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Fighting for a Democratic Future

Authoritarian Advance: How Authoritarian Regimes Upended Assumptions about Democratic Expansion

by LAURA ROSENBERGER

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, democracies again face a struggle against authoritarianism. This is not the ideological battle of the Cold War, but it is a confrontation between systems of government. As democracies are showing cracks and as authoritarian regimes are gaining strength, the global balance of power is beginning to shift to a world where authoritarian regimes are setting rules for new global challenges, especially in information, technological, and in some cases economic spaces. Using economic and technological tools once thought to be democratizing forces, authoritarian regimes are undermining and eroding democratic institutions while enabling the growth of more authoritarian governance systems. Illiberalism and authoritarianism are on the march at the expense of liberal democracy.

At the same time, policymakers assumed that technological developments and trade and investment would pierce the veil of authoritarian states. U.S. President Bill Clinton famously said in 2000 that China trying to crack down on the Internet was "like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall." In 2005, U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair told reporters after meeting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that "The whole basis of the discussion I have had in a country that is developing very fast – where 100 million people now use the Internet, and which is going to be the second-largest economy in the world – is that there is an unstoppable momentum toward greater political freedom."

But Russia and China had other ideas. These regimes continued to see democracy as a threat to their power, and invested in means to halt this march toward freedom. They understood earlier than democratic leaders that technology could be harnessed for control and manipulation, developing tools to constrain, surveil, and insidiously shape the views of their populations using information and technology, bolstering their power. And they and took advantage of market asymmetries and non-transparent Western financial practices to gain leverage and consolidate power.

Russia harnessed tools of surveillance with Soviet roots to monitor telecommunications traffic and Internet traffic within its borders. Its System of Operational-Investigatory Measures (SORM) enables

the Federal Security Service to collect, analyze, and store all forms of communication that pass over Russian networks.[1] Russia also uses information-warfare tactics online to control and manipulate public perception in support of the regime: the now-infamous Internet Research Agency originally targeted domestic audiences, when it first began posting to Twitter in 2009.[2]

Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has shown that apparently Jell-O can be nailed to the wall. Its Great Firewall of a censored Internet is now supplemented by indigenous platforms and apps that allow it to police its users' activities online, shaping their information reality and tracking their daily routines.[3] This is combined with an artificial-intelligence-powered system of surveillance and facial recognition that monitors offline activities, enabled by cameras that dot every corner of Chinese cities. The CCP has used this system most aggressively in the Xinjiang region, where it monitors and manipulates nearly all aspects of Uyghurs' lives and has put large numbers of Uighurs in "reeducation camps" for perceived disloyalty the regime.[4] And a tech-powered system of "social credit," backed by all of this data, is currently being rolled out nationwide.[5]

Leaders in Moscow and Beijing have also manipulated markets to fortify their own power. The CCP has developed a directed form of state-backed market economy, and exploited asymmetries between its system and the international economic system in which it was welcomed to gain favorable positions for its companies and interests. Rather than greater economic openness generating a push against the

party-state for political freedoms, the party-state has instrumentalized its corporate entities, using them as a means not only for economic growth, but also for coercive political leverage and to cultivate influencers. [6] President Vladimir Putin and his cronies used the privatization period in Russia to enrich themselves at the expense of the Russian people, and now rely on the Western financial system to protect these ill-gotten gains, employing a kleptocratic patronage system that bolsters Putin's power and enriches his inner circle.[7]

Exporting Authoritarianism

Increasingly, these regimes are turning these tools of coercion outward to push back on democracy and enable the spread of illiberalism and authoritarianism in order to advance their own interests. Extending the means of control they have developed at home allows them to fortify that power within their borders and without. And the erosion of institutions inside democratic countries along with a retreat in U.S. global leadership has provided these regimes with soft targets.

Putin's kleptocratic regime has developed a network of patrons across Europe, spreading corruption that weakens democracies from the inside.

In the case of Putin's Russia, this manifests in a strategy of undermining democracies as a means of weakening them to gain relative power and diminish their appeal at home. Seeing vulnerabilities in democracies as opportunities to boost his position, Putin has turned his information weaponry outward, using his intelligence apparatus and proxies to exploit divisions and weaknesses to create chaos and damage democratic governments and institutions across the transatlantic space. Putin's kleptocratic regime has developed a network of patrons across Europe, spreading corruption that weakens democracies from the inside and helps Putin to maintain power. The

1   Maréchal, Nathalie. "Networked Authoritarianism and the Geopolitics of Information: Understanding Russian Internet Policy." Media and Communication 5, no. 1 (March 22, 2017): 29–41. p. 33-4; Lewis, James Andrew. "Reference Note on Russian Communications Surveillance." Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 18, 2014.
2   Howard, Philip, et al. "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018." Oxford: Computational Propaganda Research Project, 2018. p. 9.
3   "China's Algorithms of Repression | Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App." Human Rights Watch, May 1, 2019.
4   Buckley, Chris, and Paul Mozur. "How China Uses High-Tech Surveillance to Subdue Minorities." The New York Times, May 22, 2019.
5   Mozur, Paul. "Inside China's Dystopian Dreams: A.I., Shame and Lots of Cameras." The New York Times, October 15, 2018.

6   Feng, Ashley. "We Can't Tell If Chinese Firms Work for the Party." Foreign Policy, February 7, 2019; Mitchell, Tom. "Xi's China: The Rise of Party Politics." Financial Times, July 25, 2016.
7   Dawisha, Karen. Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia? New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015.

former president of Freedom House, David Kramer, rightly observed that "corruption is Putin's biggest export," noting that is possible only because Western democracies import it, eroding good governance and facilitating Putin's efforts to make democracies look more like his kleptocracy.[8] Russia also uses state-owned companies, particularly in the oil and gas sectors, to create and exploit dependencies, cultivate influencers, and coerce governments to adopt policies favorable to Moscow.[9]

For its part, China aims to remake global rules to be more favorable to it, while legitimizing its system of government – what many have characterized as "making the world safe for China." While the CCP's end goal may not be weakening democracies, that is the effect of its actions. These include: undermining the rules-based order, including by consistently ignoring those rules; using coercive tactics, including engaging in political interference in democracies; and leveraging state-backed capital to make governments more dependent on Beijing while distorting markets. China under President Xi Jinping has also recognized the importance of "act[ing] aggressively to shape cyberspace at home and on the global stage."[10] This also helps it shape standards and norms for the technologies and information architecture of the future. The CCP is increasingly turning the tools of control it developed at home outward – censoring discussion beyond its borders on indigenous platforms such as WeChat,[11] and using a cyber-attack tool that some have dubbed the "Great Cannon" to conduct denial-of-service assaults to silence its critics overseas.[12]

The Chinese Communist Party is increasingly turning the tools of control it developed at home outward.

Furthermore, the techno-authoritarian systems of surveillance and control that the CCP has deployed internally are being exported to other countries – sometimes in the form of "Smart Cities" or other seemingly commercial high-tech deals.[13] These deals are not simply about shipping the technology – they often include training for government officials on how to use its capabilities as the CCP does, shaping the behavior of officials in other countries and providing them Beijing's means of control. Of course, these technological exports are not just about commercial gain. They create dependencies on PRC technologies, which provides leverage that can be deployed for other purposes, and provide data to Beijing that enables its continued technological drive. They also shape norms around the use of such technologies, supporting the development of systems that look more like China's, which contributes to legitimizing the CCP's system of government. As the *New York Times* reporter Paul Mozur has observed, by exporting its systems of surveillance and control, the Chinese party-state "become[s] the axle, and all of these different places become the spokes in this wheel, the new version of global governance, a new alternative to the messy democracies of the past."[14]

Avoiding an Authoritarian Future

The combined effect of these tactics is the weakening of democracies from within and without, and a global creep of illiberalism and authoritarianism. Russia's exploitation of internal vulnerabilities to sow division and accelerate dysfunction within western democracies creates space for an authoritarian model that is increasingly shaping openings in the global system. And China's increasingly assertive foreign policy, growing political and economic heft, and focus on technological development is shaping markets and governance outside its borders. Many of these emerging technologies will shape and govern our daily

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8   Kramer, David. Remarks at conference: "The New Tools of Authoritarian Influence." The German Marshall Fund of the United States. Berlin, Germany. May 14, 2019.

9   Alliance for Securing Democracy and C4ADS. "Illicit Influence – Part Two – The Energy Weapon." April 25, 2019. https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/illicit-influence-part-two-energy-weapon/

10   Segal, Adam. "When China Rules the Web." Foreign Affairs, September/October 2018.

11   Chen, Lulu Yilun. "WeChat Censoring Messages Even Outside China, Study Says." Bloomberg, November 30, 2016.

12   Marczak, Bill, et al. "China's Great Cannon." Toronto: Citizen Lab, April 10, 2015.

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13   As the *New York Times* recently reported, "Under President Xi Jinping, the Chinese government has vastly expanded domestic surveillance, fueling a new generation of companies that make sophisticated technology at ever lower prices. A global infrastructure initiative is spreading that technology even further."

14   Mills, Andy, et al. "The Chinese Surveillance State, Part 1." The Daily. The New York Times, May 6, 2019. Remarks by Paul Mozur.

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by Laura
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lives – online and offline – in some cases defining the information architecture and societal structures of the future. When authoritarians define the systems, rules, and standards that constitute and govern that architecture, the information domain will be more authoritarian and less democratic by design. As Council on Foreign Relations' scholar Adam Segal has observed, if China succeeds in its endeavors, it will "remak[e] cyberspace in its own image. If this happens, the Internet will be less global and less open. A major part of it will run Chinese applications over Chinese-made hardware. And Beijing will reap the economic, diplomatic, national security, and intelligence benefits that once flowed to Washington."

The implication of these trends is that democracies are now battlefields, data is power, and the information space is a domain of battle. Putin's Russia and the CCP have recognized the way they can exploit vulnerabilities in democracies and use technology to strategic ends. Information warfare of this kind poses inherent challenges to democracies while advantaging regimes that rely on control and manipulation. Democracies, however, have not yet grasped the magnitude of this challenge. This recognition - acknowledging that a new systemic challenge has already begun – must be the first step in an effective response.

The democratic response needs to remain consistent with democratic values and involve humility and a powerful push for renewal. We must jettison the illusions that democracies are self-perpetuating and certain victors, or that technology and greater trade and investment inherently favor democratic growth. This will require more than tweaking around the policy edges.

First, we need to recognize where this battle is playing out and show up. Standards-setting processes for technologies like 5G and artificial intelligence may seem technical and niche, but they will play a critical role in defining the information architecture of the future. China has taken a strategic approach to these processes and institutions, sending large and well-connected delegations to standards-setting bodies. It has recognized that shaping these requirements and guidelines can

not only provide it commercial and geopolitical advantage, but also allow it to more easily spread its indigenous information platforms, molding rules and norms for the information space.[15] The battle is also happening in countries across Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, and even Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, where China's increasingly assertive investments are providing an attractive option in spaces where the United States has pulled back. The United States must renew its global leadership, working closely with allies in Europe and Asia. When it pulls back from parts of the world, this creates space for others to fill.

Second, democracies need to present a competitive offer. Critical to competing is reinvesting in ourselves. That means renewing our democratic purpose through civic education and investing in

We must jettison the illusion that technology and greater trade and investment inherently favor democratic growth.

infrastructure and our education system more broadly. It also means resourcing basic technological research that goes beyond the commercially driven incentives of private companies. Democracies need to recognize the vulnerabilities and weaknesses that have made them less responsive to citizens' demands, driven polarization, and opened space for alternative systems. Outdated institutions need to be updated to reflect the 21st century, and strengthened from within. In the financial space, this includes eliminating non-transparent practices like anonymous shell companies that enable kleptocracy and corruption. We need to show internally and externally that democracy produces results that benefit people, and not just politicians or corporations. This also means providing a clear alternative – understanding that nationalist responses or closing ourselves off in response to threats plays into authoritarians' hands – while improving public diplomacy to underscore our strengths while bursting the bubble on the false narrative authoritarians are shaping.

Third, we need to update our institutions to meet the challenges of

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15   Kania, Elsa. "China's Play for Global 5G Dominance – Standards and the 'Digital Silk Road.'" Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 27, 2018; Segal, 2018.

today. Borders and distances no longer protect against many of the threats democracies face, and the battle is not just for territory but for minds, putting unwitting citizens on the front lines in information battles. The boundary between foreign and domestic security issues has been blurred, and in many cases interior and finance ministries, not defense ministries, play a critical role in winning these fights. Democracies need to not only update and restructure their government institutions to close gaps and seams, but also adopt whole-of-nation approaches, with coordination across government agencies, between the public and private sectors, and with civil society.

Finally, sustaining a global system that supports democracies and closes space for authoritarian expansion requires democracies to work together. This starts with remembering who our friends are, and prioritizing those relationships and the values that underpin them. Democracies need to share lessons with one another, prevent the formation of fissures between us, and bolster liberal democracies that are under threat.

Thirty years ago, democratic movements across Europe succeeded in their struggle for freedom against a formidable force. To avoid a future where those gains are lost, we need to remember the inherent strengths of democracies. Democracy is not self-perpetuating, and reinvesting in it is the best way to ensure its continuation in the decades to come.