

# **NEO-AUTHORITARIAN INTERVENTION: PURPOSE, SUBJECTS, TOOLS, CONSEQUENCES**

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## **Abstract**

This paper will explore the purpose, system of subjects, principal tools and consequences of neo-authoritarian intervention. The peculiarities of the neo-authoritarian regime, neo-authoritarian intervention, and export of neo-authoritarianism are clarified. China and Russia are selected as the main cases for analysis. The purpose of neo-authoritarian intervention is defined as the intention to strengthen the internal stability of non-democratic regimes and to broaden their influence on international processes, the effort being to change the world order and destroy liberal-democratic values. It is argued that the key subjects of neo-authoritarian intervention are the governments of neo-authoritarian states and a great number of actors (puppet parties; government-organized non-governmental organizations; marginal, ultra-radical social and political movements; state-controlled media; unscrupulous analytical centres; and international multilingual networks of TV, radio broadcasts, news agencies, which are financed by neo-authoritarian governments). The system of tools of neo-authoritarian influence includes tools of: power; influence within the soft power; subversion; value modification; election tampering; and pressure on international organizations. The tools of neo-authoritarian intervention are based on the classic tools of authoritarianism, but are modernized due to digitalization, information and communication progress, and the other technologies. Neo-authoritarian intervention is proven to increase the risks to global security. The main consequences of the strengthening of neo-authoritarian intervention on a global scale are the growth of threats to

democracy, the risks of changing the world agenda. The consequence of neo-authoritarian interference in the internal affairs of non-democratic states is the growth of dependence on neo-authoritarian exporter states, further socio-political instability, increased use of force in solving socio-political problems. The research states that in the case of neo-authoritarian intervention in the affairs of democratic states, the consequences may include both effective counteraction to neo-authoritarian interventions and thus strengthening of the quality of democracy, and destructive tendencies including the growth of populism, radicalism, corruption, and hate speech.

**Keywords:** *neo-authoritarianism; neo-authoritarian regime; neo-authoritarian intervention; the third wave of autocratization; China; Russia*

## **Introduction**

Despite the significant successes of democratization, which were achieved in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, there has been a gradual global expansion of authoritarianism in recent decades. The new autocratic tendencies are noticeably intensifying. The number of countries with deteriorating democracy is growing from year to year. These processes testify to the fragility of democratic achievements, their instability and undulating character, and the vulnerability of democracy to various global challenges. At the same time, non-democratic regimes are acquiring new characteristics compared to the authoritarian regimes of the 20th century.

The leading states of the neo-authoritarian world, such as China, Russia, Iran, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, due to the available resources, not only ensure the stability of the undemocratic regime within their borders but also export authoritarianism. In this way, they increase their destructive influence on other states, making these states dependent to a certain extent. Importantly, these regimes interfere in the internal affairs of states with all types of regimes, that is, stable democracies, and those states in a democratic transition, as well as states with various models of non-democratic regimes. Currently, all states are experiencing the influence of global autocratization.

The existence of an international dimension of neo-authoritarianism is confirmed by significant evidence of the intervention of certain states into the internal affairs of other states, the creation of an informal club of states that support each other in opposition to democratic states, organizations and values. Such support is provided primarily within the scope of the work of various democratic organizations and forums when discussing and voting on important issues. The processes taking place in the UN are one of the most vivid illustrations of this. The export of neo-authoritarianism threatens security at the global, regional, and national levels.

Neo-authoritarian intervention and the export of neo-authoritarianism need to be researched, given the insufficient study of these processes and the threats they can cause. The study of these processes is complicated by the fact that the conceptualization of neo-authoritarianism, the definition of its characteristics, and potential threats are not yet complete due to the political dynamics that are now rapidly influencing the configuration of all modern political regimes. The ascending geopolitical competition, new security challenges, and the chaotic multipolarity of the modern world are examples of this influence.

### **Materials and Methods**

The political regime is a dynamic category since the methods and means of exercising power depend on numerous factors. Authoritarian regimes in their various models have been actively evolving over the past decades. S. Huntington indicated the emergence of various forms of authoritarianism that corresponded to the features of the time (Huntington, 1991). New forms of authoritarianism appear in response to changes in social, economic, technological and informational development, encroachments on the stability of the global order, and security challenges. The introduction of such concepts as “new authoritarianism”, “neo-authoritarianism” into the political discourse is a reflection of the processes of renovation of the classic authoritarian regime. R. Dahrendorf was among the first to draw attention to the signs of a new authoritarian trend at the beginning of the 21st century (Dahrendorf, 2006).

In our interpretation, neo-authoritarianism is a modern model of an authoritarian political regime, which is based on the classic characteristics of authoritarianism, but is being renovated under the influence of many factors. Neo-authoritarianism is essentially an undemocratic regime with the characteristics of a façade of democracy (quasi-democracy). Neo-authoritarianism differs from the previous model of authoritarianism by a number of characteristics: (1) rotation of power is usually through elections, and not by violent means (Wiatr, 2019); (2) reduced role of ideology in the functioning of the state; (3) adaptability to the conditions of globalization, digitalization, and the information and communication revolution; (4) increased interest in geopolitics, changes in the world order (Ginsburg, 2020; Treisman and Guriev, 2015); (5) integration into the global capitalist economy; (6) imitation of democratic principles and institutions (Ginsburg, 2020, p. 222; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013); (7) replacement of mass repression with hidden forms of pressure and control, manipulation and propaganda; (8) provision of a legal basis for government initiatives that will have undemocratic consequences. In the context of the research topic, our primary interest is the changes that have taken place in the foreign policy of states with non-democratic regimes.

Thus, those non-democratic regimes that modified their tools and mechanisms within the third wave of autocratization are neo-authoritarian. Here are included both the states that had some democratic experience but

significantly deteriorated the quality of democracy and became autocracies, and the states that had no experience of democracy or in which the democratic transition was unsuccessful and short-lived. Neo-authoritarian regimes have acquired new characteristics due to globalization, digitalization, information and communication technologies, and more recently, artificial intelligence.

The renewal of the architecture of the authoritarian regime is caused by the change in the conditions of the functioning of current regimes. The point is that they are integrated into the global capitalist economy, dependent on international trade, labour resources, and investment flows. These regimes are forced to adapt to a world with open borders, global media, and economies that are based on knowledge, technology, information and communication progress. To achieve this, such regimes adopt formally democratic legal norms and ratify international legal acts, but such elements of democracy are only a facade. Actually, the understanding of democracy by the latest authoritarian regimes is reduced only to the formal origin of power from the people and does not include other important characteristics.

Neo-authoritarianism is aimed not merely at promoting authoritarian values, but also at devaluing liberal-democratic institutions, undermining citizens' trust in these institutions, and deepening social fault lines in the communities of democratic countries. Therefore, neo-authoritarianism can be considered as a tool for the global containment of democracy (Walker, 2014), and the formation of democracy's image as an incapable regime in the context of current global challenges.

Researchers note that the new authoritarianism is not a local or regional phenomenon, but a global one that has developed "on both sides of the Atlantic" (Waring, 2018, 2019). C. Ogden believes that the world is on the verge of capitulation to an authoritarian order; it will transform global institutions, human rights and political systems and usher in an authoritarian century (Ogden, 2022). The current wave of autocratization is different in that it is slower and appears to be eroding the democratic foundation from within (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019).

When studying the stability of authoritarian regimes, researchers pay attention to the importance of the international factor (Art, 2012, p. 201; Erdmann et al., 2013). Although modern authoritarian states have different national interests, they interact to strengthen their stability and increase pressure on their ideological enemies, liberal democracy, civil society, the rule of law, and free media. Neo-authoritarian regimes not only openly oppose themselves to democratic states, but from year to year increase their destructive influence on liberal-democratic values around the world (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Gleditsch and Ward, 2006).

The cooperation of non-democratic states distorts and even dismantles the democratic international order. It threatens peace and stability to such an extent that it has increased the probability of the use of nuclear weapons and terrorist attacks on nuclear power plants, as well as the use of other weapons prohibited by international conventions. Through cooperation, authoritarian rulers seek to maximize their chances of survival (Soest, 2015, p. 623).

In the political discourse, a consensus is generally reached that international factors are important for the functioning of political regimes (Börzel and Risse, 2012; Brinks and Coppedge, 2006; Gleditsch and Ward, 2006; Khoma and Nikolaieva, 2023; Magen and Morlino, 2009, p. 11-13). Researchers use the concept of “authoritarian diffusion” to denote the transnational spread of authoritarianism, the international cooperation of non-democratic regimes, the adoption by some regimes of the repressive experience of others (Ambrosio and Tolstrup, 2019; Bank and Weyland, 2020; Erdmann et al., 2013; Weyland, 2017).

The export of authoritarianism can be: (1) *active, direct*. This is a targeted intervention to undermine democracy and promote anti-democratic goals. This influence is called “autocracy promotion”; (2) *passive, indirect*. This influence spreads undemocratic models of behaviour, ideas, and values in an unobvious, latent way. It is referred to as “autocratic diffusion” (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2021). Both the autocracy promotion and autocratic diffusion have their origins, first of all, in the so-called authoritarian gravity centres (Richter, 2022). These are non-democratic states whose resources and interests of ambition and imperial past push them to go beyond their state borders. That is, not only is authoritarianism preserved and strengthened within a country’s borders, but also various forms of intervention are carried out on the territory of other states in which there are particular interests, be it geopolitical, military-strategic, or economic. The formation of authoritarian gravity centres is facilitated by state, non-governmental organizations and even individuals endowed with various types of resources, such as power, finance, and private military companies. The goal of their activity is therefore either the promotion of autocracy or the implementation of autocratic diffusion.

In our analysis, it is assumed that in order to achieve their destructive goals, authoritarian states resort to different formats of cooperation due to differences in resources. Some states, such as China and Russia, are powerful global authoritarian gravity centres. Other states, such as Venezuela and Saudi Arabia, can be considered regional authoritarian gravity centres. Other authoritarian states, such as Zambia, Myanmar, and Sudan, are low-impact objects of international politics, a kind of periphery of authoritarian influence, which do not export, but primarily import authoritarian technologies, testing them on their citizens. The constructed model of international cooperation includes authoritarian actors of three levels: 1) states-centres of global authoritarian gravity; 2) states-centres of regional authoritarian gravity; 3) peripheral states that are under the influence of states of global and/or regional types of authoritarian gravity.

There is a deepening dependence of many African, Asian and other states on a few of the strongest neo-authoritarian states. In fact, this explains our choice of the cases of the two neo-authoritarian states, China, and Russia, to study the purpose, scope of subjects, tools and consequences of neo-authoritarian intervention. Such states are figuratively called “black knights” (Tolstrup, 2015, p. 673). These political actors use strategies to promote anti-democratic narratives in different ways, which will be considered below.

### **Foreign policy interests of neo-authoritarian regimes**

Neo-authoritarianism has an ascending interest in foreign policy and geopolitics. Such regimes seek to change the international order that is based on international law, universal rights and values. Neo-authoritarian states with great resource potential not only pursue policies aimed at strengthening the stability of non-democratic regimes within their borders, but are also active in destructive processes of influence outside their borders. They conduct subversive activities in order to weaken democratic institutions in a particular state and change the global order as a whole. This is done through instruments such as espionage by persons who are officially representatives of diplomatic, consular offices or trade missions; interference in election processes by inflicting reputational damage on candidates they deem to be dangerous; and toxic information campaigns through all types of media, especially through social networks.

Modern authoritarianism synthesizes all types of power that are present in international politics, soft, hard, smart, and sharp types of power. Neo-authoritarian regimes use a wide range of instruments that can be used as weapons: data, information, people (such as migrants or refugees), food (such as Ukrainian grain), fossil fuels (such as Russian gas), and investments. Paradoxically, even the animal world can be used as a weapon. For example, Russia employed dolphins to protect its fleet in Sevastopol Bay, Ukraine from underwater attacks, and in the port of Tartus, Syria, it used these mammals to retrieve objects and deter enemy divers; the Russian Navy also trains beluga whales, seals and bottlenose dolphins for military purposes in polar waters.

Neo-authoritarianism is based on the idea of various internal and external threats, which only a strong state can resist. Neo-authoritarian states apply the instrument of blackmail in international politics, using energy, food, the threat of nuclear warfare, and blocking and vetoing important decisions. Such regimes tend to spread distorted information, conspiracy theories, and unsubstantiated accusations, manipulatively influence international public opinion, and conduct informational and psychological operations. The discourse of the representatives of neo-authoritarian regimes demonstrates various forms of latent and open aggression, the language of enmity. Moreover, this is characteristic not only of propagandists but is also of the rhetoric of diplomats, and spokesmen of the foreign policy department.

In international interactions, neo-authoritarian regimes use a wide range of tools. First of all, these are power tools, such as the annexation of the territory of sovereign states, various violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity or the threat of such violations; and holding military exercises and weapons tests for the demonstration of force. Tools are also employed to force other states, their governments, or individual officials to take certain legislative or administrative actions, using bribery, blackmail, or threats. Neo-authoritarian regimes widely invest in and use soft power tools such as funding of educational and research institutes, and think tanks, or investments in large-scale infrastructure projects (Walker, 2016, p. 57-58). By building economic,

cultural, sports and other networks, neo-authoritarian regimes influence the politics of other states.

Simultaneously, tools of sharp power are applied using informational operations of influence, informational cyber terrorism, manipulation of public opinion, diversion of attention from acute international problems, and active work with diasporas to use them as propaganda conductors. The subversive tools of neo-authoritarian regimes most often include propaganda and disinformation campaigns through the networks of foreign branches of state media and social networks, cyberattacks, and support for pro-government non-governmental organizations.

In international relations, neo-authoritarian regimes widely apply the tools of value formation and “correct” perception of socio-political issues. Media channels, state and pro-government non-governmental organizations are primarily used for this purpose. Foreign policy tools of neo-authoritarian regimes include the use of pressure on international organizations, for example, initiating the adoption of certain decisions and their lobbying for or blocking decisions.

Elections are a democratic institution that is one of the most vulnerable to external influence. The destructive activity is manifested in the direct and covert actions of foreign governments, and more often, their agents, who aim to directly or indirectly change the behaviour of candidates, parties, or voters and their electoral preferences. There may be interference in the course of the election campaign, from the nomination of candidates to the counting of votes, a search for incriminating information on candidates is carried out, the situation in societies is shaken on the eve of voting, and candidates and political parties are discredited. These interventions aim to promote the victory of the desired candidate or party that will subsequently lobby for the issues needed by neo-authoritarian governments.

The indicated tools, which are currently applied by neo-authoritarian regimes for international interactions, are not an exhaustive list, as only the most obvious ones are mentioned.

### **Features of neo-authoritarian intervention**

All the characteristics of neo-authoritarian intervention, which are inherent in the latest non-democratic regimes, depend on whether a particular regime is interested solely in strengthening stability within its state borders, or also aims at the international dimension by exporting authoritarianism on a regional or even global scale. Most modern authoritarian regimes, especially in states with low socio-economic indicators, are only interested in keeping the current regime within their borders. On the other hand, the leading states of the neo-authoritarian world, thanks to the available natural resources, technological, institutional or other potential, strive to ensure the stability of the regime within their borders, and actively export authoritarianism, increasing their influence on other states, due to a desire to change the current international order. Such neo-authoritarian regimes interfere in the internal affairs of both

democratic and neo-authoritarian states. A special area of interest of neo-authoritarian states is the export of authoritarianism to young democracies and states that are undergoing democratic transitions. In the same way, the “democracy containment doctrine” is implemented (Walker, 2014). It is assumed that the main goal of the newest authoritarian regimes is to deter the spread of democracy and change the international order that was formed and functioned after the Second World War but is now under threat.

The tools, mechanisms, and tasks of neo-authoritarian intervention depend chiefly on the resource potential of a particular regime, as well as the characteristics of those states with respect to which the authoritarian intervention is carried out. The rapid growth of exports of neo-authoritarianism is connected with information and communication progress. Technologies have increased the area of influence of some states on others, significantly reduced the cost of these processes. Artificial intelligence, social networks, and special software (for example, facial recognition) are all now tools of neo-authoritarian regimes, both for internal and external use.

The spread of misinformation on social networks is becoming a growing problem. Facebook, Twitter, Google struggle to intercept Russian propaganda and disinformation, but there are many platforms (Parler, Gab, Truth Social, Gettr, Rumble, etc.) on which information operators can freely share disinformation due to the lack of content moderation (Geissler et al., 2023; Graphika, The Stanford Internet Observatory, 2022).

Neo-authoritarian states (especially China and Russia) actively engage in social networks as a tool for promoting foreign policy agendas. Foreign policy agencies and government officials try to shape international public opinion through their accounts (in particular on Twitter). Such topics as Russian politics, elections in the USA and to the European Parliament, the security situation in the Indo-Pacific region, etc. are particularly distorted by propaganda manipulations. It is certain that without significant efforts by governments and social media platforms to curb the spread of misinformation, toxic content can spread widely and virally. This will strengthen global authoritarianism and undermine democracy.

Non-democratic actors are increasingly using artificial intelligence for disinformation. They deploy AI-powered bots on social media and train AI-powered algorithms to promote hate-filled and misleading content. Disinformation generated by artificial intelligence is a huge threat to democracies. AI tools are already being applied to spread plausible-looking deepfakes and other disinformation, in places via mock news sites or fake broadcasters – complete with AI-generated news anchors.

Neo-authoritarian states resort to promoting their desired ideas in other states through visually faked well-known news websites that are highly trusted by the citizens. The design of well-known media is copied, but the content is filled with propaganda. Only an attentive user can notice that a single character in the website name (domain name) differs from the original name of a popular publication. In fact, fake news sites steal the names of well-known media brands. In 2022, *spiegel.de*, *welt.de*, *bild.de*, *t-online*, and others faced this

problem. Similar cases have been recorded frequently in recent years. Pseudo-sites act as propaganda mouthpieces of neo-authoritarian states.

A separate form of neo-authoritarian intervention is the organization and financing by non-democratic states of protests in other states. Intelligence services and agent networks of neo-authoritarian states shake public sentiments with various public actions. Sponsorship of protests is in addition to cyberattacks, funding of political parties in different states, and other methods of exercising authoritarian influence. For example, Russia has been destabilizing the situation in Moldova for many years. Pro-Russian associations, primarily, the Șor Party<sup>1</sup> and PACE, organized paid protesters for anti-government protest actions, to which “demonstrators” were brought, including from outside of Moldova. This is an example of how neo-authoritarian states use local political forces to implement various hybrid attacks.

A manifestation of neo-authoritarian interference, which can be traced to Russia’s actions in the EU countries during the war in Ukraine, include the organisation of various anti-war protests. For example, the pseudo-movement Stop Killing Donbass arranged actions in France, Italy and Spain in support of the population of Donbass and against the provision of arms to Ukraine. In France, these protests took place near the French defence company Nexter. Various marginal socio-political movements (“anti-vaccinators” or left movements) were involved in such actions. The goal was to create a picture of the growing dissatisfaction of the population of the EU countries with the actions of their state institutions due to the aid to Ukraine. If it was not possible to organize protests, the information was falsified. For example, in Copenhagen on February 6, 2023, the Danes protested against the government’s intention to cancel one of the public holidays in order to increase revenues to the state budget, but this event was interpreted by Russian propaganda as a protest against Denmark’s support of Ukraine with weapons.

Against the background of Russia’s gas blackmail of the EU, the energy issue was used to organize protests against the actions of the authorities of democratic states that joined the anti-Russian sanctions. For instance, in Prague in September 2022, about 70,000 demonstrators protested against the rapid rise in electricity prices and demanded an end to sanctions against Russia because of the war in Ukraine. Such large-scale events prove that Russia is not only capable of organizing and financing propaganda and disinformation campaigns abroad, but that there are still a significant number of citizens of other states who are susceptible to the destructive influence of propaganda or actually support such sentiments.

The number of such events increased immediately after the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine. The key theme of the protests in the democratic

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<sup>1</sup> The party was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Moldova in July 2023. However, the leaders of this party almost immediately announced the creation of a new political organization the “Chance. Duties. Realization” bloc.

states of Europe was alleged discrimination against Russians. The Russians considered the prohibition of wearing/drawing symbols of a “special military operation” or any forms of its support to be oppression. Given the number of Russians living in democratic states, they constitute a strong social base for destabilizing actions, spreading propaganda, and shaking public sentiments. Therefore, authoritarian governments seek support for promoting their narratives and subversive plans among those citizens, public activists, and politicians who live in democratic states and enjoy all the achievements of such a regime, but ideologically do not support liberal-democratic values and principles.

Numerous states have political parties that cooperated or are currently cooperating with the regimes of Russia, China, or other authoritarian states. For example, within the EU, the following are pro-Russian: the Estonian Centre Party (Estonia), the Freedom Party of Austria (Austria), Alternative for Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany), Ataka/Attack (Bulgaria), Lega Nord/Northern League and the Five Star Movement (Italy), SYRIZA (Greece), Podemos (Spain), Jobbik (Hungary), the National Rally (France). The pro-Chinese parties are the Workers’ Party (Brazil), the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, the Ba’ath Party (Syria), the Patriotic Front (Zambia) and other parties of predominantly left-wing ideology. Certain parties, from those that support the policies of the largest neo-authoritarian states, are in power and, due to this, actively lobby for the necessary issues. A clear example is the ruling Hungarian party Fidesz. It voted against the resolution that would have allowed V. Putin to be arrested and extradited to the International Criminal Court in the event of his visit to Hungary. This party also opposed EU sanctions on Russian oil and gas.

Outside their borders, neo-authoritarian states maintain networks of spies that carry out a wide range of destructive tasks. One of the most obvious results of their work is the influence on authoritative people in democratic states and the formation of the necessary public opinion owing to interaction with officials, journalists, bloggers, opinion leaders and trendsetters. Both open propaganda mouthpieces, such as RT (which continues to function in some states), and other more hidden methods of influence are used. Thus, during the war with Ukraine, in the states of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia strengthened the network of agents who monitor the transit of weapons and humanitarian aid to Ukraine and plan various sabotages. In recent years, Russia has invested considerable effort and money to rebuild its espionage network in Western countries. Chinese intelligence services are creating extensive spy networks in the United States and other Western countries, which are supported by consular institutions of the People’s Republic of China. At the same time, China encourages its citizens to join counterintelligence work.

Recent authoritarian regimes have created an anti-democratic toolkit that is a mirror image of democratic “soft power”. Various democratic principles, tools, and mechanisms were adapted to the needs of neo-authoritarian regimes. For example, non-governmental organizations are initiated and funded by neo-authoritarian governments to guarantee their pro-

government course. This mechanism contradicts the nature of civil society. It is about GONGO (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization), i.e. “non-governmental organizations that are organized by the state”. Such organizations are non-governmental only nominally, but in fact, they support the state, the current political regime. Direct or indirect management of such NGOs and control over their activities “is carried out by institutional agents of the state” (Lushnikov, 2019, p. 138). It is our belief that such pseudo-social organizations are created in order to: 1) demonstrate to the world that the authorities of non-democratic states are not against the existence of civil society. This is aimed at limiting international criticism of the regime; 2) use these organizations to promote in society the narratives needed by the authorities, prevent the spread of “harmful” attitudes, and create the illusion of mass support of the ruling regime by the people. For example, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the Russian youth movement Nashi and other GONGOs use “democratic practices to subtly undermine democracy” (Naím, 2007).

Neo-authoritarian regimes have not merely succeeded in diminishing the role of those who have long had the reputation of “mouthpieces for democracy”. Owing to financial incentives, they managed to engage certain Western universities, analytical centres, media, and technology companies to promote their interests at the global level. Individual institutions with a democratic image have commercially integrated with the authoritarian systems of China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Brazil and other non-democratic states.

Moreover, neo-authoritarian states weaken the institutions that ensured international order after the end of the Cold War. In fact, the standards of the institutions that defined the architecture of liberal democracy since the end of the Cold War, for example the UN, OSCE, are being eroded. This is done in order to undermine their stability in terms of protecting human rights and democratic values. At the same time, neo-authoritarian states create their own organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Eurasian Customs Union, and the Union State of Russia and Belarus, within which neo-authoritarian states cooperate to promote the latest undemocratic projects.

Over the past several decades, neo-authoritarian states have been building up their resources: the military-industrial complex, a dense network of diplomatic institutions, trade missions, cultural centres, and foreign media offices. Currently, one cannot ignore the fact that these states have achieved significant progress in their destructive activities in the international arena. Some neo-authoritarian states have even shown certain confidence in further permissiveness. Until recently, the rather weak cohesion of democratic states in opposing neo-authoritarian influence was the basis for this. Neo-authoritarian states were sure that the West was divided. Meanwhile, after the support demonstrated by the collective West in 2022-2023 in relation to a number of states (Ukraine, Moldova, Finland, Sweden), it is expected that neo-authoritarian states will review the tools and mechanisms for achieving their

goals. These tools and mechanisms will become more and more radical. For example, until recently, Russia supported UN sanctions against North Korea's due to its nuclear program, but today Russia is actively moving closer to North Korea.

### **Export of neo-authoritarianism by China**

The undisputed leader among neo-authoritarian states in terms of influence on the politics of other states is China. Xi Jinping's regime produces and uses artificial intelligence to monitor and control citizens. New powerful surveillance tools are constantly being developed and exported to other countries. Over the coming years, these technologies will be improved and integrated into comprehensive video surveillance systems that autocrat rulers can use for total control over citizens, thereby strengthening the stability of an undemocratic regime.

China currently refrains from forceful foreign policy scenarios and generally tries to implement its plans by disguising them as soft power, the Chinese version of soft power is quite different from the Western understanding. It is based on economics, culture and public diplomacy, but rejects liberal-democratic values and principles.

Let us cite only a few examples of China's export of autocracy to other countries. The Malaysian government partnered with Chinese startup Yitu to provide facial recognition for citizens. Chinese companies participated in a competition to equip each of Singapore's 110,000 lampposts with facial recognition cameras. China acted as a supplier of surveillance equipment to Sri Lanka. Kenya, Uganda, Mauritius equipped their large cities with Chinese-made video surveillance networks. The Chinese company Dahua installed surveillance cameras that use artificial intelligence on the streets of the capital of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar. Huawei in Serbia created a "safe city system" with facial recognition cameras. ZTE sold Ethiopia a system for reproducing audio recordings of recent phone calls of mobile users. China financed Ecuador's purchase of a surveillance camera system for \$240 million. And thanks to a loan taken from the Chinese government, Bolivia purchased equipment for monitoring citizens.

This formal economic cooperation of China affects the strengthening of the authoritarian stability of other states (Bader, 2015, p. 655). By selling telecommunications equipment to developing countries at a substantial discount, China resorts to unfair credit terms in order to gain control over the networks and data of other countries. For example, in 2018, the Chinese startup CloudWalk Technology entered into an agreement with the government of Zimbabwe to create a surveillance network. Under its terms, the government sends the entire array of recorded information to the Chinese developer. This is an important body of data given that migration flows from all over sub-Saharan Africa pass through Zimbabwe.

Non-democratic states consult most often with China regarding censorship of information and the possibility of monitoring information flows.

Civil servants from several non-democratic states are studying with Chinese experts how to control the new media and manage the flow of information.

The Chinese government co-opts those politicians and elites of other states who have unstable liberal-democratic values or are willing to deviate from the course of strengthening democracy for their own purposes. An example is the Western Balkans, where China pursues a policy that undermines the democratic development of the countries of the region in order to distance them from the EU. The growth of such influence is recorded primarily in Serbia (Shullman, 2019). After Xi Jinping's historic visit in June 2016, China has been very actively investing in this country, taking advantage of its close relations with the illiberal leadership of Serbia, in particular, President A. Vučić and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party.

Not only Serbia, but also Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia experience the strengthening of China's position in the region. The risks of becoming debt-dependent on China are increasing. According to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), between 2009 and 2021, China invested EUR 32 billion in the region (Stanicek and Tarpova, 2022). The level of presence in the countries of the Western Balkans is different: large projects in Serbia and Montenegro and projects of a smaller number and scale in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. These processes cause concern in the states that are interested in European integration, because Chinese economic expansion can affect the prospects of EU membership.

China's export of the autocratic management model has been carried out within the framework of the One Belt, One Road initiative and development strategy since 2013. Although it was adopted by the Chinese government to invest in almost 70 countries, it had far from only economic goals. It was aimed at creating a potential Sinocentric system. The One Belt, One Road initiative is an example of neo-imperialism, neo-colonialism and debt-trap diplomacy. Several states (Angola, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Zambia for example) risk falling into debt dependence on China. These states are already being used and are likely to be used for various purposes to promote the latest authoritarian policies, for example, to host China's military bases. Such bases already exist in countries where China exports authoritarianism, for example, in Djibouti (since 2017 the Port of Doraleh in Djibouti, the Gwadar port in Pakistan since 2013, and a military base in the Gulf of Siam, with potential locations for new military bases are considered to be Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Equatorial Guinea. In addition to naval bases, China sees the prospect of expanding military bases on the land of other countries.

China actively interferes in the election processes of numerous countries by trying to control information flows and implementing disinformation campaigns. In particular, during the US election campaigns, China implemented influence operations, tried to change narratives in its favour, promoted pro-Beijing US politicians, and disseminated distorted or false information. China conducted influence operations during election

campaigns through fake accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. There, messages were disseminated on the most sensitive topics such as the right to abortion, and issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic with an orientation mainly to the states that are characterized by unstable electoral positions (Nimmo and Torrey, 2022).

China has also repeatedly interfered in Canada's election process. In addition to illegal campaign contributions, numerous tools have been applied to influence the Canadian public, ranging from the broadcasting of state-sponsored propaganda on the social media platforms of Facebook and Instagram to exercising government control over the social media platforms of WeChat and TikTok. China's political regime has also used traditional tactics of espionage and pressure on the diplomatic corps, although it traditionally rejects accusations of such actions. The political strategy of the Communist Party's United Front in Canada was used to advance its political programme (Jung, 2022). China also secretly funded at least eleven federal candidates in the 2019 election. Canadian intelligence identified a secret network that involved members of Canada's two main political parties, the Liberals and Conservatives (Cooper, 2019). Representatives of Chinese diplomatic institutions in Canada, as well as a proxy group of the Chinese Communist Party, were involved in these destructive processes. China resorted to intermediary payments to individual candidates for elected office linked to the Chinese Communist Party. Attempts to corrupt former Canadian officials in order to gain leverage in Ottawa were documented. Aggressive campaigns were conducted to "punish" Canadian politicians whom China considers a threat to its interests. China was also accused of meddling in Canada's 2021 federal election in favour of the Liberal Party in order to weaken conservative politicians unfriendly to Beijing (Fife and Chase, 2023).

China's area of priority interests is not only North America, but also, the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in Australia where structures associated with official Beijing rewarded influential politicians so that they tried to shape Australian foreign policy in favour of China (Remeikis, 2017). China has repeatedly attempted to interfere in Australian parliamentary elections through coordinated information and disinformation campaigns aimed at promoting candidates sympathetic to the Chinese government and its actions. Such facts were recorded not only in Australia, but also in New Zealand and several Asian countries. In general, China's ambitions are not so much regional as they are global.

### **Export of neo-authoritarianism by Russia**

Russia, in recent years, due to sanctions, expulsion of spy diplomats, and closure of some information channels, has lost certain tools for implementing the policy of authoritarian intervention. However, in new geopolitical realities, this state is constantly working on new destructive alternatives. Russia supports the leaders of non-democratic states, such as Kim Jong Un or Bashar al-Assad, and receives some support in return. One of the

results of such influence was the open or latent support of Russia in the war against Ukraine by many non-democratic states, or at least their consistent neutral position.

The vote on Russia's exclusion from the UN Human Rights Council was indicative in terms of the analysis of Russia's influence on other authoritarian states. Only 93 states supported this decision, 24 states opposed it including China, Syria, Cuba, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Iran, North Korea, and Vietnam, and 58 states abstained including Brazil, India, Mexico, Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Egypt, Pakistan. When in September 2022, during the UN General Assembly, particular states voiced a proposal to exclude the Russian Federation from the permanent members of the UN Security Council, they were opposed by states interested in preserving Russia's strong position in international politics. Generally, voting within the UN shows the existence of a coalition of states, including non-democratic ones. Votes in the UN on issues related to Russia demonstrate that modern autocracies experience a greater or lesser degree of dependence on Russia or are strongly connected to it by certain interests. Russia has lobbyists of its interests all over the world, using various levers of influence. This state has created a whole network of connections based on informal destructive practices, primarily corruption. For many years, Russia has encouraged the cooperation of former high-ranking officials of other states, through whom it lobbied for its interests at the highest international level. Such actions can also be seen as an export of authoritarianism.

In 2014-2022, Russia indirectly provided support in the amount of at least 300 million dollars to political parties and candidates in more than 20 countries in order to gain influence there (Russia has spent, 2022). This is only the amount that US intelligence managed to record, its volume and the number of countries involved could have been much larger. During that period, cases of financing "necessary" electoral actors in states of various regions, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Ukraine were recorded. There are suspicions of Russia's interference in the election campaigns of Madagascar and Ecuador as well.

Election campaigns in the USA are a good illustration of authoritarian interference in the electoral process. US intelligence services concluded that V. Putin personally gave instructions to interfere in the presidential election with the aim of undermining Americans' confidence in the electoral process and reducing the chances of the US Democratic Party candidates H. Clinton in 2016 and J. Biden in 2020 (National Intelligence Council, 2021; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). In other words, the highest management level of the authoritarian state tried to bend political processes outside its borders to its interests and applied a wide range of tools toward this end. An example of such a tool is the ex-deputy of the Ukrainian parliament A. Derkach, who publicly accused the US presidential candidate J. Biden of corruption. He acted as a person involved in Russian influence operations. The Russian narrative about the corrupt ties of J. Biden and his son H. Biden with Ukrainian business was broadcast to the American audience through the created networks. It was established that V. Putin had purview over the activities of A.

Derkach, who was later recognized by the Ukrainian parliament as a Russian agent.

In the fall of 2022, attempts to interfere in the midterm elections to the US Congress with the help of Russian bot farms were recorded. The information attacks were directed against the US Democratic Party and its candidates. Specifically, the social network Gab, popular among Americans with conservative views, was used. Subsequently, the head of the private military company Wagner, Ye. Prigozhin, stated that Russia had interfered, was interfering and would continue to interfere in these processes. He also acknowledged his leading role in the creation and operation of the Internet Research Agency (better known as the “troll factory” from Olgino), which interfered in the American electoral process using fake accounts on social networks.

Elections in the United States are the most striking, but far from the only, example of authoritarian intervention. Here are a few other examples. During Brexit (2016), Russia took active measures to facilitate the exit of Great Britain from the EU, thereby deepening internal divisions and crises in this country (Kupiecki et al., 2022). During the 2017 presidential elections in France, Russia supported the far-right, anti-European and pro-Russian presidential candidate M. Le Pen (Jurczyszyn, 2018). A similar situation was observed during the parliamentary elections in Germany (2017), where Russia supported the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (Applebaum et al., 2017). During the referendum on the status of Catalonia (2017), Russian information campaigns were intended to support separatism in Spain (Kupiecki et al., 2022). Russia is also involved in the election processes of post-Soviet states, even those that have been members of the EU and NATO for two decades. For example, structures of the PMC Wagner interfered in the parliamentary and European Parliament elections held in 2019 in Estonia.

During the latest presidential election campaign in the Czech Republic (2023), Russia conducted an active disinformation and manipulative campaign against P. Pavel as the most inconvenient candidate. To reduce his support among voters, a fake video was posted in which P. Pavel allegedly declared the need for the Czech Republic to enter the war with Russia. Czech voters were also exposed to narratives about manipulations during candidate registration and external (Western) influence on the electoral process. One day before the second round of elections, disinformation was launched through the Russian mail service Yandex about the death of P. Pavel, and consequently, his elimination from the election race. Russia now most often uses Telegram channels of Russian propagandists, propagandist media (Sputnik agency and RT television company), and pro-Russian influencers to launch manipulative videos and messages, with the idea that these videos will go “viral”.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine had no immediate results for Russia, it increased its influence on the non-democratic states of Africa. Russia tried to open a “second front” to oppose the West. It promotes its interests in the Sahel region, in the strip of states from Mali to Sudan. Apparently, there are plans to create a “belt of coups” that will provide Russia with tangible influence

there and displace the West. Africa is currently important for Russia's geopolitical and economic interests. At the same time, the leaders of some African states are still interested in cooperation with Russia for access to various advanced technologies of authoritarian rule as well as economic necessities such as food.

Modern Russian tools of neo-authoritarian intervention in the internal affairs of democratic states consist, first of all, in cyberattacks on the information systems of political parties and state structures, hacking of private and business e-mails with the subsequent controlled leakage of stolen data (hack-and-leak) along with their massive distribution on social networks with the help of bots, trolls, propaganda channels, networks of pro-state think tanks, agents of influence and other "active agents" (Kruglashov and Shvydiuk, 2020). Unlike the Chinese tools of neo-authoritarian interference in the internal affairs of other states, Russian tools have gone far beyond soft power and include armed aggression, nuclear blackmail, genocide and linguicide against other peoples.

### **How democracies can guard against the neo-authoritarianism?**

Given the above, the question arises as to how democracies can counter neo-authoritarianism. The main task for democratic states and organizations is the manifestation of political will and consistency in defending democratic norms and values. Today, the global situation literally demands a struggle for progressive values, goals, and principles. In order to prevent the newly emerging autocratic states from changing the global order and normalizing authoritarianism, democratic states must actively and consistently compete ideologically with autocracies. Democracies have often been reticent to assert the value of their own governance system, but the scale of current challenges requires an active and decisive position and the formulation of a positive vision of democratic principles and international relations. It is important that democratic countries continue to support the democratization of the states in the Global South, build healthy information ecosystems to counter manipulation, involve citizens through "civic education to foster a constructive democratic culture and to empower citizens to challenge authoritarian narratives" (Siegle, 2024, p. 3).

To counter authoritarian narratives about Western exploitation, democratic failure, and a new world order based on multipolarity and non-interference, democracies must convincingly demonstrate the advantages of their norms and values for further development, peace and security. The message that only democracy offers the prospect of global peace and progress should be the basis of the argument about the inadmissibility of the normalization of neo-authoritarian practices.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the results of the analysis, the purpose, subjects, and main tools, as well as the most obvious consequences of neo-authoritarian intervention may be determined.

The purpose of neo-authoritarian intervention is the intention to strengthen the internal stability of non-democratic regimes and their influence on international processes, the efforts to change the world order, to destroy liberal-democratic values. The purpose of neo-authoritarian influence depends on the type of political regime in which the intervention is attempted. In the case of states with a stable liberal-democratic tradition, the goal is to undermine the trust of the citizens of these states in democracy, its institutions and values, to deepen various social and political disagreements, to exacerbate social tension, to “shake” public opinion, and to create an atmosphere of uncertainty. In the case of states with an unstable democratic tradition or non-democratic states, the goal may be to prevent the emergence/strengthening of democracy, to develop a gradual economic, technological, defence dependence and to further control of these states.

The subjects of neo-authoritarian intervention are: governments of neo-authoritarian states; puppet parties; government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGO); marginal, ultra-radical social and political movements; state-controlled media; unscrupulous analytical centres that work to fulfil orders with the desired results; agent networks; “state” hackers-cyberspies and other types of cybercriminals; international multilingual networks of TV, radio stations, news agencies, which are financed by neo-authoritarian governments.

The tools of neo-authoritarian intervention depend on the specific goal. They are based on the classic approaches of authoritarianism, which are modernized due to the opportunities created by democracy, globalization, and digitalization. These tools include: interference in the course of election campaigns in order to support candidates and political parties convenient for promoting their interests; illegal financing of political parties, candidates for elected positions, and public pseudo-movements; sponsoring the protests that take place under the necessary slogans; cyberattacks, cyber-operations of various types with subsequent use of the received information; espionage involving representatives of diplomatic and consular institutions, trade missions, and cultural funds; recruitment to high positions, inclusion of ex-officials of democratic states in supervisory boards of top corporations to use their connections in lobbying the interests of a particular authoritarian state; influencing the information space of other states, conducting complex disinformation campaigns of spreading fakes, conspiracy theories, disinformation, and data manipulation, spreading propaganda and authoritarian narratives through multilingual media; creating fake news websites that mimic well-known sites and filling them with propaganda; investment in, development of large-scale infrastructure projects in the countries that are subject to neo-authoritarian intervention; financial support of universities, and analytical centres in democratic states to promote the interests of neo-authoritarian

governments at the global level; a wide range of “soft power” tools, primarily in the field of culture and education; support of local autocrats, either in the government or the opposition, with surveillance and control technologies, and food, as well as weapons; weakening of institutions that ensure international order, and the creation of alternative institutions in opposition to them.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of tools of neo-authoritarian intervention, which is constantly expanding. Although non-violent forms dominate, which disguise themselves as “democratic” formats and “soft power”, forceful scenarios are also present. Therefore, the consequences of the intervention of neo-authoritarian states in the internal affairs of other states include an increase in socio-political tension at various levels, destabilization, a decrease in the quality of democracy and a slowdown in the spread of its standards and values, as well as attempts to change the world order. The possible consequence of such processes on a global scale will be the expansion of the range of states with non-democratic regimes, which will become an additional challenge for the stability of democracy.

The consequences of neo-authoritarian intervention depend on the stability of national democracies, the prevailing type of political and legal culture of the population, as well as the ability to resist various destructive practices. Hence, for democratic states, the possible consequences may be: growth of populism, radicalism and nationalism in social and political life; rising hate speech and xenophobia; coming to power of radical political forces; emergence of a segment of quasi-civil society in the structure of civil society; and the slow down of anti-corruption measures. Under such external influence, liberal democracy first turns into illiberal, and then regresses in the direction of the newest authoritarian regimes<sup>2</sup>.

The consequences of neo-authoritarian intervention for non-democratic states are: reduction of prospects for democratization and strengthening of the regime’s repressive characteristics; deepening economic and other dependence on states that export authoritarianism to them; growth of destructive informal institutions, such as corruption, nepotism, and clan networks; increasing instability; loss of control over deposits of energy raw materials and mineral deposits; and power scenarios for solving socio-political problems.

It is obvious that currently the forms of influence of some states on others have become more sophisticated and disguised. Such networks of influence are being created when anyone can be used by a foreign state to exert destructive, criminal influence.

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<sup>2</sup> The case of Hungary during V. Orbán’s premiership is one of the most vivid illustrations of such processes.

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