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REVIEW ARTICLE

Transnational Authoritarianism

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Abstract

In a globalised world, authoritarian politics does not stay within state borders. Autocrats and their allies reach abroad to influence their international environment to, at a minimum, protect authoritarianism at home or, more ambitiously, to promote pro-authoritarian norms and practices abroad. A rich stream of political science literature – comparative, international and area studies – has mapped the contours of this 'transnational authoritarianism' in an increasingly permissive international environment. This review article argues that transnational authoritarianism is facilitated by the rise of authoritarian powers and deepening globalisation. It first examines the drivers of contemporary transnational authoritarianism before identifying and categorising its central actors. The review then organises the literature on this topic into two strands, each enabled by autocracies' ascendance in a globalised era. First, official channels of transnational authoritarianism see mostly state actors advance regime goals with familiar instruments such as security cooperation agreements, but with renewed vigour and support. Second, unofficial channels feature a mix of state and non-state actors exerting leverage and influence within the networks and channels of global interconnectedness. By necessity, these categories traverse the fields of comparative politics and international relations, revealing how these transnational dimensions are critical to the success of contemporary authoritarian regimes. The review concludes by revisiting earlier literature on autocracy promotion considering these emergent realities, and reflecting on how recent political developments in the United States relate to these processes.

Keywords: authoritarianism; autocracy; transnational; globalisation; interdependence

On 21 May 2021, a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius that was flying over Belarusian airspace was forced into an emergency landing in Minsk. The reason for this audacious act by Belarusian forces was soon revealed when Roman Protasevich, a Belarusian journalist and editor of the popular Poland-based Nexta Telegram channel that had become a hub for posting videos of protests against dictator Alexander Lukashenko, was plucked out with his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, and detained by security services.

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Protasevich's case illustrated how many external states and spaces had become implicated in Lukashenko's authoritarian network and opposition to it. Europe's longest-standing dictator hatched a military operation, in apparent coordination with Russian security services, to hijack a civilian airliner travelling between two NATO countries to capture an exiled journalist who was viewed as a regime threat because of his transnational social media activities (Cooley 2021).

Bold new tactics like this have prompted academics to systematically study the extraterritorial reach of authoritarian states. A rich scholarly literature that cuts across political science and related subfields addresses the causes and consequences of authoritarianism crossing borders. This literature includes comparative politics and international relations, but also migration and diaspora studies, area studies, studies of kleptocracy, and human rights.

This area of study can be called 'transnational authoritarianism', defined as *the extension of authoritarian regime influence across borders with potential effects ranging from protecting authoritarianism at home to promoting pro-authoritarian norms abroad, including normalising authoritarianism as an acceptable mode of governance*. To qualify, an action should come from an authoritarian state or state-linked entity or individual and should extend beyond the territorial borders of that autocratic state. There are grey areas, but a few examples may clarify the boundaries of the concept. An authoritarian government's domestic propaganda does not qualify under this definition, but propaganda aimed at foreign audiences or the diaspora does. Repressing a protest or demonstration domestically does not qualify, but harassing, intimidating or coercing those who flee abroad and/or their families who remain in their home states does. Domestic legislation that restricts or violates civil-political rights within the state does not make the cut, but trying to influence accepted legal understandings of human rights at the United Nations (UN) or a regional organisation to make them align with authoritarian practices does.

Growing bodies of scholarly literature now examine these second sets of practices, namely transnational actions that serve as extensions of classic domestic authoritarian tactics. This research underscores the growing scope of authoritarian actions and ambitions in an international order that is increasingly conducive to assertive authoritarian postures and actions. Two developments over the last decade are particularly noteworthy. First, the rise of China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and other powerful autocracies with an active interest in reshaping international rules and norms has significantly eroded the democratic consensus that once characterised global governance institutions and networks. Second, contrary to assumptions in the 1990s and 2000s that economic globalisation would support democratisation in emerging markets, we now see a variety of ways in which global investments, service providers and the expansion of consumer markets support transnational authoritarianism. Existing concepts such as 'sharp power' (Walker 2018) and 'authoritarian image management' (Dukalskis 2021) capture important aspects of this new authoritarian environment, but not its broad scope.

The next section examines the drivers of resurgent transnational authoritarianism, focusing on the re-emergence of authoritarian powers and the interconnected global order. We then examine the actors who operate in this context, arranging them by the

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proximity of their ties to the authoritarian state. We frame the remainder of the literature into two broad channels of transnational authoritarian actions. Official channels see state actors advance regime goals through formal state actions, diplomatic pathways and within existing institutions of global governance. Unofficial channels involve a mix of state and non-state actors exerting leverage and influence within the networks of global interconnectedness, including covertly influencing target states' domestic policies. The review concludes by reflecting on earlier literature about autocracy promotion and looks to the contemporary moment to understand how democratic erosion in the United States may accelerate transnational authoritarianism.

Autocracies surviving and thriving in an interconnected era

Certain aspects of transnational authoritarianism are not new. The Soviet Union hunted down dissidents abroad (Scott 2023). The Nazis hired public relations (PR) specialists to monitor and spin their image in the United States (Michel 2024). The People's Republic of China (PRC), since its entry to the UN in the 1970s, has promoted strong conceptions of state sovereignty above individual rights in the global conversation about human rights (Kent 1999). In the 1970s, anti-communist Latin American military dictatorships cooperated across the continent to track down and forcibly return one another's dissidents (Lessa 2022; Lessa and Balardini 2024).

While most of these activities became taboo in the immediate post-Cold War era, two dimensions of an increasingly permissive international environment have supported the resurgence of transnational authoritarianism. First, the rise of major authoritarian powers since the 2000s has created a more enabling environment for transnational authoritarianism (Casey and Dolan 2023; Cooley and Dukalskis 2025; Owen 2023). China's emergence as a global power is, of course, important in this regard. But so too is Russia's decisive turn away from democracy towards personalistic dictatorship, the influence campaigns of tremendously wealthy Gulf monarchies, and Hungary's assertive 'illiberal democracy' which, until its electoral collapse in 2026, influenced developments within the European Union and served as a model for other illiberal parties and far-right social movements from liberal democracies. Liberal democracies have lost the position of global economic dominance they enjoyed in the 1990s (Wiebrecht et al. 2023: 775–776). Material power and wealth enable authoritarian states to advance counter-democratic norms that emphasise sovereignty, civilisational diversity and traditional values (Cooley 2015). Powerful autocracies serve as protectors for smaller ones by lending diplomatic and material support, including acting as safety valves for sanctions pressure and serving as models for illiberal governance practices (Easley and Chow 2024; Marat et al. 2024). They can also leverage their markets to resist liberalising pressure and counter consumer activism (O'Connell 2022).

Second, since the 1990s, processes of globalisation have entangled the societies and economies of authoritarian states with those of democratic and semi-democratic ones to a far greater extent than during the Cold War. For example, China is the largest trading partner for more than half the countries in the world and an important source of development finance for dozens of countries across all regions, democracies and autocracies alike (Dreher et al. 2022). Hundreds of thousands of Chinese students study

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in the US and Europe annually, foreign companies tailor their products to Chinese consumers, and Chinese companies themselves expand globally. This is a far cry from the Cold War, when person-to-person interaction and commercial interchange between blocs were far more limited.

Importantly, the telecommunications and informational technology advances of globalisation have exponentially increased the speed and reduced the cost of transmitting all types of data, information and interactions across both autocracies and democracies. For transnational authoritarianism, this means that authoritarian states and their agents can now reach across borders with greater ease, often requiring nothing more than commercially available and undetectable spyware installed on a target's telephone (Deibert 2023). Contra early optimistic expectations that these technological advances might facilitate democracy and liberal advocacy (Keck and Sikkink 1998), global interconnectedness increasingly facilitates authoritarian learning, as actors in autocracies simply use Google to research what tactics worked elsewhere to undermine civil society and neutralise opposition threats (Hall 2023). Elaborate and resource-intensive schemes such as deep cover spies gathering intelligence in liberal democracies still happen, but their value is limited in an era when social trends can be studied and influenced online, companies willingly comply with restrictions to enter authoritarian markets, and dissidents can be easily tracked and cheaply pressured (Walker 2025).

These two factors – rising authoritarian powers and an interconnected global system – have emboldened authoritarian state actors to extend their influence and experiment with new methods. Ours is not the only analytical review of these themes, but it builds on incisive contributions by colleagues to spotlight how a globalising world – once assumed to promote liberal democratic norms, governance and values – now makes it easier for authoritarians to target and control their diasporas (Tsourapas 2021) and implicates market actors and transnational networks in the promotion of autocracy (Gurol et al. 2024; Tansey 2016; Way 2016; Weyland 2017; Yakouchyk 2019). On top of this, autocracies actively cooperate with one another across a range of domains to contest democracy (Cheeseman et al. 2026). Taken together, the global environment for transnational authoritarianism is no longer prohibitive; in fact, scholarship strongly suggests that it is increasingly permissive (Cooley and Dukalskis 2025).

Transnational authoritarianism actors

In this new global context, we begin by identifying the types of actors implicated in transnational authoritarianism, arranging them on a spectrum based on their proximity to the authoritarian state. On one end are actors that are state personnel, such as diplomats and security services. Next are state-linked elites who are not explicit personnel but are practically allied with the regime. This category is followed by professional enablers, domestic and international, who provide services to the authoritarian state for profit. Finally, we identify engagement partners who cooperate with the authoritarian state for their own purposes but may become targets for co-optation.

Authoritarian state actors

The most straightforward type of actors involved in transnational authoritarianism are formal state actors. These include politicians, diplomats, security services, militaries

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and state media outlets that carry out the state's authoritarian agenda. For example, in occupied Ukraine, Russia has relied on military and security personnel as well as bureaucrats who have issued passports, imposed the Russian education system and otherwise registered occupied Ukrainians into Russian state institutions (Bukrieieva and Afanasieva 2023; Lewis 2024). In Hong Kong, the PRC directly expanded its control across the city through legislation such as the Beijing-imposed National Security Law in 2020, which has been enforced by official Hong Kong personnel coordinating with the party-state agencies of Beijing (Cheng 2020; Hui 2020).

But in less direct impositions, state actors still play an important role. In the information realm, authoritarian state media outlets actively promote their messages abroad (Carter and Carter 2021; Dukalskis 2021; Kurlantzick 2023; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021). External propaganda is still directly state-controlled, but state media outlets no longer conform to stereotypes of acting as bland and dogmatic messengers for a state's official policies (Moore and Colley 2025). Rather, they are actors engaged in covering global affairs, framing major stories, news and commentaries with a regional and even local audience in mind (Marsh et al. 2023). Their work is built on a foundation of information denial at home through repressing and controlling foreign journalists (Lim 2025, 2026).

For example, China's CGTN (previously CCTV-9 and CCTV News), an international television station with global offices and coverage, is part of the Chinese state's propaganda apparatus under the holding company China Media Group, directly controlled by the central government in Beijing via the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party (Brady 2015; Tsai 2017). *Xinhua* is an important case as it advances itself as a reputable news wire service engaged by hundreds of outlets across the world but remains directly party-controlled – effectively an agent of China's foreign propaganda apparatus (Hong 2011: 382). Russia's RT is state-controlled and aims to magnify US social and political tensions and inequalities, as well as spotlight instances of Western policy hypocrisy (Carter and Carter 2021; Elswah and Howard 2020; Miazhevich 2018). Beyond great powers, other states also maintain direct state-controlled propaganda for consumption abroad, such as North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt and quasi-democratic states like Hungary under Orbán and Türkiye that advance their preferred viewpoints. The literature shows that with varying degrees of success, they can influence narratives about their sponsors and/or rivals abroad (Bailard 2016; Carter and Carter 2021; Kobayashi et al. 2025; Mattingly et al. 2024; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018).

State-linked elites

It is useful to supplement the analysis of state actors with actors not formally part of the state. Consider Russia's so-called oligarchs, who for years managed to split their transnational personhoods by residing in the West and becoming patrons of Western cultural and philanthropic institutions, while remaining loyal to the Kremlin and the increasingly aggressive foreign policy of Vladimir Putin. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Western states reframed and stigmatised these actors, previously regarded as independent individuals with a global presence, as active agents of the Kremlin and imposed sanctions across multiple jurisdictions, including travel bans

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and freezing assets such as bank accounts, ownership of prominent sporting clubs, and yachts (Cooley and Harrington 2022).

State-linked elites can promote authoritarian influence abroad through their wealth, business dealings, philanthropic giving and political networks. In the higher education sector, for example, authoritarian state-linked elites, sometimes through companies or investment vehicles, often make sizeable donations to universities (Cooley et al. 2022). The upshot is that the recipient university now faces conflicting interests between academic freedom when it comes to the politics of that elite or his/her origin country on the one hand, and keeping the donor happy on the other. Jonas Draege and Martin Lestra (2015) found that Gulf-funded Middle East institutions in the UK were less focused on democracy and human rights topics than non-Gulf-funded institutions. Such donations can sometimes come with access to university governance, named academic chairs, or research centres and might privilege research on certain topics over others.

Obscuring the link between the state and the elite can be an intentional strategy. For example, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) United Front Work Department is a party organisation responsible for work with various ethnic groups, diaspora groups, and issue areas abroad (Groot 2021: 51). Research explains how this allows the Chinese state, via the CCP, to link elites abroad to state goals via an intermediary that few casual observers comprehend (Brady 2018).

Professional enablers

A further step removed from the state are foreign actors who contract with authoritarian states or state-linked elites to advance transnational authoritarianism. Writing in the context of kleptocracy, Alexander Cooley and co-authors (2024: 386) identify 'enabling professional service providers (usually Western), such as lawyers, lobbyists, public relations specialists and wealth managers' who are key intermediaries in an emerging 'transnational uncivil society' that undermines global liberalism. These actors offer their legal and advertised services to pro-authoritarian principals in exchange for money.

Enablers are often prestigious and reputable companies, such as McKinsey & Company (Bogdanich and Forsythe 2023). As John Heathershaw and co-authors (2024: 7) write: 'service provision to authoritarians is not an outlier practice by "bad" actors, but rather the unexceptional norm across these professions'. To illustrate the point, Heathershaw and co-authors (2025) identify a wide range of professional services offered by enablers in the United Kingdom to post-Communist authoritarian governments, noting how actions taken by law firms, PR firms and private intelligence companies can contravene and even undermine official foreign policy stances of their democratic governments towards these regimes (Heathershaw et al. 2025).

The literature shows that PR and lobbying firms help authoritarian states to sanitise their image, marginalise critics, and advance preferential policies abroad. Jon Pevehouse and Felicity Vabulas (2019) find that if a foreign state more actively lobbies the US government, this leads to more favourable assessments of that country's human rights records in the US State Department's annual human rights reports. Adam Scharpf and co-authors (2025) find that the more repressive they become, the more

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likely autocracies are to contract with American PR firms. Contracting with PR firms and lobbyists helps authoritarian regimes adapt to the more open information environment of democracies, where the autocracy has far less ability to censor, compel viewership or strong-arm politicians.

Tasked with generating positive images of the state, PR and lobbying firms in democracies offer benefits such as free trips to influential persons and/or set up fake 'grassroots' groups to artificially inflate support for the state (Dukalskis 2021: 56–66). These practices build on earlier experiences. In the 1970s, the South Korean dictatorship of Park Chung Hee used professional enablers as part of a multidimensional lobbying and PR campaign to repair Seoul's image and ensure US military aid continued to flow to the country (Engel 2023). And yet, the usage of PR and lobbying firms by autocrats, at least in the United States, is not only strikingly common but has risen since the twentieth century (Scharpf et al. 2025).

Online influencers who bolster dictatorships on social media platforms are a new type of enabler. Journalistic reports have uncovered networks of online influencers that advance content internationally on behalf of authoritarian states (Mozur et al. 2021). Research shows that authoritarian propagandists hire social media influencers and that efforts are evolving from 'inorganic' bot-based campaigns to sophisticated and adaptive strategies involving micro-targeting and localised platforms that reach the intended audiences (Woolley 2022; see also Jones 2022; Uniacke 2021). Some results indicate that foreign pro-authoritarian influencers, such as American YouTubers making videos sympathetic to China's political system, can be persuasive to co-nationals (Liang and McNamee 2026). This is a fruitful avenue for future research, particularly as data analytic tools become ever more sophisticated.

Engagement partners

Finally, an engagement partner willingly enters a relationship with an authoritarian government or its agent as a partnership to further its mission, not a service contract like a professional enabler. Such individuals and organisations may not even think of themselves as having a political motive or agenda, but as they interact with the authoritarian government, they become targets for control or co-optation. Across a range of domains, research shows that the assumption that authoritarian financing and engagement could cohabitate with pro-democratic outlooks has been problematic (Cooley and Dukalskis 2025; Pils 2021).

For instance, many higher education partnerships between Western universities and counterparts in the Gulf states, China, and Singapore in the 2000s began as attempts to export a US-style university model overseas; however, over time, host governments intervened in the governance, oversight and curricular affairs of these joint entities (Cooley and Dukalskis 2025). Even in the relatively early days of US universities in Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, foreign academics working in these institutions understood the incentives not to transgress local political norms or 'rock the boat', with boundaries and off-limits topics clearly understood (Koch 2016; Vora 2019).

The 'strategic internationalisation' push of many Western higher education institutions has largely failed to promote political liberalisation in partner states. These

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engagement partners have become bound up with the larger global backlash against liberal higher education by both authoritarian states and illiberal movements within democracies (Schofer et al. 2022; see also Owen 2020). Students sent from states like Saudi Arabia and China to study abroad are subject to techniques of discipline and surveillance to moderate any liberalising influence their education may have and to encourage proactive defence of their political systems while abroad (Yan and Alsudairi 2021). Authoritarian financing infused into Western institutions through donations or financial dependencies created by large cohorts of fee-paying students can create real or perceived leverage that influences approaches to inquiry, activism, or public event programming at the home campus (Tiffert 2020). Likewise, academic publishers as engagement partners have incentives to protect their markets, particularly in China, and have demonstrated a willingness to censor content on behalf of Chinese authorities (Loubere 2020; Wong and Kwong 2019) or even participate in pro-CCP propaganda (O'Dwyer 2025).

Higher education is far from the only engagement partner influenced by tie-ups with authoritarian actors. In their search for new markets and financing, sports leagues and associations in golf, basketball, soccer, automobile racing and tennis have been embroiled in political controversies that pit the free speech or political activism of athletes or clubs against the political norms of authoritarian host states or financiers (Cooley and Dukalskis 2025). Looking forward, the dramatic investments of Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund to stage and host a range of global sporting events may be publicly justified with a commercial logic, but research suggests that geopolitics and reputation-management through 'sportswashing' remain important concerns and are likely to continue to influence the politics of sport (Dubinsky 2025; Ettinger 2023). Authoritarian investment and engagement in the high-profile business of global sports is becoming 'normalised' (Grix et al. 2025).

Official channels of transnational authoritarianism

The actors outlined above operate through a variety of channels. We make a distinction between 'official' channels of influence, such as international organisations or bilateral engagement, and 'unofficial' channels that are less institutionalised or publicised. But both channels are facilitated by the rise of powerful authoritarian states and global interconnectedness, often reinforcing one another. In this section, looking at official channels, we address the literature on authoritarian strategies in international and regional organisations as well as cultural outreach and aid.

International and regional organisations

On the formal side, a substantial literature explores the ways in which international, including regional, organisations help sustain and even advance authoritarian rule. Researchers have examined how autocrats have sought to transform long-standing international organisations, once associated with promoting (or at least respecting) liberal democratic norms (Cordell and Dukalskis 2025; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2025; Paulselli et al., 2023; Vreeland 2019). Using the language of multilateralism and democratising international relations, autocracies erode existing rules and reshape

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them to align with their interests (Flonk and Debre 2025). One aim of such a strategy is to use the material and ideological resources afforded by international organisations for protection from challenges (Cottiero et al. 2025: 233).

One significant example is China's role within the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) (Dukalskis 2023). Rana Siu Inboden (2021a, 2021b) has traced how China has gone from defending its human rights violations to actively shaping the agendas and procedural rules of monitoring organisations. At the HRC, China has sought to limit country-specific resolutions and the role of special rapporteurs, while blocking non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and human rights monitors from engaging with various human rights-related UN hearings, often in coordination with other authoritarian states (Dukalskis 2023).

The repurposing of long-standing international organisations has been accompanied by authoritarian states establishing new regional organisations that support or even promote authoritarian ideas and practices. Much of this research upends the long-held assumption that regional integration and cooperation would help advance democratic practices and norms through the pooling of sovereignty, as it was perceived to have done in the case of European integration (Cottiero and Haggard 2023). Scholars examining groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization have drawn attention to how these groups' norms and mission statements both critique universal principles and advance goals that are in conflict with democratic values (Debre 2025). The SCO's security focus on combatting the 'three evils' of terrorism, extremism and separatism mirrors China's framing of movements advocating for autonomy or independence as dangerous security threats (Ambrosio 2008).

Russia's use of regionalism has helped export its techniques of political repression; scholars have employed plagiarism detection software to reveal how Russia has transferred authoritarian policy to Central Asian states via copied legislation in areas such as restricting peaceful assembly and civil society (Lemon and Antonov 2020). Russia has also provided frameworks through which side-payments and patronage can be funnelled to regimes to act in a similar fashion (Obydenkova and Libman 2019). International election observation, once considered an important component of democratic influence, has been transformed by authoritarians to ensure that observers from authoritarian-friendly regional organisations provide validation for flawed elections (Bush et al. 2025; Cottiero and Haggard 2023).

Authoritarians have conflated regime security with state security, and fashioned new regional architectures – most notably security treaties and cooperation frameworks – to enable coordinated crackdowns on political opponents, groups and media living and working abroad. One tool, used by both the SCO and the GCC, is to create regional lists of security threats where each authoritarian member of the organisation agrees to recognise the listed entity as a security threat (Cooley and Schaaf 2017). Creating common watch lists facilitates logrolling among members, where governments agree to mutually accept securitised designations by fellow member countries. Take the SCO's common security watch list. According to data publicly released by the Regional Antiterror Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent, in 2006, the RATS Council placed 15 organisations and 400 individuals on the watch list;

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the following year, the number had exploded to 42 organisations and 944 individuals (Cooley and Schaaf 2017: 175). The SCO's 2010 anti-terror treaty also authorises extraterritorial actions, including permitting the security services of one treaty partner to conduct investigations and operations on the territory of another (for 30 days) and allowing member states to request the transfer of a suspect without a legal predicate.

Cultural outreach and aid

Authoritarian states also increasingly deploy 'soft power' as a state-led effort to exert global influence (Bader and Loughlin 2026; Henne 2022). Official state-led educational initiatives represent an important vector of such influence. China's Confucius Institute (CI) programme, a network of cultural and language institutes in foreign universities, is the most prominent example and has drawn considerable scholarly attention (Hartig 2015; Pan 2013; Paradise 2009; Zhou and Luk 2016). Most research concurs that CIs are explicitly a part of China's soft power projection and are state-directed in important respects, but that there is significant local variation in how they operate. There is less consensus on whether CIs are effective agents of influence. Nonetheless, studies have identified important patterns, such as CIs improving the tone of media coverage about China in localities where they operate (Brazys and Dukalskis 2019), gaining support from stakeholders as part of wider engagement with China (Repnikova 2022), and facilitating student mobility to China from certain countries that host them (Lien and Miao 2023). Host states have responded to controversies surrounding CIs and their state links, with attitudes turning more sceptical in the US and Europe in particular (Dukalskis 2024).

International sporting mega-events provide another visible channel for authoritarian soft power. While 'sportswashing', or using sports to distract from or mask human rights abuses, is a new label, the idea that major sporting tournaments and politics are intertwined is not (Cha 2008). The objective is to present images of the state the autocratic government wishes foreign publics to see, while obscuring images and information about autocratic activities. This mode of influence is official in that hosting rights must be secured via international sporting federations, typically via a competitive bidding process and member state vote. Advances in research methods and data analysis have revealed in detail how authoritarian states use sports mega-events to manage their image. During the 1978 Men's World Cup in Argentina, the military junta used repression targeted with breathtaking precision to prevent foreign journalists from witnessing or reporting state violence (Scharpf et al. 2023).

The effects on public opinion are less clear. For example, research on the 2022 Men's World Cup in Qatar has employed survey experiments (Gerschewski et al. 2024) and longitudinal public opinion data (Gläßel et al. 2025) to assess the event's impact on European public opinion on the Gulf monarchy. The results show little effect on Qatar's image in Germany but reveal increased sympathy for the wider Arab world and, paradoxically, heightened criticism of certain German institutions and politics (Gläßel et al. 2025). Experimental effects varied across eight European countries depending on the event framing; human rights critiques of Qatar produced negative evaluations, while emphasis on organisational capacity generated more positive responses

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(Gerschewski et al. 2024). One study of public opinion about the Qatar World Cup among online football fans in China found that the 'sportswashing' label did not enjoy support because of the perceived hypocrisy of Western actors, although Qatar's image did not itself appear to benefit (Lee 2026). Although 'sportswashing' strategies may not create committed supporters of authoritarian politics abroad, it does appear to normalise authoritarian politics in previously contested spheres (Grix et al. 2025).

Finally, the provision of foreign aid and credit by autocracies, most notably China, has engendered important research about the effects of such programmes on recipient country public opinion. Axel Dreher and co-authors (2022), synthesising a much larger body of work done by them and several collaborators over a decade, demonstrate the importance of China as a donor and, more importantly, as a lender since around 2007. While China's aid programmes produce broadly similar effects as other donors, they find that China is 'effectively becoming a lender of first resort for poorly governed countries' (Dreher et al. 2022: 151) with 'loans issued at or near market rate … more likely to go to corrupt and authoritarian countries' (Dreher et al. 2022: 129). This is an important finding, considering the research that has mapped the ways in which Chinese financial support, among other types of backing, can help sustain authoritarian incumbents in recipient countries (Bader 2014; Easley and Chow 2024; Loughlin 2021). Authoritarian leaders unable to find economic support elsewhere in times of need can now turn to China, giving them resources with no conditionalities on democratic reform.

Still, quantitative research on Chinese development programmes presents a more complex picture of their soft power effects. Some evidence suggests that Chinese aid exerts little impact on associations with China or commitment to democracy (Blair et al. 2022), while others find that Chinese-led projects increase perceptions of corruption (Brazys et al. 2017). Still others suggest that Chinese aid and investment may be associated with soft power benefits for Beijing, even as trade is associated with negative perceptions (Morgan 2019). Given China's importance as a development financier, with similar questions to those about Gulf states' increasing investments, these debates are likely to continue.

Unofficial channels of transnational authoritarianism

Recognising some overlap between official and unofficial channels of transnational authoritarianism, in this section we note the less visible, less institutionalised, and often covert forms of influence that autocracies attempt to generate. These are facilitated by resurgent authoritarian state power, but perhaps more importantly, underpinned by global interconnections that have grown profoundly since the 1990s (Cooley and Dukalskis 2025). We review the emergent scholarship in three of these areas: transnational repression (TR), authoritarian leverage over private actors (entanglement), and active subversion.

Transnational repression

Research has conceptualised, measured, mapped and noted the responses to TR. Dana Moss and Saipira Furstenberg (2024: 2) define TR as 'the border-crossing practices

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used by authoritarian regimes and non-state actors to control, coerce and punish exiles and diaspora members abroad'. The specific acts that qualify as TR can vary by study but generally include physical (Dukalskis 2021) and digital threats (Michaelsen 2017; Michaelsen and Thumfart 2023); targeting family members domestically to punish or deter politically active relatives abroad (Moss et al. 2022); extradition requests, usually under the guise of terrorism or financial crimes (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Lemon 2019); assassinations (Dukalskis 2021); arrest or detention, sometimes with host state assistance (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Dukalskis 2021); abduction, renditions and physical attacks (Dukalskis 2021); and coercion to return (Lemon et al. 2023). One leading researcher argues we are living in a 'golden age' of TR driven by impunity for previous transgressions, technological advances that facilitate extra-territorial reach, a private market for authoritarian services akin to the 'gig economy', and high levels of global migration (Schenkkan 2025).

Conceptually, authoritarian regimes are not the only actors who engage in TR, but empirical evidence suggests that democracies are less likely to rely on repression abroad than their autocratic counterparts. According to Freedom House's most recent report, the 'top 10' perpetrators of TR since 2014 – China, Türkiye, Tajikistan, Russia, Egypt, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Iran and Rwanda – account for 80% of all cases (Gorokhovskaia et al. 2023). Research using different methods and time periods confirms that authoritarian states drive TR (Dukalskis 2021: 72), and TR is understood as part of the transnational authoritarianism toolkit (Furstenberg et al. 2021; Tsourapas 2021).

Although gathering data on TR is difficult, several research teams have compiled new datasets, enabling a more precise understanding of its drivers (Dukalskis et al. 2022). Alexander Dukalskis and co-authors (2024) find that domestic crackdowns tend to precipitate subsequent TR because victims of repression may flee abroad and publicise it, and because states perceive the links between domestic activists and exiles as political threats.

Rebecca Cordell and Kashmiri Medhi (2024) examine interactions between perpetrator states and host states. They find that a host country's respect for the rule of law shapes opportunities for TR, while economic ties determine the leverage perpetrators wield over hosts. They ultimately find that authoritarian states have more success eliciting cooperation from host states with weaker rule of law and closer economic ties to the perpetrator (see also Oztig and Karluk 2025). Marcus Michaelsen and Kris Ruijgrok (2024) analyse how host state characteristics shape tactical decisions. They find that in autocratic host states, perpetrators can employ tactics requiring the cooperation of local authorities, whereas in democratic hosts, perpetrators must bypass local authorities through direct attacks.

Measuring the effects of TR on dissent and activism is also challenging, but researchers have produced important insights from both cross-national data and qualitative methods such as interviews. Dana Moss (2016) demonstrates how TR helped prevent mobilisation critical of the Libyan and Syrian dictatorships prior to the Arab Spring by sowing distrust and fear in diaspora communities. Saipira Furstenberg and co-authors (2021) show how TR helps embed state power in extra-territorial relationships in Central Asia, allowing even relatively weak states to exert

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power over exiles. Cumulatively, these studies suggest that TR generally dampens anti-authoritarian transnational activism. Arne Wackenhut (2025) shows how TR can even garner support within polarised diaspora groups. A broader perspective shows how TR is embedded in diaspora governance strategies that may elevate, ignore, or repress different segments of the diaspora (Adamson and Han 2026).

Entanglement

The tactics of transnational authoritarianism are not always violent or coercive. An increasingly common mode comes through the leverage that authoritarian state actors exert over foreign non-state actors in autocracies. Eva Pils (2021) argues that when actors in liberal-democratic states engage with authoritarian systems, such as in the higher education or sports examples noted above, authoritarian norms and practices can radiate outward to influence liberal polities. Pils (2021: 4) finds that financing or access to lucrative authoritarian markets can suppress extraterritorial speech, noting that 'money, in the case of autocratic actors engaging in transnational exchange, does not so often "talk" as it silences'. The pathways through which liberal influence once purportedly flowed, such as universities, cultural products, media, or consumer products are being blocked and repurposed by autocracies to advance their own aims (Cooley and Dukalskis 2025).

Researchers have mapped the contours of these relationships by examining the leveraging of market access to influence political speech abroad. William O'Connell (2022) identifies three mechanisms through which this threat of market access enforces censorship: content bans where governments refuse to broadcast or sell products from the offending entity; position reversal mechanisms such as coerced apologies or retroactive content removal, and pre-emptive self-censorship to maintain positive relations with authorities. For example, in 2019, after a US National Basketball Association team executive tweeted support for Hong Kong's democracy movement, authorities in China responded forcefully, cancelling broadcasts, issuing warnings and leveraging its market power (Cha 2019; Tyler et al. 2021). Similar dynamics played out after soccer star Mesut Özil, then with Arsenal Football Club, tweeted support for the Uyghur cause (Gündoğan 2025: 123–152). International hotel chains, airlines, clothing brands and other businesses have faced nationalist backlash and consumer boycotts aimed at enforcing political red lines on company speech or actions, often supported by the Chinese government (Bohman and Pårup 2022). The underlying threat is the curtailment of market access if the offending action is not rectified.

Active subversion

Finally, the most direct form of transnational authoritarianism is active subversion or control. Here, authoritarian states attempt to impose their political practices beyond their borders in new territories, states or transnational spaces they perceive as threatening. Russia's direct imposition of authoritarian rule – with the help of local collaborators – in areas of Ukraine, and the PRC's assertion of control over Hong Kong, stand as stark examples of how major authoritarian states expand the borders of their regimes.

Russian influence operations, often characterised as 'hybrid warfare', aim to destabilise and influence the domestic politics of neighbouring states (see Lanoszka 2016;

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Person et al. 2024). While the aim is not always to promote autocracy or autocratisation directly, it is clearly to promote Russia-friendly governments and to prevent democratic states forming closer ties with Western democracies. In this sense, Russia acts as an 'authoritarian gravity centre', in which autocratisation can occur in the target state voluntarily through shared ideology or through coercive tactics such as hybrid warfare methods of disinformation, election manipulation, and economic leverage (Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2016). While observers were generally sceptical that Russia was promoting autocracy as such during the 2000s and early 2010s (Way 2015), the territorial and transnational political ambitions of Putin's Russia have clearly expanded since. Furthermore, research shows how the region's elites are learning from one another how best to sustain autocracy (Hall 2023; Lemon and Antonov 2020).

Similarly, debates about the 'China model' are central to transnational authoritarianism's influence on the domestic politics of target states. Since Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012, foreign policy has become explicitly framed through a highly elaborated ideological system (Tsang and Cheung 2024: 168–193). In 2017, at the National Congress of the CCP, Xi argued that the China model 'offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence, and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing humanity' (quoted in Economy 2020: 1).

There is a long-standing scholarly debate about the contours and replicability of the Chinese model of authoritarian rule paired with economic dynamism (Hodzi and Åberg 2020; Zhao 2017). Sceptics of China's intention to promote its model abroad note that it is difficult to replicate, that efforts to do so are often ineffective, and that the CCP retains a fundamentally defensive posture in a world that still prioritises liberal democracy (Weiss 2019). However, given that the variables identified are mutable as actors learn and as international norms evolve, the diffusion of the 'Chinese model' may not be decisively foreclosed.

Conclusion: recasting autocracy promotion and looking forward

The rise of powerful authoritarian states and an enabling international environment have combined to foster the renewed importance and substantive transformation of *transnational authoritarianism*. Rather than recapping our review, we conclude with two points.

First, we return to the concept of autocracy promotion. Our review underscores that a strict definition of autocracy promotion in which State A promotes a specific brand of authoritarianism in State B for explicitly ideological reasons is inadequate for understanding contemporary transnational authoritarian politics.

Research on autocracy promotion that blossomed in the 2010s was generally sceptical that authoritarian regimes intended to promote authoritarianism in other states. For example, Oisín Tansey (2016: 155) advocated a strict definition, arguing that 'it must apply only to those cases where there is a clear intention to promote autocracy as a regime type, based in significant part on an ideological commitment to authoritarianism itself', and that to qualify 'there must be a clear ideological commitment to promote a particular, non-democratic regime type' (Tansey 2016: 156, 150). Kurt Weyland (2017) argued that authoritarian states with strong ideological claims are

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more likely to spread their ideas and practices, but that this is relatively rare in the contemporary world.

Scholars concluded, with a few exceptions (de la Torre 2017; Vanderhill 2013), that contemporary autocrats were fundamentally defensive, interested in 'democracy prevention' (von Soest 2015), that there was little evidence for autocracy promotion in the sense of promoting particular regimes (Bank 2017), that there was no effort to build world-wide authoritarianism because 'there is no unifying objective toward which the democracy resisters either could, or would, rally' (Whitehead 2014) and, ultimately, that 'a consensus has emerged in the literature that autocracy promotion, as an ideological project of establishing and stabilising autocracies as a regime type, does not seem to exist' (Yakouchyk 2019: 156).

However, much of the research cited in this review illustrates how a state-to-state mode of promoting autocracy is only one part of a much more diverse constellation of actors and channels of influence. With the rise of authoritarian powers and an enabling global environment, transnational authoritarianism appears to more fruitfully capture contemporary dynamics of global authoritarian politics than autocracy promotion.

Second, we conclude with the United States. The world's most powerful democracy is wracked by domestic polarisation, and its unabashedly illiberal president, in his second term, has taken an axe to both domestic and foreign policy institutions that had served to support liberal principles and practices for decades (Cooley and Nexon 2020, 2025). The cuts that the Trump administration has made to US democracy promotion, federally funded research to universities and NGOs on issues related to democracy and governance, and the closure of global media outlets that promoted liberal democratic values and principles of journalism, such as the Voice of America, now leave a limited number of state funders actively supporting democratic actors, institutions and processes internationally. Executive constraints on foreign policymaking are so eroded in the second Trump administration that two leading scholars conclude that the US 'now effectively has the foreign policy of a personalist regime' (Hyde and Saunders 2025: S73). It is not clear how these policies will ultimately unfold, but significant damage has already been done to the US role as guarantor and underwriter of transnational liberal democracy. This appears to clear the way for transnational authoritarianism to advance even further.

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