

Democracy Disruption: The Second Wave of Global Authoritarianism

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Introduction

In recent years, many analysts and scholars have argued that a second wave of global authoritarianism has emerged in contrast to the first wave which involved authoritarian regimes cooperating with each other, learning from each other, and stemming off democratic challenges as a means of supporting authoritarian regime survival. These analysts and scholars argue that the second wave is distinct in that authoritarian regimes—especially China and Russia—have now globalized authoritarianism beyond fellow autocratic regimes and are now engaged in undermining democracies with the intention of fostering authoritarian norms. In addition, this second wave is different by way of the coercive tools used to achieve these ends, namely ‘sharp power.’ While it is clear that the second wave of global authoritarianism is distinct from the first wave given the new focus on undermining democracies through the use of coercive measures (e.g. censorship, manipulation, and co-optation), it is not evident that the ultimate goals of such global strategies are rooted in authoritarian ideology. In his work on autocracy promotion, Oisín Tansey argues that there is no irrefutable evidence that the second wave is driven by a core desire to promote authoritarian norms and ideology for their own sake.¹ However, the second wave is not completely devoid of normative dynamics either.

In the second wave, authoritarian regimes are using coercive tools to undermine democracies with the intention of countering the normative global hegemony of liberal democracy. But, while the desire to make authoritarianism seem more normatively acceptable on the global stage is a new phenomenon in the second wave, this normative strategy is simply a means to strategic and material ends, which includes regime survival and the desire to better compete globally. In a sense, the second wave represents the recognition by authoritarian powers that autocratic regime survival and competitiveness in a world dominated by the norms of liberal

¹ Oisín Tansey, “The Problem with Autocracy Promotion ,” *Democratization* 23 (2016).

democracy require global strategies that weaken such normative hegemony. Thus, this paper characterizes the second wave as ‘democracy disruption’ rather than ‘autocracy promotion’ because while the strategy of disrupting the normative global hegemony of democracy is new, the core motivations and ultimate goals remain strategic and material. Authoritarian regimes are simply taking advantage of the great power competition in an increasingly multipolar world by altering the normative playing field for non-normative (i.e. strategic and material) ends. Therefore, in order to understand and assess the threat that this second wave of global authoritarianism and the emergence of ‘sharp power’ pose to democracies and democratic norms globally, it is imperative that this ‘democracy disruption’ characterization is adopted.

The Second Wave: Undermining Democracies via Coercive Measures

In contrast to the first wave of global authoritarianism which focused on strategies pursued among fellow autocracies, the second wave is clearly distinct and compelling in that it involves targeting and undermining democracies using new coercive measures characterized as ‘sharp power.’ Most notably, the actions of China and Russia in recent years clearly demonstrate a new wielding of influence in countries of all governance forms, with a budding emphasis on democracies.² Through employing the tactics of sharp power, China and Russia have been actively seeking to undermine and corrode the integrity of democratic countries and institutions with the intention of eroding the resilience of liberal democracy on a global scale.^{3 4} This transition away from the first wave’s sole focus on strengthening authoritarianism within autocrats’ own regimes or fellow authoritarian regimes represents a form of authoritarian learning in a sense; after learning how to control political ideas and norms within authoritarian

² Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, “The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020).

³Ibid.

⁴ Andrew Foxall and John Hemmings, “The Art of Deceit: How China and Russia Use Sharp Power to Subvert the West” (Henry Jackson Society, December 19, 2019).

countries, these regimes are now adapting such methods to manipulate discourse and normative perceptions abroad, especially in democracies.⁵ China and Russia especially have developed strategies of political and informational manipulation once used among autocracies—either their own regimes or fellow authoritarian regimes—and applied them to democracies.⁶ For example, China’s use of censorship domestically is now employed in strategic ways within democracies, while Russia’s media-manipulation that was once primarily used to undermine its elections in favor of Putin are now strategically utilized to manipulate discourse and elections in democracies.⁷ Thus, the literature on the second wave is quite compelling in that there has been an evident shift from solely bolstering autocracies to now undermining democracies.

In addition to the shift in the regime types of target countries involved in global authoritarianism, the second wave is compellingly distinct from the first in the new coercive tools employed for such target countries. Such tools, defined by the literature as ‘sharp power’ are inherently new and necessary for influence operations within democracies, which means that their relative nascency is linked to the recent shift toward undermining democracies. In the seminal report by the National Endowment for Democracy in 2017 which introduced the ‘sharp power’ concept, the authors argue that the ‘sharp’ description refers to the fact that such tools seek to “pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments of targeted countries.”⁸ This necessity to pierce and penetrate is new to the second wave precisely because of the new target of democracies; when engaging in authoritarian cooperation and anti-democracy assistance, such secretive and invasive techniques are not necessary due to the

⁵ Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018).

⁶ Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, “The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018), 12.

welcomed nature of such influence operations, further proving the ‘sharp power’ concept compelling.

Sharp power is distinct in that it involves a severe level of censorship, manipulation, and co-optation within democracies that is not seen in the first wave.⁹ Censorship is the first tool employed by sharp power within democracies in order to establish authoritarian influence. Such a strategy is most notably associated with China since a main focus of its influence operations is to discourage challenges to its preferred presentation of the country by suppressing reporting and ideas critical of the country (e.g. human rights abuses) and encouraging reporting and ideas supportive of it (e.g. successful state-led/anti-democratic development).¹⁰ The second tool that makes the second wave and sharp power a compelling argument is manipulation, which is characterized by the elements of distraction and stealth integral to sharp power actions. For example, much of Russia’s sharp power actions work by manipulating the public conversation within democracies by distracting such populations of its influence through the stoking of domestic polarization and turning citizens within democratic populations against each other.¹¹ In addition to distraction, both Chinese and Russian sharp power efforts rely on an aspect of camouflage to cloud their strategies and intentions. In its methods of co-optation, China disguises state-directed influence projects as commercial opportunities. Russia, as exemplified by its use of manipulation and distraction, is stealthy in that it convinces populations within democracies that the real threat is domestic political opponents, pushing local actors to engage in polarizing and inflammatory rhetoric that supports its foreign propaganda efforts.¹² Lastly, a unique and compelling aspect of the sharp power argument is that foreign influence efforts

⁹ Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence” (National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017).

within democracies engage sub-nationally, involving an overlap of the tools of censorship, manipulation, and co-optation.

In contrast to the first wave of global authoritarianism in which authoritarian regimes primarily engaged with fellow authoritarian governments in more or less consensual ways, sharp power is distinct in that when engaging with democracies, authoritarian regimes employ divide-and-conquer tactics that aim to isolate and subvert individual institutions, taking advantage of the competition inherent to democratic and capitalist societies.¹³ As a result of these sub-national methods, the second wave is compellingly distinct from the first in that the corrosive effects of such authoritarian influence are not limited to the government level, but are also felt in the spheres of business, media, and civil society.¹⁴ In the cases of both China and Russia, engaging with sub-national institutions is crucial to achieving their sharp power aims.¹⁵ While the aims of all of these sharp power tactics are not universally streamlined in the literature—and thus require further discussion later—the tactics themselves represent a compelling aspect of the second wave and sharp power argument presented by analysts and scholars. In its censorship tactics, China co-opts local individuals and institutions to support its influence operations. For example, in Australia, the Chinese government offers lucrative contracts to media companies with the stipulation that such companies suppress topics sensitive to China and promote positive ones.¹⁶ In New Zealand, China offers attractive commercial incentives—such as board positions—to former politicians in exchange for positive coverage of its interests, demonstrating another form of sub-national co-optation.¹⁷ Russia, on the other hand,

¹³ Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, “The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): pp. 124-137.

¹⁴ Christopher Walker, “Russian and Chinese Sharp Power,” *Financial Times*, July 8, 2018.

¹⁵ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence” (National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017).

¹⁶ Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018).

¹⁷ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence” (National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017).

engages sub-nationally primarily in other ways. Instead of employing co-optation to promote censorship and support for its interests, Russia engages in manipulation and disinformation within democracies to exploit domestic conflicts and tensions, which works to increase distrust in democratic institutions and norms.¹⁸

Overall, the utilization of these new coercive tactics in undermining democracies demonstrates that some aspects of the second wave and sharp power argument are notably compelling. In other words, there is general consensus and evidence that the second wave and its sharp power component are compelling in that autocracies are now exerting influence on democracies and are employing new coercive tactics to do so. However, while some of the aims of such influence operations were briefly noted here, the literature on the second wave and sharp power are not uniform and compelling in how these proximate tactics and dynamics support various goals. Thus, it is important to highlight the shortcomings of the second wave literature in relation to autocracies' supposed core motivations and aims—specifically the normative aspect—before presenting a streamlined argument as to how the second wave differs from the first in its use of intermediate normative means to achieve strategic and material ends.

The Second Wave: Not Autocracy Promotion, but Not Devoid of Normative Dynamics

A notable shortcoming and unclear dynamic involved in the second wave and sharp power literature is whether ultimate goals and motivations differ from those of the first. Some analysts and scholars argue that authoritarian regimes have the intention of fostering authoritarian norms in democracies, a marked contrast from the first wave. While this may be a new strategy, the altering of the normative playing field is simply an intermediate means, as will be explained in the next section. In terms of motivations, it is quite clear that the driving forces behind global authoritarianism have not become purely ideological as some analysts and scholars

¹⁸ Miro Popkhadze, “Standing Up to Russia's Sharp Power,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 2018.

have suggested. Oisín Tansey argues that there is little evidence of ideologically-driven autocracy promotion since the end of the Cold War, meaning that authoritarian regimes do not seek to promote autocracy in the way that many democratic countries seek to promote democracy (i.e. for its own sake/good). In addition, such autocracy promotion would stipulate that autocracies are trying to promote authoritarian *rule* in democracies, which is not seen, rather than the observed attempt to promote the acceptance of authoritarian norms among key actors.¹⁹

Although some of the second wave literature is not compelling in its assertion that authoritarian ideology is an ultimate goal or motivation, the sharp power literature that claims the tool to be devoid of any level of normative attraction is misguided as well. Walker and Ludwig write that this new form of authoritarian influence (sharp power) “is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; it centers on distraction and manipulation” and that involved authoritarian regimes “are not necessarily seeking to ‘win hearts and minds’ ... but they are surely seeking to manage their target audiences by manipulating or poisoning the information that reaches them.”²⁰ Such a characterization of sharp power and the second wave is somewhat misguided. Though sharp power relies on distraction and manipulation, these are simply tactics to coerce attraction primarily among the key actors within democracies (e.g. media, business, academia) in contrast to soft power which relies on less deceptive tactics to breed attraction. Thus, it is evident that ideology does not serve as a motivation or ultimate goal in the second wave, but it is also true that sharp power involves tactics to coerce normative attraction among key groups as an intermediate means to strategic and material ends.

¹⁹ Oisín Tansey, “The Problem with Autocracy Promotion,” *Democratization* 23 (2016): pp. 141-163.

²⁰ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence” (National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017), 6, 13.

Autocracies Altering the Democracy-Dominant Global Normative Playing Field as an Intermediate Means to Strategic/Material Ends

As discussed earlier, the second wave of global authoritarianism is distinct from the first in that autocracies are actively engaged in undermining democracies. However, in order to understand the second wave and the intentions of involved autocracies, it is important to view undermining democracies as a means, and not simply a goal in itself. In an increasingly competitive global landscape that remains dominated by the norms of liberal democracy, autocracies have recognized that surviving and thriving require more than engaging globally with other autocracies. In order to compete in the global arena, autocracies have to undermine democracies and democratic norms globally. Therefore, in the second wave, authoritarian powers such as China and Russia remain driven by strategic and material motivations and ends, but they now seek to reforge the established rules and norms of international politics—currently dominated by liberal democracy—in a manner that suits their preferences, i.e. to become relatively more accepting of authoritarianism.^{21 22} By making authoritarianism seem more normatively acceptable and making democracy seem less relatively attractive (in comparison to authoritarianism) through the use of coercive sharp power tactics, global authoritarian powers such as China and Russia seek to make global politics more conducive to their strategic and material ends.

Through its sharp power efforts in the second wave of global authoritarianism, China attempts to make its form of authoritarianism seem normatively acceptable to key actors through the use of censorship and co-optation to suppress negative perceptions of the country and

²¹ Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018).

²² Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, “The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): pp. 124-137.

promote positive ones.²³ Depending on the context, these efforts help China to portray itself either as a benign foreign power or influence, or as a successful example of non-democratic economic development ripe with opportunities.²⁴ Censorship is a key tool to help China alter normative perceptions because it allows the country to shape its international image.²⁵ In many African countries, the Chinese government is involved in manipulating the discourse surrounding the country's perception. For example, Chinese editors oversee stories in African media outlets that are sensitive to the CCP in order to paint the regime in a positive light, highlighting a form of direct censorship that negates criticism of the country and pushes positive coverage. By taking advantage of struggling media outlets in these countries and offering them support and resources, China is able to coerce such sources to frame perceptions in pro-CCP ways that work to improve the normative acceptability of Chinese authoritarianism. In addition to directly overseeing the publishing of African media outlets, the Chinese government also offers training to African journalists that emphasizes the achievements of the Chinese government, especially in the realm of development, which then in turn pushes these African journalists to report news and commentary from the CCP's perspective.²⁶

This strategy of media censorship is not only occurring in media outlets within developing countries, but also within established democracies such as Australia and New Zealand. Although the tactics in Australia and New Zealand may not be as effective in shaping normative perceptions since the censorship primarily targets Chinese-language media—rather than media meant for the general public as seen in African countries—such strategies demonstrate that China is attempting to control the information available to key actors in

²³ John Fitzgerald, "China in Xi's 'New Era': Overstepping Down Under," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018).

²⁴ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence" (National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017).

²⁵ Anne-Marie Brady, "China in Xi's 'New Era': New Zealand and the CCP's 'Magic Weapons,'" *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018).

²⁶ Christopher Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?", *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018).

established democracies, such as the Chinese diaspora. In Australia, the Shanghai Media Group—which is backed by the CCP—brokered a deal with the Australian Broadcasting Group which stipulated that the ABC eliminate news and content deemed objectionable to the CCP from its Mandarin-language service.²⁷ Chinese-language media outlets in Australia are enticed by deals with China-based media groups that offer them rich business opportunities.²⁸ Similar scenarios are playing out in New Zealand, where media sources partner with or source content from Chinese state media in exchange for lucrative business deals.²⁹ Such agreements represent sharp power in that the Chinese government coerces media outlets—sometimes by concealing the government control of Chinese media firms—within democracies to censor negative perceptions of the country and promote positive coverage in an attempt to improve the normative acceptability of the country. Further, in a range of other countries, Xinhua—the Chinese state-owned media outlet—maintains content-exchange agreements with underfunded media organizations in which it provides news and photos for free or at a lower rate than Western outlets in order to make the Chinese perspective on global events more normalized among public audiences.³⁰ All of these censorship strategies represent sharp power in that they attempt to promote a pro-CCP view of China and the world through manipulating foreign outlets with the intermediate goal of altering perceptions of China and thereby improving the normative acceptability of authoritarianism globally.

In addition to media censorship, China's sharp power tactics involve the co-optation of key actors within democracies with the goal of using these actors' cooperation and support to improve the normative acceptability of the country and its form of governance. Walker and

²⁷ Christopher Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?", *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018).

²⁸ John Fitzgerald, "China in Xi's 'New Era': Overstepping Down Under," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018).

²⁹ Anne-Marie Brady, "China in Xi's 'New Era': New Zealand and the CCP's 'Magic Weapons,'" *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018).

³⁰ Samuel Brazys and Alexander Dukalskis, "China's Message Machine," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 4 (2020).

Ludwig argue that “such new connections offer the prospect of greater prestige and access to resources” and that “currying goodwill and shaping the perspectives of key individuals” can alter policy and gain indirect access to wider audiences in order to shape their normative perspectives as well.³¹ In New Zealand, China seeks to further its strategic and material agenda by co-opting local elites and thus manipulating public discourse and perceptions. For example, China has promoted mergers, acquisitions, and partnerships with New Zealand-based companies so that these firms embrace a positive view of China and thus improve the local sway of the Chinese government and normative perceptions of its governance style. In addition, the Chinese government has offered high-level positions in CCP-tied entities to former New Zealand politicians in an attempt to build support for normative acceptance of the country.³² In Australia, China employs parallel strategies by offering lucrative consultancies and board memberships to former politicians in exchange for advocating China’s interests within Australia and abroad, thereby improving China’s normative acceptability.³³ While these sharp power actions may not improve normative perceptions of the general public (although this is certainly a goal), the strategy is effective in that it improves acceptability of an authoritarian regime among actors—such as corporations and public officials—who have significant global influence over the normative landscape.

Similar to the censorship and co-optation strategies utilized by China in the realm of media and business, China employs sharp power tactics in foreign academia. The most notable example of such is strategy is evident in Chinese Confucius Institutes around the world, which function as educational and cultural centers on foreign university campuses. Confucius Institutes

³¹ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence” (National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017), 19.

³² Anne-Marie Brady, “China in Xi’s ‘New Era’: New Zealand and the CCP’s ‘Magic Weapons,’” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018).

³³ John Fitzgerald, “China in Xi’s ‘New Era’: Overstepping Down Under,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018).

both censor criticisms of China and authoritarianism by preventing conversations surrounding topics sensitive to the CCP (e.g. Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang) and also emphasize positive views of the country and its governance style through the promotion of Chinese culture and values, such as non-democratic state-led development.^{34 35} By monopolizing ideas, suppressing critical narratives, and exploiting institutions and academics—many of whose careers depend on access to the country that is only made possible through CCP-stipulated cooperation—the Chinese government is able to improve the normative perception of the country and authoritarianism in a sector key to the framing of global governance norms: academia.^{36 37} All of these influence strategies employed by China in the realm of media, business, and academia highlight the sharp power intention to obscure. China aims to use such obscurity in order to make authoritarianism seem more normatively acceptable in the global arena as a means of improving its ability to compete and achieve strategic and material ends.³⁸ The other major global authoritarian power, Russia, similarly employs sharp power with the intent to obscure, but instead of making authoritarianism appear more normatively acceptable, Russia seeks to make democracies and democratic institutions seem relatively unattractive in comparison to its form of authoritarian rule in order to achieve strategic and material ends.³⁹

Throughout the second wave of global authoritarianism, Russia has employed sharp power tactics to attack the prestige of democracies and democratic institutions through negative framing and coverage, amplifying divisions within democratic societies, and interfering with

³⁴ Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, “Forget Hearts and Minds,” *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2018.

³⁵ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018).

³⁸ Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, “The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): pp. 124-137.

³⁹ Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, “Forget Hearts and Minds,” *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2018.

elections in order to make democracy appear relatively less attractive as a global norm, therefore improving Russia's ability to compete for strategic and material ends.⁴⁰ Similar to China's use of state-owned media (Xinhua), Russia uses the RT network as a form of sharp power. However, in contrast to Xinhua's promotion of favorable Chinese coverage, RT focuses its efforts on highlighting negative coverage of Western democracies and peddles conspiracy theories about democratic countries in order to attack the prestige of liberal democracy.⁴¹ By making Western democracies look fragile and chaotic, RT's coverage makes Russia and its supposed authoritarian stability look better by comparison.⁴² These efforts represent a framing attack on the prestige of democracies and democratic ideas that help to undermine the relative credibility of democratic institutions globally.⁴³ These narratives are able to tap into existing frustrations in democratic societies about their governance and is therefore effective even where Russia is viewed unfavorably. By employing these strategies, Russia does not need to convince democratic populations that its authoritarian system is appealing or acceptable in its own right. Through highlighting the negative aspects of democracy, Russia can convince these populations that it is a normal member of the international community and that its kleptocratic and authoritarian governance is no less valid than that of democracies. This strategy of inducing relative acceptance is contingent on Russia sowing doubt and disorder within democracies, which Russia is then able to showcase globally through RT.⁴⁴ However, Russia does not simply highlight the

⁴⁰ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence" (National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017).

⁴¹ Peter Pomerantsev, "Authoritarianism Goes Global (II): The Kremlin's Information War," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (2015).

⁴² Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence," *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017.

⁴³ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence" (National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

negative aspects and societal divisions of democracies through state-owned media, it also engenders such division and disorder in the first place.

The sharp power tactics employed by Russia within democracies allow the regime to cut into the fabric of these societies and amplify existing tensions that are inherent to democratic polities.⁴⁵ Miro Popkhadze writes, “Moscow has been exploiting existing political, economic, social, and cultural conflicts and grievances [within democracies] to partly increase polarization and distrust towards democratic institutions and to partly undermine democratic comity and consensus,” which demonstrates that Russia’s sharp power tactics seek to not only undermine the domestic societies of its democratic rivals, but also seek to corrode normative support for democracies by exploiting their susceptibility to division and chaos.⁴⁶ To engender such polarization, Russia has used information micro-targeting on social media platforms, such as using trolls and bots to spread disinformation, including deep fakes, which are fabricated videos meant to appear real and credible. These digital disinformation tactics employed by Russia “muddy the waters of democratic debate by convincing targets they are interacting with their fellow citizens, not foreign trolls” and thus have the effect of exploiting polarization and highlighting such chaos and divisions as an example of why democracies are not relatively more appealing than Russia’s form of authoritarian rule.⁴⁷ Such efforts are notably present in the United States where the Russian government created social media accounts posing as Americans and then proceeded to post increasingly inflammatory and divisive content regarding race, immigration, and religion. In fact, these Russian-operated accounts even encouraged and organized opposing rallies around polarizing issues, which Russia was then able to shed media

⁴⁵ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence” (National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017).

⁴⁶ Miro Popkhadze, “Standing Up to Russia's Sharp Power,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 2018.

⁴⁷ Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, “The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): pp. 124-137.

coverage on in its attempt to showcase the relative unattractiveness of democratic divisiveness in the world's most powerful democracy.⁴⁸

In its sharp power efforts during the second wave, Russia has especially employed such strategies of disinformation and polarization during elections in democratic countries. Miro Popkhadze claims that “in recent years, the Kremlin has meddled in nearly every election in major Western countries” and that “by interfering in democratic elections, Moscow has dealt a great blow to the very foundation of democracy.”⁴⁹ Thus, Popkhadze points out the key to Russia's sharp power strategy in the second wave of global authoritarianism: convincing democratic populations of the chaos and unattractiveness of democratic institutions. One could point out recent support by right-wing Americans to overturn the 2020 presidential election, which bolsters the relative normative appeal for authoritarianism by weakening support for and corroding perceptions of democratic institutions among populations in democracies. In a sense, the most dangerous aspect of Russia's sharp power strategies is democratic societies themselves; by turning their focus inward and degrading the normative consensus within democracies, Russia is able to showcase that democracy is neither stable, effective, or appealing in comparison to its form of authoritarian governance. Such dynamics allow Russia to slowly chip away at the normative global hegemony of liberal democracy and thereby improve its ability to compete for strategic and materials ends as a more acceptable and ‘normal’ player in the increasingly multipolar global arena.

Defining the Second Wave of Global Authoritarianism: Democracy Disruption

Overall, these sharp power strategies, exemplified by China and Russia, demonstrate that the second wave of global authoritarianism is certainly distinct from the first wave of

⁴⁸ Alina Polyakova, “The Kremlin's Plot Against Democracy: How Russia Updated Its 2016 Playbook for 2020,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 11, 2020.

⁴⁹ Miro Popkhadze, “Standing Up to Russia's Sharp Power,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, December 2018.

authoritarian cooperation and anti-democracy assistance. However, as argued earlier, the second wave cannot be rightfully characterized as ‘autocracy promotion’ given the lack of ideological motives or ultimate goals, nor can it simply be defined by ‘sharp power’ which represents the proximate tools used rather than the set of intermediate means and goals themselves. Therefore, in order to conceptually understand the second wave of global authoritarianism and the ways it seeks to undermine democratic countries, weaken the normative global hegemony of liberal democracy, and achieve strategic and material ends in an increasingly competitive global arena, the term ‘democracy disruption’ should be adopted by analysts and scholars. Not only are authoritarian powers in the second wave disrupting democracies themselves through coercive tools such as censorship, manipulation, and co-optation, but they are also crucially disrupting the normative global hegemony of democracy and democratic ideas. Thus, unlike the first wave which did not seek to alter the global normative playing field, the second wave is distinct in that authoritarian regimes recognized the need to combat the normative bulwark against their governance styles if they wished to more effectively compete to achieve strategic and material ends. Further, even if democratic publics do not buy into the normative acceptance of authoritarianism, sharp power still has significant potential if authoritarian countries can coerce or convince key actors, such as multilateral forums, to adopt more welcoming stances toward their styles of governance. Lastly, as a result of streamlining, conceptualizing, and defining the second wave of global authoritarianism, it is consequently possible to briefly assess the threat of democracy disruption and sharp power to democracies and democratic norms globally.

Conclusion: Assessing the Threat of ‘Democracy Disruption’ to Democracies and Global Democratic Norms

Key to the success of sharp power tactics employed by authoritarian regimes in the second wave is the asymmetry between democratic and authoritarian systems. Inherent to democracies is their open nature and a level of internal competitiveness that leaves them open to coercive foreign influence. Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, are inherently closed off in terms of public debate and civic space, meaning that they are not as susceptible to the influence operations carried out by democratic countries.⁵⁰ Thus, assessing the threat of democracy disruption first requires an understanding of such asymmetry. In addition, democratic countries must embrace the conceptual framework of democracy disruption so that they can more fully comprehend the various threats posed by sharp power tactics. By relying on an outdated framework that defines all non-military foreign influence operations as soft power, democratic countries will remain susceptible to sharp power tactics and, as a result, democracy disruption operations will continue to pose a major threat.⁵¹ With an updated and improved understanding of the second wave of global authoritarianism (democracy disruption) and a variety of strategies to combat sharp power tactics—such as strengthening democratic institutions domestically—there is some potential that the threat of sharp power diminishes in the coming years. But, as demonstrated by the construction of a conceptual framework in this paper, before these democratic countries can appropriately react and combat sharp power, they must first be able to perceive what is actually occurring in the first place.

⁵⁰ Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018).

⁵¹ Andrew Foxall and John Hemmings, “The Art of Deceit: How China and Russia Use Sharp Power to Subvert the West” (Henry Jackson Society, December 19, 2019).

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