

UNDERSTANDING  
AUTOCRATIC COUNTRIES'  
ATTACKS ON LIBERAL  
DEMOCRACIES TO  
DEVELOP EFFECTIVE  
COUNTER-MEASURES

ANN NONYMOUS



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**A**lthough many scholars have examined domestic threats to liberal democracy (e.g., voter apathy, identity politics, etc.),<sup>1</sup> they have largely neglected the motivations and mechanisms of foreign threats. Whereas successful liberal democracies (e.g. US, Japan, Australia) showcase leadership via mutual agreement and rule of law, autocracies (e.g., Russia, China, Iran) rely more on power (military, economic, etc.) and fear of harmful consequences.<sup>2</sup> As democracies threaten autocracies both domestically (via a competing governing system allowing more human rights and capabilities) and internationally (via multilateral agreements),<sup>3</sup> autocracies denigrate democracies. For example, Chinese diplomats advocate their governance's greater efficiency and

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Hart, and James Youniss. *Renewing Democracy in Young America*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 2.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Deudney, and G. John Ikenberry, "The myth of the autocratic revival: why liberal democracy will prevail," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1, 2009.  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2009-01-01/myth-autocratic-revival/>

<sup>3</sup> Hal Brands and Jake Sullivan. "China Has Two Paths to Global Domination." *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2020.  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/22/china-superpower-two-paths-global-domination-cold-war/>

effectiveness and castigate US democracy as immoral, broken, hypocritical, and failing.<sup>4</sup> Autocracies also promote autocratic rule and anti-democratic parties.<sup>5</sup> For example, Russian banks lent 36 million euros to Marine Le Pen's far right National Party.<sup>6</sup> Weakening liberal democracies not only hinders their foreign alliances and security policies but also increases the attractiveness of geopolitical bargains with autocracies.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Habets, Ingrid. "Liberal democracy: the threat of counter-narratives." *European View* 14, no. 2 (2015): 146.

<sup>5</sup> Lugosi-Schimpf, Nicole, and Lori Thorlakson. "Words that hurt democracy: the sticks and stones of anti-democratic discourse in Hungary and Germany." In *Political Incivility in the Parliamentary, Electoral and Media Arena*: 34.

<sup>6</sup> Ivo Oliveira, "National Front Seeks Russian Cash for Election Fight," *Politico*, February 19, 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/le-pen-russia-crimea-putin-money-bank-national-front-seeks-russian-cash-for-election-fight/>; David Chazan, "Russia 'Bought' Marine Le Pen's Support Over Crimea," *Telegraph*, April 4, 2015. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11515835/Russia-bought-Marine-Le-Pens-support-over-Crimea.html>

<sup>7</sup> National Intelligence Council, "Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," March 16, 2021 <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2021/item/2192-intelligence-community-assessment-on-foreign-threats-to-the-2020-u-s-federal-elections>

### **Autocracies' Anti-Democracy Strategies**

Hence, many autocracies undermine liberal democracies both directly (election interference and influence) and indirectly (reduce public confidence in fair elections and polarize voters). In the last decade, autocracies (mostly Russia and China) spent over US\$300 million to influence elections over 100 times in 33 democracies.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Russia's *Internet Research Agency* (IRA) created a coordinated, digital ecosystem with hidden links among 173 different groups across Facebook/Instagram, Google/YouTube, Twitter, etc., the growth of social media enabled poorer foreign countries (e.g., Iran, Lebanon Hezbollah, Cuba, Venezuela, and Turkey) to use readily accessible, remote, low cost, deniable, scalable, cyber tools to influence US elections.<sup>9</sup>

Election interference directly harms election officials, processes, and outcomes. In 2020, Iran's hackers infiltrated US states' election websites, sent spear phishing emails to

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<sup>8</sup> Josh Rudolph and Thomas Morley, "Covert Foreign Money," Alliance for Securing Democracy, August 18, 2020.

<https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/covert-foreign-money/>

<sup>9</sup> National Intelligence Council.

political campaign staff, and issued death threats against US election officials.<sup>10</sup> Although the US government claims that "it would be difficult for a foreign actor to manipulate election processes at scale without detection,"<sup>11</sup> the US electoral college's mostly winner-take-all of state votes facilitates effective small-scale election interference. Manipulating a few voting machines in four counties (Maricopa, Arizona; Gwinnett, Georgia; Douglas, Nebraska; Waukesha, Wisconsin) to swing only 32,505 votes (0.0002 of the 158 million actual votes) in 2020 would have made Trump president again.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Russia's IRA targeted voters in Arizona, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> National Intelligence Council.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security. Foreign interference targeting election infrastructure or political organization, campaign, or candidate infrastructure related to the 2020 US Federal Elections. March 2021.  
<https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1376761/download>

<sup>12</sup> Ballotpedia, "Election results, 2020: Pivot Counties in the 2020 presidential election," July 21, 2021.  
[https://ballotpedia.org/Election\\_results,\\_2020:\\_Pivot\\_Counties\\_in\\_the\\_2020\\_presidential\\_election](https://ballotpedia.org/Election_results,_2020:_Pivot_Counties_in_the_2020_presidential_election)

<sup>13</sup> Young Mie Kim, Jordan Hsu, David Neiman, Colin Kou, Levi Bankston, Soo Yun Kim, Richard Heinrich, Robyn Baragwanath, and Garvesh Raskutti. "The stealth media? Groups and targets

Election influence can suppress votes for undesirable political candidates or encourage votes for a preferred candidate, often via fraudulent identities. Voter suppression can include election boycotts (reject all candidates), deception (lie about voting times, locations, or procedures), and attacking undesirable candidates; for example, Russia hacked and released embarrassing emails of John Podesta and of Emmanuel Macron during Hillary Clinton's and Macron's presidential candidacies, respectively.<sup>14</sup>

Autocracies support strong candidates aligned with their interests or outside candidates to weaken their strongest opponent; for example Russia supported Trump and Bernie Sanders against Hillary Clinton.<sup>15</sup> Under Vladimir Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin gave cash, customized news media, and soldiers to favored African leaders.<sup>16</sup> Also,

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behind divisive issue campaigns on Facebook." *Political Communication* 35, no. 4 (2018): 522.

<sup>14</sup> Young Mie Kim, "Uncover: Strategies and Tactics of Russian Interference in US Elections." Project Data, September 4, 2018. [https://journalism.wisc.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/41/files/2018/09/Uncover.Kim\\_.v.5.0905181.pdf](https://journalism.wisc.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/41/files/2018/09/Uncover.Kim_.v.5.0905181.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> National Intelligence Council.

<sup>16</sup> Bellingcat, "Putin Chef's Kisses of Death: Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed," August 14, 2020. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and->

China co-opted Chinese executives and other leaders in foreign countries (e.g., Huang Xiangmo in Australia; Zhang Yikun in New Zealand) into its *United Front* organization to bribe/donate to local politicians.<sup>17</sup>

In democracies, autocracies' public association with their preferred candidates might tarnish the latter's reputation and popularity, so autocracies often use third parties, fraudulent identities, or covert funding to launder their stories.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, Russia had Ukrainian legislator Andriy Derkach hire a US firm to encourage US officials to promote four audio recordings about Joseph Biden's allegedly corrupt activities in Ukraine before the 2020 election. Also, Russia and China buy/fund credible,

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europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/; Ilya Rozhdestvensky and Roman Badanin, "Master and Chef: How Evgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa," Proekt, March 14, 2019. <https://jfj.fund/master-and-chef-how-evgeny-prigozhin-led-the-russian-offensive-in-africa/>

<sup>17</sup> Angus Grigg, "Huang Xiangmo's big night of gambling," Financial Review, December 12, 2019.

<https://www.afr.com/politics/casino-cash-used-for-huang-s-100-000-000-alp-donation-20191212-p53jhz>; Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping," Washington: Wilson Center, 2017.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>

<sup>18</sup> Kim.

independent media sources/reporters/freelancers (e.g. pro-Chinese political spam network *Spamouflage Dragon*)<sup>19</sup> to produce/publicize favored election stories (e.g. Trump called Haiti and African countries "shithole countries")<sup>20</sup> and censor disfavored ones.<sup>21</sup> China alone spends US\$10 billion per year on media to influence foreign audiences, including owning and running several news media in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>22</sup>

As many democracies allow many non-profit or religious organizations to spend on politics without

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<sup>19</sup> Ben Nimmo, Camille Francois, C. Shawn Eib, and Lea Ronzaud. "Spamouflage Goes to America." Graphika, last modified August (2020). <https://graphika.com/reports/spamouflage-dragon-goes-to-america/>

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Westcott, "The Trump administration's Africa policy." *African Affairs* 118, no. 473 (2019): 739.

<sup>21</sup> Department of Homeland Security. "Homeland Threat Assessment," October 6, 2020. [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2020\\_10\\_06\\_homeland-threat-assessment.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2020_10_06_homeland-threat-assessment.pdf); Bradley Hanlon and Thomas Morley, "Russia's Network of Millennial Media," The Alliance for Securing Democracy, February 15, 2019; <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russias-network-of-millennial-media/>; Brands & Sullivan, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Alex Palmer, "The Man Behind China's Aggressive New Voice," *New York Times*, July 7, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/07/magazine/china-diplomacy-twitter-zhao-lijian.html>; Brands & Sullivan, 2020



disclosing their donors,<sup>23</sup> Russia, China, Iran, and other autocracies buy political ads under false names on their social media platforms (e.g., Facebook ad by “bernie.2020\_\_”).<sup>24</sup> Other covert funding include cryptocurrency payments (e.g., bitcoin)<sup>25</sup> and political donations under other people's names (*straw donors*)<sup>26</sup> or by bots (*donor bots*).<sup>27</sup>

Autocracies also attack election processes (mail-in ballots, alleged voting irregularities, biased procedures

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<sup>23</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), "Germany, Parliamentary Elections, 24 September 2017: Final Report," November 27, 2017: 6.

<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/germany/358936>

<sup>24</sup> Clarissa Ward, Katie Polglase, Sebastian Shukla, Gianluca Mezzofiore and Tim Lister, "Russian election meddling is back -- via Ghana and Nigeria -- and in your feeds," CNN, April 11, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/12/world/russia-ghana-troll-farms-2020-ward/index.html>; Facebook, "Taking Down More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior," August 21, 2018. <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/08/more-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/>

<sup>25</sup> Luke O'Brien, "Who Gave Neo-Nazi Publisher Andrew Anglin a Large Bitcoin Donation after Charlottesville?" Huff Post, June 12, 2019. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/andrew-anglin-bitcoin-mysterious-donor\\_n\\_5d011cc6e4b0304a12087e0c](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/andrew-anglin-bitcoin-mysterious-donor_n_5d011cc6e4b0304a12087e0c); United States v. Netyshko, No. 1:18-cr-215 (D.D.C. July 13, 2018)

<sup>26</sup> United States v. Lev Parnas, Igor Fruman, et al., No. 1:19-cr-725 (S.D.N.Y. October 9, 2019)

<sup>27</sup> Paul Wood, "Andy Khawaja: 'the whistleblower'," The Spectator, February 24, 2020. <https://spectatorworld.com/topic/whistleblower-andy-khawaja-micropayments/>

toward mainstream candidates, voter fraud) and results to reduce public confidence in them.<sup>28</sup> As Trump made false claims attacking US democracy during the 2016 and 2020 elections,<sup>29</sup> IRA simply amplified them rather than create new attacks.<sup>30</sup>

Autocracies also inflame both political extremes of democracies to polarize their voters, thereby hindering compromises and worsening legislation and governance.<sup>31</sup> With 67% of its ads devoted to race, Russia's IRA targeted veterans; rural, working-class whites; and Black Americans, spreading messages about racial identity/conflicts (Blue Lives Matter vs. Black Lives Matter), immigration (especially anti-Muslim), nationalism/patriotism, and gun rights.<sup>32</sup> Miniaturizing their disinformation campaigns to

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<sup>28</sup> National Intelligence Council.

<sup>29</sup> Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand. "Examining false beliefs about voter fraud in the wake of the 2020 Presidential Election." The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review (2021). <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/research-note-examining-false-beliefs-about-voter-fraud-in-the-wake-of-the-2020-presidential-election>

<sup>30</sup> National Intelligence Council.

<sup>31</sup> Chris Zappone, How does Russia meddle in US politics? The Sydney Morning Herald. October 27, 2020. <https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/how-does-russia-meddle-in-us-politics-20201024-p5688e.html>

<sup>32</sup> Kim.

hide from surveillance, Iran's agents infiltrated private social media groups (e.g. WhatsApp, Telegram etc.) of Israeli activists and shared polarizing messages to raise doubts and mistrust of one another.<sup>33</sup> As China collects more social media data in other countries (WeChat, TikTok) for its artificial intelligence programs, its capacity to learn, predict, and manipulate people's voting behaviors improves.<sup>34</sup> Deep fake artificial intelligence videos, such as Biden and Nancy Pelosi apparently slurring their speech, are especially troubling.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, Russia uses an affinitive, right-wing, tribal, racially exclusive worldview to attract angry young men (skinheads, biker gangs, football/soccer hooligans, etc.) and direct their anger against their country's institutions.<sup>36</sup> For example, Russia's paramilitary group Partizan trained

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<sup>33</sup> Sheera Frenkel, "Iranian Disinformation Effort Went Small to Stay Under Big Tech's Radar," *New York Times*, June 30, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/30/technology/disinformation-message-apps.html>

<sup>34</sup> Brands & Sullivan; Zappone

<sup>35</sup> João Paulo Meneses, "Deepfakes and the 2020 US elections: what (did not) happen," arXiv preprint arXiv:2101.09092 (2021).

<sup>36</sup> Michael Carpenter, "Russia Is Co-opting Angry Young Men," *The Atlantic*, August 29, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/russia-is-co-opting-angry-young-men/568741/>

Swedish neo-Nazis, who bombed a refugee center in Gothenburg.<sup>37</sup> These recruits are also backdoors to far-right, anti-democratic, political parties and anti-establishment politicians.<sup>38</sup> For instance, Russia gave weapons training to Danish far-right National Front party leader Lars Agerbak.<sup>39</sup>

### **Democracy Counter-Measures**

Liberal democracies can partially counter these anti-democratic strategies with stronger regulation, election security, transparency and documentation, collaboration, and democratic practices, but these solutions require careful implementation and can have (unanticipated) drawbacks. For example, new laws can ban cryptocurrency donations<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Lester Feder, Edgar Mannheimer, Jane Lytvynenko, "These Swedish Nazis Trained In Russia Before Bombing A Center For Asylum Seekers," BuzzFeed, July 22, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Carpenter.

<sup>39</sup> Siw Ellen Jakobsen, "Russian right-wing extremists responsible for strikingly high level of violence," Science Norway, June 20, 2014. <https://sciencenorway.no/extremists-forskningno-immigration-policy/russian-right-wing-extremists-responsible-for-strikingly-high-level-of-violence/1403223>

<sup>40</sup> Kim

and foreign government ads to influence an election (PAID AD Act).<sup>41</sup> As cryptocurrency gains wider acceptance and transparency however, a ban on cryptocurrency donations might become unwieldy and require updates and exceptions.<sup>42</sup> Also, identifying a foreign government as the buyer of an ad targeting a US election is non-trivial.<sup>43</sup>

Superior security for election infrastructure and their supply chain includes firewalls, timely security patches, multifactor authentication, pre-election testing of voting equipment, cybersecurity training, and isolation of election-specific systems.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, redundancy measures like backups, auditable ballots, and post-election audits can identify vote tampering and reduce the impact of election interference.<sup>45</sup> Although election scholars generally agree on these relatively low-cost measures, persuading all fifty states to agree to them requires extensive education and

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<sup>41</sup> United States Congress, H.R.2135 - PAID AD Act, April 8, 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2135>

<sup>42</sup> Garrick Hileman and Michel Rauchs. "Global cryptocurrency benchmarking study." Cambridge Centre for Alternative Finance 33 (2017): 34.

<sup>43</sup> Ward et al.

<sup>44</sup> Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security.

<sup>45</sup> Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security.

vigilance (e.g., checking for profitable but confidence-damaging cost-cutting measures by [sub-]contractors).<sup>46</sup>

Greater transparency and documentation enhances confidence in election results. Required reporting of all foreign contributions/assistance to favored candidates can discourage them (SHIELD Act,<sup>47</sup> DISCLOSE Act,<sup>48</sup> Honest Ads Act,<sup>49</sup> Anti-Money Laundering Act),<sup>50</sup> and required reporting of foreign funding of media increases skepticism of their objectivity.<sup>51</sup> Also, legislators and regulators can extend current advertising and reporting rules to digital political campaigns.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, improving online platforms' identity verification/labeling reduces foreign actors' capacity to create sets of bots or fake users (*shell*

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<sup>46</sup> David Evans, and Nathanael Paul. "Election security: Perception and reality." *IEEE Security & Privacy* 2, no. 1 (2004): 27.

<sup>47</sup> Rudolph & Morley; United States Congress, H.R.4617 - SHIELD Act, October 8, 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/4617>

<sup>48</sup> United States Congress, S.1147 - DISCLOSE Act, April 11, 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1147>

<sup>49</sup> United States Congress, S.1356 - Honest Ads Act, May 7, 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1356/text>

<sup>50</sup> United States Congress, S.Amdt.2198 to S.4049 - AML Act, June 25, 2020. <https://www.congress.gov/amendment/116th-congress/senate-amendment/2198/text>

<sup>51</sup> Rudolph and Morley.

<sup>52</sup> Kim.

groups).<sup>53</sup> However, political deadlock has largely prevented the Federal Election Commission from promptly punishing perpetrators of election violations, raising doubts about the effectiveness of such laws.<sup>54</sup>

Greater sharing of information on malicious / suspicious cyber activities and collaboration within and across government agencies and political organizations can also help reduce these activities, though calculations about the harm to political opponents can discourage such collaboration.<sup>55</sup> Lastly, facilitating democratic practices of voting and civil discourse can reduce political polarization, though effective measures for doing so are non-trivial.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Kim.

<sup>54</sup> Bradley A. Smith, and Stephen M. Hoerstring. "A toothless Anaconda: innovation, impotence and overenforcement at the federal election commission." *Election Law Journal* 1, no. 2 (2002): 145.

<sup>55</sup> Laura Rosenberger. "The ASD Policy Blueprint for Countering Authoritarian Interference in Democracies," *The Alliance for Securing Democracy*, June 26, 2018.  
<https://www.gmfus.org/publications/asd-policy-blueprint-countering-authoritarian-interference-democracies>

<sup>56</sup> James Fishkin, Alice Siu, Larry Diamond, and Norman Bradburn. "Is deliberation an antidote to extreme partisan polarization? Reflections on America in One Room." (2020).  
<https://cdd.stanford.edu/2020/is-deliberation-an-antidote-to-extreme-partisan-polarization-reflections-on-america-in-one-room/>

Also, too few primary or secondary schools teach about countries outside the US to understand how they affect democracy (and many areas of politics, economics, etc.), so more instruction involving foreign countries across academic subjects is critical in our era of globalization.<sup>57</sup> Such instruction can range from lesson-specific changes (e.g., a mathematics problem of computing and comparing the annual growth rates of the US, Russia, and China) to systemic curriculum changes (e.g., a required global education course). Building on this global education, transdisciplinary research across political science, communication, law, psychology, sociology, and artificial intelligence enhances understanding of foreign countries' anti-democracy efforts to inform development and implementation of suitable counter-measures.

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<sup>57</sup> Anatoli Rapoport, "Facing the challenge: Obstacles to global and global citizenship education in US schools." In *Nation-building and history education in a global culture*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2015: 155.



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