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AUTHORITARIANISM IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: TRENDS, MESSAGES AND TOOLS

Democracy and its Enemies

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Authoritarianism is on the rise. The 2016 Freedom of the World Report shows that authoritarianism has been growing for 10 consecutive years¹. This upward trend is not only prolonged, but also wide: the same report indicates that over the last decade, authoritarianism fell in 61 countries but increased in a whopping 105². Moreover, in the *marketplace of ideas*, one can detect growing uncertainty about the desirability of liberal democracy. Eric X. Li's claim of the Chinese regime's superiority over liberal democracy has found echo even in the West³; and when the prime minister of a European Union country doubts the competitiveness of liberal democracies, as Hungary's Viktor Orbán has recently done⁴, one can be sure liberty has enjoyed better days. No matter if framed in numbers or in ideas, the case for an authoritarian surge is robust.

But waves of authoritarianism are a recurrent phenomenon. The contemporary world has lived through previous episodes of drowning democracies, most notably in the interwar period. The current one, however, is a new animal. Compared to the last autocratic wave, that of the Cold War era -- from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s --, the current one is manifestly different. While 20th century autocracy typically set in via the *coups d'etats*, executive coups by elected leaders or outright election fraud, these have all dramatically declined in frequency⁵. The 21st century has witnessed other trends of authoritarianism, namely: promissory coups⁶ - the ousting of an elected government to arguably preserve democracy; executive aggrandizement⁷ - the weakening of checks on executive power via legal channels, and strategic manipulation of elections.⁸ Indeed, the crucial difference between mid-20th century democratic backsliding and that of today is arguably that, while

¹ In the website of the Freedom of the World Report, Freedom House states that: "The world was battered by crises that fueled xenophobic sentiment in democratic countries, undermined the economies of states dependent on the sale of natural resources, and led authoritarian regimes to crack down harder on dissent. These developments contributed to the 10th consecutive year of decline in global freedom." (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016>)

² In the website of the Freedom of the World Report, Freedom House states that: "Over the past 10 years, 105 countries have seen a net decline, and only 61 have experienced a net improvement." (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016>)

³ As evidenced in his much-applauded TED talk, the description of which states: "It's a standard assumption in the West: As a society progresses, it eventually becomes a capitalist, multi-party democracy. Right? Eric X. Li, a Chinese investor and political scientist, begs to differ. In this provocative, boundary-pushing talk, he asks his audience to consider that there's more than one way to run a successful modern nation." (https://www.ted.com/talks/eric_x_li_a_tale_of_two_political_systems)

⁴ A. COOLEY, "Countering Democratic Norms", *Authoritarianism Goes Global: the Challenge to Democracy*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2016. p. 117.

⁵ N. BERMEJO, "On Democratic Backsliding", in *Journal of Democracy*, 27-1, January 2016, p. 6

⁶ *Idem*

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

the former were sudden, the latter are incremental. As Nancy Bermeo puts it: “troubled democracies are now more likely to erode than to shatter.”⁹

This essay purports to determine some of the political messages and tools autocracies are employing to erode 21st century democracies. Section one will fit the current autocratic tide in the recent history of democracy. Next, the essay will locate that phenomena’s context in Western retrenchment. The third section will discuss the political messages that drive the authoritarian surge. Finally, section four will elaborate on the fronts those messages are pushed onto as well as the tools employed. Throughout the exposition, special emphasis will be awarded to the role played by the interconnectedness allowed by globalization.

Historical Trends

In a broader historical perspective, one can argue¹⁰ that the current authoritarian surge is a cyclical counter trend to the democratic wave that followed the end of the Cold War. Indeed, in the 25 years from 1990 to 2005, the quantity of democracies jumped from 76 to a staggering 119.¹¹ The collapse of the Soviet Union, made liberal democratic values appear “triumphant and free of significant ideological competition.”¹² This triumphalism, epitomized in Fukuyama's *End of History*, bred the assumption that “patient engagement with authoritarian states”¹³ would coax them towards political reform.¹⁴

But even that colossal post-Cold War wave of democracy eventually came to a halt. In the mid-2000s, an autocratic trend began to emerge as regimes increasing tightened control over civil society groups and the media. A trend that would eventually consolidate into a distinct phenomenon of “backlash against democracy”¹⁵ or autocratic surge. This is the first to occur in the globalized world of information technology and globalized

⁹ N. BERMEO, “On Democratic Backsliding”, p. 14.

¹⁰ An argument much in line with Samuel Huntington’s thesis in his *The Third Wave of Democratization*.

¹¹ L. DIAMOND, M.F. PLATTNER and C. WALKER, “Introduction”, *Authoritarianism Goes Global: the Challenge to Democracy*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2016. p. 3.

¹² A. COOLEY, “Countering Democratic Norms”, *Authoritarianism Goes Global: the Challenge to Democracy*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2016. p. 118.

¹³ C. WALKER, “Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence”, *Authoritarianism Goes Global: the Challenge to Democracy*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2016. p. 216.

¹⁴ An assumption that would be largely frustrated in the case of Russia, as Lilia Shevtsova argues that “What began as a Western partnership with Russia has ended not in Russia’s liberal transformation but in its return to one-man rule...” L. SHEVTSOVA. “Forward to the Past in Russia”, *Authoritarianism Goes Global: the Challenge to Democracy*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2016. p. 41.

¹⁵ L. DIAMOND, M.F. PLATTNER and C. WALKER, “Introduction”, p. 3.

markets, whereby authoritarian forces can use the globalization expressways to coordinate and expand their reach. As Diamond, Plattner and Walker put it "authoritarianism has gone global."¹⁶

Indeed, the proximity allowed by globalization has enabled the "Big Five" authoritarian states, namely China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela to coordinate action in order to "contain democracy on a global level."¹⁷ Globalization has thus allowed such autocratic states to more effectively challenge the liberal international political order by containing the spread of democracy.¹⁸ As Christopher Walker argues, authoritarian regimes have "turned the tables on democracies"¹⁹ - not only deepening their authoritarianism but "turning it outward"²⁰ by developing practices to block the advance of political freedom. Lucan Way seems to second that opinion in arguing that those Big Five have, in the last decade, attempted to "prop up autocratic regimes in their neighborhoods."²¹

A Weakened West

The authoritarian surge has benefited from Western loss of self-confidence and economic momentum. The balance of power has tipped away from the West²², rendering liberal democracy less appealing to regimes and populations.²³

Indeed, the 2000s drove a series of blows to the "Western core."²⁴ Among such, one can highlight (i) the growing resistance to the concept of exporting democracy after the U.S invasion of Iraq²⁵; (ii) the "enlargement fatigue"²⁶ of the European Union; and, perhaps most important of all (iii) the post-2008 financial crisis' devastation of Western economies.²⁷ In this sense, Alexander Cooley argues that, since the financial crisis began in 2008, the West has been in "normative retreat."²⁸

¹⁶ L. DIAMOND, M.F. PLATTNER and C. WALKER, "Introduction", p. 4.

¹⁷ *Idem*

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹⁹ C. WALKER, "Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence", p. 216.

²⁰ *Idem*.

²¹ L. WAY, "Weakness of Autocracy Promotion" in *Journal of Democracy*, 27-1, January 2016, p. 65.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 64.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

²⁴ *Idem*.

²⁵ *Idem*.

²⁶ *Idem*.

²⁷ *Idem*.

²⁸ A. COOLEY, "Countering Democratic Norms", p. 117.

Such blows have attenuated both Western ambitions and capacities to support democracy globally, as well as the values that underlie it, leaving ample room for the expansion of autocracy. Along such lines, Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner and Christopher Walker argue that it is "no surprise that the authoritarian surge has taken off a time when malaise seems to grip the world's leading democracies."²⁹

Driving Messages

With the weakening of democracies, authoritarian messages have found lesser obstacles to reach receptive years. Perhaps the most easily assimilable among them is the call for "war on terror", which autocracies often appeal to in order to safeguard their regime's security.

The September 11 attacks raised "concern over terrorism" to the top of government agendas, both democratic and autocratic alike. But to regimes with an authoritarian tendency, the call for "war on terror" also constitutes a powerful rationale for restricting civil liberties.³⁰ This risk is aggravated as the terrorism scare tends to increase population's acceptance to trade freedom for security – resulting in toleration for surveillance, blacklisting of suspects³¹, suppression of opposition³² and other authoritarian measures.

Compared to "war on terror", autocratic regimes' fear of "color revolutions" are much less palatable. Perhaps for this lack of immediate public support, Christopher Walker argues that the avoidance of "color revolutions" has become the main informing concept of authoritarian regimes' security and propaganda strategies.³³ To galvanize public opinion against "color revolutions", autocratic regimes may characterize them as undue Western interference. Walker refers to a Moscow Conference of International Security held on May 2014, where Russian speakers warned that "color revolutions are a new form of warfare invented by Western governments seeking to remove independently-minded national governments in favor of ones controlled by the West."³⁴ Indeed, the concern over

²⁹ L. DIAMOND, M.F. PLATTNER and C. WALKER, "Introduction", p. 17.

³⁰ L. WAY, "Weakness of Autocracy Promotion" p. 65.

³¹ A. COOLEY, "Countering Democratic Norms", p. 119.

³² L. DIAMOND, M.F. PLATTNER and C. WALKER, "Introduction", p. 16.

³³ C. WALKER, "Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence", p. 222.

³⁴ *Idem*.

“color revolutions” has led Russia to denounce liberal democracy's universalism as a cover up for U.S and Western geopolitical interests.³⁵

But such calls for increased safety and regime security against terrorism and “color revolutions” are but one of the various messages that underpin the current authoritarian surge. Cooley discerns two important additional ones: (i) the concern for preserving “civilization diversity”³⁶ and (ii) the concern to preserve “traditional values.”³⁷

The former is championed by the Chinese regime and guides the principles of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The “Shanghai Spirit” calls for respect for state sovereignty and noninterference and condemnation of political and economic conditionalities by global-governance institutions.³⁸ Indeed, after Xi Jinping ascended to power in 2012, the Chinese regime has grown bolder in pursuing its economic and strategic interests, by denouncing “universal values” and calling for state sovereignty and noninterference.³⁹ And to prop up the distinctiveness of its culture, in an effort to “sway elite non-Chinese audiences”⁴⁰ China has already created more than one thousand Confucius Institutes and classrooms worldwide.⁴¹ Even if such efforts eventually prove insufficient to popularize Chinese culture, their sheer magnitude attests Beijing’s determination to publicize its alleged cultural exceptionalism vis à vis the West.

The latter, that is, the “traditional values” concern, has been championed by Russia. Putin’s regime has constantly denounced the moral decay allegedly produced by the West’s excessive individualism. The proposed remedy for that decay is a return to sources of national culture, heritage and religion.⁴² But Lilia Shevtsova recommends caution in taking Russia’s declarations at face value. She argues that “For the Kremlin, ideas are instrumental”⁴³ and that “the system’s propaganda may claim ‘Russian values do not differ dramatically from European values. We belong to the same civilization’ only to posit a moment later that the West is Russia’s main enemy.”⁴⁴

³⁵ A. COOLEY, “Countering Democratic Norms”, pp. 118-119.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

³⁷ *Idem*.

³⁸ *Idem*.

³⁹ L. DIAMOND, M.F PLATTNER and C. WALKER, “Introduction”, p. 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁴¹ *Idem*.

⁴² A. COOLEY, “Countering Democratic Norms”, p. 120.

⁴³ L. SHEVTSOVA, “Forward to the Past in Russia”, p. 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 43-44

Indeed, each of those messages -- “civilization diversity” and “traditional values” -- convert alleged cultural particularities into a shield against liberal democracy's claim to universality.⁴⁵ But an examination of the tools autocratic regimes employ to allegedly protect such cultural particularities suggest a concern that is less for protecting culture than for conserving and increasing power.

Arenas and Tools

In the globalized world, current autocracies typically push their calls for state security, civilization diversity and traditional values onto two strategic fronts: (i) that of regional and international organizations, and (ii) that of what one may call ideological or "soft-power".

Organizations

In the front of existing regional and international institutions, such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States, autocracies' efforts aim at weakening those organizations' “human rights and democracy components.”⁴⁶ In this sense, Walker argues that authoritarian regimes have "set out to undermine the very institutions and arenas that welcomed them."⁴⁷

But this institutional front is not only limited to reshaping existing organizations, it also involves the creation of new ones to promote "authoritarian friendly norms."⁴⁸ Indeed, some autocracies have been active in setting up regional organizations that attract their neighboring states to agendas that fail to reaffirm democratic principles⁴⁹, such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas – ALBA, and Union of South American Nations - UNASUR, both spearheaded by Venezuela. Leading regional powers, like Brazil, may fail to denounce such initiatives, and even partake in them for fear of creating resentment that may detract from their leadership status.⁵⁰

Autocracies' actions in the front of organization, be it via the reshaping of those already in existence, or via the creation of new ones, follow the same common ambition: to shield

⁴⁵ A. COOLEY, “Countering Democratic Norms”, p. 120.

⁴⁶ C. WALKER, “Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence”, p. 219.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 219.

⁴⁹ A. COOLEY, “Countering Democratic Norms”, p. 125.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

authoritarian regimes and their policies from foreign scrutiny and criticism.⁵¹ They achieve this by challenging the universality of democracy, thus eroding the organization's liberal-democratic norms and replacing them with counter-norms that emphasize state security, civilizational diversity and traditional values.⁵²

Soft-Power

Arguably the most important of the two strategic fronts is ideology, as it comprises the distinctive aspect of new authoritarianism, namely "soft-power."⁵³ As an ideological tactic, "soft-power" enables authoritarian regimes to project power and influence beyond borders, targeting democratic institutions via tactical instruments that compete with democracy in the realm of ideas.⁵⁴ Walker argues that such instruments compose what he calls an "antidemocratic toolkit" that includes: (i) government-organized nongovernmental organizations – GONGOs; (ii) "zombie" election monitors; (iii) foreign aid and investment and (iv) state media enterprises such as China's CCTV and Russia's RT. These tools enable authoritarian regimes to better exploit the expansion opportunities presented by globalization.⁵⁵

While Walker calls such authoritarian toolkit an instrument of "soft-power" he also caveats the impropriety of that labeling. He argues that analytical rigor would recommend calling the authoritarian toolkit not an instrument of "soft-power" but of a "malign mirror image of soft power."⁵⁶ ⁵⁷ Indeed, the "authoritarian toolkit" is also a malign mirror image. Its components are each a corrupted reflection, a simulacrum, a distorted twin of a corresponding democratic institution: GONGOs are the autocratic version of NGOs; zombie election monitors are the autocratic substitute for impartial monitors; and media outlets such as China's CCTV and Russia's RT are autocratic distortions of the likes of BBC and Deutsche Welle. Authoritarian regimes thus simulate democratic institutions as

⁵¹ L. DIAMOND, M.F PLATTNER and C. WALKER, "Introduction", p. 7.

⁵² L. DIAMOND, M.F PLATTNER and C. WALKER, "Introduction", p. 11.

⁵³ C. WALKER, "Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence", p. 218.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 217.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 218.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

⁵⁷ Indeed, taking this malign mirror image for soft-power would induces a mistake: to assume that the authoritarian regimes media outlets are established to "build prestige" or to "win hearts and minds". Walker is adamant in arguing that those are not their goals. Instead of promoting authoritarianism, their goal is "to contain the spread of democracy and reshape the norms of the international order." C. WALKER, "Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence", p. 230.

a way from preventing authentic democracy, via fake political parties, phony social movements, state-controlled media, and GONGOs.⁵⁸

Where NGOs are authentic voices of civil society, their autocratic simulacrum, GONGOs, are the regime's voices disguised as civil society. While the former kind criticizes governments, the latter collaborates with regimes. GONGOs aim at "subverting authentic debate either by spreading regime messages in non-transparent way or by crowding out authentic voices."⁵⁹ But crowding out is only the gentle alternative. To promote GONGOs, regimes often persecute and eliminate NGOs.⁶⁰ To Cooley, authoritarian regimes have learned that they will face few international consequences for clamping own NGOs, and that such measures are well regarded by China, Russian, and other non-Western powers.^{61 62}

"Zombie" monitors are the corrupt twins of democratic monitors. They enable authoritarian regimes to manipulate the integrity of elections by endorsing frauds⁶³ while also appealing to xenophobic sentiments in suggesting that unofficial foreign observers are biased against the local regime.⁶⁴ The endorsement of fraudulent elections by zombie monitors can be disseminated via state media, so as to manipulate the electorate.⁶⁵

Finally, state media outlets like Russia's RT, China's CCTV and Iran's Press TV are not like BBC or Deutsche Welle. As pointed out by Walker, those autocratic media outlets operate according to "a fundamentally different value system"⁶⁶, and their content is compromised due to the editorial accountability resting with the political leadership.⁶⁷

This difference, however, does not prevent such autocratic vehicles from competing with its democratic counterparts in the global media market. The competition means that, in the 21st century, the West no longer plays the near-exclusive role it played in the 1990s

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 224.

⁵⁹ C. WALKER, "Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence", p. 218.

⁶⁰ A. COOLEY, "Countering Democratic Norms", p. 123.

⁶¹ *Idem*.

⁶² As an example of the service GONGOs render to regimes, Walker recalls that Cuban and Venezuelan governments took GONGOs to the April 2015 Summit of the Americas in Panama, presenting them as if they were authentic members of civil society. C. WALKER, "Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence", p. 225.

⁶³ C. WALKER, "Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence", p. 226.

⁶⁴ A. COOLEY, "Countering Democratic Norms", p. 124.

⁶⁵ C. WALKER, "Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence", p. 227.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 218.

⁶⁷ *Idem*.

as provider of information to the world.⁶⁸ Russian and China's continuous pouring of funds into their broadcasting channels has effectively broken the western media monopoly of global media.⁶⁹ And the dispute for the same worldwide news market further blurs that distinction between democratic and autocratic outlets, which is never perfectly clear to audiences.

Furthermore, the fragmentation of today's media, especially on the internet, make western channels more likely to unknowingly pick up narratives pushed by their autocratic counterparts. This facilitates authoritarian regimes' manipulation of the perception of key issues by "making it harder to distinguish between authentic and phony information".⁷⁰ Indeed, Walker notes that a large part of such media's efforts is aimed at distorting perceptions of democracy and tarnishing the image of the United States and Europe by broadcasting an anti-Americanism as an ideology⁷¹ for which autocracies also rely on "trolls, cyberattacks and disinformation."⁷²

Conclusion

Globalization has not rendered the 21st century immune to a rising tide of worldwide authoritarianism, quite the contrary: authoritarian regimes have found ways to exploit integration to broaden their influence in the democratic world so as to "undermine democracy from within."⁷³

Political messages that "question the feasibility or desirability of liberal democracy's universal aspirations"⁷⁴ dressed in guises that appeal to widespread sentiments -- as is the case of "war on terror", civilizational diversity and traditional values --, can be cast into norms that change existing organizations or foment new ones. Moreover, such messages can be supported by GONGOs and broadcasted by state media outlets. In the end, globalization offers autocracies ample opportunities to challenge liberal democratic values.

⁶⁸ A. COOLEY, "Countering Democratic Norms", p. 130.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

⁷⁰ C. WALKER, "Dealing with the Authoritarian Resurgence", p. 229.

⁷¹ *Idem*.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 227.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

⁷⁴ A. COOLEY, "Countering Democratic Norms", p. 121.

In view of such opportunities, democracies ought to “improve their game.”⁷⁵ More fundamentally, the West needs to recuperate confidence, for, as Cooley puts it, “without confidence in its own values, the West not only will continue to lose its global appeal, but will lose itself.”⁷⁶

There are, however, reasons for optimism. If Bermeo is indeed correct in contending that the current authoritarian trends cause not the shattering, but the erosion of democracies, such trends may well constitute “ironic proof of democracy promotion's partial success.”⁷⁷ That the elements of the “authoritarian toolkit” do not openly confront the ideals of democracy, but try to pass for them, is also quite telling. As odd as it seems, 21st century authoritarianism may be paying a distorted tribute to democracy.

⁷⁵ L. DIAMOND, M.F PLATTNER and C. WALKER., “Introduction”, p. 18.

⁷⁶ A. COOLEY, “Countering Democratic Norms”, p. 131.

⁷⁷ N. BERMEO, “On Democratic Backsliding”, p. 15.

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