authoritarian powers to fill the resulting vacuum. Democracies cannot assume that the superiority of participatory models of governance is self-evident. In order to retake the initiative, democracies need to “play the winning hand they have” and articulate a positive vision of democratic principles and international relations.

Such a strategy would have five main imperatives:

1. **Elevate Democracy as an Organizing Principle for International Relations:** Democracies need to prioritize support for democratic processes, democratic norms, and countries undergoing democratic transitions.
2. **Articulate a Positive Vision of Democracy and a Democratic World Order:** Democratic actors should not rest on the assumption that the efficacy of democracy is well recognized; they must make the public case for democracy to help inoculate audiences against the appeal of authoritarianism.
3. **Challenge Claims of Authoritarian “Performance Legitimacy:”** Democratic governments, civil society groups, and media need to remind audiences that democracies have a stronger track record of economic and human development progress, even among low-income countries—and they need to articulate the numerous weaknesses of autocratic systems.

4. **Foster Cultures of Democratic Self-Correction:** Democracies should sustain citizen engagement and civic education to foster a constructive democratic culture and to empower citizens to challenge authoritarian narratives.
5. **Building Healthy Information Ecosystems to Counter Manipulation:** Democracies and civil society networks need to invest more in building journalists' skillsets, reinforce standards for professional journalism, and expand support for the technological and infrastructural requirements of media outlets in the Global South so that they are not so reliant on autocratic sources of support.

At root, authoritarian narratives are essentially attempts to reframe an unappealing authoritarian value proposition by making the democratic path seem less attractive and offering authoritarianism as an alternative model. To counter authoritarian narratives about Western exploitation, democratic failure, and a new world order based on multipolarity and noninterference, democracies need to reemphasize their core principles while reminding audiences of democracy's moral, developmental, and security advantages.

THE EXPANDING REACH OF AUTHORITARIAN NARRATIVES

The military coups that swept through West Africa over the past several years have been justified by a pernicious narrative that democracy failed to deliver on its promises of freedom, security, and the rule of law.

This narrative, at times voiced by youth carrying identical placards of the Russian flag and repeated by a myriad of analysts and journalists, represents one of the core messages advanced by authoritarian regimes with global reach. Their aim is to foster citizens' disillusionment with democracy and the normalization of authoritarian practices.¹

As the coups themselves illustrate, more than seventeen years of declining global freedom have created momentum not just for more aggressive rationalizations of authoritarian rule, but also for more extreme authoritarian outcomes, with narrative and action reinforcing one another.

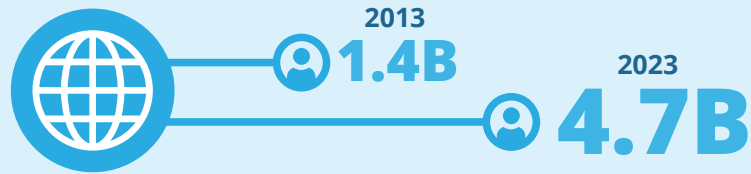
An estimated 4.7 billion people around the world now use social media platforms, up from 1.4 billion ten years ago.² This expansion of social media usage has created an unprecedented opportunity for authoritarian powers to reach global audiences at marginal cost, and to distort national information environments and perceptions about the efficacy of democracy while boosting the appeal of authoritarian alternatives.

Narratives are a potent, asymmetric instrument of power, as they reframe events in a way that conforms to and propagates a particular worldview. They have the potential to shift relations between society and the state as well as between individual states and broader coalitions.³ **While employing different tactics, the regimes in both Beijing and Moscow promote authoritarian narratives as a vital tool to amplify their influence, project the inevitability of their desired outcomes, and reshape the international order in ways that disadvantage democracy.**

In Latin America, for example, the Russian state broadcaster RT sows doubt among its fourteen-million daily viewers that democracy is the optimal governance model, providing ideological cover to antidemocratic leaders in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, and El Salvador.⁴

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Increase in the number of people using social media worldwide



Note: These figures represent estimates. Source: ASMM Digital

In Eastern Europe, Kremlin-backed narratives have undermined confidence in the media, political institutions, and objective truth with the aim of stoking societal distrust in the democratic process in Bulgaria, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, among others.⁵

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has tried to use narratives to shift global governance norms away from popular political participation and respect for human rights, and toward deference to dominant-party political systems.

CCP general secretary Xi Jinping has elevated the policy of “discourse power” as a national priority. In a May 2021 speech to the party’s Central Committee, he explained that China must take control of the narrative with its international communications, enabling its “foreign friends” to be the “top soldiers of propaganda.”⁶

“Building a [global] community with a shared future” is a favorite CCP slogan aimed at promoting Beijing’s model as legitimate, rules-based, and win-win.⁷ In Asia, the Chinese government seeks to build partnerships through narratives of shared victimhood at the hands of Western imperialism and the threat of “external powers” who cause trouble and sow division in the region.⁸ This messaging is coupled with themes on the inevitability of China’s rise, minimizing resistance to its norms.⁹

The CCP invokes the principles of “noninterference” and “state sovereignty,” while criticizing U.S. democracy for having “far too many checks and balances.”¹⁰ Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi alluded to these principles in an address to the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum, contending that “whether or not a country is democratic and values human rights is up to itself to decide.... China and Middle Eastern countries should firmly follow their own path.”¹¹ Of course, the authorities in Beijing and in other authoritarian capitals afford no such choice to their people.

While Moscow and Beijing have led the effort to disseminate authoritarian narratives globally, regional actors like the regimes in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela have regularly reinforced the same themes.

The paradox is that nearly all citizens in the societies targeted by these authoritarian narratives aspire to more freedom, public influence over politics and policymaking, and popular sovereignty.¹²

REBRANDING AUTHORITARIANISM AS NONINTERFERENCE AND MULTIPOLARITY

Threatened by their growing political and ideological isolation amid the global spread of democracy in the 1990s and early 2000s, authoritarian leaders have since ramped up their efforts to undermine the appeal and viability of democracy. Preserving and expanding the number of authoritarian governments also has the functional goal of enlarging the cohort of receptive partners for global authoritarian influence.

Building on the democratic backsliding of the past decade and a half, which these narratives have facilitated, Moscow and Beijing have become more explicit in their efforts to normalize authoritarianism as an equally viable and legitimate form of government.¹³

Rarely do authoritarian narratives take the form of open appeals to authoritarianism. Such is the allure of freedom, popular self-determination, inherent individual rights, transparency, government accountability, and multiparty competition that even the CCP touts its one-party governance model as “democracy with Chinese characteristics” or “democracy that works.”¹⁴ Russia under Vladimir Putin likewise maintains a façade of democracy by holding periodic elections, even if they are heavily manipulated. Like all modern authoritarians, the leaders in these two countries are trying to claim the mantle of democratic legitimacy without actually gaining popular endorsement or respecting fundamental freedoms.

Instead of trying to sell authoritarianism as such, authoritarians’ narratives focus on themes that do have popular appeal—while imputing a wide range of visceral grievances with democracy. These narratives fall into four broad categories:

1. Noninterference, Choice, and Threats to Sovereignty

The first category of narrative attempts to invoke universal themes such as sovereignty, noninterference, and choice,¹⁵ which, incongruently, are presented as under threat from the spread of democracy. By focusing on the autonomy of the state rather than the individual, these arguments shrewdly portray ruling parties as the defenders (and interpreters) of their nations’ freedom from foreign interference. In practical terms, this narrative strain asserts that it is up to the ruling party to set its own rules with regard to respect for human rights, political participation, and the selection of national leaders. Any condemnation of human rights violations is thus redefined as “interference.”

Authoritarian actors sometimes package such messages as a defense of “traditional values,” appropriating cultural symbols of strength and masculinity while associating democracy and concerns about human rights with weakness and femininity.¹⁶

Instead of trying to sell authoritarianism as such, authoritarians’ narratives focus on themes that do have popular appeal—while imputing a wide range of visceral grievances with democracy.

2. Exploiting Grievances in the Global South

A second category of global authoritarian narrative aims to attribute the numerous grievances in the Global South to exploitation by the West. Despite the many complex factors contributing to these grievances, such simple framing can gain traction in settings where poverty and economic disparity persist.

CCP narratives in Latin America, for example, smear support for democracy as a form of neo-imperialism. According to this theme, democracy assistance originating in the United States or Western Europe precipitated the “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe and Eurasia as well as the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, bringing “chaos and disasters to many countries, gravely undermining world peace, stability and development.”¹⁷ Conjuring the specter of imperialism in this way also helps to deflect attention from ongoing Russian and Chinese expansionism, as seen in Ukraine and the South China Sea, respectively.

Designating democracy as a foreign imposition enables authoritarians to label democratic leaders in the Global South as Western proxies, undermining these leaders’ genuine legitimacy. It similarly taints local prodemocracy activists seeking more open, responsive, and accountable governance. In effect, such framing denies any agency to local politicians, activists, and citizens.

This genre of authoritarian narrative attempts to tap into highly emotive issues to mobilize popular support against a given political target. A vivid example is the Kremlin’s use of latent resentment toward France’s colonial legacy and continued influence in West Africa—sixty years after the formal end of colonial rule—to undercut the legitimacy of incumbent national governments. Not coincidentally, most of the governments targeted have been democratic leaning, including four—in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger—that subsequently succumbed to military coups. The leading international patron (and beneficiary) of the new military juntas, in turn, has been Moscow.¹⁸

3. Democracies Failing to Deliver

A third category of authoritarian narrative takes aim at the efficacy of democracy. Democratic systems are depicted as divisive, chaotic, and unstable. Protests, an accepted form of popular expression and an important means for holding governments accountable in democracies, are portrayed as signs of discord and anarchy. A stark formulation of this narrative is that citizens face a binary choice between democracy and stability.

Similar messaging is promulgated on the topics of crime and corruption. In democracies, a free press, civil society activists, and opposition parties draw attention to these problems in order to raise public awareness and stimulate corrective measures. Authoritarian propagandists exploit that healthy exposure to paint a picture of moral decline, threats to personal safety, and the breakdown of law and order.

Amplifying corruption in democracies is also a form of authoritarian projection—distracting attention from the fact that transparency and accountability, long recognized as central to combating corruption, are largely absent in authoritarian systems.¹⁹

Some CCP narratives stake a claim to authoritarian “performance legitimacy,” suggesting that authoritarian systems prove their worth by achieving practical results—while avoiding the dysfunctions associated with democracy—justifying their lack of political and civil rights.

4. Need for a New World Order

Collectively, the claims of Western interference, exploitation, and governance failures are intended to generate disillusionment with democracy and receptiveness to nondemocratic rule. They are also framed as validation for a new, undefined international order.

The new order narrative is paired with seemingly innocuous calls for multipolarity in global affairs. Beijing and Moscow, despite the fact that they directly shape the current international system as permanent members of the UN Security Council, offer themselves as an “alternative” source of leadership, pledging to stand up against the “domineering” rules-based conventional wisdom promoted by Western powers. They disseminate such appeals to global pluralism even as their domestic political structures depend on suppressing individual rights and diversity of thought and expression.

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MANY AUDIENCES, DIFFERENT MESSAGES

Variants of these authoritarian narratives are crafted to target specific audiences around the world, with the mutually reinforcing goals of empowering local authoritarians and sowing doubt about democracy’s ability to address pressing challenges.

The most obvious beneficiaries are incumbent or would-be authoritarians who can use the narratives, wrapped in nationalist and populist rhetoric, to advance their claims on power. **This practice underscores a key aspect of global authoritarian narratives—they nearly always have willing domestic advocates and collaborators who can employ them opportunistically to narrow the space for democracy.**

Authoritarian narratives also target general populations in democratizing countries to shape the information space and undermine confidence in the utility of democratic processes. They soften public resistance to what begin as brazen restrictions on freedom, such as obstructing opposition party rallies, criminalizing criticism of public officials, harassing independent media outlets, or politicizing law enforcement and the military.

In societies living under authoritarian or semiauthoritarian rule, these narratives cast prospective transitions to democracy as treacherous and destabilizing—with the aim of deterring popular pressure for reform. At the very least, they give pause and inhibit collective action for broader political participation.

Fearmongering about democracy in the Global South seeks to characterize democratic governance as a foreign construct that is being imposed from the outside. Building on a long-standing relativist trope that democratic values are incompatible with the needs and cultures of the developing world,²⁰ this narrative persists despite being refuted repeatedly as offensive to human equality and the legacies of pluralism and public life in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.²¹

Another target audience for authoritarian narratives are international media outlets, which can serve to cultivate perceptions of superior authoritarian performance and stability, and the notion that authoritarian powers' rise to global leadership is inevitable.²² Such narratives in the international media also reinforce the view that extraconstitutional and exclusionary political practices are simply the way things are done “in other parts of the world.” Thus, coups are tolerated in Africa. Compromised judiciaries are normalized in Eastern Europe. The stripping of full citizenship rights from members of ethnic or religious minorities is accommodated in Asia. Moreover, fraudulent elections are recognized in Latin America and elsewhere.

PLATFORMS FOR ADVANCING AUTHORITARIAN NARRATIVES

Many of the world's new social media users access major platforms from their mobile phones and have never owned a computer or television. Most have limited digital literacy skills and may be ill-equipped to filter out malign influence and information campaigns. If their societies lack a preexisting, trusted, independent source of information, they will be particularly vulnerable to social media scams, deceptive messaging, and conspiracy theories.

One tool authoritarian actors have used to exploit this vulnerability is state-sponsored troll farms—orchestrated networks of paid professionals and automated “bot” accounts that populate social media and internet fora with fake online profiles, disseminate false messaging, share content to give the impression that it is popular, harass those who hold opposing views, and erode trust in mainstream media. Such practices weaken democracies by interfering with citizens' access to reliable information, drowning out dissent and promoting polarization simultaneously.²³

Over the years, authoritarian trolling campaigns have become more sophisticated by engaging troll farms in third countries and local influencers who are better connected to contextually relevant issues, sensitivities, and colloquialisms, which also makes it more difficult to trace their origin.²⁴



Cyber mercenaries

One group boasted of having interfered in **32 elections** and “succeeding” **27 times.**

Authoritarian narratives are increasingly outsourced to so-called “cyber mercenaries” who advance authoritarian messages for a fee—again obscuring their origin. One group boasted of having interfered in 32 elections around the world, and “succeeding” 27 times.²⁵ Research by Oxford University’s Computational Propaganda Project indicates that this group is just one of about 65 such cyber mercenary outfits.²⁶

Global authoritarian narratives are also disseminated through state media like RT, Sputnik, Xinhua, and China Global Television Network (CGTN). These outlets have the tone and imprimatur of an official news service, giving them a veneer of credibility that expands their reach.

Such state outlets aim to embed their content within national information environments. In Central Asia, well-resourced Beijing-backed media entities seek to make national outlets dependent on Chinese financing, content, and production capacity, ultimately promoting positive views of the CCP and crowding out critical messages.²⁷ In Uganda, millions of viewers of the Ugandan Broadcasting Corporation are exposed to several hours of RT content per day, reportedly in exchange for up to six Russian-made military helicopters.²⁸

CGTN, which operates under the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP, has seventy news bureaus around the world—more than any other news broadcaster—dedicated to “reporting the news from a Chinese perspective.” Over fifty percent of the stories on CGTN Español’s main newscast, for example, are related to China.²⁹ China Radio International (CRI) has been particularly effective at gaining local audiences. CRI Facebook pages in Bengali, Hausa, Kiswahili, Sinhala, Tagalog, and Tamil each have more than a million followers.³⁰

The free content that resource-constrained media outlets in the Global South can access from Chinese broadcasters enables Beijing to shape the public discourse in many countries.³¹ The CCP conducts annual trainings for an estimated one thousand journalists from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East as a starting point for ongoing relationships. The sessions propagate norms of party control over the public information sphere and journalistic deference toward government officials.³²

Chinese entities also provide the communications infrastructure to support national broadcasters in various countries worldwide. In Pakistan, Beijing has reportedly attempted to leverage this arrangement by establishing a “nerve center” to monitor and shape Pakistan’s information space.³³ Buying foreign media companies, in whole or in part, is a rapidly expanding element of the CCP’s communications strategy.³⁴ These investments have the indirect effect of incentivizing self-censorship when it comes to criticism of the CCP. The phenomenon is actively reinforced through intimidation of journalists who do publish critical coverage.³⁵

The CCP has a dedicated institutional bureaucracy, called the United Front Work Department, tasked with advancing the party's narratives on governance, human rights, and China's benign role in the world.³⁶ Working overtly and covertly through hundreds of thousands of people and organizations that are not officially affiliated with the CCP, the United Front creates an echo chamber of positive perspectives about China. The result is to soften the authoritarian giant's image globally and to seemingly show popular support for the CCP's governance model and expanded influence.³⁷

Some authoritarian narratives are institutionalized within multilateral fora. In the UN Human Rights Council, for example, Beijing has engineered the passage of a resolution that shifts the definition of human rights away from the political and civil liberties of individuals and toward "collective rights" and the "right to economic development."

The CCP further operationalizes its narratives through multilateral bodies like the World Internet Conference, the International Organization for Standardization, the International Electrotechnical Commission, and the International Telecommunication Union, where it can influence standards related to information and communication technology.³⁸ In organizations such as the South-South Human Rights Forum, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and BRICS, Beijing is advancing concepts such as a "harmonious world" (as an alternative to democratic accountability, transparency, and the rule of law), the "democratization of international relations" (moving away from a UN-based international system), and "diversity and tolerance" (challenging the normative superiority of democracy).³⁹ In each of these concepts, the emphasis is on relations between states, with a presumption that governments will enjoy impunity for acts of violence, oppression, and intolerance within their own borders.

AUTHORITARIAN NARRATIVES BOLSTER AUTHORITARIANS

Advancing global authoritarian narratives, unsurprisingly, goes hand-in-hand with advancing individual authoritarian governments. The latter, in turn, provides further local access and seeming credibility to the former. For example, while the CCP institutionalizes its narratives within the UN Human Rights Council, Beijing and Moscow have attempted to defund human rights investigations of authoritarian regimes in Belarus, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, and Syria.⁴⁰ The two regimes have similarly used their seats on the UN Security Council to block sanctions on other authoritarian governments that have engaged in repressive actions against their citizens.

Advancing global authoritarian narratives goes hand-in-hand with advancing individual authoritarian governments.

Helping fellow authoritarians gain and then keep power expands the influence of the leading authoritarian actors while increasing the junior partners' reliance on their global patrons.⁴¹

Another means by which global authoritarian narratives tilt the playing field in favor of authoritarian governments is illustrated by the Kremlin's active involvement in electoral interference. Moscow has engaged in concerted malign influence campaigns, the funding of ruling political parties, and intimidation of political rivals—a pattern of attacks on democracy that has been observed in two dozen African countries in recent years.⁴²

Partly as a consequence of these global authoritarian interventions, countries that were once on a democratic path now have regimes that support authoritarian narratives vociferously. International media and analysts may then unwittingly, and erroneously, present the new leaders' pronouncements at face value, as reflections of the will of citizens, the stability of authoritarianism, and the failure of democracy.

HOLDING A MIRROR UP TO AUTHORITARIAN NARRATIVES AND ARTICULATING A POSITIVE DEMOCRATIC VISION

Authoritarian narratives are essentially attempts to reframe an unappealing authoritarian value proposition by making the democratic path seem less attractive and offering authoritarianism as an alternative. To counter authoritarian narratives about non-interference, Western exploitation, democratic failure, and a new world order based on multipolarity, democracies need to reemphasize their core principles while reminding audiences of democracy's moral, developmental, and security advantages.⁴³

Such a strategy would have five main imperatives:

1. Elevate Democracy as an Organizing Principle for International Relations

Democracies are engaged in an ideological competition that will affect the contours of the future global order, and they need to prioritize support for democratic processes, democratic norms, and countries undergoing democratic transitions. They have been less willing to undertake such support in recent years for a variety of reasons, including reluctance to appear hubristic, recognition of democracy's shortcomings, and the need to address a series of near-term financial, security, and health crises. Many, understandably, also want to avoid a Cold War-style division of the world into hostile camps.

Yet democracies' reticence to assert the value of their own governance system has contributed to an information vacuum that authoritarian powers have filled, allowing them to redefine democracy as an ineffectual and unstable model.

Democracies must recognize that their economic prosperity, security, and ability to mount collective responses to a whole host of transnational challenges are integrally linked to the vibrancy of other democracies. While democratic leaders have often advocated for the expansion of democratic practices, democratic societies need to commit more political, financial, and security capital to support governments whose leaders come to office through democratic means.

Policies that accommodate foreign leaders who retain power through repression, even when such accommodation seems to be justified on national security grounds, provide an easy entry point for influence by authoritarian powers with global reach. To recalibrate their priorities, democratic governments will have to reinvest in diplomatic corps that can

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uphold democratic norms vigorously and build strong relationships, both at international fora and in countries throughout the Global South where much of the normative competition over governance is taking place.⁴⁴

Democracies will also have to stand steadfastly with democratic actors facing extraconstitutional threats. Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao of Timor-Leste captured this sentiment in explaining why his small country has been such a stalwart supporter of the democracy movement in Myanmar despite political repercussions: “Among small, fragile nations, all we have is our solidarity.”⁴⁵

Solidarity among democracies and democratizing countries is different from the transactional Cold War rivalry, which frequently resulted in both sides competing for the temporary allegiance of autocrats. **This is not a short-term battle for access or influence. Rather, it is about sustaining a global coalition of governments and societies committed to popular participation, freedom of expression, freedom of thought and belief, and the rule of law.** These shared principles should serve as the foundation for ongoing, mutually beneficial partnerships and a basis for North-South cooperation.

2. Articulate a Positive Vision of Democracy and a Democratic World Order

Authoritarian narratives are most likely to gain traction when they operate in a space that features little critical examination. Democratic actors should not cede this information space on the assumption that the efficacy of democracy is well recognized, nor should they fear the digital backlash from authoritarian trolls. **By making the public case for democracy, advocates will leave audiences around the world better informed and help inoculate them against the siren calls of authoritarianism.**

Democratic voices from a diversity of settings need to remind audiences that democracies are better guarantors of basic freedoms—speech, the press, assembly, religion, due process, and the right to vote. Likewise, democracies offer more opportunities for addressing citizen grievances like corruption, impunity, and lack of dignity.

Given that leaders who come to power through undemocratic means are more susceptible to cooptation by major authoritarian powers, democratic governance also provides citizens with safeguards against state capture and foreign domination.

A positive democratic narrative should advance a vision for a rules-based, democratic world order with all its attendant benefits. Democracies have a superior ability to collaborate and find compromises to address transnational challenges.⁴⁶ Such a positive vision would foster hope and inspire citizens to push back against the apathy and cynicism authoritarian narratives often engender.⁴⁷

A positive democratic narrative should advance a vision for a rules-based, democratic world order with all its attendant benefits.

This vision should recognize existing problems and catalyze action to improve the current global system. It should be juxtaposed with the outcomes that an authoritarian world order would deliver. Authoritarian narratives have touted the need for an amorphous “new” world order. Billed as benign and multipolar, it is in fact an effort to reinstitute an old, pre-United Nations order that was transactional, allowed powerful countries to pursue imperial ambitions with impunity, and lacked any accountability for governments’ domestic human rights violations.⁴⁸

This democratic vision must be articulated through practical illustrations and engaging storytelling that resonates with the experiences of national audiences. For example, the Russian military’s invasion of Ukraine—and particularly its direct attacks on Ukrainian grain shipments destined for the Global South—demonstrates the extent to which authoritarian regimes contribute to a more lawless and less prosperous world. Beijing’s constant pressure on the territorial integrity of India, Bhutan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, and others similarly undercuts the authoritarian narrative that democracies and their values are standing in the way of international harmony and respect for national sovereignty. China’s predominant role in illegal and unregulated fishing in Asia, Latin America, and Africa is a further illustration of what this alternative, authoritarian world order would look like.

3. Challenge Claims of Authoritarian “Performance Legitimacy”

An essential premise of authoritarian narratives is that authoritarian governments are better than democracies at providing security. The deal authoritarians ostensibly offer is that citizens can realize greater stability by giving up their liberties. To counter authoritarian narratives, democracy advocates need to expose this fallacy.

It is well established that autocracies are much more prone to conflict.⁴⁹ In fact, they are often the instigators of inter-state hostilities—seen vividly in the Kremlin’s unprovoked attack on Ukraine. They are also more subject to civil unrest, which is frequently the result of exclusive power structures that leave citizens with no peaceful means of addressing grievances. Autocracies are, similarly, far more susceptible to financial crises and sudden economic contractions, given their lack of checks and balances, antipathy to transparency, and tendency to prioritize leaders’ narrow interests over the general welfare of societies.⁵⁰

Democratic governments, civil society groups, and media need to remind audiences that democracies have a stronger track record of economic and human development progress, even among low-income countries.⁵¹

The median Human Development Index ranking for democracies in developing countries is seventeen places higher than for autocracies. This figure translates to a 25 percent lower infant mortality rate and children attending two additional years of school, on average. Overall life expectancies are six years longer.

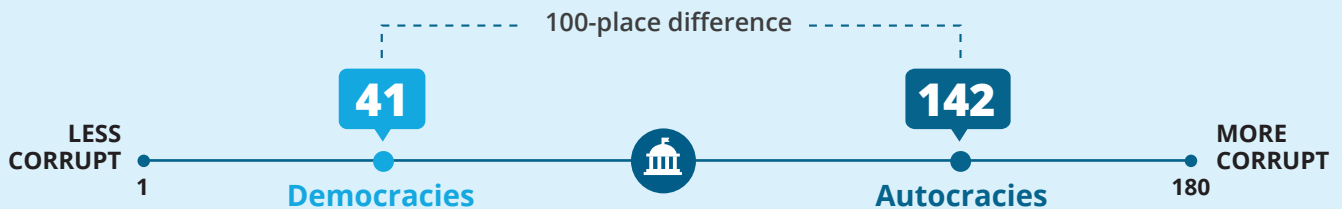
Compare the economies of democratic and authoritarian neighbors like South Korea and North Korea, Colombia and Venezuela, or Botswana and Zimbabwe.

There are tangible benefits to living under transparent, accountable governance.

This democratic vision must be articulated through practical illustrations and engaging storytelling that resonates with the experiences of national audiences.

Public corruption is a viscerally emotive topic for any society, representing a betrayal of citizens’ interests by those entrusted with public resources. This is one of the reasons that corruption features so prominently in authoritarians’ antidemocratic narratives. Yet the openness of democracies makes them institutionally better suited to expose and address corruption—a key argument to be made in countering authoritarian narratives. The median ranking for countries with authoritarian governments on Transparency International’s annual Corruption Perceptions Index is 142 out of 180 countries, while the median ranking for democracies is 41—a full one hundred-place difference.⁵² The performance gap has direct implications for social welfare, a vibrant private sector, and public trust.

Median Ranking for Autocracies and Democracies on Corruption Perceptions



Source: This graph is based on the data from Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (based on Transparency International’s 2022 survey). Please note: The median calculation is based on 180 countries. Democracy and autocracy designations are derived from categories of “Free” and “Not Free” countries in Freedom House’s annual Freedom in the World index.

A priority for journalists and analysts is to avoid unwittingly disseminating unsubstantiated authoritarian narratives. They will need to cultivate a more acute awareness of such pitfalls.⁵³ One important step would be to differentiate between autocracies that hold pro forma elections and countries that are genuinely pursuing a democratic path consistently.

There is also a need to ramp up civic education. Among other goals, civic education programs should focus on distinguishing between elite- and citizen-based systems. Global authoritarian narratives are effectively ruses designed to convince citizens that they will be better off if they accede to authoritarian rule. Democratic civic education must not only counter these falsehoods, but also enlist the public in self-advocacy, as authoritarian models are expressly focused on building and consolidating exclusive power structures. **In societies where a free press cannot operate, democratic civic education will depend on media outlets like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, independent national outlets operating from exile, online newscasts, and social media networks.**⁵⁴

4. Foster Cultures of Democratic Self-Correction

A vital distinguishing feature of democracies is that they require sustained citizen engagement to thrive. Part of the purpose of civic education, then, is to foster a constructive democratic culture—of participation, transparency, and coalition building—to empower citizens against authoritarian narratives.

While democracies tend to perform better, they still face many challenges. Citizens in low-income countries, in particular, confront a plethora of hardships—poverty, lack of opportunity, health threats, and insecurity. Moving onto a democratic path does not magically erase them. The openness of democratic societies, moreover, draws disproportionate attention to their shortcomings. Authoritarian narratives often exploit such openness. Yet recognizing deficiencies, far from being a weakness, is the first step to correction and improvement. Democratic narratives, therefore, should focus on the trendlines and not just the remaining challenges.

It is noteworthy that the military juntas that have seized power in parts of West Africa in recent years have justified their coups opportunistically by citing underdevelopment, corruption, and insecurity. Such pretexts should not go unchallenged. Scratching just below the surface, one finds that the brief periods of democratic progress in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea over the past decade yielded notably better economic outcomes than the previous decades of autocratic (typically military) rule.

Progress in low-income countries with weak democratic legacies was always going to be more challenging than in wealthier societies with higher levels of education and stable political environments. Rather than jumping on the bandwagon of democratic pessimism when challenges arise, citizens, journalists, analysts, and democratic partners should recognize that democracy offers a range of options for addressing genuine grievances between elections. Possible responses include civic activism to promote reforms, investigative journalism to press for accountability, passing legislation to strengthen independent oversight bodies like public protectors and ombudspersons, establishing rules to make judicial appointments more transparent and merit based, institutionalizing apolitical civil services, appointing national security task forces, and organizing protests, among other activities. Employing these levers of influence inside and outside of government is what enables democratic self-correction. By dissolving democratic constitutions, gutting democratic checks and balances, and suppressing dissent, military coups and other authoritarian interventions not only fail to address underlying grievances, but also destroy the very tools societies require to deal with them.

Refocusing the discussion on how democracies and democratizing countries can do a better job of responding to challenges will serve to blunt authoritarian narratives that weaponize the existence of such challenges as grounds for the suspension of political rights and civil liberties. Audiences should be reminded that antidemocratic responses compound a society's problems while leaving it less free to change course.

Part of the purpose of civic education is to foster a constructive democratic culture to empower citizens against authoritarian narratives.

5. Building Healthy Information Ecosystems to Counter Manipulation

Democracies rely on trusted public information spaces to function effectively, debate issues, and hold governments accountable. The effects of information manipulation in democracies, accordingly, are particularly pernicious—and one of the reasons they are often targeted by authoritarian narratives and information operations.

It is imperative that democracies ramp up their capacity for detecting authoritarian malign influence, awareness of which is often limited by a lack of trained experts who can identify and expose the relevant campaigns, actors, and narratives. Building coalitions of local journalists, researchers, and fact checkers with the necessary skills is a critical step in this process. It requires enhancing forensic capabilities and successfully prosecuting cyber mercenaries who attempt to undermine democracy and foster social polarization.

The threat of authoritarian malign influence promulgated through authoritarian narratives is greatest in undeveloped information environments that lack trusted media platforms and fact-checking organizations. These environments can be overwhelmed quickly by torrents of authoritarian-backed information operations that play up real and fabricated grievances. Public figures in democracies often widen the breach for authoritarian narratives by gratuitously attacking the trustworthiness of credible news organizations.

Local media and civil society actors are most familiar with their contexts and the narratives that resonate. **Given that governments may be the beneficiaries of global authoritarian narratives, media and civil society will often need to take the lead in countering them.** Still, funding to build and support these counter-malign influence initiatives is woefully inadequate, stymieing both a robust response and the sharing of lessons among experts in this field.

Making information environments less permissive to authoritarian narratives also requires more capable and trustworthy media outlets. There are numerous courageous and talented journalists in developing democracies, but the caliber and consistency of journalism varies widely, and outlets often lack the financial autonomy they need to thrive. Moreover, the CCP is sponsoring an alternative set of journalistic norms grounded in subservience to the ruling party.

Democracies and civil society networks need to invest more in building the skillsets of journalists as well as reinforcing standards for professional journalism. Democracies should also expand support for the technological and infrastructural requirements of media outlets in the Global South so that they are not so reliant on Chinese support, which may come with strings attached.

AN ALIGNMENT OF INTERESTS AND VALUES

The rise of digital communications and the growing boldness with which authoritarian powers are seeking to reshape global governance norms have together given authoritarian narratives an unprecedented reach worldwide. These narratives are part of a campaign to disrupt the rules-based global order and reshape it into something more conducive to authoritarian rule.

While perceived short-term security or economic interests lead democracies to accommodate and partner with certain authoritarian governments regularly, democratic policymakers need to understand that a global landscape with shrinking numbers of democracies poses direct threats to security and economic progress. Since authoritarians are less responsive to the public will, less concerned with shared principles, and less bound by treaties or the rule of law, a global tilt toward authoritarianism creates major obstacles for the sort of consistent cooperation required to address transnational challenges.

The world's democracies need to recognize the breadth of authoritarian efforts to promote their preferred narratives and the traction they have gained. Democracies cannot assume that the superiority of participatory models of governance is self-evident. If they do, they risk exacerbating an informational vacuum that authoritarian powers have been happy to fill.

Democracies should articulate a positive democratic message to support the progress of democratizing countries and counter the distortions created by global authoritarian narratives.

Democracies have important advantages in this battle of narratives. Most vital is the nearly universal aspiration of people around the world to live in freedom. Even amid the escalation of authoritarian influence operations, democracies continue to be seen as more intrinsically desirable. Thus, the regimes in China, Russia, and other authoritarian states persist in describing themselves as democracies. **Claiming to be something that you are simultaneously trying to undermine is hardly a compelling strategy—and it reveals the inherent insecurity of authoritarians in the ideological marketplace. To expose this weakness, however, democracies need to play the winning hand they have.**

Democracies should articulate a positive democratic message to support the progress of democratizing countries and counter the distortions created by global authoritarian narratives.

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