



PROJECT MUSE®

Documents on Democracy

Journal of Democracy, Volume 29, Number 1, January 2018, pp. 180-184 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0017>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/683648>

DOCUMENTS ON DEMOCRACY

China/Russia

On December 6, the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies convened a half-day conference to launch its new report, "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence." (See p. 187 below.) The report assesses Chinese and Russian efforts to influence the media, culture, and academic spheres in young democracies, and proposes a new conceptual vocabulary to define this variant of nonmilitary power. Excerpts from the report appear below:

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. . . .

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. . . .

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.

Zimbabwe

Following a tumultuous week defined by Robert Mugabe's detention by the military and his expulsion from the ZANU-PF ruling party, Mugabe announced his resignation from the presidency on November 21 after 37 years of uninterrupted rule. On November 24, Vice-President Emmerson Mnangagwa delivered his inaugural address as interim president, calling for a new era of internationalism and growth. Excerpts from his address appear below:

For close to two decades now, this country went through many developments. While we cannot change the past, there is a lot we can do in the present and future to give our nation a different, positive direction. As we do so, we should never remain hostages to our past. . . .

Our country is all ready for a sturdy reengagement program with all the nations of the world. . . . Whatever misunderstandings may have subsisted in the past, let these make way to a new beginning which sees us relating to one another in multi-layered, mutually beneficial ways as equal and reciprocally dependent partners. In this global world, no nation is, can, or need be an island, one unto itself. Isolation has never

been splendid or viable; solidarity and partnership are and will always be the way. . . .

I encourage all of us to remain peaceful, even as preparations for political contestations for the next year's harmonised elections gather momentum. The task before us is much bigger than competing for political office. Let us all play our part to rebuild this great country.

Concurrent with the leadership transition, more than 4,000 delegates from a coalition of Zimbabwean civil society organizations convened in Harare and issued a declaration calling for free elections and human rights. In a November 28 letter drawing on Mnangagwa's inaugural pledges, the newly formed National People's Convention urged Mnangagwa to consider the declaration's recommendations as he begins a new period of governance. Excerpts from this letter appear below:

We write on behalf of the National People's Convention (NPC) made up of churches, nongovernmental organizations, labour unions, residents organizations, women's movements, and youth organizations. . . .

We welcome your undertaking "to serve our country as the President of all citizens." We strongly identify with your goal to "preside over a polity and run an administration that recognizes strength in our diversity as a people." In our view, your commitment to inclusivity would best be epitomized by the formation of an inclusive government. . . .

In this regard, we believe that a well thought-out transitional period and mechanism would offer the nation sufficient time to establish a conducive environment for free, fair, and credible elections. Our first election in this new dispensation should therefore be open to all citizens, including those in the diaspora. As a first step, it is therefore critical that existing electoral laws and bodies be aligned to the 2013 Zimbabwean Constitution. . . .

Whilst we join the nation in celebrating the heroic roles that the war veterans played in the liberation of our country and during the recent solidarity marches to call for political change, we contend that the true legacy of our country's history of struggle is that which enables women and youth as well as other vulnerable groups to enjoy the fruits of freedom and to be shapers of the future of our country. . . . We therefore call upon your administration to adopt policies and programmes for the socioeconomic and political empowerment of women.

In order to achieve industrialization and food security, we need to deal with both the mindsets and behaviors that are inimical to national progress. In particular, there is need to curb primitive accumulation as well as conspicuous consumption. . . . Economic recovery and the provision of adequate jobs and social services are highly dependent on our collective ability to combat corruption and illicit financial flows. . . .

We see this as a season for nation building and honest introspection. Whilst human agency has been key in our unfortunate recent political his-

tory, there are systemic issues that we must collectively address as a nation. . . . We stand ready to support your Administration's efforts to achieve sustainable and value-based national healing and reconciliation by lending our existing infrastructures, competencies, and social capital.

United Kingdom

On November 13, British prime minister Theresa May delivered the keynote address at the annual Lord Mayor's Banquet in London, underscoring Britain's commitment to the preservation and defense of the rules-based international order. Excerpts appear below:

We meet here at a moment when the international order as we know it—the rules based system that the United Kingdom helped to pioneer in the aftermath of the Second World War—is in danger of being eroded.

A moment when some states are actively destabilizing the world order to their own ends, claiming that the rules and standards we have built, and the values on which they rest, no longer apply. When regional instability is driving cross-border threats such as Islamist extremism and fuelling conflicts to which many ask whether the rules based order has an answer.

A moment when the failure to translate the success of global trade into growth that benefits everyone is weakening support for the free markets and open economies that have driven global prosperity for generations. And when the rules of the game for this century are increasingly being shaped by emerging economies and powerhouses in the East.

So as we reach out into the world and write this new chapter in our national history, the task of a global Britain is clear: To defend the rules based international order against irresponsible states that seek to erode it. To support our partners in regions of instability in repelling the threats they face and to back their vision for societies and economies that will prosper in the future and play a positive role in the world. To harness for a new generation the dynamism of open economies to deliver fair and equitable growth. And in doing so, to build a new consensus in support of free markets and fair societies that may be the greatest long-term defense against division, tension and conflict. . . .

The comprehensive new economic partnership we seek will underpin our shared commitment to open economies and free societies in the face of those who seek to undermine them. Chief among those today, of course, is Russia.

In a recent speech, President Putin said that while the interests of states do not always coincide, strategic gains cannot be made at the expense of others. When a state fails to observe universal rules of conduct and pursues its interests at any cost, it will provoke resistance and disputes will become unpredictable and dangerous. I say to President Putin, I agree. But it is Russia's actions which threaten the international order on which we all depend.

I want to be clear about the scale and nature of these actions. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea was the first time since the Second World War that one sovereign nation has forcibly taken territory from another in Europe. Since then, Russia has fomented conflict in the Donbas, repeatedly violated the national airspace of several European countries, and mounted a sustained campaign of cyber espionage and disruption. This has included meddling in elections, and hacking the Danish Ministry of Defense and the Bundestag, among many others. It is seeking to weaponize information. Deploying its state-run media organizations to plant fake stories and photo-shopped images in an attempt to sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions.

So I have a very simple message for Russia. We know what you are doing. And you will not succeed. Because you underestimate the resilience of our democracies, the enduring attraction of free and open societies, and the commitment of Western nations to the alliances that bind us.

Russia

On October 30, the annual commemorative day for victims of Soviet repression, Russian president Vladimir Putin unveiled the country's first memorial to those subjected to Soviet-era abuse. In a statement released the following day, more than thirty former political prisoners and dissidents condemned the government's attendance to historic repression as it pursued repressive tactics against Russians today. Excerpts from the statement appear below:

As former political prisoners and participants in the Democratic Movement in the Soviet Union, we consider the opening in Moscow of a monument to the "victims of political repression" to be untimely and hypocritical. A monument is a tribute to the past, yet acts of political repression in Russia not only continue—they are increasing.

In sponsoring the opening of the monument, the present Russian regime is pretending that acts of political repression are a thing of the distant past: the victims of such political repression, therefore, may be commemorated. . . . We cannot mourn the past, while hypocritically closing our eyes to the present. We cannot divide the victims of political repression into those who have earned a monument and those whom we do not yet recognize. . . .

There is no doubt that a monument to the victims of political repression should be erected in Moscow. That can only happen, however, when there are no more political prisoners in the country, when their jailers and executioners have been punished, and when acts of political repression cease to be the subject of news reports, instead becoming a matter for historical study alone.